

Rethinking the Role of Agriculture in the Future of Rural Communities

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The roots of most American rural communities are in agriculture. When the Europeans first arrived in North America, they found a land of great natural wealth. Of course, the Native Americans were already here and were aware of the natural abundance of the land, but the Europeans saw far greater economic potential. Some of that potential wealth was in minerals and timber, but most of it lay in vast plains and winding valleys of fertile farmland. However, it took people to transform this potential wealth into economic well-being. People had to clear the land and till the soil to bring forth the bounty of food and fiber from the fertile fields. It took people to care for the cattle and sheep that grazed the vast plains. And as these people – these farmers and ranchers – achieved surpluses beyond their own needs, they began to need other people in towns and rural communities with whom they could trade their surpluses for the things they couldn't produce. They needed blacksmiths, dry goods stores, livery stables, banks, and salons. But they also needed schools, churches, and medical care if they were to move beyond economic survival to achieve a desirable quality of life.

Rural communities – Places without a purpose

Some of the early American communities were built around timber and mining, but most towns were farming or ranching towns. And in places that required more farmers or ranchers to care for the land, more people were needed in town to support those farms and ranches. It's probably true that distances between many towns were determined by a day's round trip by horse and wagon. But, the number of people in those towns was determined, in large part, by the nature of agriculture in the surrounding area. For example, lands well suited for vegetables and row crops could be farmed more intensively – supporting more families per acre or section. Lands suited only for small grains or pasture were farmed less intensively – supporting fewer families per section or township. Of course, town folks also had mouths to feed with locally grown foods – greens, milk, eggs, and bacon. The density of population in most rural places reflected the nature of their agriculture.

At the turn of the 20th century, America still was an agrarian country – about 40 percent of its people were farmers and well over half lived in very rural areas. But then came the second phase of the industrial revolution, and with it the need to collect large numbers of people into cities to “man” the large factories and offices of a growing manufacturing economy. The simultaneous industrialization of agriculture – mechanization, specialization, routinization, standardization – made it possible for fewer farmers to feed more people better – “freeing” farmers and other rural people to work in the new factories springing up in the cities.

The same technologies that *pulled* rural people toward the cities *pushed* them off the farms and out of rural communities. These technologies increased production per

person by substituting capital and generic technology for labor and individual management skills. As successful new farming technologies were developed, they invariably reduced production costs – per bushel or per pound of production -- but only if each farmer produced more. Thus, the incentive to realize greater profits by reducing costs was inherently an incentive to buy bigger equipment and more commercial inputs in order to farm more land and produce more output. As farmers individually responded to these incentives, production in total invariably expanded, market prices fell, and the promise of continuing profits vanished. The new technologies now were necessary – no longer for profits but now for survival. Those who adopted and expanded too little too late were unable to compete. They were “freed” from their farms to find a job in the city.

Farms were forced to become ever larger, just to survive. And, with a limited population to feed and a limited amount of land to farm, some farmers had to fail so others could survive by getting larger. In addition, large specialized farms often had to bypass the local community in purchasing inputs and marketing their products in order to remain competitive with other large farms. Their competitors were not only down the road or across the country, but could be half way around the world.

Fewer farmers buying less locally meant less need for farm related businesses in small towns. Fewer farmers also meant fewer farm families to buy groceries, clothes, and haircuts in small towns. Fewer families also meant fewer people to fill the desks in rural schools, pews in rural churches, and the waiting rooms of rural doctors. Fewer people with a purpose for being in rural areas meant that many rural communities, too, were losing their purpose for being. As farms have grown larger and fewer, many rural communities have been left in decline and decay – places without a purpose.

Today, America is no longer an agrarian nation. Today, less than two percent of Americans identify themselves as “farmers.” More than half of these “farmers” report a “principal occupation” other than farming and farm households earn about 90 percent of their incomes from something other than farming. Somewhere around 25 percent of the people live in non-metropolitan areas – but many, if not most, commute to a city to work. Few people are left in farming communities to move to “town,” and no longer are there social benefits to be gained by moving them. Old manufacturing industries are “downsizing” and “outsourcing” -- laying off workers by the thousands. As consumers we spend on the average a little over a dime out of each dollar for food and the farmer only gets a penny of that dime. The rest goes to pay for commercial inputs and marketing services – packaging, advertising, transportation, etc. Society no longer has anything to gain from further industrialization of agriculture, but yet it continues. And rural communities in farming areas continue to wither and die. Many have truly become places without a purpose.

