Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development
ISSN: 2152-0801 online
https://foodsystemsjournal.org

THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER
JOHN IKERD

Final column in the series, "Perspectives on Agriculture, Food Systems, and Communities"

Perspectives on the past and future of communities

Published online August 19, 2024

Citation: Ikerd, J. (2024). The Economic Pamphleteer: Perspectives on the past and future of communities. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *13*(4), 5–11. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2024.134.001

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.

When I was growing up on a small family farm during the 1940s and 1950s, we still had vibrant rural communities. Farming communities were interwoven networks of people who knew and cared about each other. Many of the essential tasks on family farms in those days could not be accomplished by a single farmer or farm family. However, "giving a hand" wasn't limited to helping with farming tasks or emergencies but was given anytime someone "needed a hand."

One of my early memories is of my grade-school teacher letting us kids watch the steam

John Ikerd is professor emeritus of agricultural economics, University of Missouri, Columbia. He was raised on a small farm and received his B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Missouri. He worked in the private industry prior to his 30-year academic career at North Carolina State University, Oklahoma State University, the University of Georgia, and the University of Missouri. Since retiring in 2000, he spends most of his time writing and speaking on issues of sustainability. Ikerd is author of six books and numerous professional papers, which are available at https://ikerdj.mufaculty.umsystem.edu and http://johnikerd.com.

*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*

engine that powered a threshing machine move slowly down the road going from one farm to another. Crews of up to 40 men and boys went from farm to farm to harvest grain, put up hay, or fill silos. Each farmer provided a share of the farm equipment and labor. The men and boys worked hard, but a lot of socializing also took place during these gatherings. These experiences strengthened the feeling of belonging or social connectedness within farming communities.

The "farm wives" also renewed social relationships during times of harvest. Several women and girls would gather at the host farms on harvest days to help prepare the noon meal for the harvest crews. The women also had social groups or clubs that gathered periodically to make quilts and comforters to help keep their families warm in winter. They also helped each other can fruit and vegetables, make jams and preserves, and cut up meat or make sausage on butchering days. The work was often tedious and tiring, but the conversations helped them pass the time and maintain their social connectedness.

These communities of necessity were strengthened by local churches and schools. Everybody knew everybody else in their own churches as well as most people in the other churches nearby. Fifth-Sunday singing conventions brought people from local churches together for "all-day singing and dinner on the grounds." The parents of kids who went to school together knew each other and visited at sports events, plays, pie suppers, and fund-raising activities. Unannounced drop-is visits with relatives and neighbors were common, particularly on Sunday afternoons. People also "passed the time of day" at country stores, barber shops, filling stations, and farmers' cooperative exchanges in nearby towns. These communities not only helped people make a living and enjoy life but also gave a common sense of purpose and meaning to their day-to-day lives.

Personal relationships back then, as always, were difficult to maintain, and disagreements naturally arose. But the people knew they needed to "get along to get by" in life. They weren't going to move away and live somewhere else simply because of a difficult relationship with a neighbor. They needed to focus on the values they held in common, rather than their differences. They needed to find some way to create a future that would work for themselves and everyone in the community, or at least for as many as possible. They wanted to create places where their children and their children's children would choose to return and raise their families.

The industrialization of agriculture during the 1960s and 1970s brought transformational change to rural communities. Individually owned field choppers replaced the big silo crews, combines replaced the big threshing crews, and inexpensive hay balers replaced the haying crews of my youth. Even when many farmers didn't have their own harvesting equipment, the work-sharing groups were far smaller and less social. Social circles narrowed as farms grew larger and the surviving family farms became fewer and farther apart. Innovations in manufacturing also made many of the things families had made from scratch more affordable. Modern kitchen and household conveniences eliminated the need for farmwives to share housework. They had more free time but fewer reasons to spend it with other people in their local communities.

The people knew they needed to "get along to get by" in life. They weren't going to move away and live somewhere else because of a difficult relationship with a neighbor. They needed to focus on the values they held in common, rather than their differences.

