

# Interview with Raj Patel

*Author of Stuffed and Starved*



## **What drove you to write Stuffed & Starved?**

I have been into the anti-globalization movement for decades. In 1999 I attended the World Trade Organization (WTO) meetings in Seattle and was absolutely moved by Via Campesina and their struggle for a better world; and how they were different from all the other conventional groups present. And then I started working for Food First in 2002 and made the connection between Via Campesina and urban areas which are tremendously disconnected from agricultural policies and yet mediated by the powerful corporate agribusiness. I wanted to show this as well as how much extreme capitalism is wreaking havoc on small farmers, for consumers who do not get where their food comes from, and for [large agribusiness] producers to see just how much they mediate the process between food and consumer and the consequences this has on the small farmer.

## **What particularly moved you about Via Campesina?**

How democratic and not a lobby Via Campesina was. But especially how there were so few blocs of people of color as well as representative groups of the Global South that were present in Seattle. The democratic structure that brought Via Campesina to [be able to demonstrate in Seattle is] really important and is an opportunity to learn from their struggle. Also, it was quite apparent how much more gender equality there was in Via Campesina and just how striking and powerful the organizing of women of color can be.

The release of Stuffed & Starved eerily preceded the global food crisis. What do you make of the June FAO Summit in Rome [and then the G8 Conference in Japan July 7-9 2008] and their recommendations for developed countries to continue to provide developing countries with longer term assistance, immediate support for agricultural production and trade, especially for the relevant financial institutions (World Bank, IMF) "to assist countries in developing their food stocks (Doha), an increased role of the private sector to step up investment in science and technology for food and agriculture, liberalizing international trade in agriculture by reducing trade barriers and market distorting policies, and to address the challenges and opportunities posed by biofuels?"

These are just RE-statements and RE-enwals of the same policies. This is nothing new. It is a crisis from which big corporations profit and agriculture is dying. With these statements, the advancement of the corporate agenda continues and U.S. government just gets deeper into the pockets of corporations; such that corporations have now wrestled their way into the solution rather than the problem.

## **Could you comment on the World Bank report you were involved in that looked at the failed effects of World Bank support re agriculture?**

I was involved for a month with a World Bank report called "Voices of the Poor," which was window dressing for the World Bank-it was a [public relations] catastrophe. The World Bank was to be the only interpreter of what the poor wanted. Via Campesina countered that beautifully. Not long ago I was also involved with

criticizing the World Bank report on agricultural development (The World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development) that was pushing forward the corporate agenda. The World Bank has done a [very poor] job on agriculture. A prime example of this is Sub-Saharan Africa where World Bank [and other financial institution] policies destroyed the state led agricultural infrastructure and processes in Sub-Saharan Africa. An internal document the World Bank produced, prior to the release of their 2008 report, also stated this as well as how they had believed that private corporations would come in and take control of the agricultural industry in Sub-Saharan Africa-while also recognizing that this did not turn out to be the case. Well this internal document made no difference and the World Bank came out with their report saying that small farms should be destroyed because they are inefficient and thus, should be replaced by large-scale agriculture. This is even though there was no evidence in the report to show that increased large-scale agriculture decreases poverty; which in reality we know is not the case, as large-scale agriculture only increases poverty, especially because it drives urbanization and the growth of the urban poor. The World Bank wants to destroy peasants and believes that the market is the only solution to making agriculture efficient. South Africa is the World Bank poster child for agriculture reform. However, since apartheid, less than five percent of land has been transferred from whites to blacks, because 'the market is the only solution to inequality.'

**After the G8 Conference in Hokkaido Japan during July 7-9 2008, President Bush stated that more food aid, increasing access to fertilizer and seeds and the elimination of export restrictions are necessary for the short-term alleviation of the food crisis and for the long term, we also needed a new WTO Doha Round to liberalize agriculture trade-do you agree and if not, what would you propose?**

I am only one voice amongst many and I believe that many things need to be done, but first there must be proper democracy in agriculture policy. If we are serious about democracy then a little would be nice. Right now, agricultural policy is all a war of experts and corporations, as farmers are left to twist in the wind. There also needs to be an active debate that includes family farmers/peasants because they are the ones that live or die by these decisions. There has been a shift away from democratic thinking in agriculture. Conventional industrial agriculture is now much less viable with the increasing oil prices, it is NOT efficient. The reason people go hungry is because they are poor-GM will not solve that, social policy will. We need serious social policy so working Americans can afford healthy food. Agroecological sustainability, where the entire ecology of the environment is incorporated, is imperative. Support for agricultural production, extension, and infrastructure, such as by building soil fertility also important. Permaculture does not depend on oils and it is a tough sell to small farmers, but there are more and more farmers being successful at it. Educating consumers that fresh food will cost more and about respect for [and the reality of family] farmers are needed. And agricultural support that does protect small U.S. farmers is critical. [We also need a] grain reserve and to change U.S. foreign policy. We need to think about how U.S. agriculture does or does not have an impact on other countries, what do we do with a surplus when we have one and how do we distribute it.

