

Sustaining the Sustainable Agriculture Movementⁱ

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The sustainable agriculture movement is not a passing fad – as many had expected and others had hoped it would be. I personally have been involved in various aspects of the movement for more than 25 years now – since the late 1980s. Prior to that time, I had spent the first half of my 30-year academic career as a traditional agricultural economist. I always had some extension education responsibilities and had been teaching farmers the things I had been taught about farm economics. I told farmers that farming as a way of life was a thing of the past, not of the future. Farms had to be transformed into bottom-line businesses if they were to survive. If farmers weren't willing to get bigger, to become more economically efficient, they should get out of farming: “get big or get out.” Sustainability to me was about profitability.

Most agricultural economists apparently still believe such things – as do many farmers and others who advocate so-called modern industrial agricultural practices. However, the farm financial crisis of the 1980s forced me to reevaluate what I had been taught and was teaching. The 1970s had been a rare time of prosperity in farming, when many farmers decided to follow the advice of the “experts.” They decided to “get big rather than get out” and borrowed a lot of money at record high interest rates to finance their expansion. Unexpectedly, the booming export markets, which had fueled the farm profitability of the 1970s, collapsed under the weight of the global economic recession in the early 1980s. Many of these new “big farmers” were caught with large debts that they couldn't repay. Farm bankruptcies and foreclosures were regular fare on the evening network news programs. Stories of farmers committing suicide were not uncommon. American agriculture was in crisis.

I was head of the Department of Extension Agricultural Economics at the University of Georgia at the time. The responsibility for helping farmers survive the crisis fell upon my department. If we couldn't help farmers find ways to survive, we counseled them to get out farming while the still has some equity left – or at least not to commit suicide. In counseling with dozens of farm families, I was forced to conclude that the crisis was not really the fault of farmers who had made bad management decisions, although some obviously had. The farm crisis of the 1980s was an inherent consequence of the industrial system of farming that I and other so-called agricultural experts has been promoting. The only way for some farmers to “get big” was for others to “get out.” In other words, some farmers had to fail so others could survive – but only until the next time when it might be their turn to have to “get out” rather than “get big.”

The crisis of the 1980s was not only an economic crisis for farmers, it was professional and personal crisis for me. I had to admit that I and my fellow experts had done far more to cause the

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crisis than we could ever expect to do to resolve it. The sustainable agriculture movement and my transition from industrial agriculture to sustainable agriculture were born out of this crisis.

Farm groups concerned with the economic consequence of industrial agriculture were searching for “lower input” alternatives in order to reduce their production costs. Rural advocacy groups were looking for an agriculture that would sustain small family farms and support a desirable quality of life for people in rural communities. A dedicated group of organic farmers had been lobbying Congress for years for programs to support organic farming. The three groups formed a political coalition to support the first sustainable agriculture program funded through USDA. The program was first called Low Input Sustainable Agriculture but later evolved into the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program or SARE.

By the late 1980s, I knew I couldn't continue teaching or supporting concepts that I no longer believed in. I was fortunate enough to secure a grant from the initial USDA sustainable agriculture funding to support a two-year visiting professorship at the University of Missouri. This allowed me to essentially start a new career path that would last a lifetime. I am still learning and still sharing what I have learned about the principles of sustainable agriculture. The more I learn, the more I become convinced that sustainable agriculture is the ultimate solution to all the inherent negative ecological, social, and economic consequences of industrial agriculture.

Sustainable agriculture has been given many different definitions over the years. However, there is no disagreement about what it means among those of us who take it seriously. Sustainability is the ability to meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. A sustainable agriculture must be able to maintain its productivity and usefulness to society – indefinitely. Everything of any use to us, including everything of agricultural and economic value, ultimately comes from the earth: soil, water, air, energy. Beyond self-sufficiency, this usefulness is derived through social and economic relationships. So if we continually degrade the productivity of the earth and society, we cannot sustain either the economy or agriculture. Thus, a sustainable agriculture must be ecologically sound and socially responsible if it is to be economically viable and thus sustainable over generations.

