



**THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER**  
**JOHN IKERD**

**Enough good food for all: A proposal**

Published online November 1, 2016

Citation: Ikerd, J. (2016). Enough good food for all: A proposal. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 7(1), 3–6. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2016.071.001>

Copyright © 2016 by New Leaf Associates, Inc.

*Note: This column is a follow-up to my previous Economic Pamphleteer column, “How Do We Ensure Good Food for All?,” which appeared in the summer 2016 issue.*

How do we provide good food for all 323 million Americans? I began my previous column with this question (Ikerd, 2016). In that column, I defined good food as safe, nutritious, and flavorful foods, produced by means that protect natural ecosystems, fairly reward farmers and farmworkers, and ensure that all have enough

---

*John Ikerd is professor emeritus of agricultural economics, University of Missouri, Columbia. He was raised on a small farm and received his BS, MS, and PhD 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 accessible at <http://johnikerd.com> and <http://faculty.missouri.edu/ikerdi/>*

food to support healthy, active lifestyles. I explained why our current industrial food system is fundamentally incapable of providing good food for everyone. I concluded that replacing today’s impersonal industrial food system with a personally connected food network would create at least the possibility of enough good food for all. In this column, I propose a logical means of capitalizing on this possibility.

First, we need to understand that hunger today is avoidable or discretionary, rather than unavoidable or inevitable (except under circumstances of

---

*Why an **Economic Pamphleteer**? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. I spent the first half of my academic career as a free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. During the farm financial crisis of the 1980s, I became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn’t working and wasn’t going to work in the future—not for farmers, rural communities, consumers, or society in general. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark the needed revolution in economic thinking.*

war, insurrection, or natural disaster). We produce more than enough food in the United States and globally to provide everyone with enough food. We could also provide more than enough good food, if we reduced food waste, stopped using food for fuel, and fed less grain to livestock. A recent meta-study by the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, entitled *From Uniformity to Diversity*, described the scientific evidence supporting a global shift from industrial to sustainable agriculture as “overwhelming” (International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems, 2016, p. 6).

Second, elimination of hunger cannot be left to the indifference of markets, the vagaries of charity, or impersonal government programs. Markets provide food for those who are able to earn enough money to pay market prices, which inevitably excludes many who need food. Charity is discretionary and often discriminatory. Government programs dating back to the English Poor Laws of 1601 have failed to solve problems of persistent hunger. Hunger is a reflection of systemic problems imbedded deeply within our food system, economy, and society. Elimination of hunger will require a comprehensive approach that addresses the logistical, economic, demographic, social, and cultural challenges of hunger.

Admittedly, the challenge is formidable—but it is not unsurmountable. I am proposing a specific approach to addressing hunger in hopes of stimulating a dialogue as to how best meet the challenge. To solve large, systemic problems such as hunger, we have to find points of leverage where small, doable actions can lead to large, seemingly impossible effects—like the small “trim tab” that turns the rudder of a ship, which causes the whole ship to change direction.

---

**Elimination of hunger cannot be left to the indifference of markets, the vagaries of charity, or impersonal government programs.**

---

We will not eliminate hunger until we accept the right to food as a basic human right. Accepting food as a basic right at the national level might seem impossible. However, progressive local communities might well accept this responsibility, much as some communities have accepted the challenge of global climate change. Discretionary hunger historically emerged from the depersonalization of local economies, when buying and selling replaced personal relationships. Thus hunger is a reflection of a lack of caring. The best hope for reestablishing the sense of personal connectedness essential to eliminate hunger is the reemergence of caring communities.

One means of meeting our collective responsibility to ensure good food for all would be through a “community food utility,” or CFU.

Public utilities are businesses established to provide specific public services. They are commonly used to provide water, sewer, electricity, natural gas, communication systems, and other essential services. Public utilities are granted special privileges and are subject to special governmental regulation. While our existing system of utilities ensure universal access to essential services, they

---

**The best hope for reestablishing the sense of personal connectedness essential to eliminate hunger is the reemergence of caring communities.**

---

do not ensure that everyone can afford enough of those services to meet their basic needs. As I envision them, CFUs would not only ensure universal access to food, but also would ensure that everyone has enough good food to meet their basic needs—as an essential public service.

The CFU could fill in the persistent gaps left by markets, charities, and impersonal government programs to ensure that every household in a community could afford enough good food. In 2014, U.S. households at middle income levels spent approximately 15% of their disposable incomes on food (U.S.

Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], n.d.-a). One approach to ensuring affordability would be to ensure that every household in the community has the equivalent of 15% of the community's median household income to spend for food. Those households falling below the income threshold could be provided with opportunities to make up their shortfall in income needed for food by contributing local public services.

