



The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

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Local Solutions to Economic Globalization: Remaking the Agricultural and Food System in the Northeast

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The Global Context

Farming in the United States has changed dramatically over the past 50 years. Smaller, family-labor farms have declined substantially in number as larger, increasingly industrial-like operations have become the primary source of food and other agricultural products. Technologically sophisticated and highly standardized production techniques have penetrated most segments of farming, and advances in plant and animal sciences have resulted in substantial increases in production. These advances are linked tightly to a narrow range of products.

As U.S. agriculture modernized, it also regionalized. Areas that were once characterized by diverse agricultural activities were driven to exploit their 'comparative advantage.' Farmers in the Great Lakes States and the Northeast established and maintain a niche in dairy production. Producers in the Plains States are able to raise hogs cheaper than farmers elsewhere, while farmers in California and several other Sunbelt states have used subsidized water and a favorable growing season to become the leading producers of fresh fruits and vegetables. More recently, U.S. regionalization has

given way to global regionalization as producers from all over the world participate in an emerging 'global' agricultural marketplace.

A global system of food production, one that is controlled by large national and multinational corporations, has already begun to refashion how and, more importantly, where food is produced. Driving the global/industrial system of farming is the continual search by agribusiness firms for areas of low-cost production. In a global system of food production, labor and capital flow to places where maximum profits can be extracted.

Communities can buffer and shelter themselves from the global food system only if they develop the infrastructure, maintain a farmland base, and provide the technical expertise so that farmers and processors can successfully compete against the highly industrialized, internationally organized, corporate food system in the local marketplace. There is accumulating evidence that a relocation of agricultural and food systems is taking place in regions that have been hit hard by global competition. It is not surprising that Massachusetts, New York and other states in the Northeast are in the vanguard of the relocation efforts. Large-

scale, industrial farming has largely by-passed this region that and consumers must rely on food produced elsewhere.

Evidence of Relocalization

Based on an extensive review of the literature, I have identified seven characteristics associated with the relocalization of agriculture.

1) Production is oriented toward local markets and meeting the needs of local consumers rather than national or international mass markets. (Wilkins, 1995)

2) Agriculture is viewed as an integral part of rural communities, not merely as production of commodities. (Center for Rural Affairs, 1988)

3) Producers are concerned more with high quality and value added products and less with quantity (yield) and least cost production practices. (Waters, 1990)

4) Production at the farm-level is often more labor intensive and land intensive and less capital intensive and land extensive. Farm enterprises tend to be considerably smaller in scale and scope than industrial producers. (Bird, et al., 1995)

5) Producers more often rely on indigenous, site-specific knowledge and less on a uniform set of "best management practices." (Kloppenborg, 1991; Kneen, 1993)

6) Producers forge direct market links to consumers rather than indirect links through middlemen (wholesalers, brokers, processors, etc.). (Johnston, 1987; Lyson, Gillespie and Hilchey, 1995)

7) Agriculture takes up social, economic and geographic spaces not filled (or passed over) by industrial agriculture. Landscapes are reconfigured.

The relocalizing of agricultural production manifests itself in many ways (see Center for Rural Affairs, 1988; Farming Alternatives Program, 1994; 1997):

Farmers markets provide immediate, low-cost, direct contact between local farmers and consumers, and are an effective first step for communities seeking to develop stronger local food systems.

Community and school gardens provide fresh produce to underserved populations, teach food production skills, and increase agricultural literacy. *Organic farmers* have in many cases pioneered the development of local marketing systems, and have also eschewed conventional, chemically intensive farming practices for those that are more environmentally benign.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) projects are forging direct links between groups of member-consumers (often urban) and their CSA farms.

New grower-controlled marketing cooperatives are emerging to more effectively tap regional markets.

Agricultural districts organized around particular commodities (such as wine) have served to stabilize farms and farmland in many areas of the country.

Community kitchens provide the infrastructure and technical expertise necessary to launch new food-based enterprises.

Specialty producers and *on-farm processors* of products for which there are not well developed mass markets (deer, goat/sheep cheese, free range chickens, organic dairy products, etc.) and

small scale, off-farm, local processors add value in local communities and provide markets for 'new agriculture' farmers.

What these efforts have in common is that they have the potential to nurture local economic development, maintain diversity and quality in products, and provide forums where producers and consumers can come together to solidify bonds of community.

What Can Be Done?

Complete local or regional self-sufficiency is neither practical nor desirable. Undoubtedly there is some level of equitable international and inter-regional trade that is beneficial to both exporting and importing communities. However, the balance between local self-sufficiency and global dependence needs to come back towards the local, rather than continuing on its present trajectory towards the global.

In order to effect this shift, it is critical that we recognize and address the fact that control of today's food system rests primarily with powerful and highly concentrated economic interests, and not with local communities or even government. Corporate interests will continue to influence the food system in the direction of increased economic globalization. However, communities, organizations, individuals and government have many tools, which can be used to effect change and move the food system towards greater localization. Some of these tools include:

Local economic development efforts to support community-based food processing activities.

Land use policies that protect active farm areas from random residential development.

Zoning codes that allocate land into areas of non-farm development, areas of natural preservation, and areas for agricultural production.

Institutional food acquisition practices that integrate local food production directly into the community.

Educational programs to increase agricultural literacy among both children and adults including school and community gardens, summer internship programs, and community-farm days.

Kloppenburg, et al (1996) suggest that "the centrality of food to human life [makes it] a powerful template around which to build non- or extra-market relationships between persons, social groups, and institutions which have been distanced from each other." Indeed a growing number of practitioners and academics across the U.S. are recognizing that creative new forms of community development, built around the regeneration of local food systems, may eventually generate sufficient economic and political power to mute the more socially and environmentally destructive manifestations of the global marketplace.

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