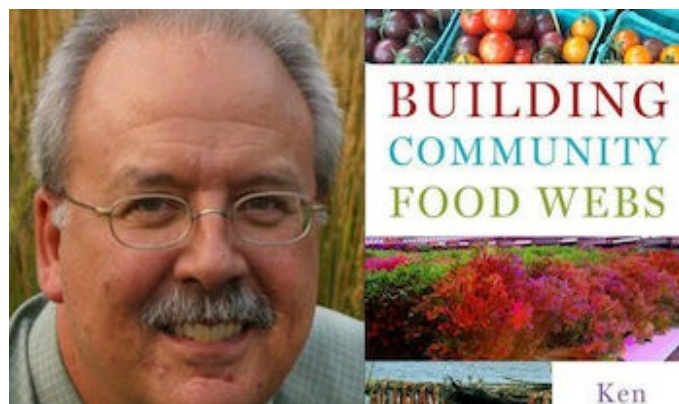




The Solari Report

March 21, 2023

**Food Series:
Community Food Webs:
Building Out the Parallel System
with
Ken Meter**



Pete Kennedy: Welcome to *The Solari Food Series* audiocast. This is your host, Pete Kennedy. With the accelerating deterioration and reliability and quality of the industrial food system, it is imperative to build out a parallel food system – one that produces healthy food per region, state, or community.

The parallel food system will have short supply chains, laws, and infrastructure geared toward greater self-sufficiency, and neighbor-to-neighbor commerce.

Our guest today describes the construction of that system by building community food webs. He is Ken Meter, who has had a rich 50-year career as a food systems analyst, integrating market analysis, business development, systems thinking, and social concerns. He has worked throughout his career on inner city and rural community capacity building.

His local economic analyses have promoted local food networks in 144 regions, 41 states, two provinces, and four tribal nations. He is also the author of a book, *Building Community Food Webs*, a book capturing success stories in the building of community food webs around the US.

Without further ado, Ken, welcome to *The Food Series* audiocast.

Ken Meter: It's great to be here, Pete. Thank you for having me.

Kennedy: You have an opening chapter in your book on the extractive farm economy and the plundering of rural America. Could you describe what the extractive economy is and give the history of it?

Meter: I'll preface that by saying I think I'm one of the few people in the world who has really tried to measure how that has happened and put some numbers to that.

I want to, first of all, say that most of the food projects I've worked with at the community level-those who take an economic view of what is happening go further. They have more success, and they are able to do more transformative work because they are actioning a new economy. That is one of the reasons I think it's important to know how the mainstream economy is making it difficult for us.

Inside of my research, which started by talking to farmers back in 1978-1979 who transformed my complete sense of economics, as well as farming was the food system we have been very efficient at 'sucking' wealth out of rural America, and it's been doing so quite steadily since around 1973.

In many ways, that is not a surprise. By now, you look at many Main Street stores and you see empty storefronts, boarded up windows, and a lot of the population has left. At the time I started looking at this, very few people were tracking that. I think that most farmers were in this framework of, "I'm getting bigger tractors and I'm getting more land, so things are pretty good," but at the same time, that very process of expanding led farmers to rely more and more on resources that their community could not provide. Tractors got bigger, but then they are coming from further away, and the parts may be flown in from Atlanta overnight to fix your tractor. Or maybe there isn't anybody who is able to repair that tractor in your community, or you are more dependent on fertilizers or chemical inputs or fuel that are not sourced in your community but rather coming to you from a global system that is quite monopolized.

I think the key that I found was that farmers have been paying interest on loans, which at one point, was interest that you may pay to a family member or to a local banker, and then that money was reinvested back into the community. But over time, it has become much more where you are giving money to a financial system that is global that would just as soon move the money to Paris or Abu Dhabi rather than to your small town.

I found when looking at the data that farmers have paid more by interest on loans than they've gotten in farm subsidies rather steadily since about 1973. So that whole process of taking on debt, which makes the farm more vulnerable, also contributes to financial resources flowing away from rural America.

Kennedy: So, this extractive system is based on commodity agriculture. As you looked at it, describe the effect that commodity agriculture has on the rural economy as opposed to an economy you were alluding to earlier where the imports were more local and the outputs are destined for local area. Describe commodity agriculture and the effect it has.

Meter: Let me start by saying that many people listening to this podcast (or

reading this) are people who worked very hard to scrounge up very precious foods, either by growing it themselves or by finding a farmer or some source of high-quality food that nourishes us in ways that the commodity food we get doesn't. I think that we have all had that experience of striving for better food.

William Cronon is an environmental historian who I really love. He wrote a book called, *Nature's Metropolis*. It's a wonderful history of Chicago and how the economy of Chicago shaped the growth of that city. He made the point that the reason for having commodity trade is that if someone can be in Chicago at the grain exchange and can buy corn from wherever they find it in the world – whether it's Buenos Aires or Duluth or France – they can understand what the quality is without looking at it. They can say, "It's number two corn," and they know that it has certain attributes.

It allows people to buy and sell things at a distance without knowing what is going on specifically. That is just the opposite of what we want to do with our foods; we want to have a relationship with the farmer, and want to know who is growing our food and know their practices. Many of us work in a farmer's field to help them with weeding or what have you. Many of us invest in a farm so that the farmer can build a new infrastructure. But this whole movement that we are part of where people are trying to connect directly with each other around food, and become more personable and more connected and more supportive of each other in the way we grow and trade and eat food, is a very different thing than the commodity system.

In the commodity system, people can make decisions in Chicago that affect the whole world. That is what makes extractive economy possible.

Kennedy: Speak about the role the commodity exchange plays in this. I remember talking to a dairy farmer years ago. He thought the price of milk was based on the price of block cheddar cheese in the commodity exchanges, even though the trouble with the milk pricing system is complex enough so that the farmers know they are getting 'shafted', but they can't figure out exactly how.

What is the role of the commodity exchanges in extracting wealth from the rural communities?

Meter: I don't have much familiarity with commodity exchanges. My main connection with that is I used to be a grains helper for the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, and I would sample the grain that was brought into the grain exchange to be analyzed, and then its attributes would be recorded so that people could buy or sell it.

I think the commodity traders are just the 'tip of the iceberg' of a larger structure that is really about taking capacity away from rural America and putting it in the hands of financiers and brokers and traders. The commodity exchanges are people who buy and sell the grains in massive quantities on very short notice. It's part of the commodities system to make those deals.

There is plenty of integrity in how grain is traded on the grain exchange because there is a lot of assurance of the quality of what you are trading and the people who work in there. They have developed a real sense of relational trust where you have to be very true to your word. Those things make the commodity system work despite its flaws.

I remember in 2008, I was sitting at a table with a staffer at a nonprofit who worked in food issues. We were talking about the crazy economy when commodity prices were rising so quickly. We were talking about what came to be known as the global housing financial crisis, but that affected commodity prices because commodity traders who had lost money in housing loans took their money out of the mortgage market and decided to buy commodities because they thought that was a more stable investment. That raised the price of corn artificially, and that made it more difficult for people raising cord-fed livestock to pay their bills. It also made it more expensive for consumers to buy food that was based on corn or any other commodity that came through that system.

What was really stunning to me was that we were talking about this crisis and what was going on, and a person at the table next to us was sitting with his laptop open. He walked over to us after about 20 minutes of hearing us talk. He said, "Can you folks tell me what is going on?"

We said we really weren't sure, but we invited him into the conversation. It turned out that he was a grain trader working out of a coffeehouse with his

laptop making grain trades internationally, and he didn't know what was happening.

