



**THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER**  
**JOHN IKERD**

*A new series of Economic Pamphleteer columns:  
 Perspectives on Agriculture, Food Systems, and Communities*

**Sustainability: The defining question of the 21st century**

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John Ikerd has contributed “Economic Pamphleteer” columns to the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* since its inaugural issue in 2010. His columns have provided economic perspectives on a wide variety of agricultural, food systems, and community development issues. He provides a perspective that comes from someone who has lived through the transition from small, independent family farms, local food systems, and vibrant rural and urban communities to a corporately controlled agriculture, a global food system, and economic and socially desolate rural and urban communities.

His perspectives are also informed by spending the first half of his 30-year academic career as an advocate for the extractive, exploitative system of economic development that brought about these changes and in the years since as one of its most outspoken critics. He has been a relentless advocate for sustainable family farms, community-based food systems, and an economic and social renaissance of rural and urban communities. The next several columns will focus on John’s unique perspectives on changes in farms, foods, and communities over the past 70 years and why understanding the past is relevant in planning and preparing for the future.

**M**y purpose in sharing my long-run perspectives on farms, foods, and communities is not to dwell on the past—neither what was nor what could have been. The past is important only

in so far as it helps us understand the realities of the present and possibilities for the future. There is a basic tendency for everything on earth to operate in cycles—physical, chemical, biological, economic,

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*Why an **Economic Pamphleteer**? In his historic pamphlet *Common Sense*, written in 1775–1776, Thomas Paine wrote of the necessity of people to form governments to moderate their individual self-interest. In our government today, the pursuit of economic self-interest reigns supreme. Rural America has been recolonized, economically, by corporate industrial agriculture. I hope my “pamphlets” will help awaken Americans to a new revolution—to create a sustainable agri-food economy, revitalize rural communities, and reclaim our democracy. The collected Economic Pamphleteer columns (2010–2017) are available at <https://bit.ly/ikerd-collection>*

and social. Life on Earth is made possible by the biological recycling of finite quantities of chemical elements. Even the universe is thought to be circular so that if we traveled far enough in one direction we would eventually return to where we started. Whatever goes around eventually comes back around. So, the past provides potentially valuable insights into the future.

The biological, social, and economic cycles we experience directly are most relevant to the future of agriculture, food systems, and communities. This is not the first time that control of the land has been concentrated among a few powerful landlords, that people have become dependent on distant sources of food, or that communities have disbanded and dispersed. The early American agricultural plantations and the collective farms in the former Soviet Union were not sustainable.

Neither were the great Incan cities of Peru and Bolivia in earlier times. These past trends were not sustainable—they couldn't continue. They all eventually stalled out and returned to decentralized ownership or control of land, local control of food production and distribution, and communities of necessity if not communities of choice.

Reality is ever-evolving, and cyclical changes never recreate the same physical, biological, or social structures and processes that characterized previous cycles. However, the same principles and patterns that dominate specific phases of cycles tend to be repeated cycle after cycle. The dominant principles and patterns of our current systems of farming, food production, and community development are basically the same as those of unsustainable systems of the past. The odds are great that farms, food systems, and communities of the future will have far more in common with those of 50 to 70 years ago than with those of today. This does not mean we are going back to the past; this is simply the way that the unfolding of reality has always moved forward or evolved.

I understand and accept that the word “sustainable” has been so intentionally confused, abused, and misused by defenders of the unsustainable status quo that it has been abandoned by most early advocates. However, I still believe that future changes in the agri-food system, the economy, and society in general will be driven by the question of sustainability: How can we meet the basic needs of all in the present while preserving equal or better opportunities for those of the future? As I have written in previous columns, the true meaning of the word sustainable and of the *authentic* sustainability movement is clearly understood by its opponents as well as its advocates (Ikerd, 2021). The confusion has been carefully crafted as a distraction.

In the simplest terms, if something we are doing is sustainable, we can continue doing it indefinitely into the future, essentially forever. Some critics who claim that sustainability is not enough are essentially arguing that what we are currently doing is not good enough. They fail to acknowledge that if the current situation is not good enough—which it is not—then it is not sustainable. In other words, sustainability is not about maintaining the status quo. The status quo is not sustainable. If we who have plenty are unwilling to secure the basic needs of all today, how can we possibly rationalize asking those in need today to sacrifice further so that

we may have even more in the future? The late Robert Rodale used to refer to sustainability as *the big question*. How can we create a regenerative, resilient, resourceful food system capable of meeting the basic human needs of all indefinitely into the future? Again, I believe this is the defining question of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As a society, we clearly understand the meaning of “unsustainable.” When I first became involved with the sustainability movement in the late 1980s, the term was unfamiliar to most people. Today, one of the most familiar phrases in the

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English language is that something is “not sustainable.” It seems to be generally recognized that societies that rely on fossil energy are not sustainable, political systems dominated by multinational corporations are not sustainable, the growing political divisiveness within democracies is not sustainable, the cultural and socioeconomic divisiveness between rich and poor people within and among nations is not sustainable, the extractive, exploitative systems of neoliberal economic development are not sustainable, and the current corporately controlled industrial agri-food system is not sustainable.

As a society, we know that virtually every critical aspect of our so-called modern society is unsustainable. Yet we go about our activities, day after day, as if we could simply keep doing what we are doing now, and have been doing for the past 40 or more years, essentially forever. We are unwilling to even consider the fundamental changes in our economic and political systems that will be essential for creating a sustainable society, economy, or agri-food system.

In the next few columns, I plan to share my perspective on the emergence, progression, and significance of specific issues related to agri-food sustainability. Organic, biodynamic, and, now, regenerative farming movements are all driven by the quest for agricultural sustainability. Permaculture, holistic management, and agroecology are all attempts to create sustainable agroecosystems. Relocalization, bioregionalism, and food sover-

eighty are all strategies to create sustainable communities.

I also plan columns focused on the means of addressing the current lack of sustainability, including reforms in farm and food policies and the use of public utilities to secure local food sovereignty and economic sustainability. These reforms will require changes in culture that prioritize resourcefulness, resilience, and regeneration over extraction, exploitation, and extermination. I plan to focus on the critical role that people in local communities must play in initiating and nurturing local cultures of caring, cooperation, and collaboration that are sufficiently successful to spread to national and global levels of organization.

It really doesn't matter to me personally what we ultimately call sustainable farms, food systems, or communities of the future—as long as they have the ability to meet the needs of all in the present while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. Organizations that lose sight of, ignore, or fail to understand that a lack of sustainability has been driving all of the major progressive social movements of the past hundred years will likely contribute more to the problem than to the solution. Thus, my perspectives on the past and future of agriculture, food systems, and communities will be presented from the perspective of concern for agricultural, economic, and societal sustainability.

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## Reference

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