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

THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER
JOHN IKERD

The need for radical changes in U.S. food policies

Published online February 4, 2026

Citation: Ikerd, J. (2026). The Economic Pamphleteer: The need for radical changes in U.S. food policies. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *15*(2), 11–16. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2026.152.001

In my two previous Economic Pamphleteer columns, I have suggested that the current political turmoil in Washington, D.C., creates an environment conducive to radical change in government policies. Those columns focused on government policies affecting economic opportunities and access to farmland for sustainable farmers. I argued that U.S. farm policies should focus on long-run domestic food security, and that land use and production for exports or biofuels should be regulated as industrial, not agricultural. This column advocates policy changes to ensure that everyone has access not only to enough food but also to "good food," defined as wholesome, nutritious, culturally appropriate, and sustainably produced food. Changes in community development policies will be addressed in my next column.

Current farm and food policies are defended politically as providing food security by making food more affordable for more people. Current government programs absorb much of the economic risks for large-scale, specialized agri-food businesses, which are alleged to be more economically efficient. Without government price supports, subsidies, access to capital, and tax credits—and the lax regulation of food quality, worker safety,

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 http://johnikerd.com and https://ikerdj.mufaculty.umsystem.edu.

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

environmental protection, and antitrust violations—today's industrial food system would be too risky for economic feasibility. The implicit assumption is that the efficiencies of large, industrial operations will be passed on to consumers through lower food prices, making food more affordable. The incomes of those unable to buy enough food to meet their basic needs will be supplemented with government payments.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers the government programs that provide supplemental food assistance. The USDA shares administration of programs in nutritional education, research, and monitoring; food safety, content, and labeling; and agri-food imports and exports with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) (Nestle, 2019). The responsibility for maintaining competitive agri-food markets is shared among the USDA, the Department of Justice (DOJ), and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

These programs were successful, at least initially, in increasing food production and reducing the percentage of consumer incomes spent on food. The percent of consumers' disposable incomes spent on food dropped from 15% in 1964 to less than 10% in the late 1990s, but has remained around 10% during the 2000s (USDA Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], 2025a). Any further reductions in costs at the farm level have been more than offset by increases in the share of consumers' dollars going to food processors, distributors, and retailers.

The industrial food system has failed to provide food security for many. Five percent of U.S. households were classified with "very low" food security in 2023 (USDA ERS, 2025c). This was slightly higher than the first official estimate of food insecurity in 1995 (Nord & Andrews, 2022), and is the same as the unofficial estimate reported in the influential 1968 CBS documentary, "Hunger in America" (Carr & Davis, 1968). The number of households classified as "low" food security has ranged from 11% to 13% since 1995 (USDA ERS, 2025b).

Equally troubling, "cheap food" polices have created an additional kind of food insecurity. Obesity among adults has tripled since the early 1960s, from 13% to 40%, and childhood and adolescent obesity has quadrupled, reaching more than 20% (USA Facts, 2025). Obesity has been linked with diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, cancer, and other diet-related diseases (Ikerd, 2015). A 2012 global report by 500 scientists from 50 countries suggested that "obesity is a bigger health crisis than hunger" (Dellorto, 2012).

The Good Food Movement is a logical response to the failure of government farm and food policies to prioritize public over corporate interests.

The Good Food Movement is a logical response to the failure of government farm and food policies to prioritize public over corporate interests. It is not a single, well-defined movement but instead numerous initiatives focused on creating a more sustainable, equitable, and healthful food system. The movement encompasses farmers markets, community supported agriculture operations (CSAs), food hubs, and farm stops, all of which promote relocalization and transparency in food provision. And the good food process begins with organic, sustainable, regenerative, agroecological farming.

The Food as Medicine Coalition[1] and Bionutrient Food Association,[2] among other organizations, emphasize links between soil health and human health. Slow Food,[3] bioregionalism (Clancy & Ruhf, 2012), the HEAL Food Alliance,[4] and Indigenous food sovereignty (Antonio et al., 2025) advocate for locally adapted, traditional, culturally appropriate foods. Food justice and food sovereignty movements demand good food for all, regardless of their ability to pay (Merritt et al., 2024). These and numerous other related initiatives

[1] https://fimcoalition.org/
[2] https://bionutrient.net/site/home
[3] https://www.slowfood.com/
[4] https://healfoodalliance.org/

constitute the Good Food Movement.

Food sovereignty provides a conceptual umbrella for radical changes in government food policies by proclaiming,

> the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute, and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. (Nyéléni, 2007)

Good food policies must prioritize those who produce, distribute, and consume food over economic efficiency driven by the quest for profitability.

Good food policies must prioritize those who produce, distribute, and consume food over economic efficiency driven by the quest for profitability.

As I have explained in previous columns, market economies respond to scarcity rather than necessity, and they will never provide the economic incentives necessary to ensure enough *good food* for everyone (Ikerd, 2016b). It is more profitable to extract and exploit than to regenerate and empower. Sustaining the productive of natural and human resources requires long-term economic investments that cannot compete with short-run profit opportunities. Those who produce good food cannot compete economically with those who provide cheap food. In the absence of good food policies, those who cannot afford good food are forced to eat cheap food or go hungry. Those of future generations will be left without enough food because the resources upon which agricultural productivity depend will have been depleted.

