

How to reduce poverty and re-connect people to nature

March 5 2018, by Cameron Fioret



Farmer-led development projects in places like Tanzania, shown here, can increase access to food and water, and reconnect people to nature. Credit: Cecilia Schubert/flickr

Access to food and water —once considered common goods and a basic human right —are increasingly treated as commodities, like precious

metals or lumber. Instead of being necessities for life that are available to all, they are being kept from people who cannot afford them.

The perils of this commodification are rife —and sometimes tragically untold —yet several stories have survived.

Water and food issues in [Detroit](#), [the San Bernardino National Forest in California](#), [the Global South](#) and [First Nations communities in northern Ontario](#) speak to the negative effects of treating food and water as mere commodities.

In each of these crises, people were separated from the basic necessities of food and water, leading to instability, strife and suffering. What's more, people have been separated —alienated —from each other.

The current free market economic system has promoted and perpetuated such inequality, and it would be illogical to say that it can lead us to a solution. But [development](#), when done well and from the ground up, can improve people's lives by connecting them to their environment, food production processes and other people in their communities.

How did we get here?

The commodification of food and water began to take shape more than three decades ago, when Western governments, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank embraced largely unfettered free market policies.

As governments deregulated their food and water industries, these goods moved [out of public control and into the hands of the few](#).

These actions spurred entrepreneurship in water and food, in selling necessities for life for a profit. Of course, they are able to do so

precisely because water and food are essential to life.

This change in direction further separated people in developing countries from the environment, from their production of food and from each other. It changed the way people saw nature and each other.

When peering through the current free market lens, nature, food, water, land or people themselves are viewed as merely something to extract monetary value from. Food and water have been commodities for a while, but an appeal to history is not a legitimate reason to maintain a harmful system.



A peasant farmer grows vegetables at a small farm near São Paulo, Brazil.
Credit: José Reynaldo da Fonseca/Wikimedia

Pressing impacts, making change

The impacts of commodifying food and water are occurring today and are pressing. [Puerto Rico](#) is in the midst of a food and water crisis. In Canada, Nestlé has been [bottling water on expired permits in Ontario](#), leading to public pressure to not privatize water. These cases are similar because, while both areas are facing food and water commodification and development issues, people are protesting to enact positive change in their communities.

If we are to see change, it must begin at the community level, later unite with others and *then* lead to pressing one's government to act for the good of all people. In [Puerto Rico](#) and [Ontario](#), community-led protests have tried to effect positive change —people are fighting back.

Development work should aim to improve life by connecting people to their environment, food production processes and other people in their communities. Doing so could promote the importance of the environment, including food and water, and foster a protective relationship that prevents a resource's exploitation, whether through destruction or privatization. [La Via Campesina](#), the world's largest mass movement of peasants, advocates for a similar strategy.

Getting involved

One approach that works well is participatory development, where communities and development professionals work together to reach their goals and find solutions to their problems.

Farmer-led research is but one example of participatory, bottom-up, community-based development. Groups like the [Practical Farmers of Iowa](#) and the [Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario \(EFAO\)](#) do work that tries to reconnect people with the environment, production processes and each other through their research programs.

In some areas, the practice of development has moved away from the top-down approach. [An analysis of farmer-led research](#), conducted in Africa, Central America and Southeast Asia, has found that farmer-led development work promotes interconnectivity between people and a strong exchange of ideas. The study found that participatory development, such as farmer-led research, grew community, a connection with the natural world, and harnessed people's creativity and ingenuity.

Critics of the participatory development family of approaches might say it lacks rigour and the necessary expertise to enact meaningful change.

But I have found in my experience with the EFAO, as well as research in participatory development, that continued bottom-up collaboration between locals and professionals as mutually beneficial. Locals benefit from the expertise and support of professionals, and professionals benefit from the perspective and knowledge that locals offer. The participatory approach grounds academics and scientists who often approach these issues with an abstracted, solely technocratic distance.

The increased collaboration between locals and development professionals makes more explicit the public's disdain for the privatization and commodification of [food](#) and [water](#). A participatory approach also engages with, and uses, local knowledge and practices.

Development professionals must shirk the current economic model that has led us to our current predicament of rampant inequality and

environmental degradation. Embracing the *status quo* framework cannot guide us away from this problem that it has initiated.

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