He was looking to nonprofit people to help him understand that. I think that is one of the problems with having this distance trade. If I were to go to you and say, "I want to buy a quarter hog from you," I wouldn't know who you are, I wouldn't know your farm, and we wouldn't have a relationship of trust based on that.

When you are sitting in a 'cubbyhole' and going to the coffeehouse for a grain exchange and trading globally, there are many things that you just don't know.

Kennedy: You were a journalist for a time. Talk about centralization of the food supply. This went to the international level, especially with the creation of the World Trade Organization in the mid 1990's. What are your recollections about how that came about and the effect it's had on the local farm economy?

Meter: We are starting to realize that many of the nonprofit activist leaders of that time – when the great WTO was formed – were right. We said, "If you have totally free trade, we are going to lose farm families, we are going to lose real communities, and we are going to lose some control over our food supply."

We were very much 'pooh-poohed' at that time, but as a journalist, I went to Brussels to cover one of the meetings that was supposed to transform the general trade talks into the World Trade Organization. So, I saw the spectacle of 800 journalists coming from around the world and having a very tight security installment so that the people who made those decisions could move and talk freely in a very secure area without the rest of us being around.

I witnessed police fire-hosing demonstrators on the street very viscerally. On a cold December morning, they were blasting water from firehoses onto demonstrators to stop their demonstration because they were marching down the street. I was watching this as a journalist.

What was interesting about that was that the belief in free trade was that if we lowered all these barriers and got the government out of our lives in some respects, people would make more money and make rural America more

prosperous. But people didn't realize that would also take more money out of rural America because there would be more concentrated power and more monopolies. In terms of trade, we have turned over the decision-making about trade.

Government officials who are elected and somewhat accountable to their constituents, the professionals who meet in Brussels or Geneva or wherever, can make technical decisions based on their view of the science, which is often very much corrupted by who has money to pay for research or by professional trackers or researchers, but they can be very good competent people making those decisions. It's just that they have pressures on them to conform to a system that keeps things flowing with minimum interference, and it keeps monopoly power intact. There is not much they can do about that, and they don't have any accountability to their constituencies, so they are basically accountable to other professionals perhaps, and most likely, to the people who might hire them in the future.

The whole process of saying, "If we lower trade barriers, we will be more prosperous," was a fallacy, and now we are starting to see that. I think that most of rural America understands that was a bad decision, and we have to come up with some better ways of protecting farmers and protecting rural communities than we ever had. Also, we had this libertarian mentality that says, "I can do whatever I want to do, and I don't want anybody interfering with me," became very tough conflict points.

Kennedy: I always thought that the WTO treaty was thousands and thousands of pages. If it's only about free trade, that is one thing, but it's basically highly-regulated trade in favor of the corporations and in favor of the multi-national interests.

Meter: In many ways, it was a process of allocating international copyrights so that if you came up with an invention, a new technology, or a new fertilizer, those patents would be protected globally. I think that was at the core of many of those negotiations, making it easier for monopolies to dominate global trade by owning the process – not only owning patents, but also owning the decision process about safety and eliminating the chance for public authorities who are responsive to their populations to intervene on behalf of their constituents.

Kennedy: Let's go back to the US economy: You were working in agriculture at the time. Earl Butz made his famous remarks about, "Get big or get out," and, "We are going to plant fence row to fence row."

What were the events that brought that about, and what were the effects of that policy?

Meter: I think we remember what Earl Butz said, and we actually only remember part of what he said. The other part of what he said was, "We are going to find you permanent markets abroad if you only plant fence row to fence row."

Farmers did plant fence row to fence row, but the permanent markets were an illusion; they never really happened.

That whole crisis grew out of the OPEC energy crisis, so it was caught up in our dependence on fossil fuels. At that point, the OPEC nations decided to restrict oil production because they wanted to jack up the price, and for whatever reasons they had globally to try to tweak the United States or tweak Europe, that was what they decided to do. That happened when the Soviet Union struggled because their distribution program had broken down, and their production had been off for a few years. So, they were facing massive shortages of grain in the Soviet Union.

Our political leaders decided that one way to pull out of part of the crisis was lining us up at the gas pump, waiting for two or three hours to buy gas to get our cars filled up, which some people are experiencing now. It was quite commonplace at that time. The gas was so scarce.

I should add that a barrel of oil back then cost \$60 a barrel in current dollars, so it was a much lower price than what we have today.

As we were buying oil at inflated prices, more and more dollars were flowing abroad to the Middle East. Our farmers were paying more to grow their crops and livestock, and Russia needed to buy grain. Russia made it known that they were in the market to buy grain, and the American USDA decided, "We are going to get farmers to grow more grain, and that will allow us to get dollars

back. Russia can pay for that grain in dollars, and that will bring dollars back to the US economy, it will alleviate pressure on Russian people by avoiding starvation, and it will also set the flow of dollars out of the country and to the Middle East.”

It was also a very cynical policy in the sense that they did this to encourage farmers to get larger, to get more acreage, to plant and harvest more, to acquire bigger equipment, and to compete with their neighbors for the land. So, it was a crisis that was manipulated into persuading farmers that they would be better off if they got larger and they could get more markets and could sell at higher prices. It was all based on the prices being high because of a short spurt in prices that happened for about two years in 1973 and 1974.

After two years, Russia stopped buying grain. It was mostly wheat, but it was also a lot of corn. When they stopped buying, the price collapsed. Then you had farmers taking on new debt, and had expanded their farms. Maybe they bought out their neighbor. Now the prices were so bad that they couldn't pay those debts back. So over time, that led to what we learned was the Farm Credit Crisis of the mid 1980's, which is when I was starting to learn about rural issues as a journalist. That is when that bill came due; it took about 12 years for that to play out.

You had young farmers who bought into this mentality, and found they repay their loans. We had many bankruptcies, foreclosures, and big turmoil in rural America. That grew out of that crisis and the way that our policymakers manipulated the crisis to make things happen in the interest of the larger system and the global monopolies, but not in the interest of rural communities.

Kennedy: I remember going to the Chicago Mercantile Exchange in the mid 1990's. I was talking to a farm group from Nebraska. Someone in that group said the biggest holder of farmland in Nebraska was the Prudential Insurance Corporation. That was a result of all the foreclosures that came out of this policy – the ‘Get Big or Get Out’ policy – that started in the 1970's.

Talk about the loss of farm income. How much has this commodity-based agricultural policy meant to the rural economy where the markets are abroad instead of local?

Meter: It's a rather distressing story. My book goes into great detail about that. We are lucky in this country to have very good data about the farm economy that many countries don't have. I can track back to 1910 with the profitability of US farming as a whole sector.

What is interesting is that farmers today – at least at the time that I did those charts – were earning less money farming than they were in 1910. That was after more than doubling productivity. So, all those investments in better chemicals and better information technology and better software and bigger tractors and combines, and so on made farms more productive, but it didn't make them more profitable. So, you see a steady decline in profitability from 1910 to the present, but then punctuated by World War I.

In World War I, we had to mobilize the production of food to ship to Europe because of the devastation in Europe. We had World War II, and especially after World War II, when we were loaning money to Europe. We were paying countries through the Marshall Plan so they could buy commodities from American farmers. That was the same time that farmers were getting fertilizers and new tractors as a technology, and many farm people, after being soldiers, wanted to leave the land; they wanted to move to cities.

