The Status and Future of Local Foods[i]

John Ikerd[ii]

The only certainty about the future is that it will different from the past or present. In the case of food and farming, I believe the future will be very different from the agri-food system of the past 50 to 60 years. That said, the present and future are always rooted in the past. So, to understand the future potential of the local food movement, we must understand how its past has evolved into its present status. Why were local, community-based food systems of the past replaced by today's global, corporate-based food system? Why are so many American consumers seeking something different from the foods being offered by today's food system? The future of local foods depends on the answers to these questions.

Local foods was the most dynamic, if not the fastest growing, sector of the American food system during the early 2000s. However, a slowing, or peaking, in direct sales from farmers to local customers followed the recession of 2008.[1] According to USDA, "local food sales totaled an estimated $6.1 billion in 2012"— less than half of earlier industry projections and a decline in sales over the previous five years.[2] The number of farmers markets increased only 2.5% between 2015 and 2017, after increasing about 8% per year between 1994 and 2015—from 1,755 to nearly 8,476[3]. [4] However, in spite of slow growth in farmers markets, local foods sold directly to consumers rebounded to $9 billion in 2015—an increase of $3 billion or one-third over 2012.[5] So, what do these ups and downs mean? Advocates tend to believe the local food movement is simply going through a natural transition, while critics tend to believe local foods are saturating their small niche market and will be just another passing food fad.

The idea of a local, community-based food system certainly is not new. It's simply an idea that is being reassessed in response to growing public concerns about the current global food system. When I was growing up in south Missouri in the 1940s and early 1950s, our family's food system was essentially local. I would guess close to 90% of our food either came from our farm or was produced and processed within less than 50 miles of our home. There were local canneries, meat packers, and flour mills to supply grocery stores and restaurants with locally grown food products. Over the years, however, the local canneries, meat packers, and flour mills consolidated into the giant agribusiness operations that dominate today's global food system. Supermarkets and fast-food chains replaced the mom-and-pop grocery stores and restaurants.

Today, I doubt there are many communities in the U.S. who get more than 10% of their foods from local sources. The most optimistic estimates place local foods at less than 3% of total food sales. Estimates of the average distance that food travels from production to consumption within the U.S. range from 1200 to 1700 miles. More than 15% of U.S. foods are imported from other countries, while more than 50% of fruits and 20% of vegetables are imported.[6] Exports

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account for more than 20% of total agricultural sales and 30% of U.S. farm income.[7] The local food system of my childhood was transformed into the global food system of today. In fact, most of these changes took place during a 40 year period, between the late 1950s and the late 1990s.

Today, I believe we are in the midst of another such transformation. I believe the local food movement is the leading edge of a change that ultimately will transform the American food system from *industrial/global* to *sustainable/local*. *Organic* foods had been the leading edge of the movement, growing at a rate of 20%-plus per year from the early 1990s until the economic recession of 2008. Organics sales are still growing but seem to have stabilized at increases around 10% per year. The organic food market reached $47 billion in sales in 2016 – representing more than 5% of the total U.S. food market.[8] Organic fruits and vegetables currently claim 14% of their market and 8% of the market for dairy products is now organic.

However, as the market for organic foods grew, organics moved into mainstream, industrial agri-food system. Not trusting the integrity of the industrial food system, many consumers then turned to local farmers to restore confidence in the integrity of their foods. So, the modern local food movement emerged in response to the “industrialization of organics.” To understand the local food movement, it’s important to understand the birth of the modern organic movement.

The organic movement has its roots in the *natural* food movement of the early 1960s, which was a clear rejection of the industrialization of American agriculture. Following World War II, the mechanical and chemical technologies developed to support industrial warfare were adapted to support industrial agriculture. The “back to the earth” people responded by creating their own food system. They produced their own food, bought food from each other, and formed the first cooperative food buying clubs and natural food stores. Concerns about the health and environmental risks associated with the synthetic fertilizers and pesticides were important, but were not the only reasons they chose to grow foods organically. They were creating and nurturing a sense of connectedness and commitment to taking care of each other and caring for the earth. The *philosophy* of organic farming was deeply embedded in their communities. To these food and farming pioneers, organic was as much a way of life as a way to produce food.