Sustainable Community Self-Development – an Experiment

The conventional wisdom in economic and community development circles is that rural communities must look to something other than agriculture for survival and future prosperity. Feeling the stress of an industrial society, many small towns have turned to industrial recruitment – trying to become a city rather than a town – as a

means of survival. But the only industrial development strategies that many rural communities are offered are prisons, landfills, toxic waste dumps, or factory livestock operations. Once prosperous agricultural communities have become the dumping grounds for the rest of society. Those that succeed in luring “clean” industries, typically end up with companies who are only looking for cheap labor. Such companies invariably move on when they find some place else, in either the U.S. or abroad, where people are even more desperate for work and will work harder for even less money.

Others communities have tried to capture natural advantages in climate or landscapes to become destinations for tourists from the cities. Those near the growing industrial centers have “rented out their communities” as bedrooms for those who are willing to commute to the city. But, most rural communities in agricultural areas have not been successful in their efforts to regain prosperity – or even to survive. Most rural communities remain places in search of a purpose.

An Experiment in Sustainable Community Development

In August of 1995, the Missouri, Michigan State, and Nebraska Universities began a five-year collaboration on a project funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Our objective was to “challenge the conventional wisdom concerning the future of rural communities... to demonstrate the proposition that a fundamental shift in the foundation of economic development from land and capital to knowledge and information, and increased public concern for the natural environment, provides new opportunities for a sustainable agriculture,” which in turn provides new opportunities for sustaining rural community development through agriculture.

We recruited communities in each of the three states who were willing to make a commitment to work with us for the duration of the project. Our commitment was to help them find and develop a foundation for their future through sustainable development of their “geographically fixed” resources -- including landscapes, climate, clean air, clean water, and forests, but with an emphasis on agricultural land. The basic premise was that for development to be sustained in a particular community, there must be reason for the activity to be carried out in that particular location; there must be purpose for development in that particular place. In addition, since people must carry out the process of development, and since the purpose of development is to enhance the lives of people, there must also be a purpose for people to be in a particular place. Thus, the first principle of our Sustainable Communities project was: “A linking of people, purpose, and place.”

The project was to be carried out by a process of “community self-development.” Our role was to be that of facilitators – not leaders. We would provide information concerning opportunities and alternatives. We would help the people get organized, help them develop a shared vision, and facilitate their collaborative efforts. But it would be up to the people of the communities to decide what they wanted to do and how they wanted to do it. We had funds in the project to facilitate their collaborative activities, and a few dollars to fund demonstration projects of their choosing, but the project provided no funds for investment in actual development projects. The success or failure

of the project in any particular community would be in the hands of the people of that community. Thus, our second principle was: “Local organization, local investment, and local control.”

Another basic premise was that everyone in a community should be considered in every decision that affected the community. Our working hypothesis was that one reason for the demise of many rural communities was that community leaders had lost touch with the real wants and needs of their community members. They had become so preoccupied with replacing jobs and rebuilding a tax base that they were sacrificing the quality of life of many for the economic benefit of a few. Many of the new “economic development” strategies for these rural communities were based on little more than exploitation of rural people who were desperate for jobs and exploitation of the natural environment. If the development of these communities was to be sustainable, all community members needed to be involved, or at least considered, in the decision making process. All members of the community also needed to be able to share in the benefits. Thus, our third principle was: “Shared leadership, shared responsibilities, and shared rewards.”

Our final working principle was based on the concept of sustainable development – that communities must find ways to meet the needs of all in the present while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. Sustainable development must be socially responsible, economically viable, and ecologically sound. Many rural communities have become so preoccupied with raising economic capital that they have allowed the social and ecological capital of their communities to become depleted. Economic development is rooted in social and ecological resources. Thus, economic development cannot be sustainable without sustainable social and ecological development. Our fourth principle was: “Building community while creating wealth and caring for the land.”