We had areas of prosperity, but they were basically based on external crises. The other two crises would be the global housing crisis, which we already talked about, and the OPEN energy crisis. That is when American farmers had been profitable for a few years, but the whole rural system has been squeezing money further and further out.

All told, between interest payments that exceed the value of farm subsidies coming in, the payments farmers have made to buying fertilizer when, 100 years ago, farmers could create their own fertilizer by rotating crops and livestock manure and building their own fertility, which were expenses not necessary 100 years ago and was taking money out of the community. More machinery is being taken out, and more fuel is being taken out.

I tracked \$4 trillion leaving the US farm sector in the last 100 years. That is the value in 2019 dollars.

Four trillion dollars is not a great deal when it comes to the national budget, but it is more than the value of all the farms that still survive in the US today. Their total assets combined are \$3 trillion. So, that loss is bigger than the rest of the farms that are left. Of course, we don't know what happened to the farms that are not in the farm sector and don't report to the farm census anymore because they are gone. That data is only a small part of the story because I can't tell you how much farmers spend on machinery. That is a lot of farm input that I cannot get data for. We also don't know what has happened with taxation and how that has taken money out of rural America or favored some style of farming over others; we don't have public data about that.

I would say that this is a 'scary' number of how large it is in terms of rural America, but also an easy one for a Washington DC policymaker to ignore when you are talking about multi-trillion-dollar funding programs, which is a tragedy for rural America.

At the time I started seeing this with the help of farmers in Green Isle, Minnesota it was subtler, but now it is very obvious that much of rural America has been hollowed out.

Kennedy: Could you talk about the Farm Bill? You just mentioned subsidies provided to the commodity agriculture while the 'community agriculture' has basically received nothing. If you would, go into the Farm Bill and the policy of subsidizing commodity agriculture.

Meter: There are several phases of our policy. I think that my favorite phase was the New Deal policy of the 1930's that was written by white farmers who had land after several attempts to write farm bills failed under FDR. That had some limitations because it didn't take into account the needs of black sharecroppers or white sharecroppers; it didn't take into account the needs of Latino farmworkers; it didn't take into account women's needs because they were viewed as a subsidiary of their husbands in that way. So it had some shortcomings, but it was a very clever policy where grain prices were held steady and high because the government retained the reserve of grain that was owned by the government and it was something that the government could sell if the markets were to get out of 'whack'.

By holding the price high and offering loans to farmers on favorable terms so that they could get into farming or buy their seed on terms that were not exploitive, it meant that farmers were thriving very well after the Depression and after the recovery, and it meant the Federal government was actually earning money from the farm program because the system was quite stable. What was paid in covered all of the costs of the program.

We've had some changes since then because now we have the more competitive economy where the US doesn't have the ability to set prices at a certain level anymore because of globalization. We now have more competitors who can undercut those policies and undercut those prices. We are further from our farm economy; we have fewer policymakers who understand agriculture, and that makes a difference.

Also, in the last two to three years, the USDA has become much better at reaching out to farmers and crew leaders to say, "What do we need to do differently?" So, there is now an investment in experiments in how to build food systems and how to build connections between producers and consumers and how to build better and smaller meat processing plants that are safe and healthy and responsive to local markets.

We are getting more and more money for regional food business clusters to help food leaders and food businesses work together – private and nonprofit – to build food systems that are responsive to their neighbors. That has happened over the last two years.

The other thing that is shifting is because the economy has become so unstable, farm subsidies – which guarantee a certain amount per acre if crops are grown that are subsidized, and encourages people to plant more of the crops that are subsidized – do not help other farmers with small grains or produce or less conventional crops.

We are now moving towards a subsidy system that is more based on insurance. It's saying, "It's risky out there. It's an uncertain environment, so we are going to insure farmers so that if they lose because of a climate disaster or lose because of market upheaval, they will get assistance buying insurance so they can keep their income coming in, even if things start falling apart."

That is becoming more of an arbitrage strategy rather than a policy building communities. I think it's a good move in a sense that it's a way of facing the uncertainty that we have, but it also doesn't address the uncertainty of the marketplace that farmers and consumers face. That is why these community alternatives of building community-based food systems is so important. Then we can alleviate some of the uncertainty by having direct relationships and conversations and negotiations with each other.

Kennedy: You came up with a couple of really interesting findings in accumulating the data on loss of farm income. One is the relationship of the loss of farm income to the increase in medical costs in this country. I think you specifically had a chart on diabetes. Maybe you could cover that.

Meter: I work plenty with local government officials and local food initiatives. I always do a chart showing the economy of their area. It might be one economy or it might be five economies. I say, "Here is what has been happening with personal income since 1969." So, I have 50 years of data that I can show people.

What is really interesting is that farm income has always been – in almost every case – steadily eroding away. The income for healthcare workers has been rising at a similar pace.

We have a system where farmers are losing more and more money, they are growing more and more commodities that go into a system of food that is produced in ways that are not healthy for us, and they are advertised in ways that make us crave sugary items and unhealthy foods. In many cases, the food companies that process those foods are also owned by the same investors that own the drug companies that treat us or even the hospital systems that treat us when we get sick.

So, we have replaced healthy farm incomes with stronger hospitals and a stronger healthcare system. We have more professional doctors and more professional specialties and much higher tech equipment. The price of that has been 'hollowing out' the farm economy.

Kennedy: We're going to go into the role of banks more when it comes to

developing food webs, but what was the role of banks in the growth of the extraction economy?

Meter: When I first started, the farmers of Green Isle told me a very rich story. They all started to farm around 1950 when farming was really good. Those people were all starting soon after the war. They had young families, and they grew up together as a cohort of young farmers. They said that it was almost like a sin at that time to get a loan from a bank.. If you were at all competent as a farmer you could make money farming for a year or two and then make a down payment on land because land was so much cheaper and the price of farm products was so much higher relative to today.

There was one farmer who I spoke with who had raised eggs for a year. He had enough money that he could buy land the next year. That is unthinkable today.

Kennedy: Absolutely.

Meter: They said that if you were at all a good farmer you could start farming and rent land for a while. You could earn enough money to make a down payment to buy the land. Then if you didn't have money, you might go to your uncle or your grandfather or your father and borrow money that way, but the money was kept in the family. Only as a last resort would you go to a banker because you had nowhere else to turn.

It was almost embarrassing to go to a bank because they viewed bankers as people who were taking wealth out of their community. Also, even at that, the banker played a very valuable role because any local banker who was responsive to the place he or she lived was also deciding who got to farm. They were saying, "Okay, you look like someone I would like to have in this community. I will give you a loan." They were making those decisions based on what they thought was better for the entire community if they were a community-minded banker. If they were not and they were simply a bank that wanted to get larger, they might say, "You might be a good neighbor, but you are not squeezing out enough profit on your operation, and we don't want to give you a loan."

So, a bank can play an interesting role in building a community or it can play an interesting role in contributing to that extraction.

Kennedy: I know one area that you've done some research is looking at the percentage of food consumed in the state that it is grown in. Your findings were much lower than what I realized. Specifically, you looked at Vermont.

Could you go over what you found when you dove into that?

Meter: The Vermont study is not one that I did; it was done by David Conner and a very good group of people from the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund and several other partners in Vermont. I was an advisor to the first part of that study. They did a very thorough study of how much food that was raised by Vermont farms ended up being consumed by Vermont consumers.

They found that about 2.8% of the food that Vermont farmers raised was eaten in Vermont. They also said that the error of this data was so high that they were going to assume double that in order to keep from contradicting food they know was bought locally but cannot be proven.

