

Crisis and Opportunity: Sustainability in Rural America¹

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May you live in interesting times! Some say this ancient Chinese proverb is actually a curse or perhaps a challenge. The Chinese word used for “interesting times” is the same as the word used for crisis, which is commonly interpreted by scholars to mean both danger and opportunity. Scholars tend to agree on the “danger” half of the Chinese symbol for crisis, but some suggest the second half of the symbol is most accurately interpreted as “a critical point in time.” A crisis then is a point in time when we are forced by perilous circumstances to make choices that will change the future, for either better or worse. A crisis may be viewed as either a challenge or an opportunity. Regardless, we most certainly are living in interesting times.

We are able to respond to most crises, such as losing our car keys, with minor changes in our day-to-day habits or lifestyles. On the other hand, some crises can be accommodated only by revolutionary changes in both thoughts and actions. In fact, every two hundred years or so throughout human history, society has gone through great transformations. Such changes arise from changes in our understanding of how the world works and of our place within it, which eventually changes virtually every aspect of our lives. I believe today's “interesting times” represent such a time of revolutionary change. The transformation we are experiencing today is at least as important as the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s, and perhaps as important as the beginning of science in the early 1600s. I'm an old man and I have seen many changes during my 70-plus years. But, the changes I've experienced are not even remotely comparable to the changes I believe today's young people will see during their lives. People who are born in the mid-21st Century won't even be able to imagine the world of today.

This “great transformation” is being driven by questions of sustainability. Sustainability asks: how can we meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future? It asks whether we can keep doing what we are doing. When we ask this basic question of sustainability earnestly and honestly; we come to the inevitable conclusion: what we are doing now isn't even meeting the needs of most of people today, and most certainly isn't leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. We can't keep doing what we have been doing. Our current way of life is not sustainable.

Ultimately sustainability is a matter of energy. Our houses, clothes, cars, our food, require energy to make and energy to use. In fact all material things are simply concentrated forms of energy. Human imagination, creativity, and labor also require energy – the brain uses something like 20% of the energy used by the human body. In addition, we are not born as productive individuals; we are born as helpless babies. We must be nurtured, cared for, socialized, civilized,

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and educated by society before we become useful to society. All of this requires human energy, specifically, biological energy.

The economic growth of the past 200-years, the industrial era, was made possible by an abundance of cheap energy – first the old growth forests, then surface mining of coal, and for the past 100-years, by shallow reservoirs of oil and natural gas. But the old growth forests are gone, we are blowing the tops off mountains to get the remaining coal, the remaining oil is deep beneath the ocean floors, and we are fracturing and poisoning the crust of the earth to squeeze out the last natural gas. We are not out of fossil energy, at least not yet, but we are quickly running out of abundant and cheap energy. The only abundant sources of fossil energy, mostly coal, are major contributors to greenhouse gasses and other pollutants that threaten the ability of the earth's natural ecosystems to support human life.

The only sustainable source of energy is solar energy. However, energy from all the sustainable sources combined – wind, water, solar panels, biofuels – in total, will be less plentiful and far more costly than fossil energy. The industrial era was an aberration in human history that is not likely to be repeated. We can't continue doing what we are doing. It is not sustainable. Change is not an option; it is an absolute necessity. Nowhere is the necessity more absolute or more important than in rural America.

I have spent my entire life with rural people. I was raised on a small farm, attended a two-room country grade school and a small-town high school, and spent my entire 30-year academic career working with farmers and other residents of rural farming communities. During my last five years at the University of Missouri, I was the project leader for a three-state, seven-community initiative exploring various means of linking sustainable agriculture and sustainable rural community development. We were successful in helping some individuals and small groups develop sustainable enterprises, but were never able even to initiate significant change in an entire rural community. Virtually everyone in these communities agreed that fundamental change was needed, but we were never able to bring the people together around a common vision for the future of their community. Nevertheless, I remain committed to the concept of sustainable rural community development.