If we were to carry out the project effectively, we knew that we couldn't follow the traditional technology development and transfer model typically used by Land Grant Universities. This project was not to be technology-based, but instead had to be people-based. Our goal was to empower people to be productive by using their innate human abilities to think, not to provide technology that would reduce the need to think. Thus, one of our objectives was: “to develop and demonstrate a new research and extension model which relies on participatory research and information sharing rather than technology development and transfer.”

My role was that of overall project leader for the three-state project and state coordinator for Missouri. I was the “keeper of the purpose and principles” of the project. The other state coordinators and the facilitators were free to interpret the purpose and principles as they saw fit. My responsibility was to make sure that everyone understood what we had in mind when we developed the project proposal and what we had promised Kellogg we would do. When people asked me if I thought something was or was not consistent with our commitments, I would give my opinion. I was the judge, but not a prosecutor. Our project plan was our “constitution” and I was Chief Justice of the

“Supreme Court.” I was ultimately responsible to the Kellogg Foundation for carrying out the project as promised in our agreement.

Sustainable agriculture – a foundation for sustainable rural communities

We believed that the problems of communities in agricultural areas was not so much that they had relied on agriculture and other natural resource development, but that they had relied on unsustainable systems of agriculture and natural resource development. They had relied on an industrial development paradigm or model – specialization, standardization, and centralization of control. The industrial system of agriculture didn't require as many farmers as did diversified family farms. And thus, it wasn't as supportive of rural communities as diversified farming, or at least didn't support as many people in as many rural communities. In addition, the industrialization of agriculture moved more and more of the processes involved in food and fiber production off farms and out of rural communities. The ninety percent of the consumer's food dollar going to pay for marketing services and commercial inputs has little positive effect on rural economies.

However, by mid-1990s, a new model or paradigm of agriculture clearly was emerging to challenge the industrial model. This new agriculture emerged under the conceptual umbrella of sustainable agriculture. And this new way of farming was potentially 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. It must be ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible.

The industrial model of agriculture is failing on all three fronts of sustainability. The specialized, standardized, large-scale systems of farming are polluting the environment with pesticides, fertilizers, and manure from confinement animal feeding operations. Industrialization is driving independent family farmers out of business and is replacing them with corporate contractors – who turn out to be little more than tractor drivers or livestock building supervisors. And industrial agriculture is ripping the social fabric of rural areas by destroying family farms and rural communities. An industrial agriculture quite simply is not sustainable.

Sustainable agriculture became a public policy issue during the decade of the 1980s. It was first promoted by organic farmers who went to Washington DC in the early eighties 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 being forced out of business during the farm financial crisis of the 1980s. The necessity for a socially responsible agriculture became apparent when rural communities felt the full impact of the agricultural crisis. By the mid-1990s sustainable agriculture was emerging as a viable alternative to industrial agriculture. Although the proportion of farmers currently following the principles of sustainability – including organic, holistic, biodynamic, permaculture, low-input, grass-based, etc. – is small, their numbers were, and still are, growing.

This new paradigm for agriculture provided a new paradigm for rural community development. Sustainable farming was more management intensive. It takes more people on the land to maintain the natural fertility and health of the land, and thereby, to reduce reliance on pesticides and fertilizers. It takes more farmers to produce a given quantity of output on diversified farms, which are necessary to produce food without polluting the environment. It takes more people to market direct 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 the farm. Sustainable agriculture reverses the industrialization process by substituting labor and management for land and capital. A sustainable agriculture would support more people on farms and more people in rural communities.

In the Sustainable Communities project, we weren't claiming that rural communities could once again depend entirely on agriculture, only that a sustainable agriculture could provide a solid foundation upon which a sustainable rural economy could be built. In the new post-industrial, knowledge-based era of the future, people would be seeking out places to live that provide open-spaces, scenic landscapes, clean air and water, and friendly people. Sustainable agriculture would make rural areas ideal residences for those people who, in the new era, would be able to carry out their work from anywhere they choose to live. Sustainable agriculture would 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 would provide the link between people, purpose, and place.