Organic farming and food production remained on the fringes of American society until the environmental movement expanded into mainstream society. Scientists then began to confirm the environmental and public health risks associated with a chemically-intensive, industrial agriculture. As organic foods grew in popularity, organics eventually moved into mainstream supermarkets. With USDA organic certification, organic production was consolidated under the control of mainstream food processors and distributors. Except for restrictions on synthetic/non-organic agrochemicals and food additives, organic foods eventually began to seem more and more like conventional industrial foods.

Consumers who were concerned about the larger ecological and societal consequences of industrial agriculture then began looking to local farmers to restore confidence and trust in their foods. Many farmers who use organic production practices no longer bother with organic certification. Their customers know and trust them to produce “good food.” In addition to the rapid growth in farmers markets during the 1990s and 2000s, the 2012 USDA Census of Agriculture estimated the number of CSAs at 12,000 and the number of farmers selling direct to

consumers by all means were estimated at 50,000.[9] The next official estimates of CSAs and farmers selling direct to local customers will be the 2017 Census of Agriculture.

The local food movement is so decentralized and dispersed that it is impossible to accurately estimate the size or importance of the movement—thus, the differences in estimates of local food sales. For example, USDA estimates of local food sales do not include "intermediated sales" to local restaurants, retail markets, or public institutions. As a result, local food advocates claim USDA data "grossly underestimates" the importance of "food hubs" that often provide locally grown foods to local food coops, schools, and public institutions.[10] The *National Good Food Network* lists more than 300 "food hubs"[11] – although I cannot vouch for their success or authenticity. Food hubs are generally defined as organizations that allow farmers to aggregate their individual production to serve markets that are larger than they can serve individually. Some of these food hubs simply aggregate production from multiple local growers to sell to mainstream retailers who want to advertise or feature "locally grown" foods.

Other food hubs are more accurately described as local food *networks* because they link farmers who sell locally with local customers who share their social and ethical values. They may be called food alliances, cooperative, or collaboratives. Local food networks of which I am personally aware include *Grown Locally*,[12] *Idaho's Bounty*,[13] *Viroqua Food Coop*,[14] *Good Natured Family Farms*[15], and *the Oklahoma Food Cooperative*[16]. These networks range in size from a couple dozen to a couple hundred farmers. Virtually everywhere I go, I discover new local foods network initiatives—many of which likely never show up in any data base.

The local food movement also is so diverse that it is difficult to distinguish between those who are committed to ecological and social integrity and those who simply see local foods as another opportunity for profits. Admittedly, the future of the local food movement depends on being able to "scale up" to serve increasing numbers of consumers. However, if farmers compromise their ecological and social integrity in the process of scaling up, they will be little different from industrial farmers who are producing foods that many of their current customers are attempting to avoid.

The most promising organizational structure for scaling up with integrity seems to be some type of "vertical cooperative" organization. The local food cooperative movement in the Twin-Cities area of Minnesota provides just one example of an attempt to bring a network of food cooperatives together with local farmers to create a sustainable local food network. [17] This cooperative network includes farming operations, food processors and related companies, and food distributors and retailers. Local food is sold through both wholesale and direct marketing channels.[iii] The core values of the system include "providing healthy and organic food, supporting family farming and sustainable farming, promoting fair trade, offering good jobs, and advancing cooperative values and enterprise."

[iii] This local food network was built over 40 years and now includes over 300 producers, a cooperatively owned distributor of organic product, and 15 consumer cooperatives operating 17 retail food stores, backed by 91,000 co-op member-owners and an additional 50,000 shoppers. Total retail sales through this cooperative system in 2013 were $179 million, with local product accounting for 30 percent of sales, or around $54 million. Local farm gate income (income flowing to producers) after distributor and retail margins was estimated to be over half of local sales or $30 million.

