



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

**Local foods: Seeds for social change**

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The local food movement has grown in direct response to the industrialization of the agri-food system—and more recently in response to the industrialization of organic foods. Locavores seem to have an intuitive understanding that the environmental and public health problems associated with industrial food production must be solved within the socioeconomic context of local communities. Similarly, the problems of social justice cannot be solved without addressing the larger environmental and public health problems of society.

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*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://faculty.missouri.edu/ikerdj/>*

Systemic problems require systemic change, which is rarely quick and never easy. However, local community-based food systems can provide fertile seedbeds of systemic social change.

From a national or global perspective, ensuring social equity and justice may seem an insurmountable challenge. Within local community-based food systems, however, ensuring social justice is both possible and practically achievable (Ikerd, 2016). Food security requires that everyone have access at all time to a sufficient quantity and quality of food

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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 at <https://bit.ly/ikerd-collection>*

to meet their basic nutritional needs for healthy, active lives (International Food Policy Research Council, n.d.). Food security has not been, and will not be, provided by markets or by impersonal food assistance programs (Ikerd, 2016b). Universal access to good food ultimately must be accepted as a basic human right. It is a matter of social justice. As with social justice, ensuring food security may seem to be an impossible task at the national or global level, but it is logically doable within local communities. Furthermore, social justice implanted in local food systems can spread social justice through the rest of communities, from community to community, and eventually bring about systemic social change at national and global levels.

Changing laws and regulations may seem a more logical means of addressing problems of social justice. Such changes may be necessary during times of crisis. However, systemic social injustice shares common roots with systemic environmental degradation and economic exploitation and can be rooted out only through systemic change. In fact, attempts to address systemic problems individually and sequentially often result in unintended consequences that make bad situations worse, rather than better. Obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and the persistence of food insecurity are unintended consequences of trying to solve systemic problems individually. The health and nutritional benefits of food have been degraded in attempts to make food more affordable and convenient for more people. These problems can only be solved by creating food systems that are socially just as well as ecologically and economically sustainable.

The roots of today's environmental, social, and economic problems are in the reductionist and

mechanistic way of thinking that emerged from the "scientific revolution" prior to "the enlightenment" (Osler, Brush, & Spencer, n.d.). The basic premise is that the world works like big complex machine, and it can be best understood and by taking things

apart or reducing them to their component parts. By implication, things can be "fixed" by repairing their faulty parts and reassembling the mechanisms. In reductionist thinking, ecological, social, and economic systems can all be reduced to their separable, fixable or

replaceable component parts.

The basic purpose of reductionist science is to reveal how humans can most effectively design, manipulate, and maintain mechanical, chemical, and biological mechanisms in order to extract the maximum usefulness or utility from the natural resources of the earth and human resources of society. This way of thinking laid the conceptual foundation for the industrial revolution and continues to dominate industrial economic development, including industrial agriculture. This worldview also dominated the thinking of advocates of mechanical, chemical, and biological fixes for today's failed industrial agri-food system.

The quest for systemic change in the industrial food system has been driven by the alternative worldview of a world that works like a big complex living organism and must be understood as a coherent whole rather than a collection of components or parts. Organismic systems have emergent properties that are not contained in their component parts but emerge from relationships among the parts within the system as a whole. Life emerges from the relationships among the various parts within organisms as wholes. Relationships matter. This worldview is reflected in the science of ecology. The first principle of ecology is that everything is interconnected. Everything we do

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Changes in relationships change the essence of systems as wholes.

The fundamental purpose of science in this ecological worldview is to understand how the world works, its functional principles, and the role of humans within the context of the whole of the earth. The functional principles are laws of nature that are inviolable and must be respected because they cannot be changed. The resources of this ecological world are bountiful and capable of nurturing and sustaining those who live in harmony with nature rather than exploit or try to conquer it. The laws of nature include the laws of human nature that are essential for harmonious human relationships and sustainable human communities and societies. One of the most widely acknowledged and accepted laws of human relationships is known as the “Golden Rule.” To sustain positive relationships, we must treat others as we would want them to treat us—as if we were them and they were us. Social justice is a core principle of the worldview that supports the local food movement.

These are not esoteric philosophical musings. These are the principles that underlie the concept of agroecology, which applies the science of ecology, including social ecology, to agriculture. The life in soils, plants, animals, farmers, families, communities, and society are all inseparable components of the earth’s integral ecosystem. Everything affects everything else—some in small ways, others in critical ways. Each field, farm, farmer, community, and society is unique, but all function according to the inviolable principles of nature. The principles of agroecology underlie the full spectrum of approaches to sustainable farming, including

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organic, biodynamic, ecological, biological, holistic, resilient, and currently most popular, regenerative farming.

These are the principles underlie the global food sovereignty movement: “Food sovereignty is 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” (Nyéléni, 2007, para. 3). These same ideals are reflected in the “Green New Deal” (116th Congress, 2019) congressional resolution, which was the culmination of decades of discussion and nego-

tiation. These ideals are also reflected in Pope Francis’ encyclical on climate change, *Laudato si’* (Francis I, 2015), which was written after decades of contemplation and consultation with some of the leading thinkers in the world.

Current public interests in social justice, economic inequality, global climate change, and food insecurity have

turned local community-based food systems into fertile soil in which to sow the seeds of systemic change. Nature, including human nature, is an awesome force for good that is currently being impeded and threatened by reductionist, mechanistic ways of thinking. But nature is still capable of healing, restoring, and sustaining vibrant and prosperous human communities and societies. Ultimately, communities and societies must function in harmony with the other living and nonliving elements of the earth’s natural ecosystem. If the seeds of social justice are planted, nurtured, and tended in the fertile soil of local food systems, they will grow into flourishing and sustainable communities and societies.

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