
Book Review

Reviewed by Maarten Van Opstal

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Ethical Sourcing in the Global Food System
by Stephanie Barrientos and Catherine Dolan
Published 2006
by Earthscan Publications, London, UK
ISBN: 978-1-84407-199-9

Ethical sourcing in the global food system primarily focuses on the social dimensions of ethical food sourcing. The book offers a wide variety of approaches. It deals with the point of view of academics, unions, workers, small producers, corporations, NGOs and audits. The book clearly concentrates on more marginalised producers and workers, often overlooked by conventional academic and policy analysis. The authors introduce the reader into the dynamics, features and effects of our new global food system. Is it still possible to know what you eat? Do we still have a real choice or do we accept selections? Global neo-liberal policies dominate the food business. Our food system is characterised by a fast acceleration of the modern supermarket model, based on discount prices, a large volume and centralised distribution systems. All these features have a devastating effect on small producers and workers' rights. Especially in the south, livelihoods, capacity, access to markets, health and safety of small workers and producers are threatened by our north-south relations and the development of global market regulated food trade. The widespread adoption of neo-liberal policies has undermined the chances of many small workers and producers in the south and north. Conditions and terms for price quality and delivery are dominated by large corporate buyers.

Today a large diversity of fair trade products is available. Fair trade puts emphasis on the situation of small producers and waged workers, who are directly affected by the global restructuring of agro-food markets and the trading of corporate buyers. The last decade meant a boom of fair-trade and ethical products (especially organic or 'bio' trade). The impact of mainstreaming is getting clear and a change towards marketing, 'brand thinking' and balancing of producer and consumer needs has been part of this evolution and struggle for life. Public concerns about things like food safety, worker's rights and food miles are putting more and more pressure on companies to implement ethical codes in their supply chain, putting forward an interesting cultural paradox. On one side, more consumers are looking for control over their own food and choices. On the other hand, this happens in a globalised food system, more and more controlled by large food manufacturers and supermarkets, trying to fulfil our desire for low-price, easily available quality food.

But who does really benefit from fair trade? Direct financial benefits often tend to be restricted to members of the producer organisation. How can we guarantee that trade

really benefits a community as a whole? Fair trade should stimulate capacity building for small producers through e.g. apprenticeship and by offering alternatives for mainstream supply chains. The authors clarify the importance of ethical and fair trade as an oppositional movement. It can demystify our global relations of exchange. Fair trade challenges conventional market principles and competitiveness based on price solely, creating alternatives for socially and environmentally destructive business practices. It should promote sustainable development and 'empowerment' of people, through education and public awareness of rights and ethical codes. Barrientos and Dolan launch a call for more guarantee of worker involvement in policy and audit and more interaction between worker and employer through a thorough and decent in depth qualitative research and an audit of working and trading conditions. This kind of audit does not end in checklists and managerial communication or data, but it looks for real insights in the concerns and needs of workers and the true status of their rights by ensuring an open atmosphere and active engagement of all parties involved, throughout the auditing process. In this way the audit enables 'empowerment', a growing to better interrelationships between workers and employers and an involvement in the audit of all parties concerned. Chapter 8 - on participatory social auditing - offers a strong critique on the flaws of the traditional 'dominant' top-down audit approach. This approach often overlooks deeper problems of marginalised workers with more temporary work. The authors emphasise the shortcomings of quantitative 'snapshot' auditing. They argue the need for a bottom-up approach based on modern sociological and anthropological participative methodologies and insights. Throughout the book the authors actively promote and apply a gender economy approach. Regulatory bodies traditionally formed labour policies with a permanent, usually male worker in mind. Women will become more and more vulnerable in our neo-liberal global food system, combining reproductive work with temporary and informal work.

Organic trade is one of the fastest growing segments of the global food industry and represents a larger share of the global market than fair trade. It has also been more 'infected' by the side-effects of mainstreaming than fair trade. Dangers of mainstreaming include more active profit-focused corporate control. Going into the mainstream also means a potential reinforcement of the north-south inequalities. Organic principles do not include minimum prices and exchange conditions *per se*. As a result they do not challenge transnational corporate domination. They can also be more easily used as a marketing tool for mainstream companies or abused for corporate 'green washing'. Although producers may benefit from long-term contracts and prices above market levels, organic trade tends to ignore additional fair trade services like capacity-building. Fair trade has limited chance to be used as a profit-oriented niche marketing scheme, if it ensures minimum price guarantees and other trade restrictions. Business-philanthropy remains a large danger for ethical trade. Fair trade labels should watch out for not being used as a welfare mask for corporate greed.