Based on a lifetime of experiences, I have come to the conclusion that most people change only when three conditions are met. First, they must become convinced that what they have been doing isn't working and isn't likely to work in the future. Next, they must have a realistic idea or vision of something fundamentally better they could do instead. And finally, they must believe that it's possible for them to make the transition from what they are doing now to what they would rather do instead – they have to have hope for a better future. Real change is always difficult and often risky. Lacking any one of the three conditions, most people just keep on doing what they've been doing.

Change is even more difficult for communities of people than for individuals. It's not enough for just a few people in a community to conclude that something is wrong; there has to be a community consensus that change is necessary. It's not enough for just a few people to have a new vision for the future; there has to be a common vision of a better future for the community. Finally, the people of a community must have a shared hope that their common vision is

possible, that together they can create a new and better future for themselves and for their community.

The process of community change is made even more difficult by the fact that real change is rarely initiated by those in positions of greatest influence in rural communities. The people with political and economic power often have gained their positions of influence because the status quo is working for them. They may be willing to tinker around the edges to appease their critics, but they are quite logically defensive against any real change. So, change in rural America will have to come from the common people. The current approach to economic development isn't working for them and isn't going to work for them in the future. So, they have a strong incentive to change. Change in rural America will take a revolution of the common people, a revolution in thinking about how the world works and where they fit within it. This revolution must begin, however, by confronting the truth about current rural economic development strategies.

The most common approach to rural economic development today is reminiscent of “imperial colonization.” The only real difference is the nature of the colonizers and the colonized. Large multinational corporations are extending their economic sovereignty over the affairs of rural people under the guise of economic development. These corporations use their economic and political power to dominate local economies and local governments. Irreplaceable and precious rural resources, including rural people and rural cultures, are not developed by these corporations but instead are exploited to enhance the wealth of corporate investors. Such corporations have no commitment to the future of rural areas; they are only interested in extracting the remaining wealth from rural places. This is corporate, economic colonialism.

Rural people everywhere are being told that they must rely on outside investment to bring badly needed jobs to rural areas, to increase local income and expand the local tax base. Economically depressed rural communities will then be able to afford better schools, better health care, and expanded social services, and will attract a greater variety of retail businesses – so they are told. Rural communities will become more like urban communities and rural people will be able to live more like urban people. Rural people are led to believe they have been left behind by the rest of society – economically and socially –and that outside corporate investments are the only means by which they can hope to catch up. This same basic reasoning has been used by imperialists throughout human history to justify the extraction of wealth from their colonies.

After decades of so-called economic development, the colonies of classical empires were invariably left in shambles. Traditional ways of life were destroyed, cultures were lost, economic resources were depleted, and natural environments were degraded and polluted with the toxic wastes of colonial economic development. Indigenous social and political structures were destroyed, leaving the people with no means of self-government to address the shameful legacy of colonialism. The only places in which colonization was considered a success are those places where the colonial powers virtually annihilated indigenous populations. The surviving *indigenous* people of virtually every previously colonized country of the world, including the United States, still harbor a deep resentment of their former colonial masters. Imperial colonialism eventually was abolished because it became obvious that colonization was about exploitation rather than development. Like slavery, political colonization eventually became morally unacceptable in a civilized society.

Regardless, the economic colonization of rural areas continues virtually unchecked all around the world, including in rural America. The Europeans first settled in rural America to exploit the economic wealth of its wildlife, timber, and minerals. Once these resources were used up, rural areas were left with “ghost towns” where river towns, logging towns, and mining towns had once thrived. *Corporate* colonialism of rural areas didn't began in earnest until the twentieth century when manufacturing plants were attracted to rural areas by a strong work ethic, the absence of labor unions, and low wages. When rural people demanded a living wage and humane working conditions, multinational corporations found people in other countries who would work harder for less money and no fringe benefits. Many rural communities have been left with empty factories, polluted environments, and local residents who no longer remember how to make a living without being told what to do.

