

## Predictable Surprises

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# Predictable Surprises: looking back

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**W**ith the ETC Group and IPES Food we've worked on the *Long Food Movement* project. One of my particular areas of enthusiasm was around the idea of what we then called grey swans, and which I think we very nicely now describe as *predictable surprises*. That to me is one of the most important areas that we were coming across and debating within the Long Food Movement. I am glad it's carrying on in this kind of exciting way, through these dialogues.

It's also really nice to see now that we have the chance to think more about the surprises of the past and to explore some of their history: the predictable surprises and the not predicted surprises of the past. Where in civil society, in different levels of activity – from the global to the local, and in terms of both food and health and environment and other areas of the movements –, we found ourselves dealing with black swans, grey swans or now predictable surprises.

I think we've been actually pretty good in civil society at pulling off surprises. Over the decades, we've surprised governments, the media, fairly often ourselves, with pretty explosively important information. One of the hallmarks of civil society has been coming up with whole new ways of seeing things, whole new ways of understanding, new information, new data, that takes key actors in the world off guard, makes them rethink their positions, and gives us an opportunity to suddenly move ahead and accomplish something that we might not have otherwise accomplished.

That does go back a long time. One of the first occasions was around what was called initially the Nestle's boycott, led by different organisations working together. Finally the campaign against the infant formula came on, of course, and it had a shock impact on the world. I remember it stirred all of the major journals and newspapers and magazines. It became a big battle between the Berne Declaration (a Swiss organisation now called Public Eye) and Nestle's, because the Berne Declaration clearly laid out the data of what was happening with infant formula around the world, how damaging it was, and Nestle's really didn't know how to respond to it, really struggled to try to come back with some kind of answer, and they did the worst of all possible things and the best of all possible things for civil society, which is Nestle sued the Berne Declaration. And that lawsuit, which I don't think the Berne Declaration predicted, but certainly welcomed, allowed a debate which caught huge media attention and which the Berne Declaration very happily lost. I remember really well traveling at the time and reading (it was *Time Magazine* at that moment) the

article which said how the judge had concluded after the trial that the Berne Declaration should be fined for what it had said because, although it is true that Nestle's kills babies, they didn't mean to. That's what the judge said! That was absolutely wonderful. I think Nestle's was fined something like 50 Swiss Francs or maybe it was 500 Swiss Francs, but it was like nothing compared to how that coalesced everybody and changed the way that civil society addressed corporations. In fact, in my experience at least, it was the first time that a civil society organisation, in the food system, directly challenged a major corporation and did so very successfully.

We pulled the surprise. We didn't – and this will become a recurring theme of what I'm saying – we didn't know how to move after that, we weren't quite sure how to capitalise on it. Certainly, in the case of the Berne Declaration they helped to form the infant formula campaign, the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), and that did move on and continue its work. It didn't lead to a multiplication of initiatives exactly, beyond the fact that the rest of us in civil society working in these issues witnessed what had happened, recognised the possibilities, and then tried to emulate what the Berne Declaration originally accomplished. We could certainly argue that more could have happened in other ways – we could have built on to that nutritional initiative in other places besides the World Health Organization (WHO), but also in FAO and elsewhere.

After that campaign, I remember one of the first that stood out in my mind was when Oxfam UK David Bull published his book on pesticides. And that again dropped like a bomb in the middle of the UN system, the UN environmental program, and created a space for a lot of international action by civil society at the local level, at the national level, as well as through international organisations. And so was born the Pesticides Action Network (PAN), which is still alive and thriving around the world and has expanded its work into other important areas. PAN itself became a coalition of civil society that has been able to build on the surprise shock of that information and make it a very important force which attracted both GRAIN and ETC Group (then called RAFI) and many others to work together as well.

It goes on from there: I'm thinking of IATP, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, I think of Sophia Murphy in the earlier days, back in the mid 1990s. Then IATP did something that was seen to be a rather superficial thing, a sort of 50th anniversary of the World Bank and 50th anniversary of FAO in 1995. But it took advantage of those occasions to really take a leadership in bringing a civil society together to perform a critique of both the World Bank and of FAO. And FAO was at that moment on the threshold of its first World Food Summit, and so it was an excellent opportunity for many of us to get together and work together in a broad spectrum of issues and concerns – pesticides, seeds, trade issues, certainly, financial concerns about the UN system, and so on –, all came together to take advantage of an occasion which we knew was coming and to grab it and turn it into something that we wanted to use, and it was an important move for us.

Again, sometimes these were one organisation initiatives, Berne Declaration or Oxfam or IATP, but others of us were able to join in, and I think we could go back and analyse about how that could have been done better in every case, but that still was accomplished.

