

The Ecology of Dignity

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: It's hard to imagine a world without food. It allows our basic survival, but it also brings joy to our daily lives. Food connects us to different cultures. It brings us together with our families and friends. And it's how we celebrate and mourn key moments in our lives.

My guest today is agriculture educator, farmer and social entrepreneur, Cherrie Atilano. She has made it her life's mission to honor the essential workers that bring food to our tables and make our survival possible.

Cherrie is the founder and CEO of Agrea - a mission-driven enterprise launched in the Philippines in 2014. Its mission? zero hunger, zero waste and zero insufficiency.

And with that is a vision to create a system that eradicates poverty for farming and fishing families in the Philippines.

During Food, Agriculture and Livelihoods week at Expo 2020 Dubai, Cherrie discussed the importance of valuing farmers from all over the world.

Here's an excerpt of her talk.

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CHERRIE ATILANO: Thank you very much for that very beautiful introduction, Lorna. A happy, healthy and holistic day, everyone. And I want you to take a pause

before I enjoy our conversation. Take a pause that if you eat today and every day in your life, please thank a farmer from the bottom of your hearts.

Can you please do that?

Let's just close our eyes for five seconds.

Thank you for doing such honor. Thank you for dignifying our farmers. Thank you for respecting our farmers.

Back to the interview with Cherrie Atilano:

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: On today's episode, we talk to Cherrie Atilano about farmers, food, agriculture and livelihoods.

I'm Tariq Al Olaimy, and this is "People and Planet." A podcast from Expo 2020 Dubai's Programme for People and Planet - where changemakers discuss what it takes to create a sustainable future for our planet.

[INTRO STING]

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: So Cherrie you are a farmer in the deepest meaning of that word. A farmer as a steward of culture and a nourisher of community, a farmer as the foundation of human civilization, a farmer as the mediator of the relationship between the soil and human souls. A farmer as the most profound educator to plant seeds of lessons that can grow across generations. And a farmer who makes

the world realize that the farm, farmer, and community are all one. It's an absolute honor to have you with us today.

CHERRIE ATILANO: Oh, thank you very much, Tariq. It's such an honor to be here. I feel so humbled to speak on behalf of millions of farmers all over the world.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And I'd love to start from the beginning, which is that you were born in the Philippines and you grew up on a sugarcane farm. Your journey to save agriculture started at just 12 years old, when you read your first book about it. Can you tell us more about your upbringing, your family, and how will the environment around you shift your path to one day becoming an agricultural educator, supporting small scale farmers.

CHERRIE ATILANO: I grew up in a sugarcane farm because my father was into sugar cane farming. And growing up in a sugarcane farm, I think I'm just a different kind of child. I observe everything, like why are a lot of children on sugar cane farms actually not going to school. Why are the farmers still poor?

And because sugar cane is a "lazy man's crop." Usually they only work for four months. And when the sugarcane is actually growing well, they don't have work for the next six months. It's called off-season.

MUSIC

CHERRIE ATILANO: Growing up, it was kind of hard, especially when my father died, and it was really tough because you observe a lot around you and would ask my mother: "why are these children working on a sugar cane farm?" Which literally brought me later on in my life to be an advocate of no child labor in farming communities.

Every Sunday, my mother would always cook a lot of food. I grew up with a lot of migrant workers in sugarcane. They lived beside our house - my father built a quartel. It's like a hotel, a four-sided building, divided into rooms and these migrant workers would live there. On weekends, when my father was alive, he asked me to sing for them. Because he was organizing parties for the farmers, entertaining them and celebrating [their] birthdays. My father was a party maker. He was really with the farmers, even taking good care of the children of the farmers. And he actually got six of them sent to school, and more.

And every weekend, my mom would cook a lot of food. And then we distributed it to these migrant workers or the farm workers and also to our neighbors. One time I was, I think, six years old. And I told my mom, "I don't want to bring food to our neighbors." So my mom actually grabbed my hand and pointed it to my head and heart. And then she told me: "I want you to be a daughter that is creating an impact. Beyond successful, be significant and relevant. You will realize later in life that you need to give food to other people because you're so lucky to have food and you need to share it with them." "I don't want you to be a daughter who is successful in the future, but is not giving."

