



About Jim Harkness

Jim Harkness joined IATP as president in July 2006. Previously he served as Executive Director of the World Wildlife Fund in China from 1999–2005. He has written and spoken frequently on China and sustainable development, and has served as an adviser for the World Bank and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

About IATP

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. IATP is headquartered in Minneapolis, Minnesota and has an office in Washington D.C..

Free trade versus food democracy

APRIL 17, 2013 – There has been a quiet revolution going around the world, as communities and nations retake control of their food systems. In the U.S., more people are taking a look at processed foods at the supermarket and opting instead for healthier choices, grown locally with fewer pesticides. People in Cambodia have taken a hard look at what’s happening to their climate, soil and seeds, and figured out a new, low-cost way to produce rice, increasing production and putting farmers in charge. Brazilians are favoring local farmers growing sustainable foods for school lunch programs, lowering hunger rates dramatically as a result.

This trend is larger than individual choice: people are using their rights as citizens to make sure governments, from local to national, support these innovations. Unfortunately, U.S. trade policy seems wedded to a discredited notion of how we should get our food and who should benefit.

These local shifts involve choices, and in many cases choices that favor local producers over transnational corporations, local markets over imports; it seems that the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) has a problem with that. In its latest report, the agency highlights what it calls the growing problems of “localization barriers to trade,” and vows renewed vigilance against these barriers to the free flow of goods and services. A free flow to where? And for whose benefit?

In the U.S., local food is sometimes dismissed as an elite niche market, but in the rest of the world it has another meaning entirely. For decades, Western aid and trade officials have told poor countries to rely on international markets to feed their people; governments were forced to cut support for “inefficient” things like local food production and emergency grain reserves; domestic farming was undermined as cheap imports flooded in. When the price of internationally traded food spiked in 2007-08, and again in 2011, the poorest couldn’t afford staples like wheat and rice, and global hunger soared. The developing countries that fared best were those that built domestic production and insulated themselves from volatile global markets. So while the USTR attack on all things local may be great for the U.S. food giants, it pushes an economic model that has been discredited by actual events.

Talks for a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) that would unite markets of 11 countries have been going on for several years. Japan just announced it will enter the talks, despite the vigorous opposition of local farmers concerned about what such an