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## Forum

# Rural Employment and the Quality of Life

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The nature of a person's employment, or lack of it, represents a critical factor influencing the quality of his life. The importance of employment arises not only from the income which work provides for an individual, but also from a variety of other attributes. This paper seeks to draw attention to the broader range of benefits which employment can generate and to consider their significance in the context of some areas of rural policy. After a brief discussion of the non-financial benefits of employment, it is argued that, if current trends continue, the relative importance of these benefits may be expected to increase. This would reduce the relevance of policy studies which ignore these issues and influence the appropriate organization of some forms of economic activity. Part-time employment in the rural sector is highlighted as an area where these trends have already had important effects. The paper concludes with a consideration of the implications for adjustment policy and alternative lifestyles.

## Work and the Quality of Life

Fairly recently, attention has been drawn to the broader aspects of employment. For instance, Sen (1975) has distinguished three different aspects which he has called:

1. *the income aspect*, employment gives an income to the employed;
2. *the production aspect*, employment yields an output; and
3. *the recognition aspect*, employment gives a person the recognition of being engaged in something worthwhile.

Scitovsky (1976) has noted the satisfaction which people get out of their work, especially where they do not have to work according to rules and discipline imposed by others and are free to vary their tasks and routine. Others have drawn attention to the status gained from employment (Hirsch 1977) and to the wider significance of human work (Schumacher 1980). Sen's third category

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might be expanded to account for all of the non-financial benefits which a worker gains from employment. Clearly of course, there may also be non-financial costs. Lloyd (1980) has referred to this aspect of employment as 'psychic income', which may be positive or negative.

It is commonly held that employment in agriculture provides a relatively high level of non-financial benefits. These are inextricably linked with the overall quality of rural lifestyles. Work in the farm sector, in small businesses involving a variety of tasks through the year and using a range of relatively complex pieces of equipment, generally provides many of the attributes associated with work generating a high degree of satisfaction. Evidence of this derives from various sources. Surveys have suggested that farmers place greater importance on their independence and type of work than on achieving a high income, particularly on small farms (Gasson 1973; Kerridge 1978) and that farm operators may prefer to accept low incomes in farming rather than move to higher income jobs elsewhere (Hawkins and Watson 1972). Farmers purchasing land commonly accept a lower rate of return to their capital than could be achieved in other investments, without having any intention of benefiting from capital gains, in order to be able to engage in rural employment. Leisch (reported by Sinden 1978) has estimated that the families which he studied would, on average, require a capital sum of \$49300 to compensate them for being forced to give up their rural way-of-life.

### **The Changing Significance of Non-Financial Aspects of Work**

At relatively low levels of development, emphasis tends to be placed on the income and production aspects of employment. However, in rich societies, where grants are generally provided for those who are unable to achieve incomes from employment, the critical importance of the income aspect of employment is diminished. People no longer starve through a lack of work. Hirsch (1977) has developed the concept of 'positional goods' to illustrate one effect of a general increase in the level of incomes. Positional goods comprise those aspects of goods, services, work position and other social relationships which are either scarce in some absolute or socially imposed sense or subject to congestion through more extensive use. Other goods and services are amenable to continued increases in productivity per unit of labour input. Examples of positional goods, suggested by Hirsch, include jobs which provide relatively high non-financial benefits and exclusive access to scenic property. With rising incomes, even with equal increases in the level of demand for both positional and non-positional goods, because of the former's supply fixity, the prices of positional goods rise faster than those of other goods. Further, Hirsch argues that the demand for positional goods is, in fact, likely to rise faster than demand for other goods, thus emphasizing the effect. Thus, this effect will also tend to increase the relative significance of the non-financial benefits of work.

The future significance of non-financial aspects of work will depend upon the direction of economic change. Prognoses for the future are not good. For instance, Gruen (1981) has commented that "even if we return to the real economic growth rates of earlier years, unemployment will not decline to the levels we were used to in the early seventies—let alone the levels recorded in the immediate post World War II period". It may thus be expected that high

levels of unemployment will continue to be a predominant social issue in at least the medium term. In an economy, then, which 'suffers' from an apparent surplus of workers, the significance of the output which any particular employee produces, or the production aspect, will, at the margin, tend to be low. This is because the work of those without special skills and abilities may be easily reproduced by drawing an extra employee from the pool of unemployed (Hodge 1982).