The most durable of rural resources for many communities has proven to be farmland. In spite of decades of soil erosion and degradation of natural productivity, farming remains a viable economic sector of many rural communities. More recently, however, corporations have turned to comprehensive production contracts as a means of completing the colonizing rural areas. Contract agriculture turns thinking, caring farmers into little more than tractor drivers, cow milkers, or hog house janitors for agribusiness corporations. The industrial practices of corporate agriculture invariably erode the fertility of the soil through intensive cultivation, poison the air and water with chemical and biological wastes. Once the remnant resources of rural America have been depleted by corporate agriculture, the corporations will simply move their operations to other areas of the world where land and labor costs are cheaper. Rural farming communities will be left with nothing but polluted and depleted streams and aquifers, mountains of livestock manure, and farmers who no longer know how to farm.

If this imperialist approach to economic development is allowed to continue, rural America eventually will be seen as nothing more than big empty spaces where society can dump its industrial wastes. Even today, many rural communities compete for prisons, urban landfills, toxic waste incinerators, nuclear waste sites, and even giant confinement animal feeding operations or CAFOs. All of these so-called economic development opportunities are nothing more than providing places to dump the human, chemical, and biological wastes created by an extractive, exploitative, colonial industrial economy. This approach to economic development isn't working and isn't going to work in the future. Change is not just an option in rural America, it is an absolute necessity.

But where is the new vision for a better future needed to motivate change? Fortunately, fundamental change is taking place in the larger economy and society. The crisis that is driving the great transition is creating new opportunities for farmers and for others in rural communities.

Everything of use to us, including everything of economic value comes, from either nature or society. There is nowhere else to get anything of value. The industrial paradigm of economic development has dominated thinking in the Western World for the past two-hundred years because it has proven to be a very efficient and effective means of extracting wealth from nature and society. However, we now know that nature and society are both finite and fragile. A growing number of people are coming to the realization that industrial development is not

sustainable because it is rapidly running out of natural and human resources to extract and exploit. They are beginning to accept that the trends of the past simply cannot continue into the future. Once the productivity of nature and society has been depleted, there will be nothing left to support economic development. Perhaps most important, those who are rebelling against the continued extraction and exploitation are creating a new vision of a new and better future, including a new vision for the future of rural America.

That vision is emerging within the sustainability movement. Sustainable development must be ecologically sound, socially responsible, and economically viable. It must respect the basic principles of nature, and nature is inherently diverse and *dispersed*. Thus, in a new sustainable economy and society, the population will be more geographically dispersed. The big cities are relics of industrialization; masses of workers had to be gathered in central locations to work in the factories and offices of large industrial organizations. Cities were built near sources of raw materials, including fertile farmland, or on rivers or seashores for cheap transportation. Cheap fossil energy allowed the cities to survive long after their initial economic advantages were lost. Raw materials could be shipped to cities from anywhere and products could be shipped from cities to people everywhere. But the days of cheap fuel for transportation are over.

Contrary to popular belief, it would not be more energy efficient or environmentally benign to concentrate population in a few large metropolitan areas in the future. Too much of anything in one place – solid wastes, chemicals, gasses, animals, people, – inevitably creates environmental and social problems. The rural places where we are dumping industrial wastes are not truly separate from the places where most people work and live; everything ultimately is connected. The problems of industrial economic development cannot be avoided and their mitigation invariably requires large amounts of increasingly costly energy. “The solution to pollution quite often is dilution.” The logical response to the problems associated with population concentration is population dispersion – not the urban sprawl of today but instead dispersion of people into densely populated rural communities integrated into the new energy-efficient transportation network.

The dispersion of population will create new opportunities for rural communities. The problems of communities in agricultural areas are not so much their reliance on agriculture and other natural resource development, but their reliance on *unsustainable* systems of agriculture and natural resource development. They have relied on an industrial development paradigm – specialization, standardization, and centralization of control. Industrial agriculture doesn't require as many farmers, and thus doesn't support rural communities, at least not as many people in as many rural communities. This type of agriculture not only moves most of the productive processes involved in food and fiber production off farms but also moves them out of rural communities. Eighty percent of the consumer's food dollar go to pay for marketing services – processing, transportation, packaging, advertising. Another ten percent or more goes for commercial inputs – fertilizers, pesticides, fuel. These activities have little positive effect on rural economies.