For example, if a carcass of beef goes into a slaughter operation and gets ground into ground beef, once that ground beef loses its identity as an animal, it can go anywhere. It then becomes hard to say if this came from a certain farm or a certain state. If a gallon of milk goes into a milk tank, once it is in the milk tank, you can't tell which farm it came from, and you don't know if it is going to go to Vermont or to New York or Boston.

They basically said, "Our best estimate would be that about 5.6% of the food that Vermont farmers raise is actually eaten by Vermont consumers."

The next time they did a study of that, they found a higher number that was more like 11%. I talked to David about that study, and he said, basically, he was having more trouble getting data from his partners because they were getting tired of being asked how much they were selling locally, and it was a burden for them, and it was not a business priority for their business operation. But he said they also included alcohol, and that increased the number plenty. If you included alcohol that has some portion of Vermont products in it, then the number became larger.

Vermont is one of the states in the country that is classically the most likely to

support local farms and have that local food trade. I'm finding in most of the states that I work in that the farmers are exporting 95% of what they produce as commodities to a global market, and the consumers are buying 85-95% of their food from someplace far away. It's a very 'wacky' system where, even in farm country, you have people lacking food and you have the incredible expense of shipping food long distances in and out, but not really helping local people feed each other.

Kennedy: Related to that, I think you've done studies where you look at a state's food infrastructure. If I remember right, you found out that invariably, the infrastructure is set up for export, not for circulating within the state. Is that correct?

Meter: That is true. In New England, you have some infrastructure where people were trading food locally, but even in 1623, one of the colonies was exporting corn to a native tribe outside of the US. Of course, in 1609, the whole plantation economy of Virginia was based on exporting tobacco and other products to England. That is part of the triangular trade of the Atlantic.

We've been an export-based commodity economy since the birth of our country. In the Midwest, it's a little harsher because many people went out there to be homesteaders. You had to have a certain prosperity to be a homesteader; you had to have enough money to chip in to buy some equipment and put some money down for land, and those were hard dollars to come by in those days.

You had many people going out to rural areas at the same time. They all had their own gardens, they all had their own livestock, and they could all feed themselves. There was essentially no local market, but those farmers had debt to pay to New England bankers, so they had to find a cash commodity so they could pay off loans to a banker somewhere else. The extractive system was in place at the beginning of many of our Midwestern communities. It was really how we got started.

In some cases, there is some local food infrastructure; most Midwestern towns have their own creamery; most Midwestern towns had a good butcher shop or a slaughterhouse. There is plenty of infrastructure that has dwindled away, but that was an afterthought. The whole rural economy was based on, "How do we

provide water to railroad trains that come through? How do we ship grain further away?”

The whole structure of the economy was based on that assumption.

Kennedy: Let’s get to the solution, and that is building the community food web. If you could, start off by defining what a community food web is.

Meter: I would say that a community food web is anything that is involved in helping us get food from the field to the plate. I have a nice diagram that I could show you if we were having a video. I have a circle where you start with a farmer. It goes to a buyer, a processor, a grocery store, a wholesaler, a restaurant, or an institution that might buy the food. Then the waste products from that whole cycle could get recycled back into the compost for further fertility for the local fields.

That is a whole cycle that is often broken in most communities, but it is a very effective way of thinking about how a food item can start on the farm and move through a system of economic exchange and come out as compost for the next cycle. But also, that whole cycle is dependent on having clean air and clean water; it depends on good research happening; it depends on supportive policy; it depends on professional experts who can help farmers and help the system thrive.

It certainly is not simply about the economics of farming. When I drew that circle diagram, I showed that there are people connected all across that circle. It looks more like a spider web than a chain or a circle.

For example, I own a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) not too far from me; it’s about 15 miles away. I’m investing in that farm and helping alleviate their risk of farming. Some people invest in the local meat-processing operation so they can have a meat processor who is responsive to the farmers or responsive to consumers.

Often in a smaller community, the grocer knows the farmers or knows the wholesalers. Those relationships are what allow us to have trade that coheres, just like the grain traders in the grain exchange have to have honesty and trust with

each other if they are going to make those massive commodity trades. The whole system runs on trust, whether it's for the purpose of extracting wealth or the purpose of building community health.

I think we often lose sight of that because in this country, we tend to think more about the money that you make or don't make on farming. We think more about the profitability of a farm or the fame of a certain chef or what have you, and we don't think about whether the whole system is cohering to build strong communities.

I have a catch phrase that a food system should accomplish at least four things: It should build health, wealth, connection, and capacity in our communities. Underlying all of that is the ability for cultural enclaves to thrive with the cultural choices that they make about how they want to eat and how they want to lead their lives.

In America, we often 'dumb' that conversation 'down' to who is the most famous and who has the most money. Once you do that, the whole thing goes 'haywire'. So, I look at community food webs to be this whole process of people building trust, building networks and relationships, building a chance to converse with each other, and making decisions together, and negotiating fairly and cleanly with each other to get the best possible food to everybody for the benefit of all of us.

I like the term 'food web' because it talks about how you can have multiple small connections that are fragile, but they end up to be a more effective, powerful force when they are together. Many people would talk about networks, and they are a part of that process, too, but I don't think the network concept is as rich and showing the interrelationship of connections. Many people have network diagrams that all come out of a central core.

Other people talk about the value chain, which is an image left over from slavery when we spoke about enchaining the people so that we could have people working for nothing so people could become prosperous plantation owners. When we talk about the 'value chain', I think of the monopolies on one end holding all of the power and yanking the chain to the detriment of those of us who are trying to eat.

I like the image of a 'food web' because it's something that we can construct ourselves; it is something more organic, it is something more chaotic in some ways and unpredictable, but it also has the potential for building strong relationships, better trust, better health, and I think more vibrant and resilient communities over time.

Kennedy: You don't like using the term 'local'. Can you explain why you don't think the term 'local food' captures the essence of what needs to be done?

Meter: I use the word 'local' all the time. I don't censor myself from using it, but it is also true that it is an incomplete term. I believe it's a process of building community and building personal relationships of trust. Those can be local, but those can also happen over some distance.

The more we have local trade, the more likely it is that we won't need fossil fuels to fuel our food system. The more we have local trade, the more likely it is that I can be accountable to my neighbors and vice-versa. We can have conversations about defining the choices of the foods on our menu, defining what we want to eat, and raising it ourselves and eating it in healthy ways rather than having that come from a distance.

The people in Montana that I talked about in the book had a marvelous conversation during the last farm crisis of the 1980's where they said, "We've got some farmers up in northeast Montana. They are 30 miles from the Canadian border. If they bought a food item from Alberta, would we say that it's not local food because it didn't come from Montana? Not really."

The definition of local food, at that time, was Montana-grown food. So they started saying, "Well, maybe this is about more than geography or the miles of food traveled; maybe I'm closer to my neighbor in Canada than my neighbor in Helena or the Golden Triangle where a lot of the wheat is produced in Montana."

In my case, I can buy bananas at my local coop grocery store that came from cooperative growers in Costa Rica. So in that sense, I can have a communication with that system and say, "Are the workers being treated fairly? Are these bananas really organic?" and I can trace that through my system and find out

about it, whereas, if I simply go to a store and buy bananas from an anonymous place, I don't have that luxury. The more the food is commodified, the less those conversations can happen.

So, I say that 'local food' is a shorthand term, but what I really mean to say is 'a community-based food system'. The trouble with that term is most people glaze over when you say it, and they don't know what that means. It sounds very complex. That is one of the reasons I gravitated toward 'community food web' because it's a bit more of a food-linked term, and it's a way of reminding us that local connections are important.

