

Sustainable regional food cycles in Nepal

Tulsi Giri

Food systems that intend to meet the long-distance export and which are based on highly mechanical and chemical productions are not the solutions for the present day problems in agriculture. While we need not discover any newer forms of food systems or agriculture, we can revive ideas or systems that were being practiced in the past and are sustainable. Regional food cycles is one such system.

In the next decades, the Asian middle-class will become the world's most important consumer group. Also in Nepal, the middle-class is becoming visible, demanding alternative products to match its new lifestyles. Fresh consumerism is creating new (global) markets and wealth in the country. Market is playing vital role in shaping our everyday life while our communities are rapidly changing with globalization. Dreams of becoming 'modern and developed' as defined by GDP economy have altered the focus of every society. Especially, the 'developing communities' are losing their basic essence and are struggling to grab those dreams of a changing era.

A practical training session in progress



Photo: Author

One of the most affected are our communities and cultures that are based on production activities i.e. agriculture and food. Many people are leaving farming, or are being forced to leave farming. Reasons could be many, but, primarily driven by lack of 'economic incentives'.

Leaving their self-reliant households, more and more young people in Nepal are migrating to cities or foreign countries in search of alternative incomes. Farming is less interesting especially for younger generations because of reasons like a) farming is not respected as a decent 'job' as compared to 'white collar' jobs that the modern economic market offers in the cities, b) 'family farms' are subsistence in nature which doesn't provide higher 'economic returns' to match the changing needs of modern societies, c) farming as a job or business is definitely difficult and prone to different factors like harsh weather conditions which are out of human control, thus making it, many times, highly uncertain.

When the smallholders and family farms are facing the harsh realities, modern economic institutions like corporations and industrial farming companies are getting further opportunities. Thus, local producers in Nepal (and many other developing communities) lag behind in the global competitions, face environmental crises and are at risk of losing their livelihoods.

Realization

Border regions suffer from rural migration, especially among young people. This has a huge impact on regional economic development as well as food security. Countries like Nepal need initiatives fostering balanced growth, counter social imbalances and environmental damage. Production of, and awareness about, sustainable (organic) produce is part of the solution. Studies show that 'organic produce' is a major opportunity for a competitive advantage in agricultural sector.

It is already clear that our food systems based on long-distance export and highly mechanised and chemical based production are definitely not the solutions. We do not need to discover any newer forms of food systems or agriculture, either. We just need to stay calm, and understand what our older generation was doing, how they were farming and sharing food among communities.

A food cycle links rural regions with the city – it links the people working in organic farming, food processing and distribution with the consumers of organically produced food.



Photo: Author

The Bazaar – Model Shop

The idea of 'regional food cycles' was in existence before the globalized world started. The communities were self-sustained. The border regions were exchanging foods among themselves, and our societies were thriving with cultures and community living. Our basic idea is to revisit and revitalize already existing idea struggling to cope with modern changes and development. Without any exception, the modern technologies and innovations can go hand-in-hand with legacy to generate extra-ordinary results - more sound, more sustainable.

The Bazaar

In 2009, Mr. Tulsi Giri and Mr. Tanka Raj Subedi, two young friends, decided to take-up the challenges. They started a company 'Development Voyage' aiming to instill the concepts of sustainability in the markets of Nepal. Inception of 'The Bazaar: Market for Fairtrade and Organic', a supply chain management business, 'Saathi Bio Farm', a permaculture/organic farm with training character, and 'Organic Living', an agritourism service business (www.organiclivingnepal.org), were initiated. Initiation of 'THE BAZAAR Agriculture Cooperative' in 2012 together with its partner farmers has been successful. Our businesses are located in Pokhara, one of the important tourist regions in Nepal and second biggest city in the country.