However, a new mental model or paradigm of agriculture is emerging under the conceptual umbrella of sustainable agriculture. The new sustainable ways of farming are much more supportive of rural communities. A sustainable agriculture, like sustainable development, must

meet the needs of all in the present while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. Sustainable agriculture was first promoted by organic farmers who went to Washington DC in the early 80s and demanded recognition as a legitimate alternative to the industrial farms that were polluting the environment with pesticides and fertilizers. The movement was joined by farmers concerned with the economic viability of family farms as thousands were forced out of business during the farm financial crisis of the 1980s. The movement was joined by rural advocacy groups when rural communities began to feel the full impact of the agricultural crisis. By the mid-1990s sustainable agriculture was emerging as a viable alternative to industrial agriculture. The movement includes those who call themselves organic, holistic, ecologic, biodynamic, practical, innovative, permaculture, grass-based, or just family farmers. Their commonality is they are all trying to create a durable, permanent agriculture capable of supporting a sustainable society, including sustainable rural communities.

This new paradigm for agriculture is providing a new paradigm for rural community development. The *Organic Trade Association* (OTA) estimates that U.S. sales of organic food and beverages have grown from \$1 billion in 1990 to \$26.7 billion in 2010.ⁱ In a 2008 food industry study, sales of local foods were estimated to have grown from \$4 billion in 2002 to \$5 billion in 2007 and were projected to reach \$7 billion by 2011.ⁱⁱ Organic sales have continued to grow at near double digit rates even during the economic recession. While organic, local, grass-based, free-range, hormone and antibiotic free, and GMO free foods combined probably still account for less than 10% of total food sales, these markets are growing far faster than is the total market for food. The new markets provide new opportunities for small and mid-sized farms, meaning new opportunities for rural communities.

All of the various approaches to sustainable farming are more management intensive than is industrial farming. It takes more people on the land to maintain the natural fertility and health of the land, and thereby, to reduce reliance on commercial pesticides and fertilizers. It takes more farmers to produce a given quantity of output on a diversified livestock/crop farm that produces food without polluting the environment. It takes more people to market directly to consumers and to begin to rebuild local food systems, which not only re-link farmers and local people but return more of the food dollar to local farmers and keep more food dollars in local communities. Sustainable agriculture reverses the industrialization process by substituting labor and management for capital and off-farm technologies. A sustainable agriculture will support more people on farms and more people in rural communities.

The emergence of a new sustainable agriculture paradigm doesn't mean that rural communities can depend on agriculture alone, as some have in the past. Sustainable natural ecosystems are inherently diverse; thus sustainable rural communities and economies will be diverse as well. That said, a sustainable agriculture can provide a solid ecological, social, and economic foundation upon which diverse sustainable rural economies and communities can be built. In the post-industrial era of economic development, many people will be able to carry out their work from anywhere they might choose to live. Many of these people will be seeking out places to live that provide open-spaces, scenic landscapes, clean air and water, a degree of privacy, but also friendly people with whom they can connect and interact. Sustainable agriculture can help make rural areas ideal places where many people will choose to work and live. In addition, sustainable farming will be compatible with other forms of economic

development that rely on the unique creativity and productivity of the human mind, rather than on exploitation. Sustainable agriculture can provide a new purpose for people to choose to work and live in rural places.

The future of rural America is rooted in its people and its natural resources. The future of rural communities, as well as the nation, depends on our finding ways to help rural people develop rural resources by means that are sustainable. It will be extremely difficult to get people to abandon the industrial paradigm because politically and economically powerful people are benefitting from its extraction and exploitation. Regardless of the difficulty, rural people must learn to carry out economic development of rural resources for the benefit of rural people and the larger society, while being guided by a common commitment to the purpose and principles of sustainability. Rural people need to understand that the quality of their lives can be enhanced only through economic activities that allow them to care about each and to take care of their environment while taking care of themselves.

The last prerequisite for change is hope. Unfortunately, many rural people have already lost hope. They have been misled into believing the depletion of fossil energy and growing environmental problems are little more than left-wing propaganda campaigns designed to restrict or deny their basic freedoms. They are told the economic exploitation of rural areas is an evitable consequence of economic progress. They have come to believe they have no better alternatives than to settle for whatever opportunities they are offered by corporate investors from outside of their community. Rural people will not find the courage to choose their own destiny until they understand they have realistic opportunities to create a better future than the future they are being offered by those in position of political and economic power.