Communities as living systems

We knew that to challenge the conventional wisdom – of agriculture, of community development, and of research and extension – we would need an unconventional organization. Our organizational model was a variation of a chaordic organization, a model developed by Dee Hock, the founder of Visa Corporation. A chaordic organization is defined by its purpose and principles of operation. With clearly defined purpose and principles, the organization structure can remain dynamic, evolving to accommodate an ever-changing organizational environment. Each person has a wide degree of latitude of choice among alternative means of carrying out their work, as long as they remain true to organizational principles, and thus, contribute to the overall purpose of the organization. This contrasts with the industrial organization, which builds its purpose into the organization structure, so that if each person in each position carries out their assigned task, the organization will fulfill its purpose. Industrial organizations are changed only through restructuring, whereas, chaordic organizations naturally evolve.

The differences between chaordic and industrial models of organization are analogous to differences between “living and dead” systems. Living systems are organismic in nature, whereas, dead systems are mechanistic. Both living and dead systems have fixed and unchanging “patterns” of organization. For example, the pattern of living organisms is encoded in their DNA, and the pattern of a machine is represented by its blueprint. However, living and dead systems differ with respect to

structure. The structure is the physical embodiment of the pattern of organization. A dead system, a machine or building for example, has an unchanging structure. Once it is built, it maintains the same basic form until it is replaced or remodeled. For a living system, however, the structure is continually changing. The physical structure of living things naturally change and evolve as they are born, mature, reproduce, age, and die – even though their DNA, their pattern, is always the same. The “processes” of living and dead things also differ in one important respect; both living and dead things fulfill their purpose by converting input to output. Living things convert “food” into energy and work and dead things convert “fuel” into energy and work, but both convert input into output. However, for living things, the continual regeneration of the structure is a fundamental part of the process of living, while dead things are incapable of self-regeneration. Thus, regeneration is a part of the process of living with purpose.

In the Sustainable Communities project, our basic purpose was sustainable community development – to help people of these communities find ways to meet the needs of all today while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. Our fundamental principles: resource-based development, self-development, inclusiveness, and economic, ecological, and social balance, provided the conceptual DNA. If people in a community followed these principles, whatever they did would contribute to the purpose of creating a sustainable community. The people of the communities could organize themselves any way they choose, and could carry out whatever activities they chose by any means they chose, as long as they remained true to the purpose and principles.

Some General Observations

The project ended in mid-2000. We experienced both successes and failures during the five-year span of the Sustainable Communities project. On the positive side, I am confident that the lives of many rural people, in all three states, were changed in some very fundamental and positive ways as a consequence of their involvement with the project. We can't claim much credit for these changes because these people changed their own lives. But our being there provided encouragement and support for those who were willing and otherwise ready to change. Those who were already inclined toward more sustainable farming systems and more sustainable community development strategies were able to obtain more information on alternatives and were given more encouragement to turn their ideas into action than if we had not been there. For some, information and encouragement were the only critical missing ingredients. Thus, from the standpoint of empowering people who shared the purpose and principles of the project, I feel we were successful. We learned that many people would take positive actions on their own if they are given a bit of encouragement and support.

However, we were far less successful in our efforts to help people “build community.” In stating our objectives, we had used the concept of “learning communities.” We had wanted to bring people together from all segments of communities around a common purpose or vision – farmers and townspeople, leaders and those who had never led, advocates of conventional agriculture and sustainable agriculture, young people and old people, wealthy people and poor people. We wanted

to help people find a common vision of hope for the future and to help them learn, evolve, and grow together as a whole community rather than just a collection of individuals that happened to live in the same area. Perhaps we were too idealistic, but we didn't even come close to achieving this goal.

Our communities were simply too fractured to be brought together by any single initiative, even one that lasted for five years. We were committed to the principle of inclusiveness, which meant that we refused to exclude anyone, explicitly or implicitly. But, people excluded themselves, because we refused to exclude others. In some communities we ended up working with the traditional leadership and existing power structure, because those “outside” of the traditional leadership circle considered this to be a “typical” community development project and choose not to participate. In some communities, we worked primarily with people in agriculture, because the non-farm community perceived this to be an agricultural project and choose not to participate. In some cases we worked primarily with conventional agriculture groups and in others with sustainable agriculture groups, because the two groups choose not to collaborate with each other. In spite of our doing everything we could do to ensure inclusiveness and in spite of our best efforts to bring people together, the people insisted on dividing themselves into their traditional peer groups.

