

Food Sovereignty: A Revolution in US Farm Policyⁱ

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Surprisingly, I was recently asked by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations to write a policy paper on Family Farming in North America in recognition of the International Year of the Family Farm.¹ I questioned whether the FAO actually wanted me to write the paper, because of my non-conventional views of American agriculture. In the process, however, I discovered that much of the rest of the world is awakening to the realization that the values of “traditional family farming” are the key to long-run global food security. The US, Canada, and Australia have found few allies in championing industrial agriculture as being necessary to avoid massive world hunger in the future.

In exploring the challenges and opportunities for family farmers in North America, I came to the conclusion that the need for revolutionary change in US farm policies is both the greatest challenge and the greatest opportunity. First, we need to realize that the only logical justification for government policies unique to farming is to ensure food security. I also think we are in the process of discovering that “food security” ultimately depends on “food sovereignty.” However, farm policies both of the past and today are defended by claiming they are necessary to ensure that everyone has access to enough healthful food to support a healthy, active lifestyle – the definition of food security.

As people around the world have learned, or are learning, market economies simply will not ensure food security, and thus, virtually every nation has some form of farm policy. Markets only provide enough food for those who have enough money to buy enough food. Food security requires that all have enough food, regardless of whether they have enough money. Food security also is a necessary condition for agricultural sustainability, but food security alone is not sufficient. Agricultural sustainability extends the mandate for food security to those of future generations as well as those of the present. Food security is about meeting the needs of all in the present.

Government farm programs in the US were established during the Great Depression of the 1920s and 1930s – while the US was still an agrarian nation. The strategy for food security in the US at that time was to keep enough farm families on the land, farmers who were committed to caring for the land, to produce enough food for everyone in the nation. These early farm programs were but one aspect of the so-called New Deal of the 1930s, which included a wide range of government programs to address growing economic and social inequities. Government subsidies for farm families at that

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time provided badly needed income for people in rural areas, helping to preserve an economic way of life for farm families as well as provide both economic and food security for the nation.

The changes in American agriculture following World War II led to fundamental changes in US farm policies. Farms powered by horses and solar energy gave way to farms powered by tractors and fossil energy. Cheap nitrogen fertilizers and pesticides encouraged farmers to abandon crop rotations and diversified crop and livestock farming as the means of managing pests and maintaining soil fertility. Farms were being transformed into factories without roofs and fields and feedlots into biological assembly lines.

The focus of US farm policy also shifted from preserving family farms to promoting agricultural productivity, particularly during the 1960s and early 1970s. A more efficient agriculture would lead to lower food prices, making adequate quantities of wholesome and nutritious food affordable for everyone. The logical farm policies for achieving this objective were designed to facilitate and promote the industrialization of agriculture. The Land Grant University system in the US, created by various Acts of Congress between 1862 and 1914, responded by shifting from its pre-war focus on empowering farm families with education and information to developing and promoting industrial agricultural technologies.

Many people associate industrialization with the transition from an agrarian to manufacturing economy. However, industrialization is more accurately defined as a mental model or paradigm for organizing and managing resources – land, labor, and capital. The rural to urban migration of the 1900s was not the essence, but simply a consequence, of economic industrialization. The fundamental strategies of industrial organizations are specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control. Specialization facilitates division of labor – allowing each person to do fewer things better. Specialized functions then must be standardized so that each contributes its part to a coherent whole. The standardized functions can then be simplified and routinized, allowing control to be consolidated into larger, more efficient production units. In competitive market economies, profits provide the motivation for industrialization.

Specialization in farming led to mechanization and simplification of production processes, allowing farms to become larger and thereby achieve the “economies of scale” associated with industrial production. Industrial farming allowed fewer specialized farmers to produce the nation's food supply, thus ‘freeing’ others to specialize in manufacturing and other activities associated with a modern, industrial society. The transition from small family farms to large commercial farming enterprises was generally accepted as a logical consequence of government farm policy, even if not an explicit objective. Larger farms and fewer farms would make the nation both more food secure and economically secure. Farmers still made up more than a quarter of the US workforce during the 1920s, and a more efficient agriculture would free more ‘unneeded’ farmers to work in the factories and offices of the growing industrial economy.

Every major farm program in the US since the New Deal era, in one way or another, has facilitated, supported, or promoted agricultural industrialization – promoting consolidation of agricultural production into fewer and larger farms. For example, price supports, deficiency payments, crop insurance, and disaster payments, all reduce risks associated with specializing in producing one or a few basic commodities. Otherwise, a diversity of crops and livestock enterprises would be essential to manage production and market risks, which would also help maintain the ecological health and natural productivity of the soil. Grades and standards facilitate standardization and routinization of production for mass markets. Subsidized credit, investment tax credits, and

accelerated depreciation of buildings and equipment encourage mechanization and consolidation into larger production units. US farmers are told they should either “get big or get out” of farming.

