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THE FUTURE OF SMALL AND FAMILY FARMERS

It is very hard to write, or even think, sensibly about how the world's farming – and more importantly perhaps its farmers – can develop in a civilised way or even survive, because the confusion is now so great. Individuals who try to live by producing food have become the lowest and poorest section of society in most parts of the world. Correspondingly some individuals and corporations which deal in food and farm inputs have become so rich that they are virtually uncontrollable, even by governments and certainly not by wronged individuals. (What chance Percy Schmeizer against Monsanto?)

The machinations of these powerful global traders have engineered a situation where all the farmers of the world are competing against each other to sell their crops, usually at below the cost of production. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that, contrary to popular economic theory, when a farmer finds his income is not covering his costs, his immediate reaction is to produce more, to bring in more income. Often he is professionally advised to do just this. The result is the over production which is bedevilling the world trade in food. (Obvious examples are, locally, excess dairy production in Europe, and coffee, world wide.)

What we are trying to achieve, what are our goals, nationally and internationally? Possibilities: to keep food production in the control of individuals rather than big business; to have food produced on a human scale, a happy medium between mass production with excessive use of chemicals and machinery on one hand, and excessive hard hand labour on the other (this will be relative according to the state of development of an area); to produce food ethically and sustainably, not exploiting people or environment.

What is preventing us from achieving these goals? As stated above, mainly greed and the ease with which determined individuals can build powerful business empires. Once individuals or corporate groups have accumulated sufficient economic power, they are in a position to ensure the governments do not even attempt to control them. Until some means of controlling them is discovered, the outlook for justice to food producers is poor.

I, personally, feel very strongly that the issue is much confused by the champions of the South – the third world, the undeveloped nations, however described – maintaining that all will be well with poor countries if only they are allowed to sell

their produce to rich countries. We are all in the same boat, albeit at different levels, with our traditional way of life threatened and our opportunity for modest improvement of income **per family** blocked by large enterprises which either undertake the actual food production, or control the market of both inputs and produce.

While some countries are manifestly "least developed" this may be simply because the global entrepreneurs have not yet reached them. In much of the "South", both American and African, big business is now flourishing alongside less flourishing local farmers. If not contained, the rich and powerful will eventually gain control of most of the potentially productive land, putting an end to farming by individual families. The more world trade is opened up or "liberalised", the faster this will happen.

The other force for evil is the fact that subsidies, paid by governments to aid hard pressed farmers, enable the recipients to sell their product at less than cost. Worse than this is subsidising exports directly, or "dumping".

The solution to these two phenomena is simple, if unacceptable to those in power: prohibit export subsidies, and put a ceiling on the amount of subsidy any one farming enterprise may receive. (Just enough cash to bring a farm income up to the local average industrial wage.)

There still remains the problem of how to improve the present chaotic situation, which means changing government policy, to the extent that governments will attempt to control the multinationals.

A new philosophy will have to be accepted: that free trade is **bad**, not good, for world prosperity and that the principle of **food sovereignty** should be the basis of every nation's agricultural economy. It is a simple concept that all nations should be able to grow as much of their own food as is practicable and desirable. If this is accepted, it becomes axiomatic that imports should not be allowed to take the place of home grown, even if they are a little cheaper. Prosperous farmers will help the general prosperity of a nation. But means will have to be found to limit the production (and thus the prosperity) of any one individual.

Nobody wants greater control of individual activity, and some hard thinking will have to be done as to how multinationals (the rich) can be controlled for the benefit of the greater number (the poor) without such a plan being labelled communist. But surely there must be a way. If the powerful organisations which exist to produce aid for poor nations could be lined up behind a plan to curb multinationals and thus benefit family farming throughout the world, some success might be achieved.

Pippa Woods

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