Success factors described in a 2014 study of the cooperative network include:

- *Shared values:* Shared values focus around healthy food, local food, sustainable farming, and community.
- *Fostered trust:* The cooperative culture provides many formal and informal ways in which members of this system provide support to each other.
- *Resilience*: There is a culture of experimentation and learning at all levels. The system has demonstrated resilience in its ability to learn, reform, and continue to grow.
- The others factors mentioned in the report focused on various means of maintaining *economic resilience.*

Some of the challenges and risks noted in the study include:

- *Price constraints:* Production and distribution of food at a small or mid-scale is often more costly. Communicating the essential cost/price/value relationship to consumers.
- *Values tensions:* There are multiple values in the local food system, most visibly price versus: fair treatment of farmers, employees, healthy, high-quality food.
- Other challenges mentioned in the report focus on maintaining *economic viability*.

These success factors, challenges and risks are characteristic of an agri-food system that is striving to sustain the historical integrity of cooperative organizations. The primary focus of the cooperative form of organization is to foster and sustain positive relations among the member-owners and between the member-owners and their suppliers and non-member customers.

The *Food Commons* is a more recent attempt to evolve beyond the historic principles of cooperative organizations to create a set of guiding principles focused specifically on the ecological, social, and economic sustainability. In 2009, some national leaders in sustainable agriculture and local food businesses formally launched the *Food Commons Fresno* initiative, as the first Food Commons prototype project. [18] Additionally, *Food Commons National* is growing in Atlanta, Georgia and is gaining support in Seattle, Los Angeles, and Boston.

Food Commons Fresno is growing a community food system that is guided by its mission of fostering nutritional health, resource stewardship, social equity, and economic development. The Fresno system includes farm production, processing, distribution, and retail sales in Fresno and the surrounding San Joaquin Valley. Broad-based community participation is a core value of the Food Commons. Food Commons Fresno assets will be stewarded for the benefit of the community by the nonprofit Food Commons Fresno Trust. Business development will be accelerated by collaboration and partnership with existing local food and farming enterprises.

The first stage of development, which in underway, includes 1) farm-to-family local produce box purchased online for pickup or home delivery and 2) A local food hub that aggregates and markets produce from trusted farms to restaurants and institutions. During the second phase, the Food Commons Fresno will launch its first retail market, pursue farmland purchase and expand hub activities to include a commercial kitchen and light processing. Both the food production and distribution hub and the trust fund will be governed by boards that include representation from the agricultural, environmental, and health communities as well as customers and employees. The structure and bylaws of the two entities will ensure that local food

production assets and operations cannot be controlled or bought by those with narrow economic interests.

Through its "Sourcing Philosophy and Procurement Guideline," Food Commons Fresno seeks to create ease in the growing, selling, and consumption of local food. It endorses fresh, local and sustainable food, and create economic opportunity for the region. In alignment with its values and principles, procurement process is guided by the following objectives:

- *Buy local* - We purchase from growers in the San Joaquin Valley. If we need to go farther afield for quantity, quality, or variety of products, we seek the nearest alternative sources.
- *Buy quality* - We seek the tastiest, highest quality seasonal produce and aim to deliver it to our customers at the peak of freshness, usually within 48 hours of harvest.
- *Support diversity, resilience, organic, and sustainability* - We support healthy, diversified agriculture and healthy, diversified eating with a variety of products from a variety of sources. We purchase products grown with sustainable and regenerative practices that nurture the soil, the environment, the community and the workforce.
- *Create economic opportunity for small farmers* - We seek to support the development and scaling of small farmers by purchasing their products at fair and sustainable prices, expanding their markets, and telling their stories to our customers and community.
- *Provide great value to customers* - We seek to provide great value to customers and to make our products affordable for people across the economic spectrum.
- *Be transparent and accountable* - Every purchasing decision involves a balance of multiple, sometimes competing objectives. We seek always to be as open and transparent as possible about our processes, decisions, and products. We welcome input and feedback from all.

These guiding principles of the Food Commons allow farms and food processing and distribution systems to "scale-up" to gain economic efficiencies as long as the gains in efficiencies do not compromise the ecological and social integrity of the system. The Food Commons National is designed to grow by "networking-out" rather than scaling up, with each node or city in the network being guided by a common set of principles which maintain the ecological, social, and economic integrity of the Food Commons agri-food system.