However, there is growing public skepticism regarding farm policies in the US, which is fueled by large government payments to larger farming operations and wealthy landowners – including celebrity non-farmers. More than 60 percent of US farmers receive no government subsidies, while the top ten percent of subsidy recipients receive 75 percent of total payments.² The recent shift in funding from direct payments to crop insurance subsidies has made and will make this situation even worse. There seems to be no limit to the ability of those formulating US farm policy to find ways to continue promoting the industrial paradigm of agriculture.

As US agricultural production continued to expand well beyond needs for domestic consumption, the focus of farm policy shifted from production for domestic consumption to producing for export markets. US agriculture would continue to ensure domestic food security by maintaining an agricultural trade surplus in global markets. US farm policy then became closely linked with US trade policy. The inclusion of agriculture in the GATT and WTO negotiations was welcomed by the US and Canada as well as the multinational agribusiness corporations.³ The official US position on agricultural trade has been to push for “free markets” – through the General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT), the World Trade Organization (WTO), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and other bilateral and regional trade agreements.

Over time, the US and Canadian agricultural economies have grown to become dominant players in a global industrial agro-food system. The US is the major agricultural exporter in the world and Canada ranks fifth among nations. Approximately 50 percent of the farm value of Canadian agricultural production is exported and exports account for about 30 percent of US net farm income. While the US is clearly the dominant player in the global food arena, Canadian agriculture has been and remains closely interconnected with US agriculture and the global industrial agro-food system.⁴

US farmers continue to be told that they have a moral obligation to expand production to help “feed the world,” and that a growing global food demand will challenge their ability to do so in the future. However, the US biofuels mandate⁵ of 2005, moved farm policy even beyond exports to energy. Meeting the biofuels government mandates has resulted in 40 percent of recent US corn crops being devoted to ethanol production.⁶ The consequent rise in global food prices in 2008 caused many to seriously question the proclaimed commitment of US agriculture to providing food for the world's poor and hungry people. The biofuels mandate has only served to accentuate the emphasis of farm policy on productivity and economic efficiency, magnifying its attendant negative impacts.

Many countries of the world continue to resist leaving their food security vulnerable to global markets. Small farmers and peasants have joined in protesting the anticipated impacts of GATT, WTO, and various bilateral and regional trade agreements because of their negative impacts on local food markets, rural livelihoods and cultures, and the environment.⁷ However, the forces of agricultural trade liberalization have prevailed, not only in US and Canada but globally. The latest regional trade negotiations, the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), focuses on the Asian-Pacific, linking the US and Canada with countries of South America and the Asian Pacific.⁸

The global *food sovereignty* movement has emerged as an explicit rejection of the industrial agriculture policies that were being forced upon lesser-developed nations under the guise of promoting global food security. The “poster child” for these policies, the *Green Revolution*, is

still heralded as a great success in the US but is despised by many in the parts of the world most directly affected. The term, “food sovereignty” was coined in 1996 by Via Campesina, which is an alliance of 148 international organizations advocating family-farm-based, sustainable agriculture.⁹ A basic premise of the movement is that to achieve authentic *food security*, people of the world must be ensured of their basic human right to *food sovereignty*.

During a global *Forum for Food Sovereignty* in Sélingué, Mali, in February 2007, about 500 delegates from more than 80 countries adopted the "Declaration of Nyéléni":¹⁰ It defines food sovereignty as “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” Food sovereignty puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute, and consume food at the heart or central focus of food systems and farm policies, rather than submitting to the policy demands of free markets and food corporations.

The principles of food sovereignty obviously need to be interpreted differently in different countries, but its basic principles are just as valid in the US as elsewhere. The right to food must be recognized as a basic human right, not left to the vagaries of charity or the indifference of the marketplace. Markets have never provided food security and never will. This reality must be respected and reflected in farm policies for long-run food security. A food-sovereignty economy, in which all have an equal right to enough food, must be separated from the market economy, where rights to food are determined by willingness and ability to pay.

Food sovereignty “guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those who produce food.” The food sovereignty movement offers a strategy to resist, dismantle, and replace the current corporate trade and food regime with “food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users.” It promotes transparent trade and prioritizes local markets and community-based food systems over national and global markets.