One of the biggest ones I remember, was what Larry Lohman did almost 20 years ago now. He surprised us with this enormous study about the scheme of carbon trading and climate change negotiations – which was just so detailed that it was unavoidable for governments. It simply again was a game-changing explosion of information and data which no one could fight with, it was really hard to do anything but sort of say ‘okay, we’ll try to do better’, which is not what we wanted to achieve, but it made a huge difference. And it was again a predictable surprise, in that many of us knew that Larry was doing the work, together with the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, of course The Corner House putting this together, and it had tremendous potential to be game-changing. But in civil society we seemed to lack again the actual bandwidth or the actual resources, the human financial resources to build upon it in the way that maybe we could have. It still made a huge difference, there’s no doubt about that, it’s just we could have wished perhaps for more if we had had a chance.

Look at the work that was done by GRAIN a few years later. Around 2007 or so, I remember talking to Renée Vellvé about the work GRAIN was doing around land grabs, a totally new concept for me. I had never even heard of the idea before in any real way. I found the information that Renée was digging up completely astonishing and extraordinarily important and initially almost hard to believe. I had to be taught to understand it better, and it had a big impact on the world and how we understand these issues. Again, one more time we’ve captured the headlines, captured the attention of governments and media and United Nations agencies, and produced information that was important not just as some sort of global level, but it clearly had national and regional and local implications that allowed for civil society to act at all of those levels. It had implications for not just food. This was an opportunity again, another bomb dropped by civil society that impacted everybody.

What else can I suggest? Certainly, Vía Campesina. First at the World Food Summit in 1996, but then of course with the Nyéléni process. I think that the conclusions, above all the concept of *food sovereignty*, changed the game for all of us in civil society and how we look at these issues, understand these issues, and it caused virtually everybody else in the world to scratch their heads and tried to figure out how this was going to change their own negotiations, whether it was again at the national level, in dealing with or fighting corporations, or handling UN agencies. It changed everything. And it was a concept, again a surprise, that reached out and really brought a wide range of civil society together in a coherent way. Perhaps this was a real change from the earlier examples I gave, because everybody was invited in, everyone had a place to see themselves in aligning themselves along with food sovereignty, understanding it, seeing how it applied to what they were doing, and it invited collaborations that weren’t there before.

These examples keep on going. For ETC Group, the *Terminator* technology (suicidal seeds) issue was one surprise where Hope Shand discovered the patent, got it into a CBD negotiation and suddenly Terminator seeds became both a moratorium in the United Nations system, but also a major political debate around the issue of GMOs. And of course, there was the wider issue of GMOs, which is worth looking at as well and how that evolved over time.

The thing, for us, is then: we in civil society are good at surprises, we're not necessarily good at sharing the information about those surprises in advance, and we're not necessarily very good at planning them ahead – even for ourselves and our own organisations or our own sector of civil society. We almost never have the resources we need to be able to build on the initial surprise and make it move.

You can divide predictable surprises into categories. There's maybe, I would say, three kinds of predictable surprises. There's a surprise. There's what I'd like to think of as being surprise parties, where civil society gets together and plans, such as the Nyéléni Initiative, or such as a UN conference of some kind, or a campaign against GMOs, where there's collaboration. And we prepare our way and we're coordinated across groups and civil societies, so that yes, our enemies or governments – some enemies, some not – are surprised, but we've planned it well. Those examples are rare, we haven't done those very often and I think that's been a weakness – that we haven't been able to do that better.

Then, another kind of surprise, I think, is what I've described as sleepover surprises. These are the kind of things that happen occasionally, sometimes by accident, where we've put in place ideas or initiatives that don't bear fruit until sometime later, but they can play a role.

One was the creation of the Committee on World Food Security back in 1974, during the World Food Conference. It was sort of a token giveaway to angry governments of the global South and angry civil society organisations. At that moment, Henry Kissinger and his friends were kind of capturing the UN agencies, capturing FAO, separating the World Food Council from FAO, creating the financial instruments for the food system and moving science and technology out of FAO into CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research). All of that was happening, so the one sort of breadcrumb that was thrown out to the rest of us was, 'okay, we'll let you have this Committee on World Food Security, which will ostensibly allow these various UN bodies to come together and consult with each other', so there'll be some sense of cohesion between the different instruments that Kissinger was happily creating on us.

And it was useless, it died almost immediately, or it seemed. It would have been nice if it died, as it felt at the time, it just didn't play a role. Until, suddenly, in 2008, with the world food price crisis and the economic crisis and the UN in disarray and efforts by New York to capture the Rome-based agencies, civil societies said: well, why don't we just rejuvenate the Committee on World Food Security. We needed to grab onto that, persuade the heads of UN agencies that it was really the only option that was viable, throw our weight behind

it and create a revitalized Committee in World Food Security which, for all of its weaknesses, still has remained the most important forum for debate on food and agricultural issues.