In all honesty, we held firm to our stated purpose and principles in some communities, but in others we did not. In some communities, the single principle of community “self-development” prevailed, and the people gave little regard to linkages of purpose with place, to inclusiveness, or to sustainability. A couple of communities focused on economic development within the conventional agricultural community. Producers pooled their capital and formed “new-age,” closed cooperatives to add value to their traditional agricultural commodities. These communities showed the most impressive, tangible and measurable results, with millions of dollars of local investments. They built soybean and alfalfa processing plants and formed a hay marketing cooperative. But, they did little if anything to strengthen the social fabric of the community or to protect local natural resources from exploitation.

One of these economic development projects included producers from a broad geographic area, reflecting little sense of either community or place. One facilitator worked closely with existing community leaders and the other worked with existing farm leaders. One utilized the traditional technology transfer model of extension, while the other relied very little on extension. Both communities' projects would have to be considered successful using traditional measures of success in economic development. But neither provided much insight into the basic question of whether rural community development can be sustained through sustainable agriculture. Neither focused on sustainability, either in agriculture or in community development.

In communities where the purpose and principles of the project were upheld, traditional community and agricultural leaders choose not to participate. Contrary to our working hypothesis, we were forced to conclude that the purpose and principles of sustainability were either not sufficiently understood or widely accepted to allow

sustainable community self-development to occur. Apparently, *economic* development is so deeply engrained into the minds of community leaders and conventional farmers that they refuse to accept the basic premises of sustainability. They don't see any means by which the social and environmental objectives of sustainability can be pursued without sacrificing economic performance. They are locked into short-run thinking, where economic results can be achieved through exploitation of human and environmental resources, rather than thinking about the longer term, in which economic, social, and ecological objectives must be mutually supportive. They apparently don't believe that caring for each other and being good stewards of the land are as important as are jobs and income in determining their quality of life.

In one community the conventional and sustainable groups were neither able to work together nor was either willing to accept a leadership role in the project. Some potentially productive communication took place and some good things happened in this community, but little was achieved in the way of community building. In one community a group of farmers who were already oriented toward sustainable agriculture eventually came together to form a loosely organized collective marketing group. The group has managed to retain a marketing agent for more than a year after completion of the project and at least has some hope for self-sufficiency. In another community, those initially involved with the project had some history of working together on environmental issues, and thus, were able to make more progress than most others in initiating joint projects that show promise of enhancing the overall sustainability of their communities. But across all communities and all states, the converts from conventional economic development to sustainable community development were few and far between.

One of the biggest disappointments of the project to me was our failure to demonstrate a new model for extension programming. Our new model would have transformed extension agents into facilitators rather than technical specialists. The role of facilitator was to help people gain access to information rather than to provide the information themselves. A facilitator helps people learn what they want to learn rather than teaching them what they “need to know.” A facilitator doesn't make things happen, but helps other people make things happen. We had facilitators hired from project funds in all of our communities. These facilitators worked very effectively, but we were not able to get the various University Extension programs to embrace, or even support, the concept of extension agents as community development facilitators.

In Missouri, the Sustainable Communities project was carried out within the extension system – we weren't given a choice. When I announced that this would be a “different kind” of community development project, I was told that we would either “do it within the existing extension framework, or it wouldn't be done.” So we relied heavily of county level extension agents in the initial stages of project implementation. Our extension agents were supposed to serve as facilitators and the facilitator we hired through the project was supposed to support the extension agents. Without going into a lot of details, this plan didn't work. About midway into the project, we were forced to abandon our initial collaborative arrangement with extension to avoid complete failure.

I formed the following conclusions regarding the role of extension – based on my experiences in Missouri. The extension organization is not willing to turn over control of programs to people in local communities. Giving up control means giving up the ability to “create the illusion of success,” which is an essential element in any extension program. The organization will not tolerate being associated with potential failure. Most extension agents are not willing to give up their role as experts – to become a “guide on the side” rather than the “sage of the stage.” Extension has developed close ties with existing community and agricultural leaders in order to maintain funding. Extension agents are not willing to jeopardize those relationships by working with “fringe” groups, such as organic farmers, small farmers, and opponents of factory hog farms. In Missouri, only two of the original seven extension agents stayed with the project until it was completed. One of these two has since left the Extension Service. These two agents were tremendous assets to the project – they were “exceptionally” good. But in general, Extension “talks the talk” of community self-development, but just isn't able to “walk the walk.”