I believe the local foods movement represents an even greater challenge to the industrial status quo than the natural and organic food movements, even though organic obviously is a more meaningful label or descriptor than local. Industrial foods are local to *someone, somewhere*. However, most industrial farmers, meaning conventional commodity producers, know they can't sell all, or even a significant part, of their total production locally. They are simply too large and too specialized. Large commodity producers must sell to industrial processors and distributors, which are also too large to rely on local markets. Large industrial organizations are inherently dependent on, and must compete in, "non-local" markets.

The most frequently mentioned motivations of consumers for buying local foods include freshness, flavor or taste, and nutrition. People have learned that shipped-in foods generally are not as fresh and flavorful, and are probably not as nutritious, as fresh-picked, locally-grown

foods at farmers markets, CSAs, and other local markets.[iv] Many people consider local foods to be safer because they are more likely to be produced organically, or at least without pesticides or GMOs. In the case of meat, milk, or eggs, hormones or antibiotics are more common concerns. Most farmers who sell locally understand the concerns of people who buy local foods and attempt to address concerns that are not being addressed by the industrial food system.

In return, people who buy local foods often mention their desire to support local farmers economically and to help build stronger local economies and communities. Estimates based on comparison of local and industrial food production in general indicate that foods grown for local markets contribute about four-times as many dollars to local economies as commodities grown for industrial food production. That said, the popularity of local foods and the incentives to produce local foods cannot be reduced to economics. "Several studies have found that the social desirability of buying local food plays a central role in influencing consumers to participate in the local food economy."[19] Many local food advocates care about community.

People tend to trust "their local farmers" to not only produce "good food" but also to be good neighbors, good community members, and good stewards of the land. Some experts may question the importance of social, ecological, and *unselfish* economic motives for buying local. However, the fact that local foods clearly emerged in response to the perceived industrialization of organics suggests otherwise. Americans are trying to restore trust and confidence in "their food system" by "buying local." For this reason and others, farmers motivated primarily by profits or economics are unlikely to be successful in local markets. Eventually, their customers will see their foods as little different from industrial foods and will value them accordingly.

Perhaps most important, the local food movement not only represents a rejection of industrial foods but also represents an emerging vision of a fundamentally better food system of the future. I can foresee a time when every community will have its own local, community-based food system. Communities will not be "self-sufficient" in food production, but will give priority to buying local foods from local farmers who give priority to local markets. They will give priority to those farmers who maintain personal relationships with their local customers through personally-connected economic transactions. In order to maintain relationships of trust and integrity, face-to-face contacts at farmers markets, on-farm sales, regular farm visits, or local food festivals will punctuate less-personal economic transactions. The primary objective of such community-based food systems would be to provide local assurance of quality and integrity, rooted in shared social and ethical values.

I believe this vision of a new and better food system is emerging from today's local food networks – alliances, collaboratives, cooperatives, personally-connected food hubs and other innovative relationships. Skeptics may ask: would it actually be possible for a new local, community-based food system to replace our current corporately-controlled industrial food system? When I'm asked this question, my answer consistently has been, *yes*. I am convinced such a change is possible, although I am not so naïve or idealistic as to think that the

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[iv] A summary of studies of motives for buying local foods in provided on page 30 of the report by Sara Low and others, Economic Research Service, USDA, "Trends in U.S. Local and Regional Food Systems: A Report to Congress," January 2015, https://www.ers.usda.gov/webdocs/publications/42805/51173_ap068.pdf?v=42083

transformation will be quick or easy. The defenders of the corporate status quo are economically and politically powerful, but not as powerful as "the will of the people."

Why do I believe it is possible? First, as mentioned previously, I lived through the transition from the local, community-based food system of my youth to the industrial-global food system of today. The major part of that transition occurred within a span of about 40-50 years during the latter 1900s. I believe the new organic/local/sustainable food systems of farming and food production today are further advanced today than the industrial farms and food systems were in the early 1950s. I still remember the steam engine lumbering by my grade school, moving from one threshing location to another. This was early industrial agriculture. I remember my mother handing her "grocery list" to a person behind a counter at our country grocery store who would select the items on the list from shelves, barrels, and the meat case, weigh and package as needed, put the items in a "paper poke," and total up our "grocery bill" for the week. There were no supermarkets. I saw my first fast food restaurant when I went away to college – a McDonalds.

