



HARVESTING RESILIENCE IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

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In this new reality of COVID-19, we have become painfully aware of our basic needs and grateful for the essential workers who risk their lives so that we can remain safe and healthy.

There's no time that I feel this gratitude more acutely than during my weekly visit to the grocery store. I feel immensely grateful for the farmers who produce the food in my shopping cart, the transportation workers who deliver the food from the farm to the grocery, and the grocers who are working overtime to keep our access to food safe and secure.

These workers, just like their healthcare counterparts, are the people who sustain human life, whether in times of crisis or not. When all other services have been stripped bare as a result of stay-at-home mandates, we are finally able to clearly see how critical these workers are to our very survival. This was always true, but now it's self-evident.



SHI participating farmer José Santos Hernandez waters the vegetables in his garden in El Limón, Penonomé, Panama. His vegetables, including cabbage, tomatoes, and peppers, will feed his family and the families of his neighbors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

[The FAO has warned that the pandemic will likely disrupt people's access to nutritious sources of food – especially fruits and vegetables – at a global level.](#) But as farmers markets across the United States shutter, the heartening news that [sales are surging for direct-to-](#)



[consumer farmers](#) suggests that my gratitude is part of a much larger groundswell. And with more people now confined to their homes, we're already seeing [a revival in "grow your own."](#) All this suggests that there's now a growing appreciation for the role of farmers and farming in our society, and with due cause.

We're adopting new and creative strategies to support our local farmers and other community members even as we remain physically distant from one another. But rather than let our worlds shrink to the confines of our own homes, we're looking to nourish our ever-expanding circle of community connections.

I hope that this compassion and awareness of our interconnectedness continues to extend outwards. After all, our communities, just like our food systems, are more global than we often realize. Indeed, more than half of fresh fruit and one third of vegetables consumed in the United States today are imported.

And of the 2.5 million farmworkers in the United States, the majority are Latino migrants. As the U.S. government closes down the U.S.-Mexico border, [U.S. farmers are concerned that, without sufficient migrant laborers, fruits and vegetables may simply rot in the fields.](#) Meanwhile, those who continue to work in the field remain particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. [Migrant farmworkers often live in crowded housing, are exposed to chemical agents that weaken their respiratory health,](#) and don't have the same access as others in our society to healthcare or other social safety nets. While we've come to recognize their work as essential, we also must regard their health and wellbeing as such.

LESSONS IN RESILIENCE FROM LATIN AMERICA

For the small-scale farmers who work with Leonardo Pech, the Director of Sustainable



SHI participating farmer Delia Carcamo sows sweet pepper seed in her nursery in Patchakan, Belize. Photo taken by SHI field trainer Indira Patt.

Harvest International (SHI) Belize, the COVID-19 pandemic is just one more crisis they've experienced over the course of their lives. Whether confronting the devastation of a drought or an insect plague that wipes out their entire crop, they've had many opportunities to reflect on the hard-learned lessons of crisis and the importance of building resilience into their very relationship with the land.

By embracing methods of regenerative agriculture, such as no tillage, cover-crops, and composting, these small-scale



farmers are sequestering carbon from the atmosphere while building healthy soil and encouraging biodiversity. In doing so, they're also increasing the water retention of their soil and, thus, protecting themselves against unpredictable droughts or floods. Meanwhile, crop diversification is their insurance against outbreaks of pests and fungi. Further, they no longer need to spend precious funds on pesticides, fungicides, or chemical fertilizers.

As practitioners of regenerative agriculture, they've become champions for the important connection between the health of the soil, the health of their crops, and the health of their families. By recognizing complex webs of interdependence, regenerative agriculture builds resilience from the ground up.

For Leonardo Pech, one of the most important lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic is that we must be proactive, not reactive. He draws a parallel between the countries who have “adopted preventionary health measures early on” to mitigate disaster from the pandemic and the small-scale farmers who have employed regenerative agriculture methods in order “to eliminate and avoid outbreaks of pests and diseases.” In both cases, they are proactively building the ecosystems and farming practices necessary to absorb shocks and setbacks.



In this agroforestry plot in the community of San Antonio de la Cuchilla, Siguatepeque, Honduras, you can see crops such as coffee, plantains, corn, beans, and soy being grown together under the forest canopy.