If I had it to do all over

Part of my responsibility, as project leader, was to provide the W.K. Kellogg Foundation with my opinion as to whether they should support similar projects in the future, and if so, what they should do differently.

First, my experience with this project has only served to strengthen my commitment to its fundamental purpose – helping build sustainable rural communities through sustainable agriculture. I remain convinced that the future of rural America is rooted in its people and its natural resources. Thus, the future of rural communities, and of the nation, depends on our finding ways to help rural people develop rural resources by sustainable means.

I also remain committed to the organizational principles of “living systems.” I believe that prevalence of use of the industrial organizational model is a root cause of the degradation of both human and natural resources. We must adopt models appropriate for living systems if we are to manage living systems, including human systems, without degrading and ultimately destroying them. I learned that it is extremely difficult to get people to abandon the industrial paradigm with its hierarchical structure of command and control. Regardless of the difficulty, however, we must learn to organize and to work while being guided by a common commitment to empowering people to pursue the purpose and principles of sustainability.

Admittedly, our experiment with the “living organization” paradigm in Missouri was less than completely successful – primarily because we were unable instill a common commitment among participants to the purpose and principles of the project. However, I remain convinced that a living organization is not only a far more hospitable climate in which to work, but is potentially far more productive than is the more common industrial organization. The people who work in organizations are living beings and most of the truly productive work being done today relates to biological and social relationships. So, it is just common sense that our organizations should be modeled after living systems.

By organizing around principles, the structure of the post-industrial organization can continually change and evolve as needed to continue fulfilling its purpose in a dynamic environment. The post-industrial organization can empower people to use their uniquely human capacity to think and to act on their own. This will be the hallmark of the post-industrial society.

A primary challenge will be to convince those in leadership positions to give up control over the day-to-day operation of the organization. The role of leadership in a living organization is to protect the “genetic code” of the organization and to “encode” it in the hearts and minds of all members of the organization. Members of the organization must be given both the ability and responsibility to be productive and successful. The role of leadership is to empower the membership, not to control the organization or to “make it work.”

The larger the numbers of people the greater will be the difficulty in achieving and maintaining consensus concerning its purpose and principles. Thus, the living systems model may not be well suited to large organizations. The best examples I have seen of large organizations that function according to purpose and principles may be churches. In the case of churches, the basic purpose of a church and the principles of various religions are widely understood among its members – although many churches have become bureaucratic and “industrial” in their administrative functions. Democratic governments also are examples of large “living organizations,” although, there is growing evidence that the American Democracy is suffering from “organizational arthritis.” Universities are natural candidates for large “living organizations,” since the basic purpose and principles should be widely shared among institutions of higher education. However, over the years, universities, like governments, have become increasingly rigid, hierarchical, and bureaucratic in their structure.

Conflict between organizational size and “organizational life” seems more likely to arise in organizations with narrowly defined purposes – requiring a sentence or more of verbiage to delineate them from the purposes of other organizations. This characterizes most businesses and non-profit organizations. In such organizations, each member of the leadership team and each member of the organization must, by one means or another, come to share a common commitment to the purpose and principles of the organization. The more people involved in the organization, the more difficult it will be to maintain this commitment. However, this apparent limitation may instead be an asset. As we move toward an era that demands living organizational principles in order to achieve success, we may well find that organizations, by necessity, will become smaller and more humane. Regardless of the implication for size, I have become firmly committed to the concept of “living organizations.” I don't see any way a sustainable community development project could possibly succeed without a “living organizational” structure. Thus, if I had it to do over, I would choose the same type of organizational structure.

However, I would do a lot of other things differently. I am not sure that future failures could be avoided, but at least they wouldn't be the same as our past failures.

First, I would not try to carry out a similar project through the Extension Service, or even through a university. Universities simply lack the flexibility in programming and funding to support sustainable community development programs – or any program of true community self-development. Unfortunately, protection and maintenance of “the institution” has become more important than meeting the real needs of common people. My suggestion to Kellogg was to fund such efforts in the future through existing rural advocacy groups – groups that are already committed to bring about the changes that Kellogg would like to see occur.