Second, there were far fewer good reasons to change the system of farming and food production back in those times than there are today. The main reason to change farming in the 1950s was to reduce the physical labor and drudgery of farm work and to free up farmers for jobs in the factories and offices of a growing industrial economy. Industrial agriculture was also meant to reduce costs of production, eliminating hunger by making "good food" affordable and accessible to everyone. I spend the first half of my 30 year academic career as an agricultural economist promoting industrial agriculture because I believed it would make life better.

It was a noble experiment but it didn't work. We have more people in the U.S. classified as "food insecure" or hungry than we had back in the 1960s. More than one-sixth of American children live in food-insecure homes.[20] In addition the U.S. is plagued with an epidemic of diet related illnesses, such as obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and a variety of cancers. The industrial food system may have removed much of the drudgery of farming, but it hasn't eliminated hunger or malnutrition. I don't want to belabor the point, but an industrial food system is not sustainable. Sustainability is the ability to meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. Industrial agriculture obviously has failed to meet even the basic food needs of the present—let alone preserve opportunities for the future.

If we have learned anything from the experiment with industrial agriculture, it should be that we can't eliminate hunger by making food cheap. We already produce more than enough food for everyone. It just isn't getting to the people who need it most. We can provide food security by making good, minimally processed, un-packaged, unadvertised, food available locally and helping people learn to select foods for nutrition and health and prepare food for themselves. About 85 cents of each dollar currently spent for foods in the U.S. does not go to pay for the food itself, but for processing, transportation, packaging, advertising, pre-preparation, and retailing. People will find ways to spend quality time with their families preparing food from scratch once they understand the true costs of "quick, convenient, and cheap," industrial foods. Food security will be achieved only by people coming together in their local communities with a common commitment to ensuring enough good food for everyone.[21]

Third, we need not return to the drudgery of farming of the past in order to produce enough food for everyone. New scale-appropriate mechanical and electronic technologies offer new possibilities for ensuring "food security" without degrading the integrity of nature or society and without diminishing opportunities for those of the future. The basic concepts embodied in microcomputers, including laptops, tablets, and smart phones, are equally applicable to small-scale equipment for growing, tilling, harvesting, processing, and preparing healthful, nutritious foods. Scale-appropriate technologies in farming include portable electric fencing, which has revolutionized the possibilities for sustainable small-scale humane, grass-based, and free-range livestock and poultry production. Walk-behind and small pull-behind tilling and harvesting equipment is reducing the drudgery, as well as costs, for small-scale organic, local, and direct marketers of produce and field crops. Sales of "human scale" farming and marketing technologies are approaching the point in popularity where it will be economically attractive for more inventors and small-scale equipment manufacturers – using new technologies.[22]

In my travels, I meet many young people who are choosing "human scale" farming as their way of life. I recently came across a blog piece on the National Young Farmers Coalition website. It began: "You want to be a farmer? [23] That's great news because we need a lot more farmers! But there are some things you should know before diving in:" The author is a young farmer who has been farming with her partner in the Pacific Northwest for more than 10 years. She went on to name five things that anyone who wants to be a farmer should understand: 1. Farming is really, really hard. (Let me stress that one more time….) 2. Farmers are not just farmers (They have to do a lot of other things.) 3. Farming can be dangerous. (You can get hurt farming.) 4. It takes money to make money (particularly to get into farming).

She finished with 5. "It's the best work you'll ever do." She went on to explain: **"**Do you want to feel completely satisfied and fulfilled by your work? Lay your head down at night knowing you are doing something that helps the planet and your fellow humans? There is nothing more satisfying than providing a basic need: food. I love what I do, and wouldn't trade it for anything—sore muscles, financial risks, and all."

It's also possible to make a good economic living on a "human scale" farm. At a recent conference in Toronto, Ontario I met a young farm couple, Jean-Martin Fortier and his wife, Maude-Hélène Desroches.[24] They gross more than $100,000 per acre on a 1 ½ acre market garden with an operating margin of about 60% of gross sales. They have been farming for more than a decade now, and today, Jean-Martin leaves most of the farming to Maude-Helene while he works on an educational farming project to help other young farmers learn how to make a good living pursuing their purpose or calling as farmers**.**

His new farming project, *Ferme des Quatre-Temps*, is designed to further demonstrate how "diversified small-scale farms, using regenerative and economically efficient agricultural practices, can produce a higher nutritional quality of food and more profitable farms."[25] Jean-Martin writes, "If there is one thing I've learned through all my years as a farmer, it's that if we are going to change agriculture, it's going to be one farm at a time. All we need is for more people to be willing to go out there and just do it."