So, it's kind of a sleepover surprise. We didn't know what use it was going to have, it didn't look very promising for some time, but it finally was. And that's not the only example, I think we've seen others. Twenty three years ago, around the Cartagena Protocol, the Third World Network (TWN), made efforts to create some kind of a structural proposal for a governance over the transboundary movement of living modified organisms. It seemed very weak at the time, it had some dangers built into it, which we were alarmed by, but it created a structure which still had the potential to be adapted. Once it was there, once it was structured, it could be amended and modified, interpreted differently, both for and against us, but it could be interpreted either way, and it has the potential to move out and have a wider impact than we'd ever would have imagined back in the year 2000.

The same is true of the work the TWN did again in 2010 at the CBD with the Nagoya Protocol, which civil society was fighting to have it established. There was deep alarm around the digitalisation of genetic sequences, the "DSI", question was not being addressed, but the structure was put in place, it had some muscle in terms of governments at least being keen on the issue and aware of it; the issue of new ways of biopiracy being very clear. And so, even years later, as we see the negotiations completed now around the oceans treaty, with all of its weaknesses, there still is an element of DSI there and debate around that, and it's a structure again which was a sleepover surprise, but one which is still useful to us as time goes on. So putting some of these structures in place I think is valuable and we shouldn't necessarily underestimate or ignore these structures.

**S**o those are the kinds of surprises, but maybe I should also say that I identify two other areas that concern me as I looked at the history of this. I remember an issue was coming up during the discussions around Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and the development of biotechnology very early in the 1990s, around 92-93, being with Henk Hobbelink in Amsterdam. The Dutch government brought civil society and scientists together to debate biotechnology, and told us that it's not enough to have an early warning system, you also have to have an early listening system. And in civil society, I think we've lacked that generally. We haven't really developed our own skills for listening – to others, to ourselves, to our neighbours or in civil society, to see how we can move forward and make changes, how we can build on each other's experiences. So, the bomb dropped by Larry Lohmann, or the bomb dropped by Henk Hobbelink, or the bomb dropped by whoever, with that new information, new ideas, can actually be built on in a way that we know it's coming, we know its potential, how do we work together to turn it into something more powerful. I think it's a standing concern for us in trying to understand the possibilities ahead of us.

The other thing that's clear is that we're living in a world of crises, there's no doubt about that. We're now, and I'm going from the past to the present, we're in a century of crises,

where none of us will be surprised that there'll be, no predictions required here, we know that there will be another pandemic at some point. We're not sure whether it's going to come from African swine fever or it's going to come from H5N1 or Dengue fever or where, but we know there will be another pandemic. We know that there will be another financial crisis, we might be in it right now in terms of not just inflation, but in terms of banks and where that takes us. We know that there will be environmental catastrophes that will grab the world, and not just regional ones, as horrific as they are, but ones which perhaps have even a wider global implication or demand more global response. There will be other wars, something we didn't think was true and now we know is true and there's of course about thirty of them right now around the world.

So we know that those are there and knowing that they're going to come we can start to think now about how we do respond to them, what steps do we need to take now. And to me, the surprise has been that it doesn't make that much difference whether the crisis comes from a famine, a drought, or it comes from a cyclone, or it comes from an economic collapse or a pandemic. When it hits, it will impact everything else. You never have uni-functional crises, it's always a multiple crisis. You don't have a drought without having multi-crop collapses and livestock collapses and famines. When you have that, you also have disease. With famine and disease, there's usually war. So, these things come together, it doesn't matter much where it starts, where it's initiated, we all get involved, whether we are looking at these issues from the point of view of labour and what's going to mean for labourers and workers around the world, or we're looking at it from the point of view of the food system, or health systems, or fighting the marginalisation of people in municipalities, or racism. It's going to affect us all.

And so, we can, in this century of crisis, think together about what roles each of us can play. Wherever the crisis originates, how do we try to recognise that's coming, how do we already put in place, already have sorted out now the steps that need to be taken to ameliorate the crisis, and perhaps even take advantage of that surprise to achieve some of the goals we wouldn't otherwise achieve. Can we take the work that's been done on agroecology and prepare it in terms of analysis of land availability and markets and opportunities and health needs of people in communities, to now have a strategy in place that, when a drought comes or another crisis comes, we can take the experiences we have from agroecology? Can we find ways (with the preparatory work we've done), with which we can quickly support marginalised communities and the health community and others to survive the crisis and build upon our experiences?

I think this is the importance of recognising that the crisis will be multiple, that the crises can be looked at from a global level or a local level. It's kind of easier for us to think perhaps more at the local or the national level about how to come together, and to know that in civil society we have the strength already to again make the surprises happen. We have now a capacity that we never had 50 years ago, when I first got into this work, to cooperate together, to be talking to each other like this to make things change. And we know that those crises are coming, and those beautiful surprises are out there. So, what do we need to do, what planning and preparation do we need to have, what does the health community

need to say to us, what do the education folks need to say, what do the food folks need to say, what do the peace folks need to say, so we can build on these things together? I think the potential for turning these black swans (as we used to call them) into grey swans or into the predictable surprises that we can take advantage of, and orchestrate ourselves and to build ourselves, the potential for that is really very high, and the opportunity I think it's great.