The question isn't how far my food travels, but what kind of relationship I have and what kind of relationships I build and what trust I build by exchange of food with each other.

Kennedy: As I mentioned earlier, you go through a number of success stories in building the community food web out. Was there anything in common in the initial steps? What did you see these groups or organizations take as initial steps where there was some buildout in the community food web?

Meter: I think my favorite story about initial steps comes from Montana. It is in one of the early chapters of the book; I think it's in Chapter Two. It's very relevant to our time because it is a story from the farm prices of the 1980's when I was learning about this firsthand for the first time. It's a very similar situation to what we have today where farmers in Montana sat down with each other over coffee, and said, "You know, we're not making money farming this way."

They had gone through the farm crisis, and realized their soil was eroding because of the chemicals they were using. It was blowing away with the wind, and it was going into the watersheds where they had water. They realized they were beholden to banks that didn't care for them. They were shipping commodities to anonymous buyers who didn't invest back into the communities. They felt that something was wrong, and they weren't feeding people they knew.

So, they sat down and asked, "How are we going to change this?"

That was a time when we were in a crisis, so resources were very scarce and people were not very knowledgeable on what to do. They went to an energy organization and made this wonderful argument to an energy organization called AERO (Alternative Energy Resources Organization) in Montana. They said, “As farmers, we harvest solar energy on a daily basis. You should work with us because we have been harnessing renewable energy.”

AERO said, “You’re right, but we don’t know anything about agriculture.” So, they raised some money to give small groups of farmers grants to do experimentation. They said, “If you can form a group of at least three people, including at least one farmer, one research, or extension agent who can keep this narrative coherent, and then any other neighbors you want to involve, we will give you a small grant of \$200 to \$600 so you can experiment on your farm and try something new. In exchange for that money, you have to give us a report at the end of the project, and you have to tell everybody in the state of Montana in this network what you learned.”

Out of that came what is now an international effort trading pulses (12 leguminous crops) like lentils and other crops that are very good to grow in Montana. They are now being bought in Taiwan and China because farmers in Montana came up with this system for producing and cleaning and packaging and marketing those grains, making Montana and the Dakotas among the national leaders in raising pulses. That is an export-based economy, but it also produces food for Helena and Missoula and other urban areas in Montana, and it created a different mentality of saying, “We are going to make decisions for ourselves about the way we want to farm.”

It also led one group to try an experiment on a tribal reservation where they were using sheep to harvest weeds rather than spraying them with pesticides. They said, “The sheep loves to eat this stuff. If we can raise sheep on that, we reduce our chemical input costs, and we get a marketable product that we can sell abroad and to local consumers.” Many benefits came out of that one change in the system of not spraying but instead, grazing sheep to take those weeds out.

Numerous experiments like that started up. Mobile processing for chickens started happening at that time and many experiments like that.

Many people did that together and turned that into a statewide conversation and a statewide conference. They went from 200 small groups that spawned a network of 800 people statewide who met annually and exchanged information. They built a complete awareness of the policies they needed to adopt to get the state of Montana Ag Department to support local food production, to measure local food production, to incentivize it, to give grants, and to create a system where that flourished for everybody.

They tell a good story about working in a bipartisan way across the aisle to legislation that would allow both Republicans and Democrats to support moving forward in a sensible way.

I think that is my favorite story about working in tough times because it resonates the most with what we are in the middle of today where so many people are feeling isolated, uncertain where to go, and not sure how to make anything better. Bringing people together and building trust is a very important part of the process.

To answer your question, I think the heart of each of these efforts is that people build strong relationships of trust, and there is a core group of people – it might only be three people or it might be eight people – who have fights with each other, but they fight cleanly and have principled discussions about where is the right way to move this system and a way that is going to be better for all. They can trust each other enough so when things go bad, they know how to counter that and move forward. They can have a vision for the future that is very long-term, so they can write sensible policies that creates a better future instead of simply meeting some constituency's short-term needs. I believe that is the heart of a web.

The other stories in the book have people in Hawaii who work together to bring back traditional culture and traditional growing practices and traditional herbs, and they take that to a health clinic in a poor area of Honolulu to have a cultural conversation about how they can build capacity and trust and the ability to grow more of their own foods and medicines in their neighborhoods. This is also tied to the statewide conversation about building a strong network across the state so they can affect policy over the long haul.

There are all kinds of other stories like that, but I won't go into them right now.

Kennedy: What about just getting the money? What do you see the role of community banks being? It seems the way that our healthcare system and food system and banking system are, we need to build out parallel systems for all three.

What do you see the role of community banks being in growing the food webs and the relationship between finance and local food?

Meter: I think the story is the same whether it's a hospital or a bank or a college or a grocer. The grocers who capture this idea the fastest are the independent grocers who are owned by someone local who cares about the community that they live in and work in. The best banks are those that are independently owned and have an interest in making loans to farmers who will build a stronger community around their bank. Those banks are more and more rare right now. Most banks, even in rural America, say, "We don't do farm loans because it's not our expertise. The loans are too large for our banks to support."

We put that to the Farm Credit System, a national system. It started as a cooperative of farmers as a public agency, and it's now a private firm that is somewhat owned by farmers but is mainly owned by investors at this point. That is a very important source of giving credit and capital to people who want to expand at a large-scale production, but the real goal would be a small bank that would provide loans to a new immigrant farmer who wants to start raising produce for the neighborhood and need some equipment to make that happen better, or a farmer who had a good farm going but needed some new equipment to expand and feed more people.

If a local bank could make those loans, they could play a huge difference in building a stronger community. But I think the common theme would be if you don't have an independent ownership that is within the community, people have different priorities. Their priorities tend to be those of the shareholders or their next career move or their boss or whatever. It has to be independent local ownership. It also has to be someone who says, "The mission of my bank or hospital or grocer is not simply to make money, but it is also to make this community stronger."

We now have food banks that are saying, “Our mission is not simply to give out food to poor people; it is to build capacity among poor people to engage better in society, and to have better lives and more prosperity, but also more political influence.”

Maybe we have a role in building a stronger food system that doesn’t make people poorer and doesn’t cause us to give out food handouts to people who are low-income. A bank that says, “My priority is to build a strong community,” or a bank that says, “We are looking to build health in our community,” will have different answers than any institution that is saying, “It’s only about the bottom line and how much money we are making.”

Kennedy: I’m curious: North Dakota is the only state that has a state bank. What do you see as to their work in helping the agricultural economy? How has that worked out there as compared to other states that don’t have a state bank?

Meter: I don’t know in detail because I haven’t worked in detail with that bank, but I do know people are very excited that they have a state bank because the bank has been more perceptive to this conversation than private lenders.

The other thing that is important to notice is that that bank would not be there without the protests of a nonpartisan league in World War I. That bank was started because farmers said, “We need a state-owned bank.” That wouldn’t be there without plenty of political struggle led by farmers who said, “We need better credit alternatives. We need banks that are responsive to us.”

North Dakota has the ‘luxury’, if you will, of having a bank that is owned by the state of North Dakota, and they can capitalize the bank with state money if they want to. They can also make decisions on a better frame of reference and a more inclusive frame of reference than a private bank, and they do.

Kennedy: Recently, states have started passing laws like Texas establishing a state depository for gold and silver. I think Utah passed a law establishing Goldbacks as an acceptable currency. What do you see as the implications of this trend for local agriculture and the community food web?

