

Rethinking Food and Agriculture – New Ways Forward **Edited by Amir Kassam and Laila Kassam**

A Review of the [Website](#) that Underpins the New Book¹

By Andrew MacMillan²

At first sight, one of the greatest achievements since the Second World War has been to produce enough food to be able to feed all people in the world even in a period of unprecedented population growth.

But, as this book and its admirable website explain, this is a hollow victory. It is now abundantly clear that the ways in which most food is being produced and consumed are destroying the world's finite natural resources and are damaging human health.



The very rapid rise in food production has caused huge damage to nature – especially to forest cover, soil quality, water quality, biological diversity and the environment, with farming also becoming a major contributor to the process of climate change as well as a victim of it.

¹ Published by Elsevier, 2020.

² Andrew MacMillan is an agricultural economist specialised in tropical agriculture, former Director of FAO's Field Operations Division. He co-authored a book entitled "How to End Hunger in Times of Crises – Let's Start Now" (Second Edition, Fastprint Publishing, 2013).

There may be plenty of food in the world, but over half of us suffer and may die prematurely from hunger and other forms of malnutrition while many others become chronically ill and face early death because they over-consume food. A lot of the available food is completely wasted: some ends up in biofuels.

People working in food production, processing and distribution tend to be poorly paid and often exploited. And the growing demand for meat, apart from requiring the slaughter of our animal kin (both domesticated and wild) on a vast scale, is causing massive damage to natural resources, especially pristine tropical forests, cleared for grazing or animal feed production.

Amir and Laila Kassam have assembled a remarkable group of 24 authors who have contributed to 20 chapters, each of which is summarised with an abstract and an extract on the website. This enables a hurried reader to get a 'taste' of all the main arguments advanced in the book before delving into more detail. All of the authors, even if they have been working separately, share deep concerns about the multiple harms caused by our mainstream food production and consumption systems and their non-sustainability. They would all subscribe to the book's claim that "Our agrarian worldview is destroying the living world under our noses".

Indeed, it has taken us far too long to wake up to the realisation that the combination of the spread of intensive farming methods, underpinned by "scientific dogmatism", and the "take-over of commodity agriculture by financial interests decoupled from the food system" continues to be "the gravest cause of damage to the web of life on which we all depend".

Most of the authors acknowledge the need to make a clean break from the alliances which have emerged between "science", corporate power and many governments in setting the dominant agenda for agricultural development and food consumption patterns, based on the seriously mistaken claim that this is the only way to assure adequate food supplies for the future.

Many of the authors, who include leading long-term advocates for change - such as Hans Herren, David R. Montgomery, Patrick Mulvany, Vandana Shiva and Colin Tudge - refer to encouraging precedents for the paradigm changes that need to happen within their own specialised fields of interest and give cause for optimism. They point particularly to the successful precedents being set by agro-ecological approaches to making farming more sustainable and driven by farmers rather than by scientists. And they also highlight the momentum that is gathering towards food consumption habits that eliminate or greatly reduce meat consumption while improving human health.

Food systems are enormously complex because they involve so many different players, each of whose livelihoods and vested interests may be affected one way or another by shifts in policies and strategies. So, even when problems are acknowledged, there is a widespread perception that change can only come slowly and so proposals for radical adjustments tend to be greeted with disbelief.

This book and its website have no such inhibitions. The Editors propose that farmers should move quickly to sustainable production systems, centred around stopping all forms of inversion tillage while linking this to the application of organic farming principles. Simultaneously, they argue that, on health and ethical grounds, consumers should cut back drastically on consumption of meat and other animal products with the ultimate goal of adopting vegan diets.

Although I was convinced that these two main directions of change, if widely applied, would address most of the problems faced by current food production and consumption systems, I have to admit that my first reaction was to consider them unattainable. I envisaged the need to set in motion a negotiating process that would have brought together all affected parties to arrive at a consensus on a way forward, but history shows that this would have been well-intended but probably futile.

It then struck me that the two proposed directions of change were both so much in the common interests of food producers and consumers that, whether scientists or corporations liked them or not, they would, if paired as suggested by the Editors, gather an irresistible momentum of their own.

Although this has gone largely unheralded, there has already been a massive shift towards agro-ecological farming systems across the world. The area of organic farming has grown by over 500% over the past 20 years: it involves 2.9 million producers, and consumer demand for organic food is expanding very rapidly. Similarly, conservation agriculture has swept aside conventional tillage of crops, with the area growing by 10 times in the past 25 years, to a total of over 200 million ha now: the pace of change is such that it is already applied to 60% of cropped land in South America and all indications are that its spread will continue apace. These changes have been driven not by governments or by research institutes, but largely by farmers – both small and large-scale - who invest in the new technologies and encourage others to take them up because they are convinced by their multiple advantages.

Ultimately, however, most of what farmers produce is determined by what consumers choose to buy. While prices are bound to remain a major influence on the demand for food, consumers' choices are becoming increasingly shaped by their knowledge of the negative environmental impact of certain food production systems (forest destruction to produce palm oil or for livestock grazing); the prevalence of harsh labour conditions in the food chain (fair trade, human rights, child labour); adverse nutritional and health impacts (pesticide and hormone residues, excess carbohydrates including sugar and fats, excess red meat consumption); and animal welfare. There is growing respect for the moral concept of kinship between humans and animals and hence for a shift towards vegan diets which is reflected in a growth in the number of people adhering to the celebration of '[Veganuary](#)' to over 500,000 this year.

If taken seriously by the governments that all subscribe to them, the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) provide an admirable framework for embarking on policies that would greatly accelerate these largely spontaneous processes of desirable change.

The editors conclude by bringing together these ways forward, along with others suggested in the book, in the framework of 'inclusive responsibility'. This framework summarises the paradigm shifts that are needed for a just and sustainable food and agriculture system. They suggest *Conservation Agriculture-based Veganic Agroecology* as one example of an alternative, inclusively responsible, food and agriculture paradigm.

Just as the [Conservation Agriculture Community of Practice \(CA-CoP\)](#) which is moderated by Amir Kassam, has done much to promote CA around the world by sharing knowledge and relevant information between CA practitioners and supportive institutions, perhaps the ['inclusive responsibility' website](#) that underpins this book could serve as a foundation on which to construct the emergence of a broad movement for nudging forward the processes of change towards a truly sustainable global food system at a faster pace.

Scansano, Italy, 14th February 2021.

To know more:

- Amir Kassam Laila Kassam (Ed.) [Rethinking Food and Agriculture - New Ways Forward](#), Elsevier, 2020.

Selection of articles on hungerexplained.org linked to the topic :

- [What future for our food? Three scenarios picture quite different perspectives](#), 2018.
- [Policies for a transition towards more sustainable and climate friendly food systems](#), 2018.
- [What are the challenges to be met in order to secure a sustainable future for our food system?](#) 2017.
- Opinion : [Hasn't the time come for some brave new thinking on food management?](#) by Andrew MacMillan, 2014.