The sustainable agriculture movement hasn't transformed industrial farming into sustainable farming, as many of us had hoped in the early years. But, neither has it gone away. It continues to grow with growing public awareness that our current food system isn't meeting the needs of many today and most certainly is not leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. In fact, the sustainable agriculture movement must be sustained, regardless of how it may evolve, what it is called, or how it is pursued. Our current industrial agricultural system is not ecologically sound, socially just, or economically viable. Industrial agriculture, in general, quite simply is not sustainable. Sustainable agriculture is not an option; it is an absolute necessity.

The sustainable agriculture movement has its roots in organic farming. However, organic farming was too politically controversial at the time to be an acceptable name for the USDA sustainable agriculture program. The modern organic farming movement began in the U.S. back in the 1960s, but didn't gain widespread public attention until it merged with the sustainable agriculture movement the late 1980s. Organic food sales in the U.S. grew rapidly during the 1990s and early 2000s, averaging 20%-plus per year – doubling every three to four years. With

the economic recession of 2008, growth rates declined and stabilized at around 10% per year, reaching \$35 billion in retail sales in 2013.¹ While organics still accounts for less than 5% of total food sales in the U.S., organic fruits and vegetables now claim more than 12% of their market – an impressive accomplishment in a nation with a long history of industrial agriculture.

The organic movement was initiated by groups of small, back-to-the-earth farmers and small, cooperative natural foods retailers. However, as organic sales grew, economic pressures grew to establish uniform national organic standards in order to move organic production into the mainstream food system. Uniform standards opened the door to large, specialized farming operations and mainstream supermarkets. By the early 2000s, mainstream supermarkets and the large natural food chains, such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, dominated retail markets for organic foods.² Many of the most successful organic food processors and producers were also bought out by large food corporations. More recently, a prominent organic food chain, Wild Oats, joined forces with Walmart in an effort to increase market share by reducing prices for selected organic foods.³ Although many small organic farms have found ways to survive, organic production is now dominated by large, specialized, “industrial organic farms.”

The local food movement emerged in response to this “industrialization of organics.” As organic production moved to larger farms and into mainstream markets, organic consumers increasingly looked to farmers in their own communities to ensure the ecological and social integrity of their foods. A 2008 food industry study estimated that sales of local foods had grown from \$4 billion in 2002 to \$5 billion in 2007 and were projected to reach \$11 billion by 2011.⁴ No reliable statistics are yet available to determine just how large the local foods market has grown. It is probably still smaller than the organic market, but local foods have clearly replaced organics as the most dynamic sector of the U.S. food market.

The growing popularity of local foods is most visible in the growing numbers of farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture organizations or CSAs. USDA statistics indicate the number of farmers markets increased from 1,755 to 8,144 between 1994 and 2013, increasing more than four-fold in less than 20 years.⁵ Current estimates by the *Local Harvest*⁶ organization indicate there were 2,700 CSAs in the U.S. in 2009, compared with less than 100 in 1990.⁷ The 2007 Census of Agriculture indicated about 12,500 farmers had sold products through CSAs. This reflects the growing number of multi-farm CSAs or collaboratives, where farmers pool their production to better serve their customers in both rural and urban areas. The local food movement is evolving to better meet the needs of more people – both farmers and consumers.

I believe the basic outline of the sustainable food system of the future can be seen in the growing number of local foods networks or cooperatives, such as *Grown Locally*,⁸ *Idaho's Bounty*,⁹ *Viroqua Food Coop*,¹⁰ *Good Natured Family Farms*¹¹, and *the Oklahoma Food Cooperative*¹² -- all of which I know personally. The *National Good Food Network* lists more than 300 multi-farm “food hubs,” although I have no personal knowledge of many of them and cannot personally vouch for their integrity.¹³ By cooperating, farmers can offer a wide variety of local products with purchase and delivery options ranging from CSA shares to on-line orders of individual items.¹⁴ This makes local foods more accessible and more affordable to more people, even if it's not as cheap as industrial foods. The current food networks range in scope from local to state or regional in size and from a dozen or so to hundreds of farmer & consumer members.

I believe these local food alliances and cooperative food networks provide a compelling vision for new community-based, sustainable food systems of the future. The most frequently mentioned advantage of local foods is superior freshness and flavor.¹⁵ Food safety and nutrition also are common reasons mentioned by those who buy local. Others buy local foods to support local farmers and keep their money in the local economy. Perhaps more important for sustainability, buying local also is seen as a means of reconnecting with friends and neighbors, and through local farmers, regaining some connectedness with the earth.