Meter: I didn’t cover this in detail in the book, but I think that a very

important part of that story would be the populous area of the 1890's. I would say that this is progressive populism. It's not the kind of authoritarian version of what we call populism today; it's a very different way of organizing.

Farmers who were feeling very pitched by the economy in the 1890's decided to organize their own credit circles; they organized their own cooperatives. They organized across racial lines to get black farmers and white farmers working together, which was very risky and unheard of at the time, especially in the wake of Reconstruction falling apart. So, it was a very courageous effort.

They were still commodity farmers in many respects, and they were thinking about how to reach global markets. At the same time, they had enough native wisdom that was rooted in place that they said, "We need to be farming in a way that builds a local economy."

They developed a system that they called the 'subtreasury system'. One of their members, who was an economist named Charles Macune, developed this very wonderful plan that is described in the book, *The Populist Moment*, by Larry Goodwyn. He said, "We want to create a Federal Reserve Bank with subtreasuries in several communities around the country, and new currency will be created based on what farmers produce in that region."

So, they tied money supplied directly to the wheat and the corn that farmers were raising. The plan for the subtreasury system was that the farmers should be the first ones to get the money because they produced the wealth in their fields. So instead of having it go to Washington DC and borrow it from that bank, they would have it initiate in Kansas City or in Texas, and then it will go from there to the rest of the economy rather than starting in urban industry and trickling out to the countryside.

That was a very incisive view of the wealth that farmers raise in raising basic commodities. It became the heart of what we now call the Federal Reserve Bank, but in the case of the progressive era developing the Federal Reserve Bank, we discovered that policymakers took the connection of farming out of it. They took the local power of local banks out and watered it down considerably from what the farmers envisioned. We now have a Federal Reserve Bank just like we have a state bank in North Dakota because of farmers organizing. They

created the concept, but it got weakened and built into a system that is much more about servicing a different set of agendas.

Kennedy: I know that there are several states that are looking at starting up state banks.

Meter: I think that we are having that conversation again. I think that would be a good effort to have. The obstacles against doing that are a little fiercer now than they might have been 100 years ago.

Kennedy: Do you see local currencies playing any role in building the community food web?

Do you see local currencies playing any role in building the community food web? The reason I bring that up is that Ithaca, New York, has a currency, the HOUR (local, time-based currency system), for many years. They are a town of about 30,000 people. I checked the farmers market, and they have an incredible number of vendors for that market. I think there may be 200 overall. Many of those vendors aren't producing food, but probably over half of them do.

It is a town of about 30,000 people. I checked the farmers market, and they have an incredible amount of vendors for that market. I think there may be 200 overall. Many of those vendors aren't producing food, but probably over half of them do.

How do you see local currency being able to help build out the food web?

Meter: I think that is a terrific example. I spoke at Ithaca a number of years ago, and I also went to the same market. It's a very exciting market. I agree with you.

I think the other thing that has happened at Ithaca is that currency is fully convertible at a bank. So, you can go to a bank. If you earn a dollar doing volunteer service work, you can take that to the bank and get a \$1 bill if you want to, or you can trade it with a farmer to get some of their product. It's very much integrated in with the currency of what is happening with the money supply as well.

Certainly, that allowed many young farmers to get started because they could sell food to someone who didn't have much money, but they had volunteered at the food bank, and they had gotten some HOURS dollars. Or someone could work at a nonprofit and earn enough money that they could buy food from a local farmer or what have you. It's an incredible, potent way to make sure that people in the local community can make decisions together about the choices they have, and about giving credit to people for what the normal economy considers 'volunteer hours'.

If you are caring for your ailing family member or if you have to stay home from work for a while for an illness, you can still build up volunteer hours, and you can participate in the economy in a very potent way in that respect. That creates plenty of alternatives for farmers as well as grocers and so on.

It's similar to the populist notion of saying that wealth is created by the things we do day-to-day, and let's recognize that wealth in a way that our community can recognize in the way we choose, and we can integrate that in with the larger banking system.

I think the question is to what extent Ithaca can maintain that sense of cohesiveness over time. As we've gotten into an economy that is more based on technology, individual achievement, and global reach, I don't think we have quite the same collaborative culture in Ithaca today as we had in the 1970's when this was started. We probably have more in Ithaca because of the currency than we have in many other places because there has been a conversation there that led people to build that culture of collaboration over time.

We are in a very competitive environment now, and the currency, by itself, can't cut through that competitive environment.

Kennedy: I see more states going back to it. For instance, Tennessee has a bill right now before the legislature that would make gold and silver legal tender in payment of debts. What do you see as the relationship between getting more gold and silver fluctuating in the economy and the growth of the farm economy within the state?

Meter: I would say that gold and silver, in my view, are a very backward view

of our society. I like the solidity that you have when you have a supply of gold or silver. You can point to it and say, “This money is backed up specifically by an ingot of gold or silver.” That is a very reassuring feeling, but also what is still behind that is trust; money is a process of building trust or having trust with each other.

If gold is worthless, then it’s not very valuable as a currency and it’s not very valuable in paying off your bills. Because the price of gold fluctuates with global markets and investors, it can be a much less steady way of conveying wealth than a dollar that is based on a system that has engendered trust in it.

There is no problem that I know of of paying debts off in gold or silver right now; it’s just a very awkward way to do it in many cases. I think the point is that as we move the economy away from gold and silver backing towards other forms, the economy gains some flexibility. It did gain some abstract power and globalization. It did encourage a commodity economy in ways that are bad. I endorse that part of the analysis.

Also, I like a community currency much better than I care about gold and silver because the community can decide what it values. They can say how much an hour of time is worth, and they can make that decision for themselves. That can be a stable thing rather than something that is born by global investors or determined by ‘fickle winds’ of the global economy.

So, I am much more about people building trust in that concrete way within their communities than about caring about which commodity backs that currency.

Kennedy: One of the goals of the buildout of the community food web is to become as self-sufficient as possible within community or state. When we were talking recently, you had an interesting example about Germany in the 18th century having prohibition against selling grain outside a locality. How did that work?

Meter: I don’t know how it worked because I recently read this reference, but that came up in a conversation. There is plenty that I don’t know about this, but my ancestors were dramatic in Europe. It does resonate with the history that I

know about my people.

One thing that I do know about that story is that my ancestors were in their town, which is in what is now the Czech Republic. Because they were rotating crops, they were using cover crops to build up soil in ways that other farmers didn't know how to do. They used rye extensively, but they also had a whole rotation to build up soil health in very marginal soil.

My ancestors were also a milling family; they were milling grain for the local population.

The book that I recently read made the point that administratively in Germany in the 1700's, those local food production items were not allowed to be sold outside of the community. There was a law saying that you could not trade that grain outside of this particular community. The idea was to keep one community from preying off the other.

It was to say, "If we don't make it safe for your farmers to have a balanced economy, feeding the people around them, and if we don't legislate that with good regulation, then it will fall apart. Some farmers will get bigger, and they will buy out their neighbors, and they will try to produce more grain and ship it to the neighboring towns. The neighboring town's mill will go under."

That, of course, did happen over time. It got worse under the collective farm era in the Czech Republic when the Soviets took over. At the same time, there was a decision that policy was meant to protect the ability of farmers to build wealth and to have healthy relationships of trade between neighbors, and to have a healthy economy that was reinforced by public policy.

I don't know if that was a responsive government over time, but Germany has been known for having a very strong fabric of community and very strong local identities and very strong farms through the years. So, I think that must have been part of the foundation that made that work.