Book Review

Reviewed by Luc Hens

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1 The Health Practitioner's Guide to Climate Change. Diagnosis and Cure
by Jenny Griffiths, Mala Rao, Fiona Adshead and Allison Thorpe
Published 2009
by Earthscan Publications, London, UK
ISBN: 978-1844077298

Although health effects of climate changes were among the first ones that were described in the early publications of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, these are still only known with a high degree of uncertainty. Different reasons exist to explain this finding:

- While a great deal of research has taken place on the geophysical impacts of climate change, health impacts received much less attention from researchers.
- Health impacts of climate changes differ around the globe: in sub-Saharan Africa they differ from those in the temperate regions of the Northern hemisphere.
- They are the result of a series of physical and environmental cascade effects, each of which adds to the uncertainty with which one can predict the consequent (health and other) effects. Moreover, their prediction is based on a far going interdisciplinary effort, which is not the strongest trademark of contemporary science.

In spite of these limitations, this book is an interesting attempt to overview the issues and elements that relate human health with climate changes. It contains two main parts. The first one contains four chapters that offer information on climate change, its impacts on health, and the importance of the natural environment for human health, and the health benefits of sustainable development and a low-carbon society. The second part entails eight chapters on what health practitioners can do in everyday lives, at work and in the community. It is about the role of health workers in influencing the local, national and intergovernmental policies on climate changes. It stresses the unique role of health practitioners in influencing and leading society.

In this way the book does not offer a catalogue of statistics of the health costs of heat-wavers, extreme weather events, air quality health effects, allergens and food security. Rather it takes the wider perspective of the societal role of health practitioners on the issue: how they can advocate policies on climate changes, how to make health services sustainable, how to contribute to sustainable communities, and how to support local, national and global action. In short, the book does not provide details on how emergency plans should be set up, but rather advocates low carbon communities, green cities and how to go there. In doing so, it cultivates a strong British point of view.

The book is very well presented. All chapters are provided with a summary and an up to date list of references. Box texts in each chapter summarise the key points that are discussed more at length in the main text.

This is a book that primarily targets health practitioners and students. They might be slightly disappointed by the limited degree of immediate practical application. However, the book is of interest for a wider audience including climate change researchers, and policy makers to name just a few.

2 A New Agenda for Sustainability

by Kurt Aagaard Nielsen, Bo Elling, Maria Figueroa, and Erling Jelsø

Published 2010

by Ashgate, Surrey, UK

ISBN: 9780754679769 (hbk)

ISBN: 9780754699361 (ebk)

More than two decades after the World Commission on Environment and Development posted the concept at the scene of international decision makers, the content of sustainable development (SD) is still evolving. By the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s, everyone who thought that he deserved some respect in the discussion, launched his own definition. By 1990 already over 300 definitions of SD were published. The UNCED discussion, characterised by the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, aimed at providing the SD concept with more detail and more operational feasibility, in a context of international consensus. This was followed by a period that put emphasis on the contradictory character of the elements of SD. By the turn of the millennium, the emphasis shifted to the economic dimension of SD. ("Economic growth within acceptable impacts on nature"). Parallel with this discussion on the core content of SD, there were a long series of attempts to measure and to make SD more objective. This allowed to provide decision makers with instruments to realise SD.

This is the background which makes a regular updating of SD and its associated trends necessary and interesting. This book offers such an update in three parts.

Part 1 deals in four chapters with the conceptual aspects of SD. Different options to define SD are presented and its notion as a necessary global issue is developed. This section entails a most interesting chapter on the ethical aspects of SD and their application to the genetically modified organisms debate.

Part 2 relates SD to political and institutional actions and activities. It is about "how to make society more sustainable?". The focus is on critical sectors for SD, that include chemicals policy (accent on the European framework for the Registration, Evaluation, and Authorisation of Chemicals – REACH), agriculture and food production, mental health, and technology.

The four chapters of part 3 explore paths for social change towards sustainability. It contains chapters on health and mobility but also on Local Agendas 21 and democracy.

The concluding chapter not only provides a summary of the chapters but also aims to detect emerging directions for both research and policy. Particular attention is given to: research on sustainability and health, interdisciplinary, social responsibility, and the sustainability – democracy nexus.

This book offers a wide variety of perspectives on SD and is written from a most interdisciplinary perspective, but remains to the point and does not embrace every detail. It shows that problems of organising and planning for a more sustainable society are complex and require new approaches to research and policy. It advocates public participation in these processes, but at the same time points to its limitations. This approach provides a range of valuable insights for a wide audience of researchers, policy makers and advisors, and students who care for inter- and transdisciplinary approaches on environment, social aspects, and economy.

The book was the result of an international conference on a new agenda for sustainable development of contemporary societies, that was held at the Roskilde University in 2007. This colours the book: what is presented is a North European view on critical issues in SD, but written with a universal outlook. It is a most worthwhile addition to the international mosaic of visions on SD.

