

Sustainable Agriculture: A Question of Social Justice

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What does “sustainable agriculture” mean to you? If your answer is like most, you probably will begin by talking about sustainability in relation to the environment – protecting the natural ecosystem and conserving non-renewable resources. And, you will be right. If our food and farming systems are to be sustainable over time, we must maintain the health and productivity of land and must conserve water, energy, and the other natural resources upon which agricultural productivity ultimately depends. An agriculture that is not ecologically sound, quite simply, is not sustainable.

The next thing most likely to come to mind is economic sustainability – if it's not profitable, it's not sustainable. Again, you will be right, or at least partly right. In a capitalistic economy, the markets determine who gets to use land and other resources – and how they will be used. Sustainable farms need not *maximize* profits, and farms need not generate a profit *every year*. But, a farming system that is not economically *viable* is not sustainable, no matter how ecologically sound it may be.

Almost everyone agrees; our food and farming systems must be ecologically sound and economically viable if they are to be sustainable over time. Even giant agribusiness corporations, such as Monsanto and Du Pont, have sustainable agriculture programs that address environmental and economic concerns. However, there is far less agreement concerning the third essential aspect of sustainability – the question of social justice. Any system of food and farming that fails to meet the needs of a society, will not be sustained by that society, no matter how ecologically benign or profitable it may appear to be. A society has physical and material needs, however, one of the most basic needs of any society is a sense of social equity or justice. Any food and farming system that is not socially just does not meet this basic need, and thus, is not sustainable.

A sustainable economy must meet the material needs of people by means that are perceived to be equitable and just by the society that supports it. Human society is a subsystem of the larger natural ecosystem and the economy, in turn, is a subsystem of society. While some level of individual economic or material well-being is a prerequisite for a sustainable society, a society is more than a collection of individuals; it includes also the *relationships* among those individuals. The sustainability of a society perhaps depends even more upon strong *relationships* among its members than upon strong individual members.

Adam Smith, the father of contemporary economics, in his landmark book, Wealth of Nations, wrote: “No Society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable.” Distrust and dissention can arise among the rich as well as

the poor – both groups being capable of dysfunctional relationships. However, distrust and dissent are inevitable consequences of substantial and persistent economic disparity among members within a society. Economic disparity inevitably creates a sense of social injustice, and an unjust society is neither stable nor sustainable. Distrust and dissent ultimately lead to civil unrest, which disrupts the economy and ultimately leads to exploitation and destruction of the natural ecosystem. Eastern Europe and Sub-Sahara Africa provide two prime examples of the widespread ecological destruction that results from persistent social injustice.

A market economy will not ensure social justice. A market economy provides for people only in relation to their willingness and ability to pay, not in relation to their basic needs. The abilities of people to earn money and to pay for food, clothing, and shelter do not necessarily match their needs. All people have a basic right to sufficient food, clothing, and shelter to ensure survival and normal physical and mental growth and development, although we are just beginning to accept this fact in America. Our market economy will not ensure those rights. Inevitably, equity and justice must be ensured through conscious, purposeful actions by the members of society – by our individual acts of human compassion and by our public acts, through government, to ensure the general welfare. Both are necessary and neither absolves our responsibility for the other. A society that does not accept this responsibility for social justice is not sustainable.

Equity and justice do not require that everyone have access to the same quantity, quality, and variety of food, clothing or shelter, or that food, clothing, and shelter be equally convenient or effortless for all. Equity and justice are matters of ensuring equal access to *specific* things to which all have equal rights – not equal access to *all* things. A right to safe, nutritious food, for example, does not imply a right to prime rib and artichoke hearts nor to packaged or pre-prepared foods. However, food and farming systems that do not accept responsibility of ensuring that all have *adequate* food, clothing, and shelter are not sustainable.

Each of us must accept our ethical and moral responsibility to help ensure the sustainability of human life on earth. We can do this, in part, by supporting farmers who are committed to protecting the natural environment – helping to make ecologically sound food and fiber systems economically viable. But, we must also accept our responsibility to help build food and farming systems that are socially just. Social justice includes employment equity for farmers, farm workers, and others employed in the system. But, social justice also demands that all people have adequate food, clothing, and shelter. Sustainability is a question of environmental integrity and economic viability, but sustainability is also a question of social justice.