It is more profitable to extract and exploit than to regenerate and empower.

Policymakers must recognize that the process of creating a *good food* system is fundamentally different from creating an *industrial* system. The industrial food system is driven and perpetuated by a single, generic indicator: economic efficiency. As a result, government policies that reduce costs of any sector of the industrial food chain—production, processing, or distribution—can lead to lower retail food costs. The process of industrializing the food system took place one vertical sector at a time: processing, wholesaling, retailing, animal feeding, and then farming, even though these sectors have since been vertically integrated.

Good food systems will be vertically integrated as well but must be developed very differently, as complete vertical food systems, from farmers to consumers: one complete food system, one food community, one bioregion at a time. It is impossible to have good food at the retail or consumer level unless good food is produced and retains its identity and quality as it moves through the vertical food chain from farmer to consumer. Farmers markets, CSAs, and farm stands are complete vertically integrated food systems, but more complex systems depend on cooperation, coordination, and commitment among all vertical levels. No sector can expand sufficiently to achieve sustainable levels of economic efficiency unless the other sectors expand simultaneously. Economies of scale in processing and distribution are typical bottlenecks in developing good food systems.

The Good Food Movement has been hindered by initiatives, programs, and policies that focus on single sectors of the food system: soil quality, pesticide use, farming, marketing, food waste, nutrition, or affordability. Such policies are destined to fail without adequate recognition that significant improvements in one vertical sector of a food system depend on complementary improvements in the others. Ecologically sustainable farmers have been unable to find economically viable markets. Socially responsible food hubs have not attracted enough ecologically sustainable

farmers or consumers. Advocates for food justice have had to rely on philanthropy, volunteers, and charity from farmers. Successful initiatives have been limited to those that have linked good food producers with consumers willing and able to pay the full economic costs of good food. Those relationships frequently lack the long-term commitment essential for sustainability.

Furthermore, every good food system is different from every other. Every community has unique food needs and preferences, and every agroecosystem or bioregion is different from others. Every food-sovereign community has the right and responsibility to determine its own food system. Every good food community must put "those who produce, distribute and consume food [including future generations] at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations" (Nyéléni, 2007, para. 3).

One approach to removing obstacles to the Good Food Movement would be to provide local *public alternatives* to today's national and global *private* food systems, much as some states are now funding private alternatives to public school systems. Today's Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) functions much like a school voucher program. Recipients receive debits to their electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards, which they use to buy food at privately owned and operated markets, much like parents use vouchers to pay tuition for private schools. A public food option would function more like the school lunch program, except that local farmers, processors, and consumers would select *menus* that work for everyone. Perhaps public food options could be called Nutritional Security or NutriSec programs, since the priority would be on nutritional health and agrifood sustainability, or long-run food security. Community members would be free to choose between private and public options to meet their food needs.

One approach to removing obstacles to the Good Food Movement would be to provide local public alternatives to today's national and global private food systems.

Those eligible for current government food assistance programs could choose to participate in the public option by authorizing the government to transfer some portion of their food assistance funds to their local or regional good food system. Medicare Advantage programs involve a similar voluntary merging of public and private healthcare systems. In return, participants would receive the assurance of access to enough healthful, culturally appropriate, sustainably produced food to meet their basic nutritional needs. The public option probably should leave some portion of participants' food budgets for discretionary spending in the private sector.

Those who are ineligible or only eligible for limited government assistance could participate in the public option by contributing a portion of a typical local food budget. For example, if a typical local food budget is US$750 per month and the public option met 100% of food needs, those ineligible for government assistance would pay the full US$750 per month. Government payments for those eligible for partial benefits would be deducted from their US$750 monthly payment. There might be a further reduction for lower net incomes. If the public option only offset purchases for at-home consumption, the payment would be US$375 or one-half of the total. If some portion of the typical food budget were left for discretionary spending, the payments would be proportionately smaller. The local government would need to make up any budget deficits for the public option.

Food services of local schools, hospitals, assisted living facilities, and other institutions subject to government oversight could be required to participate in the public food system. The potential public health and environmental benefits would justify such requirements. Anyone eating in these facilities who objects to this requirement could be provided a voucher to spend in the private food system. Funds allocated to the public option from government food assistance programs and local institutions would provide a dependable economic foundation for local farms and food enterprises

that supply both the private and public systems.

The role of government should be limited to authorization, technical support, and verification that local and regional food systems are fulfilling their intended public purpose. Food-sovereign communities would be authorized to develop, monitor, and enforce their own food safety and nutrition standards, which would exceed those of state and federal governments. Government regulations of the public food system would be limited to periodic checks of food quality and inspection of facilities. Communities would also develop and enforce their own environmental standards to ensure ecological integrity. Continuous monitoring of air, water, and soil quality would replace government regulations of production practices. The role of government in environmental protection would be limited to periodic checks of monitoring equipment and records. Government research and education would be redirected to support the development and employment of site-specific, scale-appropriate technologies to improve the overall performance of community and bioregional food production, processing, and distribution systems.