People ask me if I am optimistic about the future of rural areas and my typical answer is that I am not necessarily optimistic but I am hopeful. Hope doesn't mean that you believe the task will be quick or easy or even that your ultimate succeed is inevitable. Hope doesn't even mean that the odds of success are in your favor. Hope simply means that something good is possible; that success is possible, even if not likely. Hope arises from the realization that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out. It is hope, rather than optimism, that gives people the courage to make wise choices in times of crisis, to choose alternatives that make sense rather than alternatives that seem quick and easy.

One advantage of being old is that you can remember when things weren't like they are today and know that they will be still different in the future. Only fifty years ago, most food in America was grown on small family farms for regional and local markets. Construction of the interstate highway system had just begun and supermarkets and franchise restaurants were just beginning to catch on. By the 1960s, supermarket chains had replaced the local "mom and pop" grocers, by the 1970s, fast food franchises were "freeing housewives from their kitchens" and by the 1990s, industrial agribusinesses had replaced family farms as the nation's major food producers. In the 2000s, the American food system is being transformed from national to global. All of this happened in only fifty years.

In an ever-changing world, it seems logical to assume that changes in the food system over the next fifty years will be at least as great as in the past fifty years. With growing threats to

ecological, social, and economic sustainability, including national and global food security, it seems likely that future changes will be in a direction fundamentally different from those of the past. The evolution of the natural, organic, and local food movements reflects a growing demand for fundamental change in the way food is produced, processed, and distributed. The new food economy is at least as advanced today as the industrial food economy was fifty years ago. There is every reason to expect the new food economy to continue to grow until it becomes the new mainstream American food system.

In the not too distant future, virtually everyone in the United States will have access to the Internet. Local, community-based food associations or cooperatives could establish local assembly and distribution systems to pick up products at local farms and assemble customer orders. Existing retail delivery system networks, such as UPS and Fed-Ex, are already making deliveries into most neighborhoods on a daily basis and will become even more frequent as internet sales for all products increase in the future. A local food cooperative could help establish and maintain personal connections between farmers and their customers through local food events, scheduled farm visits, and “dinners at the farm.” With the integrity of the system ensured through local connections, relationships of trust could be established among local food networks, allowing products to be shared among local and regional “food-sheds,” or even globally, without losing ecological or social integrity. The old mainstream food system, with its supermarkets and super centers, would be relegated to a secondary role, if in fact it survives.

To understand the possibilities for sustainable rural communities, the relocalization of the food system must be viewed within the context of a nation in the midst of a great transformation. America is a nation of people searching for ways to reconnect with each other and to reconnect with the earth as a means of restoring a sense of connectedness, integrity, security, and sustainability to their lives and to the world in which they live. People throughout human history have known, beyond some fairly modest level of material well-being there is no relationship between further increases in income or wealth and increases in happiness or quality of life. Once our basic material needs are met – food, clothing, shelter, health care, – the quality of our life depends far more on the quality of our relationships than on the quantity of income or wealth.

We are social beings; we need to love and be loved; we need positive connections with other people. We are also moral beings. Our happiness depends on our having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. We need to feel that what we are doing is right and good. It is not a sacrifice to care for the earth for the benefit of future generations; it adds purpose and meaning to our lives. Sustainable rural communities rooted in sustainable agriculture provide opportunities for people to reconnect with each other and with the earth, an opportunity to find true happiness. We are in a time of crisis in America: A time of danger and opportunity. People in rural communities are being forced by desperate circumstances to make choices that will fundamentally change their future, for either better or worse. It is possible for rural people to choose a future that is fundamental better than anything they have known. In this possibility there is hope.

ⁱ Organic Trade Association, “Industry Statistics and Projected Growth,” *Organic Trade Association's 2011 Organic Industry Survey*, <http://www.ota.com/organic/mt/business.html>

ⁱⁱ *Packaged Facts*, “Local and Fresh Foods in the U.S.,” May 1, 2007. ><http://www.packagedfacts.com/Local-Fresh-Foods-1421831/>>