Food sovereignty also calls for “new social relations, free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations. It “empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal-fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability.” “It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation.” Farm policies to ensure food sovereignty support self-determination, relocalization, beneficial trade, environmental protection, land stewardship, social justice, and intergenerational equity. Food sovereignty is the logical public policy mandate to support and promote agricultural sustainability, which not only would ensure global food security but also a sustainable future for humanity. Food sovereignty is the logical fundamental change in farm policy needed to ensure a sustainable future.

Fundamental change in farm policy must be prefaced by wide-spread recognition that the industrial food systems are inherently unsustainable. Revolutionary change in public policy is always risky and sometimes painful, and will not be undertaken unless there is a consensus supporting the necessity and urgency for change. There must be widespread recognition that industrial agriculture is inherently dependent on fossil energy, which will be far less available

and more costly in the future than it has been in the past – in terms of both economic and environmental costs. Industrial agriculture pollutes air and water with agricultural chemical and biological wastes. It is depleting essential minerals; the earth's mineable phosphorus reserves could be depleted in 50 to 100 years, with a peak occurring around 2030.¹¹ Industrial agriculture places unsustainable demands on groundwater or aquifers used for irrigation, half of which has already been depleted by some estimates.^{12,13} Industrial agriculture is also destroying the natural productivity of soils through erosion, salinization, and agrochemical contamination and is a major contributor to global climate change.¹⁴ In summary, industrial agriculture depletes the natural resource base that supports its productivity and pollutes the natural environment that sustains the health of humanity. Industrial agriculture cannot possibly provide long-run food security or agricultural sustainability.

Perhaps most important, the industrial approach to agriculture has failed to provide food security – either domestically or globally. The percentage of “food insecure” people in the United States is greater today than during the 1960s – early in the current phase of agricultural industrialization.^{15, 16} Furthermore, the industrial food system is linked to a new kind of food insecurity: nutrient deficient, unhealthy foods. A recent global report by 500 scientists from 50 countries suggested that “obesity is [now] a bigger health crisis than hunger.”¹⁷ There is growing evidence that America's diet-related health problems are not limited to poor consumer food choices or processed “junk foods” but begin with a lack of nutrient density in food crops produced on industrial farms.¹⁸

Defenders of industrial agriculture point to increases in agricultural productivity – even if much has been misused, wasted, or converted to bio-energy. In fact, there is nothing to indicate that industrial agriculture has produced more food than could have been produced with more sustainable methods, only that it has employed far fewer farmers. Industrialization even seems to have lost its ability to reduce food costs with corporate integration of food production with food processing and distribution through contract production. Any production costs advantages have been more than offset by higher marketing margins and profits elsewhere within the corporate food supply chain of which industrial agriculture is a crucial link.¹⁹ Over the past 20 years, an era of agricultural industrialization, retail food prices have risen faster than overall inflation rates.²⁰

US and global farm policy needs to be radically reformed or revolutionized by shifting its focus from the current “mono-functional” approach to *food security* to a “multifunctional” approach to *food sovereignty*. “Multifunctional agriculture,” as commonly used in international trade and policy discussions, refers to the multiple potential benefits of agriculture, emphasizing the importance of non-economic benefits of agriculture. Farms are inherently multifunctional in that they have multiple ecological, social, and economic impacts on nature and society.

A Global Report, *Agriculture at a Crossroads*, points out that multifunctional agriculture “provides food, feed, fiber, fuel and other goods... has a major influence on other essential ecosystem services such as water supply and carbon sequestration or release... plays an important social role, providing employment and a way of life... is a medium of cultural transmission and cultural practices worldwide... [and] provide[s] a foundation for local economies.”²¹ At least four recent UN sponsored global reports have confirmed that multifunctional farming is the best hope for global food security and agricultural sustainability.²² Sustainable farms are unique in that they are *intentionally* multifunctional. They are intentionally managed to

provide multiple ecological, social, and long-run economic benefits, not just for the short-run economic bottom-line.

Industrial farms, including those of the Green Revolution, are *mono-functional*, in that they are managed solely or predominately for the economic benefits arising from economic efficiency and productivity. Their preoccupation with the pursuit of economic efficiency invariably degrades natural ecosystems and exploits the communities and societies they claim to serve. That's why we see the dependence on fossil energy and depletion of irrigation aquifers, the destruction of biodiversity and pollution of air and water, the demise of family farming and destruction of rural communities and economies. Industrial farms are mono-functional and mono-functional farm are not sustainable.

