The Covid-19 epidemic: are there lights at the end of the long tunnel?

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Like thousands of other farmers, I have been consumed by the day to day struggles related to coping with the impact of Covid-19 on my farming and food system here in Ceredigion, west Wales. Despite being the longest established organic dairy farm in the principality, the lockdown has hit us hard, initially reducing our sales of cheese by 70%, an experience shared by many other small scale sustainable food producers supplying specialist markets.

However, I have also been reflecting on whether the pandemic can shed new light on themes and issues relating to the principles and practices of sustainable agriculture. In doing so, I am mindful of the risk of rushing to conclusions when in the middle of an incident, since it is often necessary to gain perspective before confirming them.

The principle of positive health

One of those themes is the principle of positive health. This idea preoccupied Sir Albert Howard, an eminent British scientist, knighted for his expertise in the study of plant diseases. Howard was sent out to India in the early twentieth century to encourage the peasant farmers in the Hunza valley to adopt more western methods of agriculture which were already beginning to be intensified. Unusually, given the hubristic attitude which prevailed amongst the British at that time, he had the humility to realise that the farming systems and practices which he encountered when he arrived were more sustainable than their British counterparts, so he decided to stay in India to study their methods. Thirty-five years later, on arriving back in England, Howard wrote 'An Agricultural Testament', his homage to the farming community which inspired him.

In my opinion, it is one of the greatest books on agriculture yet written. His key message, which he observed at first hand in the agricultural practices in the Hunza valley, then part of India, now Pakistan, was that health is not merely the absence of disease but rather a vital state when an organism, plant, animal or human, is living in a dynamic balance with its external environment. His revelation was that the health of soil, plants, animals and people form one interconnected whole and the positive health which resulted from the practices of the peasant farmers of the Hunza valley, whom he referred to as his professors, enabled them to withstand and overcome external disease challenges.

This is an extraordinarily powerful idea, and one which corresponds with my own experience over more than 40 years as a sustainable farmer in west Wales. However, as the small community of St Kilda, a tiny island archipelago situated 50 miles north-west of the Outer Hebrides in Scotland experienced to their cost when they were inundated with Victorian tourists, their naive immune systems were no match for the plethora of viral and infectious diseases which the visitors introduced, as a result of which many of them died.

Fast forward to the 2020 Covid-19 epidemic, and we are experiencing something rather similar—a global population with a naive immune system which has had to be primed the hard way, by being infected with a virulent disease, which, for the lucky survivors, mobilised an immune response. Sadly, of course, not everyone has been in that category, so the question arises—does Howard's theory of positive health survive the Covid-19 experience? My answer would be a definite yes, because as the statistics reveal, the vast majority of those who have died were either very old or had a pre-existing health condition, whereas by contrast, the survivors have been almost without exception the healthy ones who probably ate better food, exercised more and generally lived in equilibrium with their environment.

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Food security

The other agricultural lesson which might be derived from Covid-19 would be the precariousness and insecurity of our globalised and industrialised food systems. Although it has been noted that in the UK and elsewhere the large-scale supermarkets with their centralised supply chains have just about managed to maintain continuity of food supply to the masses, the question has to be asked, is this what we really mean by food security? I say this because what has become clear over the last few weeks is that in relation to the food actually purchased from the supermarkets, the volume of which has dramatically increased because of the closure of food service and other collateral damage, the percentage of the intake of intensively produced commodity foods of questionable nutritional quality has significantly increased, at the expense of the sustainable, small scale and artisan food sector.

In parallel to the depressing impact of Covid making a system which was already intensive, industrial, globalised and damaging to public and environmental health, even worse, there has been an encouraging renaissance of public interest in the purchasing of local, sustainable and artisan foods. Whilst at the time of writing, this is still dwarfed by the aforementioned supermarket Goliath, nevertheless it is gathering momentum and is beginning to become a more significant element of the food market. It's as if, like animals that know when the tsunami is coming, we are hard wired at some deeper level to know that the nutritional quality of fresh, seasonal and locally sourced food is better for us and the planet, and that, critically, local food systems offer increased food security at a time of serious existential threats.

So is this the light at the end of the Covid tunnel? I suspect it might be, and that these emergent expressions of

interest in local, small scale and artisan food will continue to grow as more and more of us opt for healthier, more sustainable and resilient ways of nourishing ourselves by taking the actions I have described above.

My vision is for a new food economy with more and more of us growing a percentage of our own food, and preferentially purchasing in season and local food from local and sustainable farmers. This future food system will not be identical to those that I remember from my childhood in the '50s and '60s, since the world has changed since then. The internet and other related digital innovations including on-line marketing, and the emergence of farmers markets and community supported agriculture, are all expressions of the boundless innovation of humanity. So, let us hope that the farming community will prosper and come to play a more central role in our future food systems. Let the new food revolution flourish and thrive!

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