MUSIC

CHERRIE ATILANO: So imagine from six years old. That's the kind of environment you live in.. I never saw my parents fighting, so I come from a very loving family but it was tough because when my father died, my mom was a single mom. So she put me basically in a scholarship center because she couldn't even afford to send me to school.

I always loved reading books and that's really very important to me. And one of the books I was reading was telling me on the first page: if you're poor and you're a

farmer, 100% of your income goes to food. 70% goes to rice, and because we're Filipino, it's not a meal without rice. And 30% goes to your *ulam* - you know your valued partner with rice. And for me, it was like, wow, this is real. This is what's happening in the community where I'm growing.

I told my mom: "I want to teach farmers." And she said: "what? How will you teach farmers?" I said, I read this book and I need to teach farmers.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Amazing. And do you remember what was the first seed that you ever planted? And what was the first class that you ever gave?

CHERRIE ATILANO: I love eggplant. So eggplants looked the easiest to plant and tomatoes because you know, we always eat it. And okra, because you can just put it on top of rice, when you're cooking your rice. And after that, you know, you can have a sauce and it's a meal. So that's the easiest, and those are also the crops that I was teaching farmers.

We were taught to do composting, especially sugarcane leaves composting, because in sugarcane farms, every harvest season, they just burn thousands of hectares of sugarcane leaves and stocks. And it's really causing a lot of smoke. Our house was always getting dark. Our roof was getting dark, even our clothing.

But I didn't even know that it's very helpful to these farmers. And now that's the one that people are just learning. And I was teaching that 24 years back!

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: There is a lot of wisdom in young people, as I think you're a testament to in your early childhood. And I would love to talk about how some of that science led into your day-to-day practice and lifelong mission.

So, Agrea has a unique mission to promote three zones, zero hunger, zero waste, and zero insufficiency. And on your path to this journey, can you tell us what good food means to you and how has that meaning evolved over the years?

CHERRIE ATILANO: So I was dreaming one day about how I could build something that would impact people. How could I build something that inspires other agribusiness people to build an agribusiness with a heart, where our farmer is the core center in front of it?

But before that, I needed to educate myself. So I'm an agriculture graduate, I'm an agricultural scientist. And also studied economics. And when I was 21 years old, I happened to travel to all these provinces of the country because of my work with a non-profit organization. And I also worked as a consultant in a government agency for agriculture and agrarian reform.

I find it a crime against humanity that the producers of the food in the food chain are the poorest and the hungriest. And those are the farmers and the fisher folks. And usually they're also the most malnourished, right? Usually if you are the base of the food chain, you should have a lot of energy. You have the most resources, but at the end of the day, you're left behind.

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CHERRIE ATILANO: So Agrea is actually a fusion of two words: agriculture and Gaia - Mother Earth. Because for me, it's always food and climate, food and environment. So we said [the] Philippines is rich in natural resources, but more importantly, the beauty of the Filipinos and the real Filipino essence are actually still embedded in and still expressed in their farmers, especially in rural areas.

So we wanted to develop something that is intentional, it's coming from great intention that our business and the future is not only a transaction to farmers and to market, food producers, and consumers, but it's really a transformational journey. Hence the zero hunger, zero waste, and zero insufficiency.

Back to the interview with Cherrie Atilano:

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Beautiful. And It's touching to hear how your approach to ecology and economy of living and everything is centered around it. So in your recent talk at Expo 2020 Dubai for Food Agriculture and Livelihoods Week, you ask the audience to close their eyes and thank a farmer. And in your line of work, you famously coined the phrase: "ecology of dignity." Can you please tell us more about that and why it's so important to you?

