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THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER
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Why not food-based communities?

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During the late 1990s, it appeared to some of us that by the 2020s the industrial food system might be largely replaced by a sustainable food system (Ikerd, 2008). By then it was clear that the industrial food system was not ecologically, socially, or even economically sustainable. The number of farmers markets was doubling every 10 years (Sauer et al., 2022), and organic food sales, growing even faster, doubling every three to four years (Greene, 2014). In less than 50 years, the local food systems of the 1940s had been replaced by the industrial food systems of the 1990s. It seemed logical that by the mid-2020s, the industrial food systems might be replaced by more sustainable systems of food production and distribution. That now seems highly unlikely, if not impossible.

Nevertheless, the sustainable agri-food movement has persisted despite minimal support from government programs and passive-aggressive opposition from the "industrial agricultural estab-

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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*

lishment."[1] A special issue of this journal in 2016, entitled *Short Supply Chains*, featured articles focusing on potential alternatives to industrial food systems (Hilchey, 2016). However, the articles revealed more challenges than successes. In an Economic Pamphleteer column in 2020, I questioned whether the local food movement was just another food fad or the food system of the future (Ikerd, 2020). Large agri-food corporations had co-opted the organic food movement, and the growth in farmers markets, community supported agriculture operations (CSAs), and other local food options had seemingly slowed or leveled out.

The COVID-19 pandemic rekindled hope for the future of the local food movement by dramatically revealing the lack of resilience in the industrial agri-food system. In another special issue of this journal in 2021, *The Impact of COVID-19 on the Food System* (Hilchey, 2021), Catherine Campbell (2021) provides a comprehensive review of the literature on the evolution of the local food movement and its resurgence during the pandemic. However, her study revealed that the COVID-19 experience failed to significantly change local government stakeholders' attitudes regarding local foods.

Despite the increased sales of local foods during restaurant closures and emptied supermarket shelves, consumers have since returned to mainstream food retailers. Food corporations used the short-run supply disruptions to raise prices—and have continued to reap record profits (Perkins, 2024). Consumer concerns have shifted from food access to food prices. After near-average net farm incomes in 2020, U.S. farmers realized record-high incomes from 2021 to 2023 (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], 2024). The pandemic provided little economic incentive for change from industrial to more sustainable farming systems.

A collaboratively authored article in the special COVID-19 issue of this journal made the case for a complete dismantling and rebuilding of the food system based on the principles of food sovereignty (James et al., 2021). The dismantling principles according to the article were Decolonization, Decarbonization, Diversification, Democratization, and Decommodification. The rebuilding principles were Relationality, Respect, Reciprocity, Responsibility, and Rights. Indigenous communities are the leading advocates of food sovereignty in North America, perhaps because they have suffered culturally as well as physically from the industrial food system (Berardy et al., 2019). The principles of Indigenous food systems are also principles of agri-food sustainability.

However, dismantling and rebuilding the entire food system would require a fundamental change in farm and food policy at the national level. Barring a transformational change in public perceptions and attitudes, sustainable alternatives to the industrial food system seem destined to remain with farmers producing for niche markets that are limited to caring consumers with discretionary incomes.

Perhaps we should think about the opportunities for creating *food-based communities* — communities of interest that exist within larger communities of place.

In previous columns, I have advocated creating networks of sustainable community-based food systems as a sequential means of achieving local, regional, national, and ultimately, global agri-food sustainability (Ikerd, 2016). I have suggested community food utilities organized as vertical cooperatives to serve as sustainable alternatives to market competition and vertical integration (Ikerd, 2012). Food sovereignty provides a logical conceptual framework for such community-based food systems (Ikerd, 2015). In a 2022 column, I outlined a scenario for meeting the nutritional needs of low-income consumers receiving government food assistance by relying more on raw and minimally processed, locally produced

[1] I count among the "industrial agricultural establishment" the American Farm Bureau Federation, corporate agribusinesses, and agricultural commodity groups.

foods and significantly more meals prepared at home (Ikerd, 2022). This incremental approach to transformational change would not require major changes in state or federal farm or food policies, although policy changes could be helpful.

However, even community-based food systems have seemed too big a challenge for those involved in the sustainable agri-food movement. In today's divisive political and cultural environment, the task of bringing an entire community together to support an admittedly progressive cause seems daunting. Instead of thinking about the challenges in creating *community-based food systems*, perhaps we should think about the opportunities for creating *food-based communities*. A food-based community would be a *community of interest* that exists within a larger *community of place*. A food-based community would include only those who share a commitment to food sovereignty, meaning the right of everyone in the community to enough healthy, culturally appropriate, and sustainably produced food and the right of communities to choose their own food systems.

Unlike current ecovillages, agrihoods, and other intentional communities, members of food-based communities could reside anywhere in the larger community, and producers could operate in existing as well as new locations. Food-based communities must be small enough to reflect a common sense of commitment to ecological and social responsibility. They would not need to include the entire community to be economically viable. For example, assume the households in the food-based community can afford to spend an average of US$8,640 per year for food (US$9,000 per household for the 80% not receiving government assistance, and US$7,200 for the 20% receiving assistance) (Statista, 2025). If the farmers supplying products to the community were paid 50% of total expenditures, they would receive US$4,320 per community member.

