



THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER
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Multifunctionality: A new future for family farms

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I was surprised to have been asked recently by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations to write a policy paper on family farming in North America in recognition of the International Year of the Family Farm (Ikerd, 2014). I questioned whether the FAO actually wanted me to write the paper, because of my non-conventional views of American agriculture. In the

process, however, I discovered that much of the rest of the world is awakening to the realization that the values of traditional family farming are essential to ensure global food security. The U.S., Canada, and Australia have found few allies in their championing of industrial agriculture as being necessary to avoid massive hunger in the future.

The concept of multifunctional agriculture, as

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Why did I name my column “The Economic Pamphleteer”? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. Current ways of economic thinking aren’t working and aren’t going to work in the future. Nowhere are the negative consequences more apparent than in foods, farms, and communities. I know where today’s economists are coming from; I have been there. I spent the first half of my 30-year academic career as a very conventional free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. I eventually became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn’t good for farmers, wasn’t good for rural communities, and didn’t even produce food that was good for people. I have spent the 25 years since learning and teaching the principles of a new economics of sustainability. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark a revolution in economic thinking.

commonly used in international trade and policy discussions, refers to the multiple potential benefits of agriculture, emphasizing the importance of non-economic benefits of agriculture. Farms in this context are inherently multifunctional in that they have multiple ecological, social, and economic impacts on nature and society. A global report, *Agriculture at a Crossroads*, points out that multifunctional agriculture “provides food, feed, fiber, fuel and other goods...has a major influence on other essential ecosystem services such as water supply and carbon sequestration or release...plays an important social role, providing employment and a way of life...is a medium of cultural transmission and cultural practices worldwide...[and] provide[s] a foundation for local economies” (International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science, and Technology for Development [IAASTD], p. 6).

The report also points out that “sustainable development is about meeting current needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is indisputable that agriculture as a sector cannot meet this goal on its own. Agriculture, however, fulfills a series of additional goals besides food production. Last but by no means least, agriculture ensures the delivery of a range of ecosystem services. In view of a globally sustainable form of development, the importance of this role may increase and become central for human survival on this planet” (IAASTD, p. 15). At least four recent UN-sponsored global reports have confirmed that multifunctional farming is the best hope for global food security and agricultural sustainability (Kirschenmann, 2012).

Sustainable farms are unique in that they are *intentionally* multifunctional. They are intentionally managed to provide multiple positive benefits, not only for the economic bottom line. The global food policy agenda is being shifted toward agricultural sustainability by the growing realization that

industrial agriculture is inherently incapable of providing long-run global food security. In retrospect, many so-called developing nations see the Green Revolution as a failure. It failed to provide food for those who were hungry because most hungry people are poor. Many subsistence family farmers were displaced, leaving them without their previous means of meeting the basic food needs of their families.

Farms managed solely or even predominately for the economic bottom line are managed *monofunctionally*, even though they have multiple impacts on communities and ecosystems. Agricultural industrialization is motivated by economic efficiency and thus industrial farms, including those of the Green Revolution, are managed monofunctionally — even if they are owned and operated by families. There is no economic value in doing anything for the sole benefit of society as a whole or the future of humanity. The myopic pursuit of economic efficiency inevitably degrades natural ecosystems and

degenerates societies. Monofunctional farms are not sustainable.

Historically, family farms have been held in cultural positions of high esteem. Thomas Jefferson, for example, believed strongly that the “yeoman farmer” best exemplified the kind of “independence and virtue” essential for democracy. He did not believe financiers, bankers, or industrialists could be trusted to be responsible citizens. Adam Smith, an icon of capitalism, observed that farmers ranked among the highest social classes in China and India and suggested it would be the same everywhere if the “corporate spirit” did not prevent it. Smith never trusted businessmen and distrusted corporations in particular. The philosophy of Confucius ranked farmers second only to academics and scholars in the Chinese social order, who were then followed by workers, and lastly, businessmen. All of these respected historical figures placed farmers at or near the top of society

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and those concerned with business and economics at the bottom.


Today, Americans are being subjected to an ongoing multimillion-dollar corporately funded propaganda campaign designed to convince us that today's conventional farm businesses deserve the same high esteem historically reserved for family farmers (Lappe, 2011). All family-owned or -operated farm businesses are being portrayed as "modern family farms," suggesting they possess the same values and virtues of the family farmers idealized by Jefferson and Smith. In truth, many farms today share far more characteristics with the businessmen, financiers, and corporate managers distrusted by Jefferson, Smith, and Confucius than with the farmers valorized in past cultures.

The family farms deemed uniquely worthy of high esteem were *intentionally* multifunctional family farms. They were managed to provide positive ecological, social, and economic benefits. On a true family farm, the farm and the family are inseparable. This sense of personal interconnectedness of the family with the farm is ultimately what makes a farm a "family farm" and a family a "farm family." The same farm with a different family would be a different farm, and the same family with a different farm would be a different family. The well-being of the farm is inseparable from the well-being of the family.

A true family farm is managed to reflect the cultural and social values of the farm family as well as their economic necessities and preferences. The core "culture" of agriculture embodied in family farming is one of stewardship or caring for the land, society, and humanity. The core social value of family farming is one of neighborliness and caring for community and society. At the same time, a true family farm must also provide the

economic essentials of a desirable quality of life. These were the virtues of farming idealized by past cultures and are the virtues still essential for global food security and agricultural sustainability.

Family farmers have the advantages of a natural motivation and an inherent potential to farm sustainably. Intentionally multifunctional farms need not be owned or operated by families, but they must reflect the traditional cultural and social values of family farmers. Returning multifunctional farming to its honored, almost sacred, position in the cultures of

North America and the world promises a bright, new future for family farming. 

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