The outlook for economic growth seems more uncertain. The resource constraints to growth currently appear less fundamental than they did even a year or two ago. In the longer term, there seems to be no reason why economic growth should not continue generally, even though it may not achieve the rates experienced in the post war period before 1970. It is commonly argued (*e.g.*, Windschuttle 1980) that one of the major factors leading to unemployment is the widespread adoption of new technology. However, it must be the case that, as current advances in micro-electronics technology become increasingly applied, the resultant cost savings will be reflected in economic growth. But this is certainly not to say that their benefits will flow on to all people in all places (Coombs 1982). For instance, technological change in agriculture can leave some sectors in society considerably worse off (*e.g.*, Schmitz and Seckler 1970). Whether this is generally the case or not, if the level of unemployment does become set at a higher rate, the traditional system of sharing benefits through the level of earnings will be less successful. Also, if dependence on welfare payments by large numbers of people over long periods of time is seen to be demeaning and depressing, there will be consequent social pressures for alternative systems to be found, such as through subsidized employment schemes.

Thus it is suggested that the future is likely to bring both increased average earnings and higher levels of unemployment than have been experienced in the past forty years. Those who will be in employment and whose incomes rise will increasingly tend to seek improved lifestyles, both within and beyond their working life. For this group then, the non-financial benefits of employment will become more important. The increased level of unemployment will, for society as a whole, tend to reduce the significance, at the margin, of the production aspect of employment. Schemes providing work may be seen increasingly as a means of distributing more evenly and equitably the benefits of economic growth. Thus, the non-financial aspects of employment will also become of more significance for those at the margins of employment and unemployment. For these reasons, in evaluating policies which influence the nature of work and the numbers of jobs available, it will be more important to take into account the non-financial aspects of employment rather than concentrating solely on the value of the output produced. The agricultural sector will not be isolated from these trends, so that this conclusion relates equally to agricultural policy studies.

### **Appropriate Scale and Technology in Agriculture**

If the above trends occur, then it might be expected that they will have some influence on the way in which the agricultural sector is organized. That is to say, on the type of technology which is used. Relatively recently, especially following the work of Schumacher (1973), concern has been expressed that

trends towards larger business organizations, in agriculture as well as in other areas of economic activity, represent a movement away from an 'appropriate' technology (see *e.g.*, Jéquier 1976). This term is based on the idea that the evaluation of technology depends not only on the financial viability of an individual operation, but also more generally on the wider social implications of adopting certain forms of economic activity. In the past, the process of technological change in agriculture has involved a steady progression towards larger scale units and increased capital and energy intensity of production. This pattern of change has involved a movement away from the type of technology regarded as desirable by the advocates of 'appropriate' technology. Without necessarily accepting their value judgments, if technology is evaluated on the basis of narrow economic criteria, *i.e.*, excluding any account of non-financial aspects of employment, that shown to be most 'efficient' will not necessarily be 'appropriate'.

In Western economies, choices of technology, especially in an export dependent industry, are determined primarily through the operation of the market. Individual farmers have the option of accepting lower incomes in order to achieve a more attractive lifestyle and to some extent this is done. However, in practice, the pressures on farmers are overwhelmingly towards the acceptance of readily available and developed technology. They are influenced by their peers, advertising and government to develop along particular lines. The alternatives to this are unclear and uncertain. Little or no research effort has gone into alternative technology and so, not surprisingly, it is not well developed. Because research is directed towards improving the methods which are currently used, the extent to which they appear to be advantageous is exaggerated. Much of the research which is undertaken favours larger units. For instance, developments in mechanization have been directed towards larger and more sophisticated farm machinery which generates greatest benefits on the larger farms. It is not appropriate to smaller units, where shortage of labour is rarely a constraint (Humphries 1980). Because of the competitive nature and structure of the agricultural sector, no one farmer can generate profits large enough to engage in research and development. Consequently, much agricultural research is undertaken in the public sector and farmers have little influence over the directions taken (Barkley 1978). Further, those producers who do wish to improve their quality of life at the expense of their profits and who do not have sufficient capital of their own to enable this, would probably have difficulty in persuading bank managers and others making investment allocation decisions that they would be reliable clients. The criteria by which such decisions are made are not that flexible. Thus, the evidence that other forms of technology are very rarely selected in practice does not demonstrate conclusively that they may not be regarded as preferable by a proportion of farm operators.

It could also be argued that alternative forms of production, providing for a higher level of employment and an improved quality of life, generate external benefits. These would be reflected in a more harmonious and stable society. Further, a reduction in unemployment and the consequent reduced level of transfer payments could allow a lower level of taxation and reduce distortions elsewhere in the economy.

