

Putting the culture back into agriculture: an Interview with David Fletcher



David Fletcher has been a community development educator and researcher for over 30 years. He has had the opportunity to work with and learn from indigenous people in Africa, Asia and North America on environmental, climate change, well-being and food security issues. In the following interview David talks about his community development work in Ghana.

Q: Can you tell us about your work with rural people in North Ghana, in relation to growing food?

I've been working in community development in various parts of Western Africa since 1985. The focus on food has probably been more in the last 10 years although it's always been part of my work. In this part of Ghana, I've been particularly working on revitalisation of traditional farming techniques. A big part of the work relating to those techniques is working with nature rather than controlling nature, so it's a different approach to how people do agriculture. It's a focus on low input agriculture or just using things that people have access to that are locally available and it's called by some: conservation agriculture or agro-ecology. This part of Ghana is certainly subject to climate change. It's known as the Guinea Savanna, a dry area, a poor area in terms of wealth indicators. But the people I've worked with there have a sacred relationship with the land and the water and they feel that the part they have been given is to tend the land and harvest the abundance of the land and from that they will be able to live, which was how their ancestors were able to live. However, in the last 50 years or so, this switch to high-input industrial mono-culture agriculture, where you need to

sell crops to get money to pay for other things, has taken them away from their traditional approaches.

Q: Can you elaborate on this a little bit more?

A lot of what I have been working with them on is the revitalisation and rehonouring of traditional approaches. So it's not focussing on agri-business but on agriculture as the cultural and social components are just as important as anything else. This means encouraging fewer pesticides, fertilisers and chemicals and moving away from some of those mono-crops such as maize, but going back to some of the sorghums and millets and the diversity of foods they had traditionally. Then intercropping those with beans and legumes and all of those traditional crops that are really good sources of nutrition that they have been told by agricultural modernists over the last 50 years that they need to move away from. So it's just returning to some of those things they have done before and some of that work has been especially around re-honouring and re-introducing traditional foods and crops that you can grow on your farm, eat in your house and enjoy with friends, rather than what people see on TV in terms of fast food and fancy glossy packaging and all that kind of stuff. So what we have been involved in is indigenous food fairs where people make traditional dishes and show them off and people get to taste them and reorient their minds in a different way in terms of what good food is and what good nutrition is.

Q: What crops in particular are you referring to?

Two particular things I've worked on are ground nuts or peanuts and different varieties of peanuts which are such good sources of protein and can be used in different ways and how can we re-introduce these and provide some income for people. It doesn't need to be the other things that provide the income. And then Baobab which in the international health food regime is this superfood but people in the area where it grows had just been throwing it aside because it's not valuable, not tasty, not modern. But when they start talking about it they recognise how important it is in different seasons and the nutritional value of it. They also have this cultural belief that it is the kind of food that is served to angels or eaten by angels, which is part of this whole understanding of the interconnections between the land and the trees and other living beings and people etc and how we need to honour and build on that. So this is the kind of work I've been involved in during the last 10 years and it's a powerful movement that's going on in this area and in many other places on the African continent and around the world. But it's in the face of industrial agriculture which has very different ways of looking at things and marketing things etc, so it's not always easy but it's a valuable way to reframe our relationship in producing and consuming food.

Q: Are they able to sustain themselves with these kinds of practises?

Yes, and they have for generations and generations. Does it produce all the income they might have for all their desires or for paying children's school fees or buying the latest cell phone? Well... in these times of climate change it's challenging as it's still mostly rain fed agriculture and the rains don't always come as expected, but the whole industrial food production has been built around supplying the cities which are in the South of Ghana, supplying the urban population etc. And so much work has gone into doing that that in many ways the urban people who are buying things from the farmers have more food in their bellies than the farmers themselves. So the farmers can survive

if they are treated with respect and are able to rebuild their original relationships they had with the land and food production etc and they can also feed the cities and provide food to the cities, but things have got shaken up a bit and they're out of sync. So yes people can survive and sustain themselves but things need to change in the system in the way we all think about the system of production and transportation of food and processing of food etc.

Q: What do you think the industrial farming community can take from these indigenous communities?

They can learn lots if they are willing and that is the big question. I think for a lot of time for the last 20 years, people have tried to play around the edges of the industrial farming system to make it better. I think a lot of learning and a lot of work has happened about that and we are at a stage now where the industrial farming community needs to re-establish a sacred relationship with the land and water and energy. What we are experiencing in terms of climate change is in many ways a result of that industrial farming system that's part of globalisation and it's because land, water and energy were exploited for profit that we need to re-establish a sacred relationship. We need to understand as a human species that we have a role to honour and protect land, water and energy sources not just to exploit them in the short term for fancy things. Also we need to reclaim this sense of working with the cycles of nature rather than trying to control the cycles. So much of the industrial mindset is about power and control and I think we need to move away from that so as to work with the cycles of nature to produce what these bodies need to survive. In addition to that I always talk about the respect we need to have for those working close to the land and many of those people working close to the land around the world, or doing those first steps in the processing industry, are women and we need to have respect for those people, for women, in all stages of the value chain. How do we show our respect for the roles that people play all through the food production/consumption system so there is some equity within that? We can listen to them and learn from them. You know the industrial farming system thinks they have all the answers but they can learn a lot from listening to women food producers.

It's not about owning resources and owning the genetic material in seeds and expanding and having more control and more power, it's about sharing and caring so we can survive and we need to continue to move forward in terms of trying to make those kinds of changes.