Many people question whether it will be possible to “scale-up” today's local food systems to meet the needs of people nationally and globally without sacrificing the characteristics that distinguish them from the industrial food system. Will it be possible to scale-up without sacrificing food safety and quality? Will it be possible to scale-up without sacrificing the economic benefits for local communities? The answers to these questions depend on whether it is possible to “scale-up” without sacrificing the social and ethical values that arise in local food networks from the sense of connectedness that people feel with each other and with the earth.

To sustain the integrity of local food networks, farmers and their customers must form and sustain meaningful personal relationships. Even if the relationships are not close they must be meaningful. Farmers who feel connected to their customers will care about their customers and will provide them with safe and nutritious foods. Farmers who feel connected to their farms will care for their land and treat their animals humanely. Customers who care about their farmers will support their farmers and spend their food dollars locally, keeping the economic benefits of farming in their local community. Consequently, relationships of integrity – creating and maintaining them – may well be the greatest and most important challenge in transforming the current local food movement into a new sustainable food system for the future. Likewise, the greatest and most important challenge in sustaining the sustainable agriculture movement will be creating and maintaining relationships of integrity.

There is a natural limit to the number of meaningful relationships any given person can sustain. So, there is a logical limit to the size of a sustainable local food network. Sustainable farming also depends on a sense of personal connectedness between farmers and the farms or land they tend or cultivate. There is a logical limit to how much land or how many animals a farmer can really know well enough to feel a personal sense of connectedness. This means there is also a limit to the size of sustainable food networks as well as sustainable farms. Rather than continuing to expand in size to serve ever larger market areas, farms and food networks must cooperate with other farmers and other food networks to meet the needs of more people – until they eventually replace the current industrial food system.

The sustainability of the movement depends on farmers and their customers being willing to give cooperation priority over competition. Both are essential aspects of human nature but need to be kept in harmony and balance. However, the sustainability of harmony and balance between the two depends on giving cooperation priority over competition. A sustainable local food system will require “vertical cooperation,” giving priority to cooperation among farmers, processors, distributors, and customers, rather than each competing for maximum individual advantage. Prices at the various levels within the system will need to be determined though

cooperation rather than by competition. There will still be incentives for competition or economic efficiency, in that those who had lower costs will retain greater economic benefits.

There will also be competition for customers among individual producers, but competition based on the quality and integrity rather than price. Retail food prices must be set at levels that are affordable to customers, even if not competitive with supermarket prices. Prices at all stages in the food system also must be set at levels sufficiently high to not force anyone to exploit and extract to survive economically. The local food system may not be as economically efficient for customers or farmers, because prices will be set by cooperation rather than competition. Sustainability must take priority over economic efficiency. Competition must be kept within the bounds of cooperation.

The decision to give cooperation priority over competition will not be sustainable unless it is rooted in deeply-held and widely-shared social and ethical values. There will always be some point in time in a cooperative organization where it will be to the economic advantage for some members to compete rather than cooperate. As history has proven, a legal cooperative business structure alone will not ensure sustainability. Most successful farm cooperatives in the U.S. eventually evolved into large, industrial organizations with the inevitable negative consequences for land, people, and sustainability.

Problems generally arise as cooperatives become larger and relationships become less personal and the sense of personal connectedness is lost. Many cooperatives have broken up at this stage, due to dissention among members and leaders. Others have evolved into impersonal, purely economic organizations. Local foods cooperatives or collaboratives likewise have tended to succeed or fail economically based on their ability to sustain positive personal and social relationships among members with shared ethical values. Consequently, learning the art and science of human relationships could well be the greatest challenge in creating a sustainable food system, as suggested previously.

The Food Commons project in California provides the best conceptual blueprint I am aware of in the U.S. for forming and sustaining a vertical food cooperative organization that balances cooperation and competition.¹⁶ The differences between vertical cooperation and for-profit corporations are clearly reflected in their guiding principles. Their core principles include: fairness, sustainability, decentralization, transparency, stewardship, accountability, subsidiarity, reciprocity, and ethics, as well as the essential economic principles. Their ultimate success or failure will depend on their ability to create and sustain an organizational culture that reflects these principles, giving shared ethical and social values priority over profits and growth.

