



THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER JOHN IKERD

Food sovereignty: A new mandate for food and farm policy

Published online February 10, 2015

Citation: Ikerd, J. (2015). Food sovereignty: A new mandate for food and farm policy. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 5(2), 11–14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.052.004>

Copyright © 2015 by New Leaf Associates, Inc.

The historical justification for farm policy and other public policies related to agriculture has been *food security*. Contrary to current indications, farm policies should serve the common interests of the public rather than the individual interest of farmers. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food security as “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active,

healthy life” (USDA-ERS, 2014, para. 1). Unfortunately, the emphasis of both farm and food policy in the U.S. has been to providing enough “calories” to support active lifestyles, while placing little emphasis on health. USDA nutrition programs focus on education, clearly placing the responsibility for healthy diets on informed consumers rather than caring politicians.

John Ikerd is professor emeritus of agricultural economics, University of Missouri, Columbia. He was raised on a small dairy farm in southwest Missouri and received his BS, MS, and Ph.D. degrees in agricultural economics from the University of Missouri. He worked in private industry for a time and spent 30 years in various professorial positions at North Carolina State University, Oklahoma State University, University of Georgia, and the University of Missouri before retiring in 2000. Since retiring, he spends most of his time writing and speaking on issues related to sustainability with an emphasis on economics and agriculture. Ikerd is author of Sustainable Capitalism; A Return to Common Sense; Small Farms Are Real Farms; Crisis and Opportunity: Sustainability in American Agriculture; A Revolution of the Middle; and the just-released The Essentials of Economic Sustainability. More background and selected writings are at <http://web.missouri.edu/~ikerdj>

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.

Early U.S. farm policies emphasized keeping enough socially responsible family farmers on the land to produce enough healthful food to meet the basic needs of all. However, the priorities of farm policies shifted during the 1960s and '70s to focus on increasing agricultural productivity. Lower agricultural production costs were expected to result in lower retail food prices, making enough healthful food affordable for everyone. The farm policies of choice consistently promoted the industrialization of agriculture:

specialization, standardization, and consolidation into fewer, larger farming operations. The message sent to farmers by this “cheap food policy” was to either “get big or get out.”

Agricultural industrialization succeeded in reducing production costs, but failed in its fundamental purpose of providing food security. The percentage of food insecure people in the U.S. today is greater today than during the 1960s, when the shift in farm policies began.

The 1968 CBS video documentary, *Hunger in America*, referred to 10 million hungry Americans (Davis & Carr, 1968). The U.S. population in 1968 was 200 million, meaning about 5 percent of Americans were food insecure. The public outrage resulting from the documentary led to dramatic changes in food assistance programs, which virtually eliminated hunger within a decade. Forty-five years later, in 2013, 15% of adults were food insecure, and more than 20% of American children lived in food insecure homes (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, & Singh, 2014).

Furthermore, the industrial food system is linked to a different kind of food security problem: unhealthy foods. A recent global report by 500 scientists from 50 countries suggested that “obesity is [now] a bigger health crisis than hunger” (Dellorto, 2012). The U.S. obesity rates in 2012 were 27% for adults (Sharpe, 2013), 18% for children, (ages 6 to 11), and 21% for adolescents (ages 12 to 19 years) (CDC, 2014). More than one-

third of children and adolescents were either overweight or obese (CDC, 2014). Furthermore, obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents over the past 30 years — the era of agricultural industrialization. It’s clearly time for a new mandate for farm and food policy.

Food sovereignty is a term coined in 1996 by Via Campesina, an organization of 148 international organizations advocating family farm–based, sustainable agriculture (Via Campesina, n.d.).

Megan Carney contrasts the competing policies of food sovereignty and food security in a 2012 article in the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* (Carney, 2012). The food sovereignty movement is an explicit rejection of the industrial agriculture policies forced upon “lesser-developed” nations under the guise of promoting food security. The poster child for these policies, the Green Revolution, is heralded as a great success in the U.S. but is despised by many in the parts

of the world most directly affected.

