

Social Sustainability: Organic Food at the Crossroads

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Organic farming began with a vision of ecological sustainability and a commitment to rebuilding community. In fact, ecological sustainability and social sustainability developed hand in hand by means of the farmers market, the community-supported farm, and the local natural food store. Until recently, community values, food integrity, and food security were ensured by the marginality of organic producers and resellers. As an embattled minority, organic farmers developed a strong sense of community among themselves, while unpredictable supply encouraged organic distributors and retailers to maintain good working relationships with farmers. More importantly, the dollar value of the organic industry was too small to attract serious predators.

This is changing. After decades of being dismissed as a fad, the sales curve for organic products has risen about twenty percent a year over the past five years. This trend toward mass consumption promises great ecological benefits. Even an increase in market share of only a few percentage points would yield massive reductions in the amount of chemical fertilizer and pesticides used by farms, creating a healthier environment for everyone. But this growth curve has also caught the eye of big business. Natural foods stores, once primarily locally owned, are being consolidated into national chains. Organic farmers are scaling up production on an industrial model to meet the increased demand. Organic products are being grown in Mexico, packed in plastic containers, and shipped by air to U.S. distributors. In short, as organic food becomes more popular, it is being incorporated into the systems of finance, management, and distribution

that prevail in conventional agriculture. In the long run, industrial models of mass production and distribution threaten the future of sustainable farming and its vision of community.

The Siren Song of Mass Markets

The industrial method of increasing volume is to increase the *scale* of production: bigger farms, more high-yield varieties, and more use of mechanical sources of energy. To scale up production on an industrial model, organic businesses will need massive infusions of capital available only through Wall Street and international financial institutions. Once indebted to these lenders, organic producers will be under increasing pressure to substitute profitability for sustainability, while truncating the ecological time scale into quarterly reports of profit and loss. Once organic products are traded as international commodities, their distribution will be taken over by the same multinational corporations that created conventional agriculture. As organic standards erode, marketers will replace organic food with a perception of organic integrity created through advertising and political control of regulatory agencies.

Social sustainability will go too. Once bigness is selected for, community values are inevitably left behind. The consolidation of multiple farms, packing plants, and regional hubs under a single corporation requires the adoption of conventional big business practices, such as multiple layers of management and specialized departments. Soon the organization becomes the product, as status competition drives decision making, and meetings proliferate to the exclusion of useful work. This system is excellent for consolidating wealth and power at the apex of a pyramid, but it is antithetical to the goals of community, cooperation, local control, and personal responsibility that are part of the original inspiration of the movement for sustainable agriculture.

Sustainable agriculture must be both ecologically and *socially* sustainable. Organic agriculture is socially sustainable when its techniques are embedded in a social organization that furthers the underlying values of ecological sustainability. Ecological values include consuming only what you need, replacing what you take, ensuring that waste products can be naturally recycled, and that products used in one place are not derived from extractive industries somewhere else. Needless to say, the system of multinational trade and corporate capitalism as presently constituted is based on premises that are exactly the opposite of ecological sustainability. The system increases aggregate demand by creating wants where there are no needs. It seeks to consolidate production and distribution into worldwide monopolies through the non-sustainable technology. And it selects for get-rich-quick schemes that shift diseconomies to the environment and the public sector.

Organic farming cannot feed the population of the planet earth by being “scaled up” on an industrial model. Any radically new system of production requires a system of distribution appropriate to it. At the end of the 19th century the sheer volume of industrial products overwhelmed the ability of the corner store and

the itinerant peddler to absorb them. An entirely new system of marketing and distribution was developed to meet this need—the department store, national brands, the manufacturer’s representative, the nationwide distributor, and consumer credit. Marketers invented advertising, show windows, and mass media to create demand where there was none before. As William Leach documents in the *Culture of Desire*, within two generations in the United States, the Puritan heritage of self-denial and simple living was turned on its head, replaced by an insatiable appetite for consumer goods. A system of distribution and marketing, far from being the inevitable outcome of fixed laws of economics, is an intentional creation adapted to a specific system of production.