Thankfully, new approaches to multifunctional farming are emerging to meet the ecological, social, and economic challenges of agricultural sustainability. The new farmers may call their farms organic, ecological, biological, holistic, or biodynamic. Their farming methods may be called agroecology, nature farming, or permaculture. They all fit under the conceptual umbrella of sustainable agriculture. They are committed to meeting the food needs of all in the present without diminishing opportunities for those of the future. All of these non-industrial approaches to agriculture combined likely account for less than 10% of US food production. However, their numbers are growing rapidly and they are joining together in collaborative arrangements that eventually will be capable of replacing the industrial food system with national and global networks of sustainable, community based food systems.

Some question whether organic or other sustainable farms can meet the food needs of a growing global population. A comprehensive review, in the journal *Nature*, compared organic and conventional crop yields in “developed” countries, concluding: “Under certain conditions—that is, with good management practices, particular crop types and growing conditions—organic systems can ... nearly match conventional yields.”²³ In the United States and the so-called developed world, the challenge is ecological and social sustainability, not just yields, which also is the logical motivation for organic agriculture.²⁴ Elsewhere in the world, industrial agriculture is not needed to “feed the world.” Small, diversified farms already provide food for least 70% of the global population and could double or triple yields without resorting to industrial production methods.²⁵ Numerous global food studies sponsored by the United Nations have exposed the myths of industrial agriculture. Recent global studies call for supporting sustainable farming systems, such as agroecology.^{26, 27}

Obviously, a transition from the industrial, mono-functional to a sustainable, multifunctional approach to farming would be made far easier and quicker with support from a multifunctional approach to farm policy. Food sovereignty, as explained previously, represents a multifunctional approach to farming that has been sanctioned by people around the world to protect themselves from the negative ecological, social, and economic consequences of an industrial, mono-functional agriculture. Food sovereignty policies obviously would be different in the US, than in countries where it is currently popular, but the basic principles would be the same.

The farm policy revolution in the US should begin with a dismantling of all commodity-based farm programs – including crop yield and price insurance programs. This would free-up billions of dollars to support a variety of food-sovereignty-based farm and food programs. While program funding would come from state and federal levels, the “right of peoples to healthy and

culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems" would require devolution of implementation to the local level. Funding would be contingent on ecological and social sustainability. Specific programs would accommodate local food needs and respect the social and ecological nature of specific people and places. Like sustainability, food sovereignty is specific to the local culture, people, and place.

Perhaps most important, the people of the US must recognize the "right to food" as a basic human right. Food security simply cannot continue to be left to the marketplace. The responsibility of society to ensure enough good food for everyone is a corollary of the responsibility of everyone to contribute whatever he or she can to the greater good of society. Those who are willing to contribute to the good of the community, in whatever respect they are capable of contributing, must be ensured enough wholesome, nutritious, culturally-appropriate food to meet their basic needs. The assessment of individual needs and contributions would be made locally, where people know and care about each other. Food sovereignty programs could also guarantee "just incomes" for those willing to contribute whatever they can – regardless of whether the contribution is economic, social, or ecological. People also are multifunctional.

Local food systems would give consumers the right to control their own choices of food and nutrition, at least to the extent that their needs could be met locally. Multifunctional farms programs could give farmers and others in local communities the right to manage local farmlands, public spaces, and species diversity through local land use planning. Local control would give communities the ability to control water for irrigation and access to crop and livestock genetics. Farm and food communities should be encouraged and supported to work together to develop state and national farm and trade policies that resist, dismantle, and replace the current corporate trade and global food regime. Farm and food policies should protect local food, farming, pastoral, and fisheries systems from economic domination and exploitation by corrupt politicians and corporate agribusinesses.

Finally, the revolutionary changes in farm policy needed to ensure agricultural sustainability and food sovereignty will require new social relations in the US as well as in the rest of the world. Social sustainability will require freedom from oppression and inequality and a new, deeper sense of equality and respect between men and women, among racial and ethnic groups, social and economic classes, and across generations – including those of future generations. A sustainable multifunctional agriculture will empower "peasant farming" and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal-fishing, and pastoralist-led grazing – in the US as elsewhere in the world. These occupations may look different in different countries but the traditional values of farming, ranching, and fishing as multifunctional ways of life will be the same.

Public policies guided by the principles of food sovereignty will result in food production, distribution, and consumption based on the principles of environmental, social and economic sustainability. Farm policies for food sovereignty will support self-determination, relocalization, beneficial trade, environmental protection, land stewardship, social justice, and intergenerational equity. Food sovereignty represents a logical approach to the revolutionary change in US farm policy that will be essential to ensuring US and global food security, agricultural sustainability, and a positive future for humanity.

End Notes:

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