Fourth, and perhaps most important, new digital technologies make it possible to develop and sustain meaningful, "personal" connections among farmers and others who share a common commitment to wholesome, delicious, and nutritious, sustainably-produced foods. Obviously, digital communications can facilitate personal isolation; but email, texting, and tweeting can also help keep close personal friends in even closer personal contact. Digital technologies are already being used to create and sustain local, community-based food networks that give sustainable farmers access to far more local customers than they can stay connected with through farmers markets or CSAs. This process is sometimes called "electronic aggregation."[26]

I believe local community-based food networks of the future will include regular home deliveries – making local foods more convenient and accessible. The business of retailing – including food retailing – is changing fundamentally and rapidly. The total value of Amazon stock recently surpassed the total stock value of Walmart, although Walmart is still far larger in total retail sales. Virtually every major retailer, including food retailers, are scrambling to develop web-based markets. Food home-delivery programs – such as *Blue Apron*[27] and *Hello-Fresh*[28] – may be paving the way for local food systems that at least include a home-delivery option. The recent purchase of *Whole Foods* by *Amazon.com* could signal a coming revolution in food distribution and retailing.[29] Local food networks would seem to have a natural economic advantage in *local* home delivery of *locally grown* foods. Supermarkets and restaurants that are committed to supporting their local communities will likely continue to have a significant role in local food networks of the future. The challenge will be to sustain a common sense of ecological and social integrity that comes from personal relationships of trust and confidence.

My fifth reason for believing a new and better food system is possible is that the local food movement is a part of a much larger movement that eventually will "change everything." One of the 10 major trends in U.S. food retailing identified by Hartman Group, a leader in following food market trends, was that "Health, wellness and sustainability are starting to converge at the most progressive food retail and food service outlets. Consumers see the convergence as being all about mindfulness, integrity and authenticity."[30] The good news is that the transformation in the food system is but a part, although an important part, of a transformation in society as a whole that is about mindfulness, integrity, and authenticity. We are beginning to awaken to a wide range of symptoms of our unsustainable economy within our unsustainable society. As we respond to national and global challenges, such as natural resource depletion, climate change, dying oceans, species extinction, social injustice, and economic inequity we will create the environment for fundamental changes in our systems of farming and food production.

Growing public pressures eventually will bring about changes in public policies, including farm and food policies. Virtually every major farm policy and food policy of the past 50 years has promoted and supported the industrialization of American agriculture and globalization of the American food system. Simply removing government subsidies for industrial agriculture would represent a major step forward. With supportive public policies, the transition from global to local and industrial to sustainable could move from gradual to explosive. Replacing existing farm and food policies with policies supporting local foods and sustainable agriculture could go a long way toward "changing everything" in American food and farming.

This brings me to my final reason for believing a new sustainable future for farming and food production is possible. I believe more people are awakening to the need for the kinds of personal relationships and ethical commitments that are being developed to sustain local community-based food networks. There is a growing realization that the pursuit of material economic self-interest, including the quest for quick, cheap, convenient foods, has not brought us greater satisfaction or happiness but has simply created new problems. We are finally awakening to the fact that we are not only material beings but also social and moral beings.

Certainly we need the economic necessities of life – food, clothing, shelter, health care, – things money can buy. But, we are also social beings and need relationships with other people for reasons that have nothing do with any economic value we may receive in return. We need to care and be cared for, to love and be loved. And, we are ethical and moral beings and need a sense of purpose and meaning in life. We need a sense of what we do matters, that it is right and good. Caring about each other and caring for the earth are not sacrifices but instead give meaning to our lives. What we do or don't do matters. The creation of a new sustainable/local food system for the future, is not just about fueling the human body, it is also about feeding the human heart and soul. I believe the same spiritual awakening that is driving the local food movement eventually will "change everything." In this kind of awakening, there is always hope.

End Notes

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