Communicative Enactments of Sustainability for Global Food System Resilience

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Global food procurement increasingly relies on complex multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) and supply chains, which can sometimes downplay local concerns, despite claims of “sustainability.” This paper examines how members of the agricultural commodities arm (“Agro”) of a well-known global conservation nonprofit frame food sustainability. Specifically, I draw on in-depth interviews and key texts produced at Agro to study the communicative tensions at stake—both productive and destructive. Findings indicate that Agro emphasized a self-defined “Market” approach toward food enlightenment, focusing on “solutions rather than problems,” and reaching out to a diverse set of stakeholders to accomplish MSI goals. Food sustainability was posed as a problem of goal optimization in the face of systemic risks that local initiatives alone are ill-equipped to address, so that the global supply chain becomes irreplaceable. Even as Agro foregrounded technocratic discourses (e.g., apolitical R&D, life cycle assessment, broad-based scientific education), its members acknowledged the underlying political structures (e.g., funding lines, media coverage, measures/standards for R&D) that both enabled and restricted its work.

Rahul Mitra (PhD, Purdue University) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication, specializing in organizational communication. His scholarship focuses on environmental organizing, sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and communicative practices that enact work. He has been published in peer-reviewed journals, such as Environmental Communication, Management Communication Quarterly, Human Relations, Communication Theory, and Journal of Business Ethics.

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