With fewer farm families, many rural schools were consolidated into larger schools, and rural churches struggled to survive. With improved roads and better cars and pickup trucks, farm families bypassed the country stores and even nearby towns to shop in larger stores elsewhere. Relationships became still fewer as people grew older and their kids left the community to raise their families elsewhere. Some rural kids were

enticed to return home after college by the promise of inheriting the family farm or the family business in town. However, those who chose to "stay home" were often labeled as *not* being among the "best or brightest."

The farm financial crisis of the 1980s took an emotional and economic toll on those who chose to remain in rural areas. Iowa, an agricultural state, lost a full fourth of its farms in the early 1980s (State Historical Society of Iowa, n.d.). The state's population declined by 4.7% during the 1980s, while the population of the U.S. increased by nearly 9.8% (Hansen, 2000). More than 900 male farmers in five upper midwestern states took their lives during the 1980s (Farmers' suicides in the United States, 2024), and farmer suicide rates were more than twice the national average for white men (The Associated Press, 1991). It was widely recognized as the worst rural crisis since the Great Depression.

Since the 1980s, many new rural residents have been immigrants from other countries seeking economic opportunities, or people leaving U.S. cities for a variety of reasons. Some pick fruit or harvest crops for industrial agricultural operations, and others work on the large factory farms that have replaced most family farms. Some new residents are simply trying to escape the high living costs in cities. The remnant rural residents may be decent, hardworking, caring people, but their common interests and commitment to their communities seem to be lost. By the late 1990s, most people in rural communities didn't bother to get to know their new neighbors because they didn't need to and had little in common.

By the late 1990s, most people in rural communities didn't bother to get to know their new neighbors because they didn't need to and had little in common.

I agree with Wendell Berry's assessment of the plight of rural America in his letter to the book editors of the *New York Times*:

> The business of America has been largely and without apology the plundering of rural America, from which everything of value—minerals, timber, farm animals, farm crops, and "labor"—has been taken at the lowest possible price. As apparently none of the enlightened ones has seen in flying over or bypassing on the interstate highways, its too-large fields are toxic and eroding, its streams and rivers poisoned, its forests mangled, its towns dying or dead along with their locally owned small businesses, its children leaving after high school and not coming back. Too many of the children are not working at anything, too many are transfixed by the various screens, too many are on drugs, too many are dying. (Berry, 2017, para. 5)

My perspective is one of rural America because that is where I grew up and where my professional interests have been focused since. However, economic extraction and exploitation, in the guise of economic development, have had the same destructive effects on urban communities. The degradation of urban communities just happened sooner.

Good-paying factory jobs during the earlier stages of industrialization allowed people to meet their financial needs through transactions rather than relying on personal relationships. Over time, however, machines replaced the workers and factories moved to rural areas where people were willing to work harder for less pay. Many in administrative and supervisory positions, mostly white men, were able to find employment and housing in the growing suburbs. People in the inner cities were left not only without jobs but also without communities. Some inner-city youth seek community by joining gangs. Some turn to early marriage or single parenthood in a search for caring relationships. Others turn to alcohol or drugs to escape the loneliness. Rural communities have simply been led down the same path to social disconnectedness as the urban communities before them.

A 2017 *Wall Street Journal* article calls rural America the "new 'inner city'":

> Starting in the 1980s, the nation's basket cases were its urban areas—where a toxic stew of crime, drugs, and suburban flight conspired to make large cities the slowest-growing and most troubled places. Today, however, a Wall Street Journal analysis shows that by many key measures of socioeconomic well-being, those charts have flipped. In terms of poverty, college attainment, teenage births, divorce, death rates from heart disease and cancer, reliance on federal disability insurance, and male labor-force participation, rural counties now rank the worst among the four major U.S. population groupings. (Adamy & Overberg, 2017, para. 4–5)

Regardless of whether rural counties or inner cities rank lower, the environmental, economic, and social consequences of industrial economic development on communities are undeniable.

The consequences of this loss of community have not been limited to those living in rural areas or inner cities. In 2000, political scientist Robert Putnam (2001) documented the decline of "social capital" in the United States since 1950 in his landmark book, *Bowling Alone*. He described the reduction in all the forms of in-person social interactions that had once formed, educated, and enriched American lives. He documented declines in physical and mental health and decreases in the civility of society that paralleled increases in social disconnectedness.