If farmers producing food for the community can keep their costs low enough to retain 40% of their total sales for net farm income, US$200,000 in total sales would generate US$80,000 in net farm income. If community members received all their food from the community and the farmers received all their income from the community, each farm would provide enough food for 46 households. More realistically, if members received 50% of their food from the community and farmers provided 50% of their production to the community, the number of community households per farm would be the same: 46 per farm. The percentage commitments would need to reflect individual communities' food preferences and production potentials. However, both community members and producers would likely need to make significant adjustments in diets and production systems to move food-based communities toward food sovereignty.

While the number of community members and farmers needed for a viable food-based community may be challenging, it is not unreasonable or insurmountable.

With a 50% commitment to the community, farmers could still operate CSAs, sell at farmers markets or to restaurants, or continue other direct sales. A 50% procurement commitment by community members would leave 50% of their food budget for foods that cannot be produced or processed locally, particularly manufactured and convenience foods. Food communities could operate restaurants or other eating establishments to provide away-from-home meals and utilize products that might otherwise be wasted.

The percentage commitments and other specifics would need to be worked out cooperatively and be acceptable to both farmers and community members. The example just gives some indication of the potential size of a viable food-based community. For example, a 50% commitment by a community of 200 members would provide 50% of the income for four farm households. If the preferences of community members are comparable to those of the general population, a 200-member community could support two producers of animal products, one fruit and vegetable producer, and one producer of other products. If the community grows to 500 members, it would support 11 local

farm households: six for animal products, three for fresh produce, and two for other products. While the number of community members and farmers needed for a viable food-based community may be challenging, it is not unreasonable or insurmountable.

A 200-member food-based community would provide over US$430,000 to cover operating and administrative costs, based on a 50%-50% revenue split between the community organization and farmers. A 500-member community would provide over US$1,000,000 to cover the costs of preparing products for sale, operating the retailing or distribution facility, and carrying out the community's organizational and administrative functions.

Existing organizations could initiate food-based communities that could evolve into vertical cooperatives or community food utilities as the communities grow. Food hubs already have the assembly and distribution infrastructure to support food-based communities. Local food policy councils would be a logical source of organizational expertise and community leadership. Food hubs could continue to perform their current functions, and food policy councils could continue to serve the larger community. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018), 212 food hubs and 234 active local food policy councils were active in the U.S. in 2018.

Food stops are a more recent means of making sustainably produced foods accessible to consumers and returning a larger share of consumers' dollars to farmers (Hodder, 2024). The first national farm stop conference was held in 2023, and at least 16 farm stops are in operation in the east-central U.S. (Farm Stop Conference, n.d.). Food stops could provide the retailing or distribution function for food-based communities while continuing to provide a niche market for local farmers to serve the larger non-member community.

The new USDA Reinvestment Fund initiative is making US$60 million in loans, grants, and technical assistance available to support food retail and food retail supply chain projects that increase access to healthy food in communities underserved by grocery stores (USDA, 2024). A priority of the program is to establish grocery stores in rural and urban "food desert" communities to give low-income families affordable access to fresh, nutritious foods. However, there are legitimate concerns regarding the economic viability of grocery stores in areas that have been abandoned by mainstream food retailers.

A local food-based community with 200 or 500 members could provide a neighborhood grocery store with a stable economic foundation needed to provide everyone in the community with access to healthy, sustainably produced foods. Government food assistance funds for low-income community members could provide a stable economic foundation for the food-based community, keeping it economically viable and able to eventually expand to include the whole community. Food-based communities could also help restore the social fabric of both rural and urban communities.

Food-based communities will be economically viable only if their members, including their farmers, are motivated by the social values or benefits that result from being a part of a caring community and from doing something simply because it is right and good.

However, food-based communities will not succeed if they are motivated solely or primarily by the desire to increase farmers' incomes or reduce the consumers' food costs. The current industrial agri-food system is the inevitable consequence of farmers maximizing profits and consumers demanding cheap food. Food-based communities will be economically viable only if their members, including their farmers, are motivated by the social values or benefits that result from being a part of a caring community and the ethical values that arise from doing something simply because it is right and good—ensuring that everyone has access to good food. Food-based communities would need to be similar in concept

to the early CSAs, which were about creating caring communities as well as supporting farmers who cared for the land and produced good food (McFadden, 2004).

Sustainable food-based communities would need to be guided by the previously mentioned principles of the food sovereignty movement: Decolonization, Decarbonization, Diversification, Democratization, and Decommodification. They must insulate themselves from the colonization, carbonization, specialization, corporatization, and commodification of the industrial agri-food system. They must be fundamentally different from the existing system, rather than attempt to compete. Sustainable food-based communities must function by the principles of Relationality, Respect, Reciprocity, Responsibility, and Rights. Community members must build relationships, respect each other, help each other, be responsible to each other, and be committed to securing the basic human rights of all, including the right to good food.

Unfortunately, the consensus needed to establish food sovereignty does not exist at state, national, or global levels and is not likely to exist in the foreseeable future. However, community food sovereignty could be achieved at the local level by creating food-based communities. This may not be easy in today's divided society, but it is not illogical or unsurmountable. Regardless, we have seen limited success in trying to change the food system by creating community-based food systems. Why not try food-based communities?

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