Kennedy: There is a much greater movement these days toward homesteading. More people are growing at least some of their own food now.

In your work, how much do you see the self-sufficiency of communities improving compared to ten years ago?

Meter: I think that we are making tremendous leaps. It doesn't show up that well in our media. I think we get many stories about the famous chef who is doing creative cooking or has plenty of charisma, and we often get stories about a new technology. Hydroponics is getting much play right now as a new technology. There are many stories on what we hope will be more regenerative farming and so on.

There are so many young people who get out of college and started socializing with each other by learning how to can food together and learning which butcher shop was the best or learning which grocery store they wanted to shop at. In our case, it was volunteering at the cooperative grocery store because we have many club groceries in Minnesota. That conversation is very robust right now among people who are in their 20's and 30's. It is something that was very robust for my generation when we were in our 20's and 30's, but much of that got eroded by the pressure to have a career or the pressure to raise a family and not having time to devote to doing that.

For urban folks, it especially became a harder thing to pull off. People in the country had it more woven into their daily lives. Many people have been doing that all along.

I was trained how to can when I was a teenager, but it wasn't something I felt like I had time for for a long time. Now I'm trying to get back to producing more of my own food and making more clever choices based on my community.

I think we have many choices. We now have large grocery stores featuring organic foods. I was in a convenience store in rural Minnesota recently, and there was a bottle of Sriracha (hot sauce) on the counter of the convenience store, and that would have been unthinkable 20 years ago. There are new immigrants who are asking for Sriracha. There are immigrants asking for foods that are culturally appropriate for them at the convenience store if they are responsive. The stores are putting that on the shelves so people can buy it.

There is also this whole movement of people that is pretty quiet about, “Let’s learn how to put up tomato sauce together.”

I remember a hog farm having a workshop for its members so they could show how to break down a hog into parts. That conversation is happening, but it’s not something that creates a lot of media hype. It may be better that it doesn’t, but it’s working quietly in the community among these community webs, and building some sense of connection and building a chance for people to work together. But at some point, it also has to be ‘played out’ in a policy arena where we have supportive policies to make an impact on the broader food systems so that the food systems resembles that process of feeding each other and learning skills together and building collaborative relationships over time.

Kennedy: What do you see the role of the farmer cooperatives being? It seems like today, they are not nearly as influential as they were 40 or 50 years ago. Do you see that coming back? Do you see a place for it in trying to build up local food systems?

Meter: They certainly have a place. I’m a member of the Wisconsin Farmers Union and I also used to be a member of the Minnesota Farmers Union. They are in a very interesting position because the Minnesota Farmers Union is actually the owner of Cenex Harvest States, which is a major grain trading company. They are in a position where they own some of the commodity trade, and they have to look out for their farmer members who are raising food for that trade. They have every reason to speak for that, but they have also taken on the mantle of saying, “We are a champion of cooperatives because we came out of the cooperative movement.”

Farmers Unions, in both states, convey to their young children every year, “This is what cooperatives are. This is what cooperation is like.” There are cooperative processes in the way the people work together within those unions to make decisions and form relationships. So, you have that very long-standing quiet, patient way to build a culture that supports collaboration. The Farmers Union in many states is very strong in making that happen.

The cooperatives that you talked about, for example Land O’Lakes, which started out as a cooperative of dairy farmers, is now a global Fortune 100

company. Many farmers who I talk to say that it doesn't act any differently than a normal private business because it's in a competitive environment where it's thinking about shareholders and about its prime in value, and acting like a commodity trader more than as a cooperative that is representing its members. But there is still a vote that the members have to help influence corporate policy. We don't want to let go of that, but it's much weaker than it was in the 1930's.

There are some states that I work in that have almost no heritage of cooperations. So, you have many rural communities for people who are very libertarian, and they don't believe in cooperatives; they basically believe in individual autonomy. Then you have organizations that are set up to support that competitive process. But you also have states like North Dakota, Minnesota, and Wisconsin where the ethic of collaboration still exists. You have that in urban areas like Seattle, Boston, and the San Francisco Bay Area where there is some ethic of, "We really want to work together, and that is how we are going to make things more coherent for all of us."

I would say that in general, our cooperative culture is weaker today than it was in 1975, or 50 years ago. It is much weaker than it was in the 1930's when it was mainstream culture. I also think that those things do tend to cycle in and out of fashion and in and out of viability based on the monopolistic nature of our economy.

I think that we are having a rebirth of people saying, "How do we collaborate?" So, many young people are forming cooperatives. But it's also a very difficult climate because it's hard to find people really devoted to working together for the 'long haul' when things get tense and really trying to make things work.

Kennedy: The way the food system is going right now, they are manufacturing these synthetic foods like the lab-grown meats. There is next to no market demand for it that I've seen, but yet these companies are still pouring billions of dollars into this and getting this out. It seems like the conventional food system is becoming something we need to get away from as much as possible.

Throughout your book, you stress that building a local food presence is

complex; it takes time building out the food webs. Do you think that there is anything that can be done to accelerate it and get more independence now locally?

What I've seen with many others, there seems to be a deterioration in the overall quality of food in a conventional system.

Meter: It's a very complex and difficult time. What makes me most wary at this point, is that I've been in touch – especially since the pandemic – with some investors who are trying to invest in what they call the 'regenerative farming space' or the 'regenerative food space'. For the most part, they are people who have made money in the extractive system. They want to bring that system to the food system.

They are looking for a technology they can own and have all the rights to, or they are looking for something that is so new it will create options that have never existed before. That is one of the reasons you have people looking at new machinery, new hydroponic greenhouses, and new products like meat-like products that are not made of meat and so on. It's an effort of saying, "We want to make it more predictable, and we want it to be ownable, and we want to have the rights to that genetics," or, "The rights to that product," or whatever.

I think my argument would be that we can't have regenerative farms unless we have regenerative food systems. That means building community and building that sense of cohesion and collaboration as part of the system. It's not about owning the rights to making a profit; it's really about a different process.

Most farms, once they start farming regularly, almost immediately have a surplus of some kind. We are not limited by the amount of food that we can grow. We have enough land on the planet to feed everybody who is here, but hunger is always caused by political breakdowns. It's not caused by a lack of ability to produce food; it's not caused by a person's lack of ability to manage their own lives; it is caused by systems that intervene between people's abilities to take care of themselves.

I think that many people who are trying to build alternatives right now are doing it for profitability and are doing it for reasons that are about building new

monopolies or building new wealth. They are losing sight of the fact that this is a complicated process and an integrative system. We have to figure out how to do it in a collaborative way.

I think that is where I find the most trouble. There are many people entering the space who don't know much about it, but they want to make things change quickly, and they have some money to spend. They are changing things without much experience or vision, or without including other people, especially not including people of color who have been excluded 'down the line'.

I think the most exciting projects are immigrant communities or urban black communities that are saying, "We want land so we can raise food for ourselves, and we want to do that in a culturally rich setting that promotes our ability where we feel like we belong here and we have a cultural rootedness that we like in our new country." Those things are very exciting, but they are very small, and they are not viewed by the media as very important unless they show profitability, and that is not a very good screen for taking that in.

Kennedy: I think the biggest obstacle to small farm prosperity and building a local food system is the regulatory climate. It seems like the most that can be done is at the state level.

Maine recently passed a Right to Food Constitutional Amendment protecting, not only people's right to grow their own food, but protecting people's right to acquire food. I think this goes back to the deregulation of food – being able to buy food from your neighbor, whether they have a permit or not.