The situation has only gotten worse since Putnam's book. In 2023, the Surgeon General of the United States issued a public health advisory, citing recent studies in which about one in two Americans reported experiencing chronic loneliness (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023, p. 4). He pointed out that

> Loneliness is far more than just a bad feeling—it harms both individual and societal health. It is associated with a greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death. . . . And the harmful consequences of a society that lacks social connection can be felt in our schools, workplaces, and civic organizations, where performance, productivity, and engagement are diminished. (U.S. Surgeon General, 2023, p. 4)

The U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) in 2023 was more than four times higher than the GDP in 1950, even after adjusting for inflation (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, 2024). The relationship between a rising GDP and increasing loneliness is not a coincidence. The GDP depends on impersonal transactions, not personal relationships.

Loss of community is inevitable whenever economic self-interest is given priority over common interests and social connectedness. As societies develop economically and economies grow, personal relationships are systematically replaced by impersonal market transactions. This depersonalization is necessary to achieve the economic efficiency of industrial economic development. People buy and sell rather than swap work or share. Those who lament the loss of community and sense of common purpose are often maligned as nostalgic or longing for "good times that never were." Admittedly, most poor people today have far more money than poor people had 70 years ago. But it takes far more money to live, and there is no way to live well without family, friends, or community.

So where is the hope for the future? "The world changes through local communities taking action. … There is no power for change greater than a community taking its future into its own hands" (Wheatley, n.d., p. 1). This is the conclusion of Margaret Wheatley, a widely respected writer, speaker, and teacher, after contemplating how best to address the problems of modern society. She also says, "Global change always begins from small local efforts that then connect with other small local efforts; after many years of hard work, of experimenting and learning together, these small efforts may suddenly emerge as a powerful global system of influence" (Wheatley, n.d., p. 3). I agree with Wheatley that there is no greater power for change than the power of community.

But how do we begin to rebuild caring communities in a global society that seems committed to destroying personal relationships? I think we

need to start by agreeing on the meaning of community. There are many definitions of community. One I like is "[a group of] individuals who share a common interest, background or purpose that gives them a sense of cohesion" (Tuller, 2023, para. 3). Another is "a group of people that care about each other and feel they belong together" (Pfortmüller, 2017, "We need to update," para. 3). So I would define a community as a group of people who care about each other and share a common sense of purpose.

Sociologists and community development specialists recognize several different kinds of communities. Some I find useful (all from Horntvedt, 2021) include *communities of place,* which include people who live in specific geographically defined places; *communities of interest* are groups that come together because of shared interests; *communities of practices* are people who associate because of common professions or avocations; *communities of circumstance* include people brought together by specific situations or occurrences; *communities of action* are formed when people join together to do things they can not do individually, notably to bring about change.

Farming communities of the 1940s and 1950s had all of these characteristics. They were communities of place because travel and communication were more difficult in those days. They were communities of interest because their children attended the same schools and churches and they depended on the same businesses and commercial services. They were communities of practices because, in one way or another, nearly everyone in most rural communities depended, in some way, on farming. They were communities of circumstance because people were forced to rely on each other to make a living. And they were communities of action. When something needed to be done that they couldn't do individually, they did it as a community. I suspect the once-vibrant communities of today's inner cities once shared these basic characteristics of community.

Local food systems have many of the same characteristics of caring communities of the past and thus offer a logical place to begin rebuilding both rural and urban communities. Communities formed around interest in local foods can expand to include communities committed to affordable housing, health care, transportation, and other essentials of a desirable quality of life. Regardless of where they begin, the best hope for the future of rural America, urban America, society, and humanity depends on the willingness and ability of people to come together to restore and revitalize their communities.

To succeed, communities need to include people who feel connected to a particular ecological place, share a commitment to its sustainability, and understand farming, food systems, housing, health care, transportation, and the other essentials for a desirable quality of life. Transformational change also requires people who understand the necessity for change, share a common vision for the future, and realize that individually they can not make that vision into reality. Finally, people in transformational communities must possess the collective courage to act when the risks are real and the outcomes uncertain. All of the basic reasons to form and join communities may be necessary to restore the lost sense of caring and shared purpose.