Second, I don't believe that community “self-development” can be constrained by any predetermined purpose or set of principles. The purpose and principles of sustainability were broad, but were not broad enough to allow communities to pursue “their own” hopes and dreams for the future. Most current economic development strategies, including conventional farming, are not sustainable; unfortunately, most people don't yet understand this fact, or at least are not willing to admit it. True sustainable community development must arise from within the community – must be community self-development. So we can't have sustainable community self-development until the principles of sustainability arise naturally from within the community. They can't be imposed on the community from the outside.

Consequently, I believe that programs in sustainable rural community development should focus on “teaching and preaching” the fundamental principles of sustainable agriculture and sustainable development to people of rural communities. Existing community development programs almost invariably promote community economic development instead. Current community economic development strategies are exploiting rural people and the rural environment, the very resources that must be protected and regenerated for sustainable community development. Those who are truly concerned about the future of rural America, including those working in public institutions, should do everything in their power to stop the economic exploitation of rural communities. We need to help rural people understand that the quality of their lives can be enhanced only through programs that allow them to care about each other and take care of their environment while taking care of themselves. We cannot, in good conscience, help people degrade their own quality of life and destroy the future of their communities.

I still trust rural people to pursue their own best interests. I have no less confidence in the ability of rural people to shape their own destinies today that I did when I drafted the first Sustainable Communities project proposal more than a decade ago. However, I now realize that powerful economic and political interests are working to keep people in rural areas from controlling the development of their resources. People in remote rural areas are prime targets for economic exploitation by corporations seeking cheap labor. And, remote rural areas are prime targets for environmental exploitation by corporations looking for some place to dump their wastes. These corporations have strong political support at all levels of government, from Washington, DC to the County Court House. Most rural people are being misled into believing that they have no better alternatives than to settle for whatever they are offered, by

corporate investors outside their community. Rural people will not be free to choose their destiny until they understand that there are realistic alternatives to the limited options currently being offered by dominant political and corporate interests. Rural people today, quite simply, are not free to choose sustainability.

The Rural Renaissance

However, I am optimistic about the future of rural America. I sincerely believe that human society is in the midst of a great transition – at least as great as the beginning of the “industrial revolution” and probably as great as the beginning of the “age of enlightenment.” Terms such as the “information age” and “the new economy” barely begin to describe the multitude of the changes ahead – many of which have barely emerged. The most common mistake when describing this transition is to refer to the “changes in technologies” rather than to the “changes in thinking” that created the technologies, or the “changes in thinking” that will be made possible by the technologies.

The miracles of the industrial era were the products of changes in ways of thinking that began some 400 years ago. But society is beginning to realize that industrial ways of thinking are not sustainable. Most people don't yet know what to do about this fundamental problem, so they choose to ignore it. But it won't go away. Others have already abandoned industrial ways of thinking. These new thinkers are the creators of the new post-industrial era of development.

The question of sustainability is a driving force in the great transition. I have referred to sustainable development and sustainable agriculture, but sustainable forestry, sustainable oceans, sustainable environment, and sustainable living also are common themes. People are concerned about their ethical and moral responsibilities for future generations, but a more powerful driving force is that people are beginning to realize that sustainability also is about quality of life, right now. We are beginning to realize that quality of life is not something that we can buy at Wal Mart or Disney World with the money we earn from working all day, every day. Quality of life is a product of positive relationships, from caring about other people and sharing with other people, from living with a sense of purpose and meaning, from living in harmony with a “higher order” of things. Certainly, meeting individual needs is an important dimension of quality of life, but so is meeting our interpersonal and spiritual needs. Our quality of life is made better when we balance the social and ecological with the economic dimensions of our lives. Sustainability, ultimately, is about improving the quality of life of people.

This new way of thinking is fundamentally transforming our society. It reflects a holistic, organismic, living systems worldview that is fundamentally different from the reductionist, mechanistic, dead system worldview that has dominated the industrial era. The new way of thinking has its roots in quantum physics and chaos theory rather than mechanical physics and statistics. Truly revolutionary technologies are emerging from these new ways of thinking, and in turn, will support these new ways of thinking. These new ways of thinking will truly revolutionize human society.