It all began in 2008 when Tulsi and his friends were organizing 'Youth in Sustainable Development' project in Rivan village around 20 km north to Pokhara, a place where Tulsi was born. The project resulted in developing interest among the youth of Rivan to establish their cooperative for organic vegetable production, fish farming and community tourism as their livelihoods options. Many of the returnee migrants from Rivan joined the project. With the establishment of the producer cooperatives, a need for market channel was the next challenge. Thus, Tanka and Tulsi

jumped into fill-up the vacuum and ride the entrepreneurial roller coaster. Until 2012, the farmers from the cooperative in Rivan and 'Saathi Bio Farm', established by them, were supplying organic vegetables for first retail outlet of *The Bazaar*. Gradually, the sales of the business picked up. Customer flow and cash flow both increased. More farmers from other communities wanted to join the network, which gradually provided base to establishment of our idea of 'regional food cycle'.

The Bazaar (www.thebazaar.com.np) is the flagship brand of our company that provides supply chain management services to the smallholders in the peripheral regions of Pokhara. The core idea is to develop it as a prototype of sustainable regional food cycle in border regions, which can be multiplied to other border regions. We believe that organic farming by small/family farms is the basis of the food cycle. Selling the products in the near region brings economic impact. The sustainable regional food cycle is the future to feed the planet in a sustainable way.

"A food cycle links rural regions with the city – it links the people working in organic farming, food processing and distribution with the consumers of organically produced food. It unites the partners in commons and cooperative structures. At the core of the food cycle is a new concept of sustainable tourism adding necessary economic value to the network."

At present, *The Bazaar* provides supply chain and market facilities to more than 300 smallholders who are all associated with *The Bazaar* Agriculture Cooperative. Our farmers are distributed in more than 7 villages around Pokhara. They are of different nature, some are individual farms, and some are organized into farmer groups while others are involved in the community based production cooperative. In Pokhara, *The Bazaar* has 2 shops (one wholesale and one retail) with direct delivery services through which it reaches the customers. It also provides logistics to all the producers to carry their products to the city. The cooperative provides our partner farmers with the technical knowledge and expertise in organic farming, saving and credit facilities as well as assist them with linkages to appropriate stakeholders ranging from government services to input providers. Partnering with different stakeholders including District Agriculture Development Office (local government body), *The Bazaar* initiated 'Participatory Guarantee System (PGS)' in 2013 as the best method to provide quality control and trust between the producers and consumers.

The beauty of our supply chain is that our facilities support those farmers who would otherwise have no market channels to sell their very small produces. The cooperative is formed to address both production and sales challenges for organic

produce. On the production side the cooperative is building local capacity and coordinates with producers to increase volume, variety and quality of organic produce. On the sales side, the cooperative sensitizes the middle-class Nepali consumers to opt for fair-trade and organic produce. Once production and sales is connected, farmers and *The Bazaar* have access to information on actual demand and supplies. The connection also allows the cooperative to save profits and support marketing campaigns, agricultural innovations and policy advocacy.

Future developments

Obviously, it was not so easy for the company to go through all the above-mentioned achievements. It hasn't yet reached the stability. We have faced many challenges and hurdles in each step. It is not just the hardship to financing the idea of 'regional food network'; but also, throughout the supply chain 're-engineering' is required. From availability of organic inputs to capacity of smallholders in organic and market-driven production, to access to technical and financial services, to awareness of customers and the facilitating market systems, among many others, are all in early stages.

Realizing these issues and based on our on-going experiences, we collaborated since 2013 with a social entrepreneur in Zurich, Switzerland (rundumkultur.ch) who was working on the same vision as ours: offering development opportunities to young people through the creation of sustainable regional food cycles. We are at the moment working in developing a vocational training and education program named 'Food Cycle Academy'. Food Cycle Academy will be the center for empowerment, initiative and qualification for young people and entrepreneurs from border regions. The existing businesses shall serve as training venues and examples for young entrepreneurs, who will learn how to build a sustainable future for themselves and their region. The academy offers study programs supporting the formation of sustainable regional food cycles in border regions around the world.

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