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A PROMISE OF A MORE CIVIC AGRICULTURE

Thomas A Lyson, Ph. D.
Professor
Cornell University

The term *civic agriculture* has jumped onto the food policy scene in response to recent discussions over the future of food and agricultural systems in the U.S. While the American food and agricultural system continues to follow a decades-old path of industrialization and globalization, a counter trend toward localizing some agricultural and food production has appeared. I have labeled this rebirth of locally-based agricultural and food production civic agriculture**.** Civic agriculture references the emergence and growth of community-based agriculture and food production activities that not only meet consumer demands for fresh, safe, and locally produced foods, but create jobs, encourage entrepreneurship, and strengthen community identity. Civic agriculture brings together production and consumption activities within communities and offers consumers real alternatives to the commodities produced, processed, and marketed by large agribusiness firms.

Based on an extensive review of the literature, I have identified several characteristics associated with civic agriculture in the United States. Civic agriculture producers are oriented toward local markets and meeting the needs of local consumers rather than national or international mass markets. Civic agriculture is viewed as an integral part of rural communities, not merely as production of commodities. Civic agriculture farmers are concerned more with high quality and value added products than with quantity (yield) and least cost production practices. Production at the farm-level is often more labor intensive and land intensive and less capital intensive and land extensive. Civic farm enterprises tend to be considerably smaller in scale and scope than industrial producers. Farmers more often rely on indigenous, site-specific knowledge and less often on a uniform set of "best management practices." Producers forge direct market links to consumers rather than indirect links through middlemen, such as wholesalers, brokers, processors, and the like.

Civic agriculture enterprises are visible in many forms on the local landscape. *Farmers' markets* provide immediate, low-cost, direct contact between local farmers and consumers and are an effective economic development strategy for communities seeking to establish stronger local food systems. *Community* and *school gardens* provide fresh produce to under served populations, teach food production skills to people of all ages, and contribute to agricultural literacy. *Small-scale organic farmers* across the country have pioneered the development of local marketing systems and formed 'production networks' that are akin to

manufacturing industrial districts. *Community Supported Agriculture* (CSA) operations forge direct links between non-farm households and their CSA farms. New *grower-controlled marketing cooperatives* are forming, especially in peri-urban areas, to more effectively tap emerging regional markets for locally produced food and agricultural products. *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 farmers who cannot or choose not to produce bulk commodities for the mass market. What these civic agriculture 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.

Civic agriculture then, is the embedding of local agricultural and food production in the community. Civic agriculture is not only a source of family income for farmers and food processors, but civic agricultural enterprises contribute to community health and vitality in a variety of social, economic, political and cultural ways. For example, civic agriculture increases agricultural and food literacy by directly linking consumers to producers. Likewise, civic agricultural enterprises have a much higher local economic multiplier than farms or processors that are producing for the global mass-market.

> Civic agriculture should not be confused with civic farmers. Farmers who vote in local elections, sit on school boards, are active members of local service clubs such as Rotary, Lions, or Kiwanis, and otherwise participate in the civic affairs of their communities may be seen as 'good citizens.' However, a farm or food operation that is unconnected from the local community, that produces for the export market, that relies on non-local hired labor, and that provides few benefits for its workers is not a civic enterprise, regardless of the civic engagement of its operator.

Obviously, no agricultural or food enterprise is without some civic merit. However, large-scale, contract poultry and hog operations would probably lie at the far outside end of civicness. Likewise, large-scale, absentee-owned or operated**,** industrial-like**,** fruit and vegetable farms that rely on large numbers of migrant workers and export their products around the world would not be deemed very civic.

The conventional approach to production agriculture has been to treat the farm operator as a manager and as an individual 'problem solver.' The role of Cooperative Extension has been to provide the farmer with the 'tools' (skills, information, technology) necessary to make the best decisions within the parameters of his or her own farm. The farm operator**,** not the local community**,** has been the sole locus of attention, program development, and action. Farmers who 'failed' to make a profit and subsequently went out of business were deemed 'bad managers' by the agricultural establishment.

Civic agriculture is a locally organized system of agriculture and food production characterized by networks of producers who are bound together by place. Civic agriculture embodies a commitment to developing and strengthening an economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable system of agriculture and food production that relies on local resources and serves local markets and consumers. The economic imperative

to earn a profit is filtered through a set of cooperative and mutually supporting social relations. Community problem solving, rather than individual competition, is the foundation of civic agriculture.

The Global Food System

In order to effect a shift to civic agriculture, 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. Large-scale, well-managed, capital intensive, technologically sophisticated, industrial-like farm operations have become tightly tied into a network of national and global food producers. Industrial farms produce large quantities of highly standardized bulk commodities that are fed into large national and multinational integrators and processors. A few thousand very large farms account for most of the gross agricultural sales, but these farms are not representative of the majority of individual farm income. There are about two million farms in the U.S. today and over half of these farms sell less than $10,000 a year of agricultural products. Yet these farms account for only 1.5% of all sales in the country. On the other side of the spectrum, about 1% of the farms in the U.S. report sales over $1 million a year. However, this one percent of farms accounts for almost 42% of all sales. Taken further, the largest one-tenth of 1% of all farms, those with sales over $5 million a year, account for 20.5% of all sales – and this segment is growing. Looked at another way, there are about 2,800 farms in the U.S. today with sales over $5 million a year. These 2,800 farms account for almost fourteen times the sales of the nearly one million smallest farms, those with sales less than $10,000 a year.

