Let Us Kneel and Kiss the Earth

The first plenary of ITM 2015 highlighted the fundamental and spiritual connection that people have to soil, and how that relationship is the foundation for the health or ill of our food system. Dr. Daphne Miller told us, “We are the soil,” and provided examples of the links between the health of our earth and the health of our bodies – from the ecological and nutritional harmony of three sisters plantings, to the ways in which the layers and microbiome of our organs mirror those found in soil.

This scientific evidence was corroborated by other panelists who shared origin stories and worldviews that make these same links; Esther Wanjiku told us that in Kenya all things, including food, come from the air, earth, fire or water ancestors, and those elements are expressed in the food we eat. She asked us to honor our ancestors and allow ourselves to be guided by their wisdom through the spirit of food. Helianti Hilman, founder of the artisanal food enterprise JAVARA, spoke of her indigenous colleagues, who have successful rice crops year after year without fail by looking to the wisdom of the stars. These narratives highlight the need to give equal footing to both scientific and traditional knowledge, without a need to validate indigenous wisdom under the lens of science. The challenge lies in finding a common language that can cut through differences of expression and get to the heart of shared meaning.

“We are dying because of the lack of biodiversity”  

Daphne Miller, M.D.
We Have a Different Story to Tell

Esther Wanjiku set the stage for the day when she quoted Einstein, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.” This sentiment was echoed by numerous speakers who called on participants to tell a new story of our relationship to food – one that is not dictated by nation-states, Big Ag or the media, but that comes from the ancient cosmovisions that have guided indigenous food systems for millennia. After encouraging the audience to re-romance Mother Earth, Manish Jain suggested that, “Food is a great way to decolonize our minds… through our bellies.” Dr. Tirso Gonzales challenged us to envision a world - as the Zapatistas have - in which many worlds fit. Rather than focus on the negative process of decolonising our food story, we should look to re-indigenise it.

Sean Sherman, aka The Sioux Chef, from the Lakota tribe in the United States, offered practical advice on how to tell a new food story. He uses native plant and animal ingredients to prepare gourmet meals that not only taste delicious, but also educate consumers on their regional food histories. Sherman has cooked up innovative models of promoting “pre-reservation” Native American cuisine, and prepared wild rice from the Anishanaabeg with blueberries and maple glaze during the afternoon Taste Workshop on wild edibles.

Watu Ferdinandus highlighted the work of the East Nusa Tenggara Local Food Farmers Association, whose philosophy is “one mother, one house and one kitchen,” and their indigenous perspective is to focus on food as a source of culture and identity. He concluded by saying, “Seeds are related with culture and identity; when the seeds are lost, the culture is lost; seeds for the future to save our wisdom.” Similarly Kaichou Titiana, from a New Caledonian fishing community, shared how she tells the stories of plants, like taro, with younger generations, so that their histories remain vital.

There was a strong call to include youth in telling the stories of indigenous food. Nicole Yanes, a rising leader in her Opata community, declared, “Youth is an asset not a problem”. With her collaboration, the University of the Opata Nation started a course in traditional knowledge and indigenous agriculture. School Gardens provide a way for children to explore their creativity and passion to engage with biodiversity that is otherwise stifled in the mainstream educational system. This raises the question of how local governments could enhance curricula to enable novel educational and teaching opportunities that include values of agrobiodiversity across the food chain.

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Wellbeing in the “We Feeling”

The second plenary introduced a preliminary research study into indigenous conceptions of and pathways to wellbeing that was conducted by the Indigenous Partnership, with the help of researcher Elizabeth Hacker. The study utilised storytelling as a methodology to identify priorities for wellbeing among agriculturalists in Meghalaya, North East India and pastoralists in Isiolo, Kenya. What emerged from the study is that wellbeing stems from the combination of social harmony, cultural identity and the meeting of basic needs. It was clear that without peace and security, there cannot be wellbeing, as expressed by the Kenyan pastoralists, who said that conflict, unpredictable water for their cattle and restrictions to land diminished wellbeing. Also, changes to their cultural identity - for example when the pastoralists were encouraged to give up livestock raising to farm - cut at the root of their wellbeing. Similar stories emerged for others who were ripped from their lands or links to culture, like when Esma Khalilova spoke emotionally of her experience as an Umyut being deported from her homeland: “We couldn’t see the birds we grew up with.”

Clearly in order to maintain wellbeing among indigenous communities, there must be mechanisms in place to ensure cultural stability. Strong alliances and collectives are an important step to creating such safeguards. Indigenous peoples’ and community conserved areas and territories (ICCsAs) are another strategy. Lamen Gonnay, from the mountainous Kalinga province in the Philippines, told of the power that comes from uniting with people who are suffering the same injustices. The terrace rice farmers of his region organised into a cooperative to combat the increase of chemical farming and proved that together they could produce enough organic rice using indigenous methods for themselves and for export. In September of last year, they produced 13 metric tonnes for export to the USA. In turn, the local government went from supporting monoculture and chemical farming to creating a program that recognizes that “authentic ecological rice is from us [indigenous farmers]”.

“The survival of our land is in our kids. They need to know about the foods and the flavors of our ancestors.”
Mr. Agustin Rosendo Uriana
Teacher in Wayuu, Columbia

“We need to have peace, we need to be accepted and understood, our history needs to be told our story needs to be told.”
Noel Butler, Aboriginal Educator at
Nuragunya, Australia

“Educairse y formarse es un acto revolucionario.” (“Educating ourselves is in itself, a revolutionary act.”)
Dali Nolasco Cruz - Tlaola Nahua, Mexico

“Business can and must play a role in giving back to society and enriching the landscape of the country.”
Chef Manjit Gill - Corporate chef of ITC Hotels

“It is taboo to disrespect the rice that feeds me, my clan, and my community; and it is a sin to waste food, when we were young our mothers, sisters, grandmothers would give us a grain of rice to protect us from the evil spirits.”
Toki Blah - President of ICARE, North East India

“We know the future we want; it is in our cosmovision, in our relationship with nature. The future we want is that others can understand this relationship with the earth; the only thing we need is the opportunity”
Maria Teresa Zapeta Mendoza, Coordinator of the International Indigenous Women’s Forum, Guatemala

“It is okay to be different if we believe in what we are doing”
Helianti Hilman - Founder and CEO of JAVARA