The Connection Channel—A Sustainable Distribution System

The critical problem facing organic agriculture today is how to produce food in sufficient quantity to feed modern populations without adopting an industrial system of production and distribution. The organic food movement has developed two distribution channels that are consistent with the community values of sustainable agriculture, namely the farmers market and the CSA (community-supported agriculture) farm. Both are forms of direct marketing. The farmers market is very popular with a subset of consumers, but it is not a distribution channel that can easily meet the needs of most people. Typically, markets are held only one day a week in any one community, are open only part of the year, and are very sensitive to weather. They are not ideal for farmers either, for they often impose a great transportation burden, while putting organic farmers in direct price competition with conventional agriculture. The CSA and subscription farm, however, have the potential of providing food all year long with a freshness and organic integrity that is impossible for conventional channels to equal.

The CSA began as an offshoot of biodynamic farming, with its concept of holistic community and attention to the rhythms of life. As Steven McFadden explains it in *Farms of Tomorrow Revisited*, “One gift that the CSA gives to individuals, to families, and to culture in general is a vehicle for re-establishing a conscious connection with the rhythm of life, the rhythm of the seasons, and the rhythm of the farm...” (p.72). As the concept first developed in Europe, a CSA was a group of food consumers who banded together to support a local farm by buying stock in the enterprise, helping with the work, and dividing the produce among themselves. Since arriving in the United States the CSA concept has diversified into a wide variety of social and legal forms, with the philosophically committed CSA at one end of the spectrum (“eat only what you grow”) and the commercially-oriented subscription farm at the other.

From an institutional perspective, this diversity is a good thing, as it allows consumers to place themselves at the appropriate place on a spectrum of commitment, from the sustainability activist to the less reflective eater. Moreover, this flexibility allows the CSA model to accommodate to regional and cultural diversity. In the northeastern United States, community participation in a local farm is common; in California, where farming has been export-oriented

since the railroad arrived, people do not have a problem with subscription farms that deliver a hundred miles or more from where they are located. The definition of “eating local” depends on one’s culture and technology.

From the perspective of social sustainability, “localness” is less important than physical connection to the farm, wherever that farm may be. The CSA and the subscription farm are both examples of a new way of marketing and distributing farm products that I call the *connection channel*. In the connection channel, farm-direct products and farm brand identity come together to create in the mind of the consumer a *connection to the land*, reinforced through physical contact with the farm. The extent of the physical contact is a matter of consumer preference and CSA philosophy. Some CSA members are content with a visitor’s day once a year, while some CSAs demand from members actual ownership and participation. But in no case is the physical contact dispensable. The physical farm exposes the contemporary urbanite to exactly those things that are missing in modern urban life—the soil, the smells, the animals, the look and feel of the countryside, the taste of food before it is processed, and the rhythms of the seasons. At the farm, people see whole plants, roots and all. Moreover, food from a CSA can be traced back to a specific piece of land, giving the consumer confidence in its quality, freshness, and organic integrity. The natural foods retailer, on the other hand, can only connect the consumer to yet another commercial transaction.

Unlike industrial distribution, the connection channel creates community instead of eroding it. Since CSA members recognize the farm as their source of quality produce, and feel connected to it, they are more committed to its survival and more willing to help out. Even subscription farms with minimal member participation educate consumers in organic values, while giving them a stake in political issues affecting sustainable agriculture, such as ensuring the integrity of organic certification standards.

The farmer benefits too. The connection channel bypasses the middleman, giving farmers profit margins more comparable to the farmers market. The farmer can retain a higher portion of the final selling price while bringing the cost to the consumer more in line with conventional agricultural products, thereby reaching more people. Advance ordering and knowledge of member preferences fine-tunes the planting process, reducing the farmer’s risk of spoilage, surplus production, storage costs, and missed sales. With a pay-in-advance policy, the farmer gets the capital needed for planting and improvements.

Most important of all, the connection channel can produce organic food in quantities sufficient to feed the earth’s population while avoiding the social costs of industrial production and distribution. Instead of scaling up existing organic farms, one multiplies their number, and uses an extended CSA model to distribute the product to local and regional populations. When properly administered, the connection channel can often deliver in the afternoon what was harvested that morning, providing a field-to-fork time that no hub-to-retailer system can match.