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CHERRIE ATILANO: We always say that the farmers are the problem in our food systems. But I'm here with our four panelists who are making ways that farmers are actually the solutions in a lot of problems in our food systems. Farmers, if we are empowering them, if we are enabling them, if we are giving them the right environment to thrive, the right environment for food generation, for income making and for stability of their family to create sustainable livelihood and for equality, especially for women and girls in the agriculture sector for talking about sustainability of our aging farmers, including the next generation and also tackling about climate changes, as farmers a solution in terms of climate mitigation, I think we are solving more than half of the problems in the world.

Back to the interview with Cherrie Atilano:

CHERRIE ATILANO: Oh, it's very important for me, right? Because every time we eat there must be someone producing this food. There must be someone putting so much time, effort, energy, and sweat, and tears, and even blood just to produce this food, right. That we're eating. So the moment you recognize that there are people in the line that are bringing that food to your table and they're farmers. That's why I asked them to close their eyes because sometimes it's so easy for us to forget the farmers. So we use them as subjects or objects of our businesses.

But if we acknowledge that they are also human beings like us trying to survive. And it's coming from gratefulness. It's coming from a sense of gratitude. It's coming from human to human. And that's actually what "ecology of dignity" is all about.

There's a Polish proverb that goes: "when a farmer is poor, so is the whole country." So a lot of this is because we don't acknowledge our farmers.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And I wonder, can you speak to, how does this vision of Agrea, this dream, these powerful stories, connect with Expo 2020's motto of connecting minds and creating the future?

MUSIC

CHERRIE ATILANO: For me, we need to create the now, the present, because the now, the present will define our future. And it's not only about connecting minds because we have so many minds, but I think we need to add connecting hearts because the missing link actually is how do we put heart in humanity?

So I would always ask, for the longest time, we always measure agriculture in terms of the yield of rice, or corn or, mung beans and other vegetables, or how

many many hectares of land we planted. We never even asked how many farmers' lives have we changed? How many children of these farmers are in school? Do these farmers have a roof over their heads so that when there's a typhoon they don't end up in evacuation centers?

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CHERRIE ATILANO: If we put value on this and proper measure in this, this will definitely change the game on how we can build a more sustainable future and more sustainable and resilient food systems.

Back to the interview with Cherrie Atilano:

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And on a closing note, what do you hope that the world thinks about when they have their next meal or use their everyday staples - anything from clothes to furniture, to the bricks, pipes and materials used to build our homes are so central to our lives?

CHERRIE ATILANO: Tariq all of those that you mentioned: homes, pipes, food, are connected to agriculture, right? There's no clothing if there's no fiber. It may be from cotton, abaca, or hemp. There are no houses if there are no farmers planting trees, right? So many basic ingredients of our daily living have a foundation in agriculture.

So for me, each of us should not consider agriculture as a silo. Every time you eat your next meal, think: I'm part of agriculture. Because the mission of agriculture is not planting or dealing with the soil. The mission of agriculture is how to make a person full, healthy and well-nourished. That's the mission of agriculture: I'm

planting this because I have a community that needs food. I'm planting this because I have a community that needs clothing or shelter.

So all of us - we need to not disassociate ourselves from the source of where our convenience is coming from. Every time you choose your food, you always ask yourself: "am I destroying the planet or is the farmer producing this also availing the kind of food I have? And is this food nourishing myself because if not, you're destroying yourself in the process.

So for me, it's really a balance of you yourself: how can you be a solution to dignifying other people as you dignify yourself? How can you be a solution to every single carbon footprint we release in the environment? And how can you be a solution of really enabling an economy that is not out of prejudice and unfairness.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And while human beings may have a tendency to take our blessings for granted, thank you, Cherrie for reminding us of these age old technologies of the heart and for centering us today around an ecology of human and earth flourishing. Deeply, deeply grateful for your stories and for all the farms you're tending to in the world. Thank you so much for speaking to us today.

CHERRIE ATILANO: Oh, thank you so much, Tariq. Interviews like this and the opportunity to share what I love doing and the work on the ground of each and every single farmer we serve and work with is always an opportunity we count as a blessing multiple times.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: People and Planet is an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai. Creating a sustainable future for our planet, together.

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