Sustaining the sustainability movement obviously will require some fundamental changes in ways of thinking among farmers. Some so-called conventional farmers may be able to make the transition, but change is inherently risky, and changes in thinking are the most difficult of all changes to make. So, another major challenge in sustaining the sustainable agriculture movement will be to create opportunities for more thoughtful, caring farmers who have not been so deeply indoctrinated in industrial agriculture thinking that they are unwilling to change.

Some major challenges in creating these opportunities include providing affordable access to land and capital and to appropriate technologies and knowledge. It's not easy for a farmer to get access to land with prices of farmland at near record levels and lenders reluctant to make loans to farmers without a substantial equity or a comprehensive corporate contract. The technologies developed over the past 60+ years were designed for large, industrial farms but not appropriate for small, sustainable farms. The knowledge to farm sustainably may be the greatest obstacle of all, since public research and educational programs of the past 50+ years have focused on industrial agriculture. Government programs for “beginning farmers” are targeted primarily to new commodity producers, not new farmers who will produce for local markets. If current trends continue, even more farms will become consolidated into large industrial farm businesses, leaving even fewer small sustainable farms in the future.

To meet these challenges, farmers are turning to their customers, their neighbors, and to each other for support. Grassroots organizations, such as the *Agrarian Trust* are being formed to help new sustainable farmers gain access to farmland.¹⁷ The *Slow Money* movement is encouraging ethical investors to take the risk of making capital available to new sustainable farmers at more favorable interest rates and more lenient terms for repayment.¹⁸ New technologies are being developed and new educational programs are being developed outside of the university system, technologies that are appropriate for smaller, more sustainable farming.¹⁹

Private organizations, such as *Acres USA*, are publishing information about alternative farming practices that universities have refused to research or publish.²⁰ These articles often are written by experienced sustainable farmers. Young, aspiring and beginning sustainable farmers flocking in droves to the growing number of sustainable agriculture conferences across the U.S. where they learn from experienced, successful sustainable farmers.²¹ Retiring sustainable farmers are mentoring young farm families and bring them into their farming operations.²² Farmers, their customers, and their supporters are helping each other – cooperating rather than competing. The sustainability of these cooperative initiatives depends on the sustainability of the relationships.

That said, perhaps the most difficult challenge in sustaining the sustainable agriculture movement will be to fundamentally change U.S. farm policies. Every major farm program in the US since the New Deal era of the 1930s, in one way or another, has promoted agricultural industrialization – thereby promoting consolidation of agricultural production into fewer and larger economic production units. This challenge has intensified with the implementation a variety of international trade agreements and biofuels production that remove domestic constraints to expansion of agricultural production. Changes in farm policies are needed to at least give sustainable farmers a “level playing field” on which to compete economically with industrial agriculture.

It will take a change in political and economic culture to bring about fundamental changes in farm policies. Economic and political change is not an option; it is a necessity. Our current political and economic culture is not sustainable. Over the long run, sustainable regional, national, or global networks of community-based food systems, and the farmers who supply them, will be able to survive only within the context of larger regional, national, and global cultures that embrace the essentials of sustainability. Thus, the hope for sustaining the

sustainable agriculture movement depends on developing a shared ethic of sustainability that transcends the global economy and society.

Obviously, developing the new ethical imperative of sustainability will not be a quick or easy task, but it is possible. In possibility, there is hope. The shared social values we see in the local food movement today can and, if sustained, will naturally evolve into the shared ethical values we need for a sustainable society and economy. Cultural knowledge evolves over time from a society's collective experiences from personal social relationships. As social relationships become less personal, people begin to understand that the value of relationships arise not just from personal connections within their families and communities but also from being members of societies and of humanity. This is the process by which personal social values evolve into a sense of community, patriotism, and eventually into impersonal ethical or cultural values. Cultural values provide the ethical foundation for constitutions and laws which define acceptable and unacceptable behavior of individuals within societies. Changes in cultural values result in changes in laws and regulations, such as farm and food policies.