Extending the CSA Model

To become a high-volume distribution channel for organic products, the CSA movement must take consumer preferences seriously. Our research shows that many urban consumers perceive CSA offerings as too seasonal and too erratic. A common complaint from former CSA members is that “there was too much of this, not enough of that.” Consumers often get food they cannot use, while certain staples, such as lettuce or fruit, have to be purchased elsewhere. Many conclude that if they have to go to the natural food store anyway, the extra trip to the CSA pickup point is not a good use of their time. These complaints add up to a serious mismatch between the theory of the CSA movement and the expectations of most consumers.

The solution is not simply telling people to “eat in season.” The history of agriculture is as much the history of food processing, food storage, and food exchange as it is of food production. Shifting responsibility to the consumer conceals the conceptual flaws in the classic CSA model itself. The unspoken premise of the CSA model is that the single farm is the basic unit of both production and consumption. In some interpretations, “community” becomes redefined as the group of people who support that one farm and “sustainability” as eating only what that one farm chooses to produce. But from an historical and cross-cultural perspective, this is an artificially narrow concept of a human community.

Contemporary notions of self-sufficiency assume that the individual household is the basic unit of production and consumption. But in societies where people actually produce their own food, such as village farmers, nomadic herders, and bands of hunters and gatherers, it is the *community* of households that is self-sufficient. Should you ever visit such a society, the first thing you will notice is that people are constantly exchanging the food that they themselves produce with food produced by neighbors and kinfolk. There are often exchanges with other groups that live long distances away. Even in so-called subsistence societies, where each household could theoretically produce and consume everything it needed, the basic units of production and consumption are *not* co-extensive. The smallest unit of consumption is the household, while the basic unit of production is the workgroup recruited from multiple households. In the space between are sophisticated systems of social exchange that circulate goods and services to kinfolk, neighbors, and other villages. Any social movement that tries to short-circuit this process by consuming only what it produces is bound to fail because it ignores the role of exchange in creating human community.

In the extended model of community-supported agriculture—namely, the connection channel—the CSA is not a single farm but *the place in a web of complementary farms where consumers connect with the land*. The flow of agricultural products from the CSA to its members and the flow of money and services from the members to the farm are only the first level of exchange in the connection channel, the *on-farm level*. This basic unit of production is not self-sufficient, nor should it be. For the channel to achieve the stability and volume it needs to

maintain sustainability, each CSA farm needs to be connected to a cooperative web consisting of other organic producers. In the connection channel approach to community supported agriculture, each CSA farm is a distribution point for products that the CSA does not itself provide. For example, a CSA may receive eggs from farm A, honey from farm B, and medicinal herbs from farm C, passing these through to its members. The flow of goods and money among farms and CSAs constitute the *interfarm level*.

The interfarm level can deliver many of the organic products sold by natural food stores, but it differs from the latter in critical respects. The most important difference is that the CSA is not selling pass-through products as line items but *using them to enhance the mix of products needed to get and retain an optimal number of members*. For example, a CSA that does not grow fruit may determine that its members want at least two varieties of fresh fruit in their baskets each week, so it buys fruit from another farm. Unlike a retailer, it does not present the fruit to members as separately charged line items. Rather, it adjusts the subscription price of the basket so that the additional cost of purchasing and packing the fruit is covered in the basket price.

The conventional retail channel is specialized for providing unique combinations of products on short notice, but the connection channel is far better at fulfilling *recurrent orders of perishable and staple foods*. Each CSA needs to develop categories of subscription products that reflect the food preferences of consumers in its delivery area. In California, CSAs have developed subcategories of baskets that reflect ethnic and dietary preferences, such as Mediterranean, stir-fry, and vegan baskets. Other CSAs offer subscriptions for supplementary products not wanted by all members, such as eggs and bread. These are charged as optional add-ons to a basic subscription plan. Unlike the retailer, however, the CSA is not trying to customize orders for each individual customer but strives to develop product categories that best reflect the food preferences of its membership. The idea is to add product categories that make it easier to recruit and retain members—thereby keeping the CSA farm at optimal size, while evolving it into the primary channel for distributing staple food products to a local community. The CSA farm can provide pass-through products to its members at retail price or less because it recovers the increased cost of customized packing from the difference between the price it pays the supplier for a bulk order and what it charges its members for individual subscriptions. Because the pass-through products are complementary to the CSA farm's own production, not in competition with it, it remains the primary producer of staple crops for its members.

