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Aftershocks: Psuedo-Tsunamis and Food Insecurity in Hawai'i

A couple of my young and highly talented friends were winding down in the wee hours after their snapping GO LIVE! REAL FOOD performance in Waikiki when they got the news of the Chilean earthquake. They 'stood fixated on the flat screens, drinks in hand' as real time images of Chilean destruction were quickly followed by an official tsunami warning and a barrage of historic Hawaiian newsreel footage documenting the devastating tidal wave that hit Hilo back in 1947. After ordering an evacuation of coastal areas, the government advised people to stock up on a weeks worth of food. This is when hip-hop artists Jennifer Johns, Erwin Thomas and Lynnete Kaid learned a sobering fact:

There are only 3-5 days of food reserves available on the island. The land of lush tropical forests, sparkling waterfalls and deep, rich volcanic soils imports over 85% of its food. It is materially impossible for everyone to "stock up" on a week's food in Hawai'i.

(Read their account here)

Like many other islands that have fallen first under double whammy of colonialism and then tourism (Canary Islands, Puerto Rico and Jamaica), Hawai'i has become easy prey to the corporate food regime and no longer feeds itself. The local and indigenous population has been made poor, leaving them dependent on cheap, processed, unhealthy food from the mainland, and plunging them into epidemics of diet-related disease (obesity, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, etc). As the economy worsens, these communities are forced to rely more and more on food banks, turning what was once a stop-gap food source into a permanent grocery stop for poor -- and increasingly -- working families.

The great tsunami eventually rolled in that day at a weak 3 feet high, barely big enough to increase the heart rate of a boogie-boarding tourist. Authorities were right to order the evacuation. Better safe than sorry. But what if it had been a big one? Aside from the physical

destruction of coastal areas, what would it have meant for Hawaii's food system? Food banks are already pushed past their limit and the island's capacity to produce its own food has been turned over to corporate monopolies. In the event of a destructive tsunami (assuming the airport is not destroyed and food supplies can still be flown in), we can still imagine who would be most affected by the inevitable food price inflation resulting from the temporary scarcity: the native Hawaiians.

Hawaii's pseudo-tsunami uncovers some nagging realities of our dysfunctional corporate food regime. Built over the last half-century and dominated by increasingly ravenous monopolies (think ADM, Cargill, Monsanto, Dole, Walmart) this regime has managed to make most of the world dependent not only on a volatile global market, but on a limited number of commercial crops and varieties that are highly vulnerable to natural hazards. When these hit, the poor and underserved are the ones that suffer the most.

How many underserved communities across the US are vulnerable islands of food insecurity?

In Hawai'i a number of local organizations are working to bring the food supply back under the control of the island's inhabitants. Hawai'i SEED is a statewide non-profit coalition of grassroots groups composed of farmers, doctors, scientists, lawyers, concerned citizens, and Native Hawaiians that is dedicated to promoting diverse, local, healthy and ecological food and farming that supports real food security for the Hawaiian Islands. The Kohala Center, an independent, not-for-profit, and community-based center for research and education promotes food and energy self-reliance and ecosystem health. The University of Hawaii -- College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources Organic Agriculture Working Group, and the Hawaii Organic Farmers Association (HOFA) also promote local organic food.

These efforts parallel a trend seen across the US mainland where community food organizations are growing and supplying not just food, but helping vulnerable populations build-in food security by taking back control over the local food system. Like Hawaii's food movement, these organizations are 'islands of good food and good community floating in a poisonous sea of corporate food. We are lucky to have them and they need to be supported to grow. But if we are to truly build a resilient national food system, these "islands" will have to become the norm, rather than the exception in our beleaguered food system.