In the words of Vandana Shiva, a globally prominent ecologist and Indian food activist, “The Green Revolution has been a failure. It has led to reduced genetic diversity, increased vulnerability to pests, soil erosion, water shortages, reduced soil fertility, micronutrient deficiencies, soil contamination, reduced availability of nutritious food crops for the local population, the displacement of vast numbers of small farmers from their land, rural impoverishment and increased tensions and conflicts” (Shiva, 1991, para. 1). Stacia and Kristof Nordin, long-time farming consultants in Africa, have concluded: “Farmers throughout the world were encouraged to convert from their conventional agricultural practices to the new improved [Green Revolution] methods....We are only now beginning to see some of the long term results, but it would seem that instead of ending world-wide hunger, the Green Revolution has actually fostered it” (Nordin & Nordin, n.d., para. 3).

Obesity has more than doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents over the past 30 years — the era of agricultural industrialization. It’s clearly time for a new mandate for farm and food policy.

During a global Forum for Food Sovereignty in Sélingué, Mali, in February 2007, about 500 delegates from more than 80 countries adopted the “Declaration of Nyéléni” (Nyéléni, 2007). It defines food sovereignty as “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 the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies, rather than the demands of markets and corporations” (para. 3).


The declaration continues that food sovereignty “guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food” (Nyéléni, 2007, para. 3). It offers a strategy to resist, dismantle, and replace the current corporate trade and food regime with “food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users” (Nyéléni, 2007, para. 3). It promotes transparent trade and prioritizes local markets over national and global markets.

Food sovereignty also calls for “new social relations, free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations” (Nyéléni, 2007, para. 3). It “empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal-fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability” (para. 3). Finally, “it defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation” (para. 3).

Agricultural industrialization has failed to provide food security either in the U.S. or anywhere else in the world. It’s time for a new public policy mandate, domestically and internationally.

The principles of food sovereignty obviously need to be interpreted differently in different countries, but its basic principles are just as valid in the U.S. as elsewhere. The right to food must be recognized

as a basic human right, not left to the vagaries of charity or the indifference of the marketplace. Markets have never provided food security and never will.

Farm policies to ensure food sovereignty support self-determination, relocalization, beneficial trade, environmental protection, land stewardship, social justice, and intergenerational equity. Food sovereignty is the logical public policy mandate to support agricultural sustainability and a sustainable future for humanity. 

The right to food must be recognized as a basic human right, not left to the vagaries of charity or the indifference of the marketplace. Markets have never provided food security and never will.

References

- Carney, M. (2012). “Food security” and “food sovereignty”: What frameworks are best suited for social equity in food systems? *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 2(2), 71–88. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2012.022.004>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014, December 11). *Childhood obesity facts*. Retrieved from <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/obesity/facts.htm>
- Coleman-Jensen, A., Gregory, C., & Singh, A. (2014). Household food security in the United States in 2013 (Economic Research Report No. 173). Washington, D.C.: USDA-ERS. Retrieved from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/media/1565415/err173.pdf>
- Davis, P., & Carr, M. (Writers). (1968). Hunger in America, part I. In D. Hewitt (Executive producer), *CBS Reports: Hunger in America*. New York: Columbia Broadcasting System. Retrieved from YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h94bq4JfMAA>
- Dellorto, D. (2012, December 14). *Obesity bigger health crisis than hunger* (CNN News global report). Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/13/health/global-burden-report/>

Nordin, S., & Nordin, K. (2000). *Green Revolution fails*.

Retrieved from the Never Ending Food website:

<http://www.neverendingfood.org/articles/how-the-green-revolution-has-failed-to-feed-us/>

Nyéleni. (2007). *Declaration of Nyéleni*. Retrieved from

<http://nyeleni.org/spip.php?article290>

Sharpe, L. (2013). *U.S. obesity rate climbing in 2013*.

Retrieved from [http://www.gallup.com/poll/](http://www.gallup.com/poll/165671/obesity-rate-climbing-2013.aspx)

[165671/obesity-rate-climbing-2013.aspx](http://www.gallup.com/poll/165671/obesity-rate-climbing-2013.aspx)

Shiva, V. (1991). The Green Revolution in the Punjab.

The Ecologist, 21(2), 57–60. Retrieved from the

Living Heritage website:

<http://livingheritage.org/green-revolution.htm>

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research

Service. (2014). Overview [Food and Nutrition

Assistance]. Retrieved January 22, 2015, from

<http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us.aspx>

Via Campesina. (n.d.). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved January

22, 2015, from

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Via_Campesina