

Bernward Geier interviews:

Vandana Shiva on Rio+20, IFOAM BioFach & more....

BY BERNWARD GEIER

Vandana Shiva talks about her hopes for Rio+20 and organic agriculture in India and the wider world.

In the light of the forthcoming Rio +20 summit people are increasingly saying "It's hopeless - we've had enough talking". Do you have hope for any substantial outcome?

The Rio Summit 20 years ago was driven significantly by movements, which were able to influence and shape major international treaties like the Biodiversity Convention. I hope that at Rio+20 movements will again be able to articulate the challenges of our times and the responses we need to make. It is doubtful whether the UN system and the governmental level will be able to respond the way they did 20 years ago. But we have to try and we have to give the "public sector" a chance



Considering that many movement and NGOs are trying to get their points across, what should be the key message from the organic movement?

I think the message that the organic movement needs to bring across at Rio +20 is that organic farming provides answers to all the ecological challenges facing us: the whole set of crises. It is the answer to the water crisis because organic soils don't need the level of irrigation that chemical ones do. It's also a key answer

to climate change. 40% of all greenhouse gas emissions come from unsustainable farming systems. It is an answer to biodiversity extinction and it is a solution to the poverty and food crises. Both the Green Revolution, and now GMOs, basically suck resources out of poor farmers and leave many hungry (as we see dramatically in India). Organic farming gets farmers away from dependencies on chemical companies, seed patent fees and banks and is more profitable. No matter which way you look at it, organic farming is the answer and since the IAASTD report ('The World Agriculture Report') no government has an excuse to ignore it any more.

In the context of food security what are the concrete actions we need now? We have the World Agriculture Report, but what action is needed to get where we need to go?

With regard to food security the first thing we need to do is get rid of the major distortions 'that make the system unsustainable'. The first distortion is subsidies.



THE CENTRAL QUESTION IS WHO WILL PRODUCE OUR FOOD IN THE FUTURE?

The second is high external inputs, paid for by both the taxpayer and the environment. The third distortion is exploitative pricing which leads to cheap prices that don't reflect the real costs of production. And, on the poverty side, we need to assure fair prices for farmers and bring back decentralized (meaning local and regional) food and farming systems.

You have recently written the book "Earth democracy". We now have the Occupy Movement. Is this earth democracy at its best?

It is indeed a living democracy movement with new themes that have started to sprout. In terms of its political principles it is definitely earth democracy in practice. I think the next step it needs to take is to promote fair "living economies", for which the Occupy Movement can become the change maker.

The Occupy Movement is very much driven by young people. In IFOAM there is also an emerging "Young Organics"

movement. You recently met some of these young activists in Bonn. How do you see the role of the youth in the organic movement?

If we look at any aspect of sustainability it's about maintaining the continuity of the earth's capacity to provide, and of human society to supply human needs. It all is also very much about the rights of future generations, which means the youth of today. The youth actually has to become the leaders for the transition we need to make to real sustainable societies. And the people in "Young Organics" are well qualified and positioned to take a leadership role.

In light of the triple crisis we face (climate, peak oil and food security) what could be the contribution of agriculture?

Well, the solutions for all the crises, which are obviously very connected and inter-related, will not come from Wall Street or the headquarters of the multinational corporations. The solutions will come from the land. Agriculture is showing us

an economic model of the way into the future, but only when it is practised ecologically and sustainably. I foresee that more people will work in agriculture and food production – even in the rich countries of the North! We need to return to an economy which is related to the real world, using real energy, the real talents of people and meeting their real needs. We need to develop new cooperative models of mutual support and solidarity. If we don't soon come up with concrete and definite solutions, we will see unrivalled conflicts.

In other words, it is not bankers and business managers, but farmers that hold the solutions in their hands?

Many people believe that farmers are not very educated, if not stupid. It is my mission and work to ensure that farmers, be they men or women, are not only respected but appreciated for what they do. If we don't give utmost recognition to their work, soon nobody will want to engage in farming. We are aware of the worldwide

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trends of people migrating to the big megapolises and young people who do not want to stay on the land and work it. That leads to the central question: who will produce our food in the future? Monoculture and industrial agriculture is wasting food. We waste up to 90% of nutrients and calories by feeding soya and cereals to animals. Grazing animals don't compete with human beings for food, while they provide us with food, energy and manure.

There is no sustainable agriculture without the combination of arable farming, animals and trees. We have divided and isolated the system. We have moved to monocultures on the fields and massive cages of animals in industrial type factories. In organic agriculture animals, soil and human beings are symbiotic and create synergies.

You coordinated and published the latest and uniquely comprehensive analysis and study of the negative impact of GMOs under the title "The emperor has new clothes". What's new in this?

What's new is that for the first time all the studies, experiences and sound scientific evidence showing the countless negative and destructive impacts of genetic engineering have been collected, compiled and published in one study. Some 30 organizations from around the world, from Uruguay to Russia and Australia have

contributed. The study is well referenced and comes to the clear conclusion that GMOs make no contribution to food security: that they do not, as their proponents claim, "feed the world". Yet they have a devastating impact on the environment, the economy and the social fabric of our societies and reduce our choices. We have to stop the further spread of GMOs and begin a step by step move towards a GMO free world.

India is the country of the year at Bio-Fach. In a nutshell how do you see the development of organic agriculture in India?

The official and governmental institutions are playing an important and sincere role in promoting organic agriculture. Their problem is they aim and need to be mainstream. Actually their aim should be based on IFOAM's four principles of organic agriculture and organic farming should be coordinated by our Agricultural Ministry and not by the Ministry for Exports.

What is your view on the position that India should produce organic food for Indians and not for export. Where are market opportunities here?

First we do produce organic food for ourselves. This is what we practice in our Navdanya movement. Most of India's hungry people live in rural com-

munities and most of the malnourished children live in rural areas too. The first priority must be to get them fed and they ought to be fed well, that is to say organically. I don't see that organic production faces a conflict between market opportunity and food security. There are great market opportunities because it is a business with good profits, which is why giant chains like Walmart become involved. But these chains do not foster the creation of an organic movement from the bottom up to meet the needs of the "poorer" Indian people.

Where do you see the role of IFOAM today? Should there be changes or new priorities in the future?

I see IFOAM as our global body playing a leading role in reshaping the direction of agriculture and giving confidence to regional initiatives and assisting local farmers to work together more. I see a future role of IFOAM in combining the principles of sustainability that organic agriculture carries with the principles of an honest food system. We need to respond to the false promises of GMO food, manipulated and unfair prices and the centralised control of food production and distribution and ensure that the solutions we believe in get heard. IFOAM can play a central role in this. ■