**So your book came out here in the U.S. early this year, it is kind of ironic that it practically coincided with the global food crisis, which is based on many of the factors you lay out in Stuffed & Starved, can you comment on that, did you really expect the global food crisis to happen?**

I cannot claim any special insight into the current crisis -- the predictions are ones that have been coming from Via Campesina who have been at the forefront for decades, around which I formulated my thoughts in the book. In terms of forecasting the global food crisis, I did not think it would happen so fast and so hard; when I was finishing the manuscript things started getting bad and I always knew the [global food system] was like a house of cards in that it would only take one thing for it to topple-oil prices kinda did it. I am still surprised by the [global food crisis], the scale of it and the profound consequences still take my breath away.

An example of it here in the U.S. is illustrated by the recent applications I have been going through for Victory Gardens here in San Francisco, CA [San Francisco has one of the highest costs of living of U.S. cities]-in which many families have applied. I am struck by applications for four to five person families with a household income of \$80,000; who go on to say that at least once a month they do not know where their next meal is coming from, with medical expenses especially taking their meals away. I would be lucky to have \$80,000 and \$80,000 seems like a lot, but when you do the math for a four or five person family it isn't. In

Europe, there is decreased food marketing and increased food safety because there are nationalized healthcare systems. [European governments] realize it is to their benefit to promote healthy food because otherwise they are going to have to pay much more in healthcare costs. Here in the U.S. if we tried to decrease food marketing people would go up in arms and call it a violation of the first amendment.

**In the same statement, Bush also said that the "best way to help alleviate poverty is through trade," any thoughts?**

The free trade debate is irrelevant because it is not free trade, it is corporate welfare. Substitute free trade with corporate welfare and then talk. It would be nice if the President had evidence [that free trade alleviated poverty], but then again it would be nice if he had evidence for anything he said. It is the inequitable distribution to large corporations that is called free trade and there is a bias against redistribution.

Redistribution is never on the table, but if we are serious about a solution [to poverty] we need to stop talking about trade and start talking about redistribution.

**In Stuffed & Starved you eloquently recognized family farmers around the world, do you have anything you want to say to them right now?**

Well, thank you. I would not be able to eat if it was not for you. I try to make this and my gratitude for family farmers known as much as possible, especially when I go purchase my food from my local farmers markets. In the end, I am tremendously grateful to you. I also want them to know not just how they can contribute to [making our food system better] through changes on their farm, but how they would envision building bridges with the urban [low-income] population. There is still very much a rural poor and urban poor divide in the U.S. and yet it is hard to have a conversation about food sovereignty when this is the case; as urban people also do not realize where their food comes from. I do not know how best to help this problem of the urban-rural poor divide, but I am very curious to know what they think, especially in terms of how we further the food sovereignty discussion.

**The rural and urban poor that you speak of are likely not those who are going to be reading Stuffed & Starved, so who did you write the book for?**

I imagine that those reading Stuffed & Starved would be those organizations and concerned citizens. It has already gone into a second printing, which was well advance of what the publishing industry thought. I took radical arguments that are not taken in many of the other books on this topic; also showing how food prices rise due to increasing oil prices, supermarket prices, and some of biofuels.

**While you do lay out ten things readers can do at the end of Stuffed & Starved [1. Transform our tastes; 2. Eat locally and seasonally; 3. Eat agroecologically 4. Support locally owned business 5. All workers have the right to dignity 6. Profound and comprehensive rural change; 7. Living wages for all; 8. Support for a sustainable architecture of food; 9. Snapping the food system's bottleneck; 10. Owing and providing restitution for the injustices of the past and present], what if they just go buy an organic product from Whole Foods and think that is good enough?**

Exactly; it is a very American delusion that we create together by shopping. There is a lot more out there that can be done than just food dollars; there is no way we are going to shop our way out of the global food crisis. How denatured we [Americans] have become. Do not get me wrong, what NFFC is doing is great, but more vigorous citizen action is necessary. Actually, the next book I am working on is about how we can make this political process happen. Right now, people are not active participants, but merely consumers who cannot buy better farmer agricultural policy unless they are ADM. I hope people realize that we must take direct action.

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National Family Farm Coalition (NFFC), founded in 1986, unites and strengthens the voices and actions of its diverse grassroots members to demand viable livelihoods for family farmers, safe and healthy food for everyone, and economically and environmentally sound rural communities.

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