### Ideas related to *crises and preparedness*

#### The participants during session 1

- Be ready to improvise

The pandemic taught us, at least in the education sector, that we can't do much more than playing as the cards fall. We can't be prepared for everything. However, I do think that we do have a maturity regarding resolving things, to be able to resolve things, and we have seen this during the pandemic.

- Build financial capacity
- Have flexible organizational structures

The organizations we have structures that mean that we haven't got much flexibility. We're stuck in funding proposals, and funding timelines, and things we have to deliver, and the capacity to jump and pull people together and iterate very quickly with a response or even see a response coming and prepare for it, it's just not there. And I think that's a major threat. Our opponents have that, they have the financial capacity and the human capacity to just jump into the breach and exploit opportunities in moments and events.

- Study the disasters because they are built and will become more and more frequent

We need to look at the disasters (natural, climatic, urban disasters or catastrophes) as something that is "in the making". We need to eradicate the vision of "natural disasters". Not even earthquakes are natural disasters because the governments, the private sector, the local authorities play a role in these events becoming disasters. Now, disasters are going to be something that is much more common and stronger, first due to climate change, but not only because of that, but also because of the devastation and the lack of care of the governments to be able to take on mitigating preventive actions to prevent these.

- Building institutions that protect us and respond when needed

Preparedness relates to the institutions we are building day by day. Institutions that protect us and we can turn to in the case of a bad surprise. There may be collaboration in building the institutions but also institutions that encourage us to collaborate. Knowing you've got somewhere to turn is one of the ways in which I think we have to think about this, and ways in which we can reduce the panic and increase the instinct to be looking outward and be helpful.

- Start from the very small but think territorially

In the case of people working in the land, it is very useful for us beekeepers in Mexico to be able to think about it from a small point of view. Beginning with how are our bees doing to the bigger assembly of the neighborhood, the community and the national assembly of beekeepers that are connected via WhatsApp. Bees are indicators of the health of our territory. Thinking territorially is very important. Through the assemblies we assess risks constantly. From learning what happens in distant places we can predict how that event can come to our places. And the communication system that we practice makes us feel ready to respond quickly to crises. We can change things that maybe harmful very quickly.

- Our responses can't be siloed

And because they are interlinked crises that are multi-sectorial, it leads me to think that our responses also (and of course that's what civil society has been doing) cannot be siloed they have to be cross-sectorial, and they have to reach across, as the last speaker was talking about, in terms of building networks, is good to have friends and allies in the places where global policies are discussed, to very quickly mobilize government delegates, for example in the diverse negotiations that will affect our futures.

- Solidarity in times of crises leads to alliances that go beyond all crises

Having solidarity as a principle, during the pandemic food donations were the starting point to build new networks, have new dialogues or meet new allies. For the World March on Women and the Union of Land Workers in Argentina, political action and reaction through food and donation was something that became very important and that started to solidify the alliances with the people in the movement until today.

- Finding arguments that engage many sectors

We need to find something that inspires wide ranges of people, we have seen that talking about "ecology" engages more people than talking about only health or only food. So our discussion now are starting from ecology. In Argentina we have to use ecology as a cross-sectorial tool, it has to do with the middle classes that think that they don't want to talk about policies or politics, and so ecology comes in to give a space to discuss the model. It's not just for the people that want to live for a long time and live healthy, but ecology also becomes a necessity for all sectors, for people that want to live long, and we start, okay, there's a political discussion there. So this production comes from the producers, from the farmers, from the organizations that are part of the people, and that becomes organized solidarity, to give a response that states and governments do not prioritize.

- Seeing present crises in one place is predicting the future in another place

We need to have a general panorama of where the world is at. What is present in some spaces is going to be the future in another places. So that kind of collaboration is also important, one that focuses on when things happen here and there...

- Think seriously about the unpredictable

We have many levels of observation, and those levels of observation sometimes confuse us. Seems important to give space to the unpredictable, to be able to assume the mystery, and to be able to assume what we do not know, the relationship and the balance between certainty and mystery.

- Reconstitute constantly the communities and the people, so we are prepared for any eventuality at any moment

We have to reconstitute, rebuild the communities and the people, and prepare ourselves for any eventuality, for any kind of event. Not to be only responding always to the scenarios that we have, which obviously is also very important to see them, but that we are not only in that dependence of the scenarios. We also need to be pushing the possibilities that we have from improvisation, to be able to assume the mystery fully, those things that we cannot predict, and from there, strengthen ourselves and have our strengths grow, which are always collective, they are never of just one person.