It may be argued then, that the choices of technology made through the market do not necessarily reflect all producers' objectives, because they may either have insufficient information or inadequate capital to be able to make an effective choice and that there are possible external benefits to be gained from a shift towards a smaller scale and more labour intensive technology. These conditions represent possible sources of market failure. They are likely to be of most relevance to the small farm sector, which faces the greatest difficulty in adapting to technological change and where quality of life issues may be of relatively more significance.

### **The Small Farm Sector**

The changing structure of employment in the small farm sector does reflect the trends discussed here, especially in the growth of part-time farming. There are two main types of change: one in the operation of small farms which are unable to generate sufficient income for a full-time operator, and the other an increased involvement in the rural sector of people who already have urban employment.

Changing income levels and technology makes the position of full-time farm operators in the small farm sector increasingly untenable. They are faced with three choices if they wish to increase their income levels. First, they can migrate and seek urban employment. Second, if they have access to land and/or capital, they can increase their scale of operation. Finally, they can retain their farming operation, possibly on a modified basis, and supplement their incomes through off-farm employment. The other movement is essentially in the opposite direction, and is certainly one aspect of the 'population turnaround' which has been much discussed and analysed in the United States and elsewhere (Dillman 1979). Predominantly this is comprised of people seeking benefits of rural lifestyles while retaining their urban sources of income through the purchase of 'hobby farms'. The extent to which this is motivated by the search for an improved quality of life varies considerably. At one extreme urban purchasers of land are simply seeking capital gains and taxation advantages. At the other, their objective is the 'better' things of rural life. Wills (1978) found a predominance of non-financial reasons for part-time farming in a survey around Melbourne. Thus, at least some of those seeking the non-financial benefits of rural employment will be able to find them through their involvement in part-time farming.

These two groups present quite different problems from a policy point of view. On the one hand, those moving into the rural sector are doing so voluntarily, generally with substantial financial backing. The major issue here would be to constrain their actions, or inaction, to prevent significant increases in pest and fire hazards to other local producers. On the other hand, the second group, already in the small farm sector, faces a severely restricted range of options. This issue is considered in the next section.

## Implications for Policy

The major constraints operating over the numbers of people benefiting from employment and lifestyles in the rural sector are the farm size structure and the type of technology applied. However, public policies are unlikely to be established with the sole or even major objective of enhancing the level of non-financial benefits to be gained from agriculture. Even though some might advocate work on the land as having the potential for playing a significant role in solving the national unemployment problem, the view is taken here that there is little scope for any significant changes in the technology applied in commercial agriculture. The effectiveness of labour-saving technology means that a significant movement away from this would render Australian producers uncompetitive in international markets. The viable family farm appears likely to remain the predominant management unit in the foreseeable future (Davis and Musgrave 1981). There is more room for manoeuvre in the context of industries enjoying significant levels of protection. Discussion here focuses on two areas, namely agricultural adjustment and alternative lifestyle agriculture where an increasing importance of the non-financial benefits of employment could influence the direction of policy-making.

### (i) Agricultural Adjustment and Policy

The pressures of the market which encourage the adoption of certain forms of technology can leave those who do not or cannot change, in a steadily declining situation. The main emphasis of adjustment policy is to allow marginal producers to improve their situation by providing added incentives for them, either to leave the industry, or for those remaining, to raise their income levels by increasing the scale of their agricultural operation. Musgrave (1982) has commented that "in the final analysis, labour shedding and farm reorganization should be regarded as desirable". The emphasis of policy is on the withdrawal of resources from the rural sector. Thus it is assumed that there are gains to be made in terms of the efficiency of the agricultural sector and in the reduction in the numbers living on low incomes.

The efficiency gains of adjustment are generally expected to arise from large units achieving economies of scale in production. However, the studies which have been undertaken commonly only identify economies for small to medium scale farms, and it has been suggested that the evidence here should be interpreted cautiously (Anderson and Powell 1973). Vlastuin *et al.* (1982) fitted a production function on data from the New South Wales wheat-sheep zone. When the relatively fixed inputs of operator and family labour were excluded, the sample exhibited constant returns to scale with a flat cost curve. When these were included, the cost curve was found to decline for small farm sizes, indicating that potential savings are in terms of labour rather than in the use of other inputs.

One of the major obstacles to farm adjustment is the problem of finding alternative employment (Kennedy 1977) both for the farmer and for his family. The possibilities which do exist often involve a move away from the farmer's present location. This may be interpreted as indicating that the opportunity cost of farm labour tends to be low. In times of high unemployment, where there are social benefits to be gained from bringing people into the workforce, the social opportunity cost of farm labour could conceivably be negative.