Consequently, the culture that is evolving within local, community-based foods system is capable of evolving quite naturally into a culture of sustainability that will permeate the entire food system and economy – eventually leading to changes in farm policies and even changes in global society. The challenge will be to sustain the integrity of these relationships. In essence, the hope for sustaining the sustainability movement depends on each of us doing our part to sustain relationships of integrity among people within our communities and between our communities and natural ecosystems or “places” where we choose to live and work. The ultimate sustainability of the sustainable agriculture movement depends on the decisions of whether to cooperate or compete that will be made by each of us, one person, one community, one region, one nation at a time.

Fortunately, to sustain the sustainable agriculture movement, we need only become “fully human.” Certainly, we are material beings. Our well-being or happiness depends on having enough food, clothing, shelter and the other economic essentials of life. However, once our basic material needs are met, the quality of our life depends far more on the quality of our relationships – our friends, family, community, society – than on the quantity of income or wealth. Beyond relationships, our happiness also depends on our having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Without purpose and meaning, there is no sense of rightness or goodness in our relationships.

For the vast majority of people in the U.S. and the rest of the so-called developed world, our real economic needs obviously have been met. It will not be a sacrifice for us to care for others or care for the earth; these things will improve the quality and give purpose to our relationships and make our lives fundamentally better. All we have to do to sustain the sustainability movement is to finally become “fully human.” In this there is hope.

In the words of Vaclav Havel – philosopher, revolutionary, and former president of the Czech Republic: *Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of*

how it turns out. It is this hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that [to others] seem hopeless. Life is too precious to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love and, finally, without hope.²³

Sustaining the sustainable agriculture movement will not be easy, and there may be no logical reason for optimism; but there is still hope. We can't know with certainty that we will ultimately succeed, but we know that what we are doing makes sense, regardless of how it turns out; in this there is hope. It is this hope that gives each of us the strength help create and sustain the new community-based food networks – even while others see our efforts as hopeless. Finally, even if we ultimately fail, while daring greatly, we should always remember that life is simply too precious to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without purpose, without love and, finally, without hope.

End notes:

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⁴ *Packaged Facts*, “Local and Fresh Foods in the U.S.,” May 1, 2007. ><http://www.packagedfacts.com/Local-Fresh-Foods-1421831/><

⁵ USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, “Farmers Markets and Local Food Marketing,” <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateS&leftNav=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&page=WFMFarmersMarketGrowth&description=Farmers%20Market%20Growth>.

⁶ Local Harvest, <http://www.localharvest.org/>

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⁸ Visit the *Grown Locally* website at <http://www.grownlocally.com>.

⁹ Visit the *Idaho's Bounty* website at <http://www.idahosbounty.org/>.

¹⁰ Visit Viroqua Food Coop website at <http://viroquafood.coop/>.

¹¹ Visit Good Natured Family Farms website at <http://www.goodnaturedfamilyfarms.com/>

¹² Visit the *Oklahoma Food Cooperative* website at <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/>, list of other cooperatives: <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/Display.aspx?cn=otherstates>.

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¹⁴ Micaela Fischer, Michael Hamm, Rich Pirog, John Fisk, Jeff Farbman, and Stacia Kiraly, “Findings of the 2013 National Food Hub Survey,” Michigan State University and Winrock Center at Winrock International, September 2013. <http://kresge.org/sites/default/files/2013-national-food-hub-survey.pdf>.

¹⁵ Vern Grubinger, “Ten Reasons to Buy Local Foods,” University of Vermont, <http://www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry/factsheets/buylocal.html>.

¹⁶ The Food Commons: Imagine, Design, and Build <http://www.thefoodcommons.org/index.html>.

¹⁷ See the Agrarian Trust website, “Land Access for the Next Generation of farmers,” <http://agrariantrust.org/> also Schumacher Center for New Economics, <http://www.centerforneweconomics.org/content/agrarian-trust>.

¹⁸ See Slow Money website, <https://slowmoney.org/>.

¹⁹ See National Center for Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas, ATTRA, <https://attra.ncat.org/>.

²⁰ ACRES USA, <http://www.acresusa.com/>.

²¹ For example, see Midwest Organic Sustainable Education Service, <http://mosesorganic.org/> and Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, <http://www.pasafarming.org/>.

²² Foodtank, “Ten new mentoring programs that can help next-generation farmers land on their feet,” <http://foodtank.com/news/2013/02/ten-new-farming-mentoring-programs>.

²³ Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Random House Inc.), 1990, Chapter 5.