The task of organizing and coordinating the production, processing and distribution of food has fallen into the hands of very large multinational agribusiness firms. Today, mass-production food processors and distributors along with mass market retailers have become dominant fixtures in the American food economy. These large-scale producers and retailers provide abundant quantities of relatively inexpensive, standardized goods. The degree of concentration has reached the point where the ten largest U.S. based multinational corporations control about 60 percent of the food and beverages sold in the United States. According to *Prepared Foods*, the leading trade publication for the food and beverage industry, total sales of food and beverage products in the U.S. for 1999/2000 amounted to over $260 billion. The ten largest publicly traded U.S. corporations and their 1999/2000 sales (in $billions) were Phillip Morris ($31.1), Pepsico ($20.4), Coca Cola ($19.8), Conagra ($19.0), IBP Inc. ($14.1), Sara Lee ($10.6), Anheuser Busch ($9.7), H.J. Heinz ($9.4), Best Foods ($8.6), and Nabisco ($8.3). Several international corporations, also with annual sales in the billions of dollars, such as Diageo (UK), Nestle (Switzerland), Unilever N.V. (Netherlands and UK), and Danone (France) also control a substantial portion of the U.S. food dollar through their subsidiaries.

In a similar vein, Bill Heffernan (1999) recently identified three “food chain clusters” 1) Cargill/Monsanto, 2) Conagra, and 3) Novartis/ADM that have emerged as dominant political and economic forces in American agriculture. The large-scale, industrial-like farms that produce the bulk commodities that are processed by large food processors are becoming mere cogs in a large agribusiness machine. On the one hand, farmers who produce for the mass market must now rely on the genetically modified seeds and the special fertilizers and pesticides produced by the large multinational input suppliers. On the other hand, their marketing choices are restricted to the small number of large multinational food processors who control most of the market.

Turning Toward Civic Agriculture

While corporate interests are likely to continue to influence the food system in the direction of increased economic globalization, there are options available for communities, groups, and local governments. Last fall, Brother David Andrews (2000), writing in *Catholic Rural Life*, posed the following challenge. "In a country which increasingly takes for granted what we eat, who grew it, how it was grown, how its growth affected the environment and the local community, how it got to us, and how it affects our bodies, it is paramount to raise the questions about our food system and to search for more positive alternatives. (*Catholic Rural Life*, pg) I believe that local governments, community organizations, and even churches have many tools which can be used to effect change and move toward a more civic agriculture. Some of these tools include encouraging local economic development efforts to support community-based food processing activities; fostering land use policies that protect active farm areas from random residential development; enacting and enforcing zoning codes that allocate land into areas of non-farm development, areas of natural preservation, and areas for agricultural production; instituting institutional food acquisition practices that integrate local food production directly into the community; and developing educational programs to increase agricultural literacy among both children and adults including school and community gardens, summer internship programs, and community-farm days. The Catholic Church has always had ties to agriculture and farming. Indeed, many orders, schools, colleges, universities and even parishes have operated their own farms for generations, providing food for themselves and those in nearby communities. And in recent years, church related organizations have provided the moral basis for the movement to a more sustainable agriculture.

As the NCRLC (1996) recently noted in their publication *Religious Congregations on the Land*, "There is a growing consensus today, recovered from our religious traditions, of what is needed in the way of a sacramental worldview and a spirituality sustaining environmental ethic". However, despite a sound moral foundation, the NCRLC noted "What is still lacking are demonstrable examples of how to integrate these practices, especially at the level of the household and local economies. What is needed are viable economic alternatives that can be put into place today in a way that simultaneously produces spiritual, environmental, and community renewal".

Developing and nurturing civic agriculture is one way that the NCRLC challenge can be met. An agricultural development agenda organized around civic agriculture principles can link sustainable agriculture, sustainable communities/economies, and spiritual identity. Already there is evidence of a growing, though as yet unorganized, church-based Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) movement. The Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ in Donaldson, IN; the Heartland Farm and Spirituality Center in Pawnee Rock, KS; the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Kalamazoo, MI; and the Passionist Nuns in Clarks Summit, PA are some of the Catholic communities that have established CSA's on their farms. Other orders and communities have organized farmers' markets. For example, a group of nuns working through Catholic Charities in central New York has operated a bi-weekly farmers' market in Cincinnatus, NY since 1989. And many parishes across the country provide space and assistance for farmers' markets.

Civic agriculture, then, as one aspect of the civic community, becomes 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 community groups, including churches, 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. A turn toward a more civic agriculture is both theoretically and practically possible. Indeed, the seeds have been sown and are taking root throughout the United States. Civic agriculture represents a promising economic alternative that can nurture community businesses, save farms, and preserve farmland by providing consumers with fresh, locally produced agricultural and food products.

National Catholic Rural Life Conference
4625 Beaver Avenue
Des Moines, Iowa 50310-2199
(515) 270-2634
email address: ncrlc@mchsi.com
website: www.ncrlc.com

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Endnotes

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Heffernan, William. 1999. Consolidation in the Food and Agriculture System. Report to the National Farmers Union (http://nfu.org/).

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