The great transformation will fundamentally change America's farms and rural communities. We will have more farmers, rather than fewer, in the future, and we will have more people, rather than fewer, in rural communities. We are not going back to the past, but forward to a fundamentally different and better way of life in rural areas. The question in my mind is no longer "if," but "how and when." In the meantime, we need to do everything in our power to stop the degradation of rural people and rural resources, so we will have as solid a foundation as possible on which to rebuild rural America.

I remain hopeful for the future of rural America – in spite of what seems to be a chronic state of rural crisis. I know more about agriculture than rural communities in general, but I am optimistic about what I see happening. Family farmers are finally beginning to fight back against the giant agribusiness corporations, and against the agricultural establishment that supports them. Hog producers voted to eliminate the pork checkoff program that was using their own money to drive them out of business. Farmers and rural residents are joining environmental groups to bring lawsuits against the giant factory farming operations that pollute the rural environment as they drive family farmers out of business. Farmers are joining together to demand enforcement of antitrust laws against the giant corporations and to restore competitiveness to markets. Farmers are beginning realize that their general farm organizations and commodity organizations are far more supportive of industrial agriculture than of family farms. Farm groups are beginning to talk about multi-functionality, rather than economic efficiency, as a guiding principle for government farm programs. Farmers are beginning to fight back, and they have a real chance of winning.

I am optimistic also about the people who attend conferences dealing with sustainable agriculture, and related issues, all across the continent. The Land Grant Universities may not be increasing their support for sustainable agriculture programs, but the grass-roots sustainable agriculture movement is booming. Several regional "sustainable agriculture" conferences draw 1,200-1,500 people per year. Conferences with 400 to 500 people are becoming almost commonplace. And, the numbers of conferences drawing 100 people or more are too many to count. Sustainable agriculture is no longer a novelty and the people who attend these conferences are no longer idealists who attend out of idle curiosity. Most of the people who attend are farmers, attending because they want to learn more about what they are already doing or are seriously seeking a better way to farm. These people are a diverse lot. They are young and old, male and female, well-educated and uneducated, well-off and poor, they are a cross-section of the "people" of rural America – not representative of the existing power structure. These people are building the future of rural America – with very little help from their government, their universities, or anyone else. I think these people deserve a lot more help that they are getting. However, I think they are going succeed, with or without that help.

I have hopes that we are nearing a "tipping point" in the sustainable development movement. A recent book by the same name, the author, Malcolm Gladwell, uses the

analogy of a disease in explaining a “tipping point.” He describes it as the point at which an infection that has been lingering among the general population suddenly explodes into a full blown epidemic. He suggests that “epidemics of ideas” reach a tipping point when three conditions are present. First, people who are effective in spreading ideas to others must be “infected” with the idea. Second, people must learn to express the idea in a way that makes sense to a lot of people. And finally, people must be searching for new ideas to replace the old ones.

I think all of these tipping point conditions are imminent, if not already present, in the sustainable development movement. More and more people of influence are accepting sustainability as a fundamental guiding principle for future development. More and more people are beginning to understand that sustainability is not about sacrifice, but is about helping people achieve a higher quality of life -- realizing a higher concept of self-interest. And finally, more and more people are realizing that industrialization is destroying our civil society and natural ecosystem, and that corporatization is destroying our democracy and our national sovereignty. We are in the midst of a great transition that is changing the ways people are willing to think about everything. More and more people are realizing that there is something very wrong in America and they are ready for fundamental change. The great transition creates an environment of change.

Finally, there has never been a time when what we do, or don't do, could make more difference in the future of rural America. We can continue to defend economic efficiency as the guiding principle for America, and thus, side with the corporate interests that are promoting the exploitation of rural areas. We can sit on the sidelines and observe – somehow rationalizing the exploitation of rural people and places. Or, we can take a stand with the rural people who are fighting back. We can accept our responsibility of ensuring that people have choices without making the choices for them. We can help spread an epidemic of positive change in rural America. We can help move the country toward the tipping point of explosive change – moving toward a more sustainable agriculture and more sustainable rural American communities.

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