3 Studies in Human Ecology

by I.M. Pires, M. Gilbert and L. Hens (Editors)

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by Publishing House for Science and Technology Ha Noi, Vietnam

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Human ecology emerged for the first time in sociology. During the 1920s the term referred to a sociological approach that was most similar to the way ecologists studied natural ecosystems. Contemporary human ecology in Europe dates from the early 1970s. It was one of the interdisciplinary academic approaches that in the aftermath of the 1968 events should revive traditional thinking at universities and research centres. Today, almost 100 years after its emergence, human ecology is still a discipline looking for its authenticity. This is less related to its necessity (many scientists are convinced that interdisciplinary approaches to complex problems that link humans with their environment are most wanted), but merely to its competition with other, intrinsically disciplinary, approaches that address human ecological issues.

The search of human ecology for its own identity is the main guiding theme in this new publication on "Studies in human ecology". In 10 chapters that are structured in three sections, it highlights a variety of aspects of this discussion. The first part is about past, present and future of human ecology. It entails chapters on its history, but also on its competition with other areas of research that address the human-environment interface, such as ecological economics and political ecology. There is ample attention for the relevance of human ecology for contemporary environmental discussions of global problems, including the global environmental crisis.

Part 2 is about new additions to the multidisciplinary character of human ecology. Here, its relation with health ecology, anthropological (molecular) genetics and landscape ecology are addressed.

Part 3 is about applications of interdisciplinary studies. The chapters show in which way human ecology is useful to evaluate policies that target sustainable development and to handle environmental management systems. This section also entails an almost controversial chapter on teaching human ecology.

Interesting is the concluding chapter of the book. It offers a 13 points program that is the core of how European universities that offer human ecology (master and PhD) programs look at its specificities. Among them are the reciprocal relations between humans and their environment, the wide interpretation of 'environment', that includes not only the biophysical but also the social, cultural, technical, managerial and policy dimensions, the multi/inter/trans- disciplinary nature of human ecology, and its target to contribute to solutions for complex problems in the environment – sustainable development interface.

19 Human ecologists, from Europe, South-East Asia, and Latin-America contributed to this book, which overall offers a fair and multi faceted idea of what human ecology means today. It is most interesting and warmly recommended reading for students, researchers, trainers and professionals in human ecology world wide.

4 Environmental Chemistry: a global perspective
by Gary W. van Loon and Stephen J. Duffy
Published 2010
Oxford University Press Inc., New York, USA
ISBN: 978-0-19-922886-7

Whether you discuss the environmental aspects that are associated with wine production, or the breakdown of stratospheric ozone, a basic, and applied understanding of chemistry is an essential prerequisite. This textbook is just about this applied chemistry background, and it does so in an outstanding way.

One main reason for this remarkable quality is that the authors start from a vision: the environmental chemistry laboratory is the Earth, with its mixture of air, water, and soil phases, made up in living and non-living components. As the subtitle to the book explicitly indicates, the outlook is worldwide. The chemistry behind this is complex, intriguing, and demands a most serious study.

This book is an excellent companion to this journey. It is organised in three main parts: the Earth's atmosphere, the hydrosphere, and the terrestrial environment. The sections on water and air are the most complete ones. Next to an introduction the atmosphere section deals with processes in the different air layers: the stratosphere (ozone depletion), the troposphere (smog, acid and other precipitation, aerosols), urban and indoor air quality, and the global climate. The chapters on the hydrosphere include species in aquatic systems, gases, organic matter, metals, and colloids in water, water microbiology and the chemistry of water treatment. The section on the terrestrial environment is short. It entails contributions on soil properties, waste and organics in the land. To the extent of what is reasonable, all these problems are quantified. Over all, this textbook provides a most comprehensive overview about the chemical basis of the global environmental problems at stake today.

The main strength of the book is that it provides insight in the basic physical and chemical mechanisms that underlie environmental processes. It does so in a systematic, transparent and accessible way. To this end the format of the book contributes. Each chapter entails a summary, boxes with core information that highlights main points, a wealth of well selected tables and figures, problems, and references that are meant as additional resources. Among them, a series of (trustable) web references is most useful

for the environmental student of today. Original are the “Fermi” questions that are seeded over the chapters. Fermi questions do not require a short numerical answer that is right or wrong. They are merely about how the user is able to handle the information provided by the chapter, with intuition and reasoning to come up with an educated conclusion. Examples of Fermi questions are: “What area of land would be required to provide fuel for an automobile engine to run on ethanol for one year?” or “What volume of fuel would be consumed during the morning rush hour in Brussels? And in Cotonou?”.

The book also has its limitations. The air-water-soil compartmentalisation, that is fundamental for the structure of this work, is obviously a far going reduction of reality. It is most favourable for a systematic approach, but it is less indicated for those who are interested in the relationships between the compartments and the ecological cycles.

In spite of these limitations the Canadian authors provide with this 3rd edition a mature and up-to-date textbook.

This excellent and comprehensive summary of chemistry and physics on a wide range of environmental issues is not only strongly advocated to readers who are interested in a rigorous introduction to environmental chemistry, but the book is undoubtedly also a mayor help for students in interdisciplinary environmental programmes. A must in any university library today.