The best hope for the future of rural America, urban America, society, and humanity depends on the willingness and ability of people to come together to restore and revitalize their communities.

In previous columns, I have written about the importance of cooperation (Ikerd, 2013) and vertical cooperatives (Ikerd, 2012) and community food utilities (Ikerd, 2016) as organizational structures that could be used to create, expand, and sustain local food communities. Nonprofit organizations and benefit corporations (B Corps) are additional structures that facilitate cooperation rather than competition. However, organizational structures and processes are useless unless they are built and sustained by people who care about each other and share a common sense of purpose.

I am often asked if I am optimistic about the future. My standard answer is that I am not optimistic, but I am hopeful. I understand the difficulty of transformational change, even when it seems obvious to me that change is necessary. But I am still hopeful. In the words of Vaclav Havel, philosopher, revolutionary, and former president of the Czech Republic:

> 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. (Havel, 1990, p. 181)

Havel added, "Life is too precious a thing to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love, without hope" (Havel, 1990, p. 188).

I have hope for a sustainable future for agriculture, food systems, and for both rural and urban communities. The transformation will not be quick or easy, but I know it is possible. In an unsustainable world, working for change is the only thing that makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. This hope gives us the courage and strength to try new things, even things that to others seem hopeless. Finally, life is too precious to live without meaning, without love, and finally, without hope. These are my perspectives on the past and future of agriculture, food systems, and community development. I remain hopeful.

References

Adamy, J., & Overberg, P. (2017, May 26). Rural America is the new 'inner city.' *The Wall Street Journal.* https://www.wsj.com/articles/rural-america-is-the-new-inner-city-1495817008

Associated Press, The. (1991, October 14). Farmer suicide rate swells in 1980's, study says. *New York Times.* https://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/14/us/farmer-suicide-rate-swells-in-1980-s-study-says.html

Berry, W. (2017, May 11) Southern despair [Letter to the editors]. *The New Your Review of Books.* http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/05/11/southern-despair/

Farmers' suicides in the United States. (2024, April 11). In *Wikipedia.* https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Farmers%27_suicides_in_the_United_States&oldid=1218322900

Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. (2024, April 25). *FRED economic data.* https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/A939RX0Q048SBEA

Hansen, J. (2000). Population trends in rural Iowa: Decline and recovery. *Major Themes in Economics*, *2*, 21–31. https://scholarworks.uni.edu/mtie/vol2/iss1/4

Havel, V. (1990). *Disturbing the peace: A conversation with Karel Huížd*ala (P. Wilson, Trans.). Random House.

Horntvedt, J. (2021, August 23). *Five ways to think about community*. University of Minnesota Extension. https://extension.umn.edu/community-news-and-insights/five-ways-think-about-community

Ikerd, J. (2012). The Economic Pamphleteer: Cooperation: The key to sustainable livelihoods in food systems. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *3*(1), 9–11. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2012.031.005

Ikerd, J. (2013). The Economic Pamphleteer: Reflections on cooperation. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *3*(2), 3–5. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2013.032.001

Ikerd, J. (2016). The Economic Pamphleteer: Enough good food for all: A proposal. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 7*(1), 3–6. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2016.071.001

Pfortmüller, F. (2017, September 20). What does "community" even mean? A definition attempt & conversation starter. *Medium*. https://medium.com/together-institute/what-does-community-even-mean-a-definition-attempt-conversation-starter-9b443fc523d0

Putnam, R. (2001). *Bowling alone*. Simon & Schuster.

State Historical Society of Iowa. (n.d.). *Farm crisis of the 1980s and Iowa's economy*. https://history.iowa.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/farm-crisis-1980s-and-iowa-s-economy

Tuller, J. (2023, August 11). *The meaning of "community."* Rural Prosperity Nebraska, Institute for Agricultural and Natural Resources, University of Nebraska. https://ruralprosperityne.unl.edu/meaning-community

U.S. Surgeon General. (2023). *Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community*. https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf

Wheatley, M. (n.d.). *The Big Learning Event*. https://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/Wheatley-The-Big-Learning-Event.pdf