Where, then, are the efficiency benefits to be gained from agricultural adjustment? If it is the case that non-labour inputs are used equally efficiently across all farm sizes and that labour has a very low opportunity cost, then it is not at all clear. However, the adjustment process does involve costs both in terms of a reduction in the farm family's quality of life and in terms of the disruption involved. The reluctance of many farmers to move from their properties is in some degree a reflection of this. Further, the process of farm amalgamation reduces the capacity of the rural sector to provide the positional goods of rural employment and rural lifestyles. If the significance of the non-financial benefits of employment rises through time, then the potential losses due to adjustment will increase. Finally, the loss of farm population forces adjustments on the non-farm rural community (Salmon and Weston 1974; Jensen 1977). These problems will be exacerbated by a policy encouraging the movement of labour from farms.

This is not to say that all small farms are a 'good thing'. Many farmers find themselves trapped on farms with unacceptably low incomes and few, if any, alternatives. The problem would appear to a large extent to be one of welfare. However, if there are gains to be made in efficiency, they will not necessarily be achieved by persuading resources to move out of agriculture. There are potential benefits to be gained from a retention of the farm population.

Policy approaches should thus adopt a broader view of the adjustment problem. Greater consideration could be given to raising the incomes of small farmers while they remain on their properties. For instance, the provision of off-farm employment, would enable farmers to retain the benefits from their rural lifestyles and at the same time to achieve a reasonable level of income. Similarly, efforts could be made to reduce the land area which is required to generate an acceptable level of income, such as through the organization of co-operation between farmers or the encouragement of new, more intensive enterprises, possibly in conjunction with the establishment of primary product processing operations. Also, research could be directed towards the development of technology which is appropriate for use on small and part-time farms (Madden and Tischbein 1979).

This modified attitude to rural adjustment implies a regional view of the problem. It would be appropriate to adopt different approaches to adjustment in different areas. For instance, regions with potential for providing off-farm employment, in such enterprises as tourism, forestry or small scale manufacturing, could seek to develop these options. Other regions may have the potential of developing viable small scale farms through the introduction of new farm enterprises. These options will depend upon the resource base, labour supply and distance from markets. Some regions will not face these opportunities and so the conventional adjustment measures of assisting the movement of resources out of agriculture will represent the appropriate choice. However, this conclusion can only be established through the application of a broader perspective.

## **(ii) Alternative Lifestyle Agriculture**

An apparently growing but unknown number of people are opting out of the conventional economic system of specialization and enforced patterns of work and are choosing alternative lifestyles. These may take a variety of forms in terms of domestic organization and means of support, but in general,



in this context, we are concerned with those people, who to a large degree, seek to be self-sufficient and independent of the conventional economy. Cock (1979) has described the development of the alternative movement in Australia.

The option of public assistance for those wishing to adopt alternative lifestyles has been proposed by a variety of commentators. For instance, Hawke (1979) has commented:

“It seems to me that it would make considerable sense for us to examine whether we could not create a much more constructive relationship between the conventional society and those who would prefer to live in the alternative communities. We are, for instance, almost uniquely blessed with abundant resources of land in congenial environments. Instead of the negative expenditure on unemployment benefits, the conventional society could assist in the provision of land and facilities for alternative communities and so establish a positive and much more creative relationship between the two”.

On the face of it, by narrow economic criteria, there would seem to be little justification for subsidizing those seeking to become self-sufficient. A financial evaluation of the proposal might take the price of land as a measure of the present value of lost farm production and the average wage level as a measure of the lost labour resources. There would be little or no output to be marketed.

But these measures of cost do not reflect opportunity costs and the benefits from this particular form of land use are not reflected in marketed output. A social evaluation would follow similar lines to those applied to employment schemes more generally (Hodge and Whitby 1981). In fact, the price of land would quite substantially overestimate its opportunity cost, for a variety of reasons. Land prices embody a number of elements such as the anticipated value as a means of achieving capital gains, in terms of the privileged position which primary producers can achieve for taxation purposes, and in the amenity benefits which land provides for its owners. None of these elements reflect real resource losses which would result from taking land out of conventional agriculture, but rather concern distributional questions. The resource cost would be appropriately measured in terms of any net change in the contribution which that area of land makes to total production, and this could be very small (or even negative) if the land is used intensively by those seeking to become self-sufficient. Similarly, in the context of labour, a measure of average wage is not generally accepted as a measure of the opportunity cost of labour in times of relatively high unemployment. The opportunity cost of the labour of those seeking alternative lifestyles could be rather low. In that they have elected to drop out of conventional employment, they would probably include a high proportion of those who would not, either through choice or lack of opportunity, otherwise be engaged in productive employment. However, a low opportunity cost of labour is not dependent upon those particular individuals being alternatively unemployed. Under conditions of involuntary unemployment, the adjustments subsequent to the withdrawal of one group of people from the workforce are likely to lead to a reduction in the level of unemployment elsewhere (Hodge 1982).