For the over 400 farming families currently partnering with

Sustainable Harvest International in Central America -- receiving technical training on regenerative farming practices -- and the nearly 3000 families that came before them in SHI's 23 years of existence, no matter what uncertainties lie ahead, they have the tools and knowhow to ensure their families' access to an abundant supply of homegrown and nutritious food on their tables.



Jaime Soto, a field trainer for SHI-Honduras in the community of La Concepción, reminds us that farmers' food sovereignty will “help diminish the impact of the crisis from the pandemic.” Whereas farmers who are dependent on one or two crops may be left in the lurch as their markets dry up, farmers working with SHI have avoided disaster by prioritizing growing crops for family consumption. Although the pandemic has caused a reduction in farmers' income, Soto reports that “each family is still producing their own healthy and fresh food. They have their food right at hand.” That’s more than most of us can say.



Maria Lorenzo and her daughters continue working in their home garden in La Candelaria, Panama despite the uncertainty and fear surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, with deep roots in their rural communities, these farmers may also prove to be a critical safety net for extended family members who find themselves in cities under increasingly difficult and dangerous conditions.

As elsewhere, this pandemic will have long-term and unforeseeable consequences for the countries of Latin America. They will face challenges similar to, but not the same as, those faced by the United States. With fewer resources, higher levels of poverty, informal labor, and [precarious housing](#), these countries seem particularly vulnerable to this type of crisis.

But as we look towards an uncertain future, I think it would behoove us all to learn from those who have confronted uncertainty in the past and refashioned themselves to manage the uncertainty of the future. This is exactly what small-scale farmers partnering with SHI in Belize, Honduras, and Panama are doing. On the frontlines of tropical deforestation and climate change, they are not only managing to survive, but leading the way towards a better future for our entire planet.

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE AND A CHANCE FOR CHANGE

As with the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change spells out an uncertain future for all of us. But only in comparison to the outbreak of COVID-19 can we see climate change as a slow-moving beast. The coronavirus, in all its lightning speed, triggered collective anxiety and collective action. On the other hand, climate change could initially be overlooked and later accommodated, compartmentalized, and ignored.



But even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change remains the greatest threat to humanity and our planet.

As others have suggested, perhaps our response to COVID-19 will serve as [“a dress rehearsal for the climate emergency.”](#) This pandemic has already shown us that we’re capable of acting at a global scale by embracing local initiatives, federal interventions, and international cooperation.

Some even note that there are [unintended benefits for the environment as the economy grinds to a halt](#). And while we’re seeing a drop in Co2 emissions, such gains are unlikely to continue, [especially as governments take advantage of the opportunity to roll back regulations](#). More importantly, the health of our planet need not be inversely related to the health of our economy. Indeed, there are already those who are using these relational metrics [to question the viability, if not wisdom, of tackling climate change](#). But I think they lack vision.

The small-scale farmers who partner with SHI do not trade their economic security for the health of the planet. Rather, they regard the two as indelibly linked.

In order to build the political will and social buy-in to tackle climate change in the United States, we need to support holistic policies that do just that by connecting economic security and environmental health.

To do so, we may very well have to reverse the logic behind what holds value in our societies – people not stocks, long-term health not instantaneous profit. I believe this is possible. We can prioritize living well over the cheap thrills of thoughtless consumption.

In many ways, quarantine is giving many of us a head start.

Out of necessity, we’re collectively hitting the “reset” button on our behaviors and habits. As we’re forced to stay still in our houses, we’re focusing our attention towards our loved ones while reconnecting with the health and well-being of our communities and our local environs. We’re finding a heightened awareness in the joy they bring us.

In turn, we’re learning how to be better caretakers, not merely out of a perfunctory sense of duty but out of a deep-seated appreciation for our interdependence. Investing in our relationships to one another, we’re learning the true value of building resilient communities. But as we turn inwards, we cannot afford to forget how extensive our communities are nor how global their reach.



Despite others' skepticism, I'm overwhelmed by this growing sense of unity in purpose.

What I see around me is a revival in cultures of care and empathy. I sincerely hope they aren't fleeting. For if we can harness them to the challenge of climate change, I'm sure that we can create a healthy planet that feeds and sustains us all.