Public services of both economic and non-economic values would be accepted. CFU payments for local public services would be based on hours of service rather than economic value, giving everyone an equal opportunity. An hour of approved childcare for a mother who needs but can't afford childcare would be valued the same as an hour of landscaping of the courthouse lawn for a county that could have afforded to pay it. An hour of approved entertainment on the town square by an unemployed musician would be valued the same as an hour of plumbing by an unemployed plumber at a local government building.

CFU payments for services would be made in Community Food Dollars (CF\$s), which could be used only to buy food provided by the CFU. Priority in procuring food for the CFU would be given to local farmers willing to meet locally determined standards that ensure safe, nutritious, appetizing foods produced by sustainable means. The CFU would serve as a "food grid" by procuring foods from nonlocal producers when necessary to fill in gaps in local production. Priority for nonlocal procurement would be given to regional suppliers who are willing and able to meet local "good food" standards. Local farmers and providers would be ensured prices sufficient to cover their costs of production plus a reasonable profit, as is the case with existing public utilities. Prices would be negotiated between the CFU and farmer, much as public utility regulators now negotiate rates with public utilities.

---

**Priority in procuring food  
for the CFU would be given to  
local farmers willing to meet  
locally determined standards  
that ensure safe, nutritious,  
appetizing foods produced  
by sustainable means.**

---

Nutrition education would be integrated into all CFU programs to help participants learn to select nutritiously balanced diets for their families and to prepare appetizing meals from the raw and minimally processed foods provided by the CFU. More than 80% of the cost of foods purchased overall (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], n.d.), and nearly 90% of the cost of restaurant meals (USDA ERS, 2016), are associated with the costs of processing, packaging, transportation, energy, taxes, insurance, and services provided by food retailers. By spending CF\$s on raw and minimally processed local foods provided by the CFU, even the lowest-income consumers would be able to afford more than enough good food.

CFU foods would be made available to participants by means that ensure physical access to food for everyone and minimize food wasted due to a lack of adequate refrigeration or food storage. The needs of children and the elderly and disabled would be given special consideration. The CFU would coordinate its functions with local charities and government programs, such as food stamps (SNAP) and school lunches to avoid duplication. The CFU might operate a "community food market" where those without special needs could go to buy CFU food using CF\$s. For those lacking ready access to transportation or refrigeration, delivery options would include periodic deliveries of individually selected CSA-like "food boxes." Home delivery of foods for specific meals would be provided for those who could not be accommodated with other options. Meal preparation guidelines and basic refrigeration and storage would be provided to accommodate the various delivery options and specific needs of participants.

As local production expands beyond levels needed to address hunger, the CFU could offer good food to the general community at prices covering its full costs, with surplus revenue retained by the CFU. However, the CFU would

require continuing commitments of local tax dollars. The key difference between the CFU and existing government programs would be that government officials in caring communities feel a personal sense of connection with their community, and community members feel a personal sense of responsibility for each other. Local government officials could evaluate the effectiveness of their programs with respect to meeting specific needs of preferences of people in their communities—people who they know and care about. They would not be restrained by national or statewide programs that don't adequately address the specific needs of their communities. After all, rights and responsibilities are taken more seriously among those who know and care about each other personally.

The CFU would operate as efficiently as possible, but would not compromise its commitment to ensuring that all in the community have enough good food to meet their basic needs. As trim tab communities eliminate hunger, the rudder of public policy will begin to shift, and the ship of state will turn toward global food sovereignty. Eventually there will be good food for all, not just the hungry. However, hunger cannot be eliminated as long as the quest for economic efficiency deprives the poor of their basic human right to enough good food.

---

**Rights and responsibilities  
are taken more seriously  
among those who know  
and care about each  
other personally.**

---

I have put up a Google Site with a fairly detailed outline of my overall proposal at <http://sites.google.com/site/communityfoodutility>. It's a working document, not ready for publication yet. Comments are welcome; instructions are provided at the bottom of the Google Site page. 

### References

- Ikerd, J. (2016). How do we ensure good food for all? *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 6(4), 3–5. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2016.064.001>
- International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems [IPES-Food]. (2016). *From uniformity to diversity: A paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems*. Retrieved from [http://www.ipes-food.org/images/Reports/UniformityToDiversity\\_FullReport.pdf](http://www.ipes-food.org/images/Reports/UniformityToDiversity_FullReport.pdf)
- U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service [USDA ERS]. (n.d.). *Food Dollar Series: Documentation*. Retrieved Oct. 31, 2016, from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-dollar-series/documentation/>
- USDA ERS. (2016, April 12). *Ag and food statistics: Charting the essentials: Food prices and spending: Nearly a third of the U.S. food dollar is spent on eating out services* [Chart]. Retrieved from <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-prices-and-spending.aspx>