The benefits would be hard to measure, but it might be anticipated that the non-financial benefits accruing to people successfully pursuing an alternative lifestyle would be higher than those benefiting from the conventional land use. In that these benefits could not alternatively be provided by conventional market-based production processes, the encouragement of alternative lifestyles may be more effective as a means of reducing unemployment than job creation schemes producing conventional products. In the latter schemes, output produced is, to some extent, likely to replace output produced by other firms supplying this market, and therefore to promote a displacement of labour employed in these other firms (see Haveman 1980 for a discussion of these issues). Finally, as already noted, there are external benefits to be gained by providing people with a more satisfying lifestyle and making the rest of society more stable as a result. It might be argued that the particular individuals who would be involved in this type of scheme would not otherwise fit easily into conventional society.

Clearly the administrative problems in a scheme to assist the establishment of alternative communities would be substantial. They would involve the need to obtain and allocate land, select suitable people and, perhaps above all, to avoid the creation of backward, poverty stricken communities which are unable to be self-sufficient and which end up being permanently supported through welfare payments. A study of the fiscal impacts of back-to-land households in the United States found that while they paid fewer costs of public services, they also received fewer benefits (Marousek 1978). Similar studies could be undertaken in Australia. Currently, it appears that a number of individuals engaging in such lifestyles obtain support for this by claiming dole payments. This is not the intended use for these funds and their use in this way commonly causes bad feelings within the rest of the community. A scheme whereby funds were made available specifically for this type of use, subject to clearly defined and well-enforced limits, might also assist in the stricter policing of dole payments and perhaps help to reduce the stigma attached to them.

Clearly a number of issues need to be resolved, but the point is that the resource costs of such a scheme would be significantly less than might appear at first sight and that, if events do develop as anticipated earlier, the costs could tend to fall and the potential benefits increase.

## Conclusions

The importance of recognizing the direct contribution which employment makes to welfare has recently been emphasized, at least in part as a reaction to the continued growth in incomes. The significance of employment *per se* has also received emphasis in the context of higher levels of unemployment. A future which brings both higher average incomes and high unemployment will reinforce the relevance of these issues. It will be increasingly unrealistic for analyses to treat labour as simply another factor of production.

Agriculture has commonly been regarded as a sector in which employment can provide a high quality of life. The commercial agricultural sector, however, is most unlikely to be one which could absorb any significant increase in the numbers employed. The direction of technological change in agriculture and

the emphasis in research and extension has consistently been towards a larger-scale, and the substitution of capital for labour. However, in spite of these factors, there has been a dramatic growth in part-time farming as well as increased interest in alternative lifestyle agriculture. It is argued that these trends represent responses to the changing relative importance placed on the attributes of employment, and in particular the increasing concern for the non-financial aspects.

However, while there is little or no evidence that small farms in general are 'inefficient', policy has continued to encourage individuals and farms out of the small farm sector and to ignore the issue of alternative lifestyles. The small farm sector is relatively unimportant in terms of its contribution to food production and yet it can, and does, make a contribution to the quality of life of many of those involved in it. Some people in this sector do, of course, suffer from low incomes and face extremely limited choices. This is primarily a welfare problem. Approaches to expanding and sharing the non-financial benefits of rural employment should be examined. These could include the encouragement of off-farm employment, examination of the potential for raising the incomes generated by small farms and development of appropriate technology for use on small, part-time farms. More detailed examinations of alternative lifestyle occupations could demonstrate the real resource costs and benefits of these activities and explore the potential forms of organization.

A variety of justifications may be made for public sector involvement in this area: reduced poverty, increased efficiency in the agricultural sector, reduced unemployment and an improved quality of life. These both include and add to those associated with the current Rural Adjustment Scheme. A number of types of involvement have been suggested here. The benefits from these actions would be reflected mainly in terms of an improved quality of life in rural areas. As such, the gains are not exclusively, or even primarily in terms of increased efficiency in agriculture and so, presumably, the funds for this type of public involvement should not be provided primarily through budgets intended for agricultural development. In that the benefits will reduce the need for welfare payments, funds should also be made available from welfare sources. Similarly, there will be increased decentralization, so that funds identified for this objective could also be directed to these ends. The scope and funding for influencing rural change needs to be viewed in a broader perspective than has commonly been the case in the past.

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