With the globalization of the food supply, if we want to get back to traditional food, it seems like trust is going to play a big part in that. It's also giving people the right to purchase food directly from their neighbor, whether that neighbor is regulated or not.

What do you see for the future? What do you see as far as the deregulation of the local food economy? Do you think that is something that is going to increase even more than it has?

All states have cottage food laws right now. Many of them have completely

deregulated food other than meat. How do you see that building up in the years to come?

Meter: I would argue that it's really a process of 'reregulation' more than 'deregulation'. In a sense, it's deregulating the policies that interfere, and it's bringing in new regulations that allow us to do things that are community-building.

None of this will last over time without clever public policy. If we do only individual achievements and build nice global connections without the policy framework supporting that, it goes away in 20 years because political leaders change and the powerful forces working against us are very strong.

You and I both worked in Indiana. A classic example was in Indiana where the Indiana state has power down to the county level. That meant that a farmer might have eggs, and could sell them at the farmers market in one county, but if they went across the river and tried to sell them in the next county, they couldn't because they hadn't washed them or because the laws didn't allow a farmer to sell eggs from their farm in that county.

County health regulations are very important issues, and the state can set a real example of saying they have to be fair and they have to be responsive to farmers, and the work they have done all these years or decades to make sure that those regulations are not onerous is incredibly critical work. I really applaud all of the victories you had in that.

Making sure that we don't interfere with a farmer's fundamental right to produce food and sell it or give it to a neighbor or to someone they choose is very important. Also, it has to be done at the local level; the local officials have to be responsive to people trying to put a food web together. They are not always willing to be responsive because they have a job and they want to do things in their controlling way. It has to happen at the state level, and it has to happen at the Federal level as well.

We are now finally getting some investments at the Federal level that are quite massive. There is \$1 billion going into what could be the construction of community-based food systems, which tends to be more about bailing out the

commodity economy until we learn in our day-to-day activity to use that money to spend for a better food system.

Kennedy: I see some states have more effective cottage food laws that are preempting local regulation so that someone doesn't have to have multiple permits if they are selling county-to-county. They don't have to have stricter laws if they are in a particular county.

At the end of your book, you talk about how it's a balance. You talk about balancing production with consumption and balancing internal with external controls of value and balancing private with social success, and balancing culture with technology.

Maybe you could sum up the attributes you think would make people working on building up their local food system to have the best chance of success.

Meter: I wanted to give you one more example to what we were just speaking about. You and I both worked in Alaska for a while. There is a wonderful story there about a travel corporation that runs a home for seniors. They negotiated with the USDA about eight years ago so they could serve traditional foods like whale blubber and raw seal meat to the residents of this home because that is what people grew up wanting, and it is nutritionally-dense food and very healthy food.

They were prohibited from serving that by USDA and FDA regulations, but they worked with the government and said, "If the food that we've been told to serve is making us sick, we want to be able to get people to eat the traditional foods that they are used to," and the USDA went along with that. So, that was an incredible example of a national government corporation, which is a tribal nation, negotiating with the USDA at the national level to get a very local policy in place. It's very important to creating more health. That is a wonderful example of working responsibly.

It's really a matter of being responsive to reality and responsive to the truth and responsive to each other.

The four dimensions that you just described, we are a country that values the

individual success stories. It is the person who becomes the most powerful, the person who can buy out their neighboring farm, or the person who has the biggest bank account or biggest home or biggest tractor. Those are nice successes when they happen – and I’m not saying that they shouldn’t happen – but I think that to pull our society back to balance, we have to get to where we also incentivize people working together.

We say, “We need consistent funding and consistent rewards for people who do the very difficult work of resolving conflicts, of talking honestly through differences in a way that doesn’t promote more violence, but actually creates more unity and more cohesion as a society.” That is one of the reasons our gun discussion is so fragmented right now.

I think that in the food space, it is a matter of seeing the victories being more about building community food webs and measuring the connections and collaborations we build more than the individual heroic stories.

The next dimension is one that you worked on so fundamentally is: Are we eating the foods we really want to eat, or are we eating the foods that we were told to eat by our advertisers or by our food corporations or by the monopoly forces that are around us? Do we get to make those choices as individuals? Do we get to make those choices as a community? We bring those two dimensions together.

We are way out of balance where we are basically a society full of people eating foods that are bad for them and exercising badly and having bad health outcomes because the system has made that the easiest and most convenient thing to do. It is going to be hard to get us into better health and taking a hold of creating the menu for ourselves.

The other thing is I think we have the mentality that if we just get more people with money shopping for the best food items, we get more consumers asking for grass-fed beef. I only eat grass-fed beef because I believe in grass-fed beef.

It’s not simply a matter of buying grass-fed beef; it is also a matter of knowing what producers of grass-fed beef go through and your understanding of how rotational grazing works and knowing farmers who do that and having

relationship with them.

Carlo Petrini was the inventor of Slow Food. He talked about consumers being co-producers where they basically learn what farmers go through, they work on the farm, and understand and celebrate what they do to feed us. We're not simply people asking for the shiniest new object and the brightest, most colorful label or the brand-new food consumer item. We are really talking about building a system based on what we can produce for ourselves rather than what we can buy from far away.

The other thing that is probably the hardest one is this myth that we are going to need a technological fix to move forward. We are going to get some new invention – some new process like 3D printing or hydroponics or whatever. I would argue that technology can certainly play a role in creating new efficiencies. The pandemic showed that software technology allowed plenty of food collaborations to flourish because they could more conveniently connect with shoppers and give more flexible options and create a much bigger food trade for each locale.

At the same time, what is really more important than software is the culture that we built of collaboration. I can't think of anything better than food for building that kind of collaboration because we all need to eat, and we all try to eat three times a day. There is no reason for 1% of us to have the best quality food available and for the other 99% have rotten food that is making us ill, and for low income, to have no access to food at all.

As a society we are too wealthy to allow that to happen. So, we have to think about how everyone can have access to the highest quality food possible, and how we can organize systems at the local, state, and national level that make that possible.

I would argue that the role at the national level right now is to create models for how that could happen at a local level when state officials become more responsive. In some cases, the state officials are not more responsive than national, and in some cases they are.

It has to happen at all of these levels. In my experience, it's a matter of finding

more balance. It's a very Eastern way of looking at this rather than a Western way. It's a way of finding the balance points and striving for those balance points. Make some mistakes, and go through cycles of growth and decline, but we will be better served by balancing those forces than trying to say that we can solve them all by moving in one direction in a very linear way.

Kennedy: Ken, where can people find out more information about you and your work?

Meter: All of the work I've done is posted at the website that I maintain, which is Crossroads Resource Center. That website is www.CRCWorks.org. That posts studies from all over the country. You can find local studies there, and our state and regional food plans there. You can also find some other thought pieces that I've written through the years, including a link to my book, *Building Community Food Webs*.

The book is also available at Island Press. The link to that site is on my website, but you can also find it on Amazon. It is available as an audiobook as well as a hard copy and as an e-book.

Kennedy: Thank you. It's been great having you on. Take care.

Meter: I really appreciate the conversation that you and I have had all these years about issues that are close to our hearts and close to our work. We have had a very good example in our lives of having slightly different viewpoints, but finding ways to collaborate when it makes sense.

Kennedy: Absolutely. More than any other issue, I agree with you. Food crosses party and ideological lines.

Meter: Thank you for that connection.

Kennedy: I wish you continued success.

MODIFICATION

Transcripts are not always verbatim. Modifications are sometimes made to improve clarity, usefulness and readability, while staying true to the original intent.

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