Interfarm transactions are critical to the success of the CSA model because they address consumer complaints about choice, quantity, availability, and variety, while bringing more farmers into the system. Some of the most successful organic farmers specialize in one or two crops, such as rice, grapes, and apples. These farms can never be CSAs, and their direct marketing options are limited. Few consumers will be willing to enter into a multitude of subscriptions, one for each of the specialty organic products they consume, but they might be happy to add a number of pass-through products to their basic CSA subscription. In

reality, if not in theory, interfarm exchanges are already an important feature of the CSA movement. On the West Coast, CSAs distribute a wide range of organic products from other farms and producers, including bread, cheese, milk, eggs, tofu, yogurt, honey, preserves, range-fed meat, citrus, avocados, stone fruit, grapes, blueberries, olive oil, cider, and medicinal herbs.

This extended model of the CSA farm, the connection channel, helps the organic community to meet the goal of social sustainability. When pass-through products are identified as to their farm of origin, it gives the consumer a connection to multiple farms, extending the sense of community. By increasing the range of products offered by the CSA, it creates more satisfied customers while reducing their need to shop elsewhere. By bringing more farms into the CSA distribution system, it provides a more robust and profitable channel for everyone.

The connection channel also helps ensure the integrity of the organic food supply in a commercial environment where this will be increasingly at risk. Since interfarm products are shipped directly from source farm to CSA; and as the CSA as a whole is a better judge of organic growers than the individual consumer, the system preserves a high level of organic integrity irrespective of whether the government actually enforces organic standards and labeling.

The Optimal Size of CSAs

In order to meet consumer preferences while remaining faithful to its role of primary producer of fruits and vegetables for its members, the CSA must achieve an optimal size. A CSA has reached its optimal size when it is big enough to handle interfarm transactions and to provide diversified member baskets but not so big that the social relations of big business are required to manage it. Moreover, it must make enough money that the continued existence of the farm does not depend on second jobs by members of the farmer's family. It must have enough employees to meet its commitments through times of ill health, while paying them enough to attract young people to farming. These social sustainability goals are difficult or impossible to meet with the conventional CSA model, but the increased sales volume facilitated by interfarm transactions holds out a hope of success.

The interfarm infrastructure consists of a loading dock where products from other farms are received, a packing shed where categories of member baskets are configured, and a vehicle large enough to carry the combined products to drop-off points. In addition, there is an administrative system, discussed below, that aggregates the orders of individual CSA members and generates bulk orders to interfarm producers. Finally, there is a permanent crew of people, either farm employees or community volunteers, who staff the packing facility, handle order taking, and distribute baskets to members.

Unlike the capitalist farm, the goal is not to make each CSA as large as possible but to bring it to an optimal size and maintain it there. If the volume of products becomes so large that multiple packing facilities need to be built and multiple

shifts employed, then the CSA is getting too big to maintain the social relations of cooperative face-to-face work groups and a sense of member participation. The optimal size varies with local conditions, but there are simple indicators of an impending transformation into corporate capitalism of which farmers should be aware. Do CSA members know the names of the delivery staff? Does the CSA coordinator recognize most members? Are resources allocated on the basis of status competition among managers? If an optimally sized CSA cannot meet consumer demand in its area, then it spins off another CSA, independently owned and operated.

The interfarm CSA must strike a balance between the volume of on-farm products and pass-through products. If pass-through products appear to dominate the flow of goods to the consumer, the CSA might come to be perceived, either by the farmer or the members or both, as a natural foods retailer. At this point the psychology of the marketplace kicks in, placing self-interest at the forefront of values. Soon the CSA farmer is maximizing profit and the members are dickering about price. Even worse, the connection to the land is lost, and a great opportunity squandered.