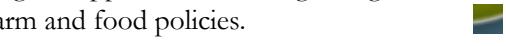
The necessary changes in food policy, locally and nationally, will depend on an understanding of the purely public, non-economic benefits of good foods.

As with public schools, state and federal governments would need to allocate additional funds to offset any shortfall between the costs of operating the public food system and revenues collected from local participants. The allocation of government funding would be comparable to the way local property taxes are used to support public schools. Those who own property pay taxes to support public education in proportion to the value of their property. Those with more property pay more, those with less property pay less, and those without property pay nothing. This is similar to how the government funds public alternatives for healthcare, transportation, legal aid, and other essential services.

Publicly supported alternative local and regional food systems could be organized initially with a relatively small number of committed participants, particularly if local institutions are required to participate. As I suggested in a previous column proposing "food-based communities," the good food alternative might be economically feasible with 200 to 500 participating households, supporting 4 to 10 farm families (Ikerd, 2025). Systems of this size would also contribute to the economic viability of farm stops, food hubs, or other intermediaries that participate in the public systems. Local food systems would need to scale up to regional systems to increase their variety in food choices and increase efficiencies in processing and distribution. The organizational structure for the public alternative could be vertical cooperatives (Ikerd, 2012), community food utilities (Ikerd, 2016a), or some other democratic form of organization.

A long-term government commitment would be essential in allowing farmers and provisioners time to adjust their production systems, and consumers to adjust their food selection, preparation, and eating habits. An emphasis on locally grown, raw and minimally processed foods would be essential for economic feasibility and nutritional healthfulness. This would likely require significant changes in the production and eating patterns of participating farmers and consumers. The success of the Good Food Movement ultimately depends on people recognizing the necessity of fundamental changes in the culture of food production and consumption.

As local and regional public food systems grow and connect to form good food networks, they will become more economically efficient and competitive with industrial food systems. However, without government programs that recognize and reward the non-market and non-economic benefits of good food, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for good food to compete with cheap food. The necessary changes in food policy, locally and nationally, will depend on an understanding of the purely public, non-economic benefits of good foods. People, as taxpayers and consumers, must be willing to support radical changes in government farm and food policies.



References

Antonio, M. C. K., Brewer, J. P., II, Elm-Hill, R., Johnson, M. K., Robin, T., Romero-Briones, A.-D., Stevens, L., & Williams, K. (2025). Indigenous food sovereignty: Pathways for Native scholars: Revitalizing Indigenous food systems through research and knowledge-sharing. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *14*(1), 5–10. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2025.141.031

Carr, M. (Writer & Producer), & Davis, P. (Writer). (1968). *Hunger in America, Part I: A CBS Reports Program*. Carousel Films. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h94bq4JfMAA

Clancy, K., & Ruhf, K. Z. (2012). Digging Deeper: New thinking on "regional." *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *8*(3), 13–17. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2018.083.008

Dellorto, D. (2012, December 14). *Global report: Obesity bigger health crisis than hunger*. CNN News. http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/13/health/global-burden-report/

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. (2015). The Economic Pamphleteer: Food sovereignty: New mandate for food and farm policy. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 5*(2), 11–14. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.052.004

Ikerd, J. (2016a). 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

Ikerd, J. (2016b). The Economic Pamphleteer: How do we ensure good food for all? *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 6*(4), 3–5. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2016.064.001

Ikerd, J. (2025). The Economic Pamphleteer: Why not food-based communities? *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *14*(2), 273–278. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2025.142.001

Merritt, K., Clark, J. K., & Freedman, D. A. (2024). Social enterprise, food justice, and food sovereignty: Strange bedfellows or systemic supports? *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, *13*(2), 53–72. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2024.132.005

Nestle, M. (2019). Primer on US food and nutrition policy and public health: *Marion Nestle comments*. *American Journal of Public Health*, *109*(7), 985–986. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6603444/

Nord, M., & Andrews, M. (2002). *Reducing food insecurity in the United States: Assessing progress toward a national objective* (Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report Number 26-2). USDA Economic Research Service. https://www.ers.usda.gov/sites/default/files/_laserfiche/publications/46632/31197_fanrr26-2_002.pdf

Nyéléni. (2007). *Declaration of Nyéléni.* https://nyeleni.org/IMG/pdf/DeclNyeleni-en.pdf

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service [USDA ERS]. (2025a, September 29). *Food prices and spending | Share of disposable personal income spent on food continues to decline in 2024*. https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-prices-and-spending

USDA ERS. (2025b, January 8). *Food security in the U.S.—History & background.* https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/history-background#history

USDA ERS. (2025c, January 8). *Food security status of U.S. households in 2023* [Chart]. https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/key-statistics-graphics

USA Facts. (2025, November 5). *US obesity rates have tripled over the past 60 years*. https://usafacts.org/articles/obesity-rate-nearly-triples-united-states-over-last-50-years/