As with the current system of organic commerce, the pitfalls of the connection channel are the replication of industrial and commercial values under the guise of sustainable agriculture. But unlike the present system, this development can be prevented by maintaining an optimal size and balancing countervailing forces—by a *social* biodynamic process. Once this balance is achieved, the connection channel can be an effective means of preserving the community values of the organic farming movement, making CSAs more acceptable to urban consumers, and meeting the demand for industrial quantities of organic food.

Staying Socially Sustainable in a Wired World

The connection channel provides an effective alternative to the direct marketing and home delivery schemes now being developed on the worldwide web. These replace the local retailer with computerized transactions and anonymous deliveries that erode community even more. Also, in the new world order, there is no longer any difference between retail commerce and electronic surveillance.

One of the best exemplars of e-commerce is the online bookseller, Amazon.com, which claims over twenty million accounts. To buy a book from Amazon, one logs onto their web site, types in a credit card number, and selects a book from literally tens of thousands of titles. When the order is submitted, the book is pulled from the shelves of a warehouse in Seattle, dispatched by UPS or air courier, and arrives at the ship-to address a day or two later. For getting a book that is not in your local bookstore the service is hard to beat, but it has potential dangers that are not apparent to the average reader.

Bookstore owners have expressed concern about Amazon's monopolistic potential, anticipating the day when the majority of book purchases will bypass the local retailer and come to rest in the computers of one or two companies,

thousands of miles away. Even less discussed is the fact that Amazon develops a dossier on each customer based on the person's book-buying history, which its computers use to automatically suggest other books that the customer might enjoy. In the hands of prosecutor Kenneth Starr, even Monica Lewinsky's book purchases were used against her.

In the grocery business, there is a similar effort underway to transform food into customer profiles. At a major supermarket chain in California shoppers are issued e-commerce cards that track the brands and amounts of every item they buy in the store. Once they make a purchase with an ATM or credit card, their food buying habits become linked to their credit history.

In the connection channel, however, customer preferences are buffered by the local nature of the CSA. Members tell their CSA what pass-through products they would like to order. A computer at the CSA consolidates requests for each product submitted by members, then scans an online bulletin board for suitable products posted by producers. In its search, the computer program can take into account such criteria as source farm, purchase price, shipping distance, and minimal purchase quantities. If there is enough member demand to trigger a minimal order, the local system alerts the CSA coordinator, who has the option of placing a bulk order with the producer. The system can also be used to trigger standing orders at preset times. Because customer records are administered on the local level, and any orders leaving the farm are aggregate orders for bulk produce deliverable to the CSA's loading dock, individual members and their preferences are invisible to the worldwide databases on the worldwide web. More importantly, a web of farms linked by interfarm transactions is very hard to buy up and take over.

Security in Numbers

Changing the buying habits of a nation is a large task, but it has been done before, a little over a century ago, in the transition from familial to corporate capitalism. And the goal is no more quixotic than that of the organic food community only a generation ago, when it set out to re-invent agriculture in defiance of science, economics, and the conventional wisdom.

In the 21st century food security and food integrity issues will move to the center of the political arena, as people become more aware of climatic changes induced by global warming, the ecological costs of conventional agriculture, and the implications of such new and controversial technologies as genetic engineering. If anything, food will be more politicized, not less. The survival of sustainable agriculture will require a large, easily mobilized constituency that can apply the appropriate political pressure, as it did in response to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's proposed organic standards. The connection channel, by integrating organic food consumers with food producers in a tight-knit web of grassroots communities, linked by high-speed telecommunications, is a formidable political force.

The connection channel makes organic farming socially as well as ecologically sustainable. It connects food buyers to the land instead of to retailers. It makes each organic producer economically stronger while providing jobs at the local level. It increases the volume of organic food while preserving the integrity of organic standards. It gives local communities a more secure and controllable food supply, while preserving product diversity and a high degree of consumer choice. Most importantly of all, it provides an institutional alternative to the new world order that can inspire the next generation of sustainability activists.

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