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Crisis on the family farm: ethics or economics?

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Ambassadors to nature: rurality, sustainability, and the resource of small farms

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RURALITY, SOCIETY, AND THE SMALL FARM

"The teaching of a culture is its environment, and agriculture is its classroom" (De Schlippe, 1956).

The continued existence of the small farm has been threatened by two factors. First, by reform of the CAP and the increasing pressure for competitive agriculture, and, second, by criticism of the terms 'rural' and 'rurality'. Cloke (1987), for example, sees the designation 'rural' as, at best, a symptom of social and economic change, but certainly not a cause, while Hoggart (1990) suggests we "do away with 'rural'" altogether, because it is obfuscatory. In the absence of any cohesive theory about the nature and purpose of the 'rural' category, it is not surprising that more immediate economic imperatives have left national government, local government and planning authorities employing an essentially urban set of development criteria for what might otherwise be termed 'rural' areas.

However, as Mormont (1987) suggested, there may be a legitimate dimension to society as a whole which could be termed 'rural', and which is realised in the relationship of society with the countryside. Its removal from our categorisation of our experiences of the world could be a short-sighted and potentially harmful proposition. Should rural development really be defined in 'urban' terms, wherein 'rural' becomes 'disadvantaged' or 'non-competitive' (ie a term which really only captures the spatial element of the subject)? The argument of this paper is that 'sustainability', as an objective in development, provides an opportunity to rediscover the term and idea of 'rurality' and, as such, the value of small farms in 'rural development'.

In terms of political economic theory, it is difficult to distinguish rural from urban development and justify either term. However, the practice of farming has been recognised as situated just beyond the reach of the capital process due to "organic nature, land and space" (Goodman & Redclift, 1986).

Depending upon the circumstances and particular conditions of these three features, subsumption of agriculture has been inhibited, and the rural producer relied upon to coordinate or manage the integration of technology, land and nature in production. This is perhaps most true in those regions where small farms predominate. Their existence belies difficult conditions in land and nature under which capitalisation is restricted.

Friedmann (1986) pointed out that, in fact, any industrial activity employs nature and works in space, and indeed depends upon types of skilled labour. However, it is important to note that it is not a discrete resource that is implied in agriculture, but a resource system. What distinguishes agriculture, whether producing food, energy or leisure, is its involvement with a biophysical system, comprised of nested and differentially responsive subsystems, ranging from soil bacteria to local microclimates. Interactive, yet separately governed, these subsystems cumulatively define a varying and larger dynamic in which agricultural production eventually takes place.

In economic terms, it might be assumed that human techniques, technology and know-how are sufficient for satisfying the (agricultural) development process. However, as Glaeser (1984) pointed out, though, 'technique' includes a method (or system), externally supplied by the capital process, and the knowledge related to the application of that method. The involvement of biophysical systems obliges a flexibility in the use of a technique which allows it to be more responsive to changes in local conditions over space and time. This local translation is more dependent upon an internally supplied knowledge component and is the resource upon which sustainable 'adaptive management' might be built. Such an adaptive management approach combines both economic/technical and ecological/cultural elements (Batie, 1992).

DIVERSIFYING THE ROLE OF SMALL FARMS

Small farms are, typically, the least endowed with development alternatives. They lack not only the economies of scale for competition in conventional markets, but also the capital and time necessary to diversify. As such it is not surprising to find few have taken up the call to explore new enterprises. In Northern Ireland, for example, a recent survey by the *Changing Farm Economies Project* (part of the *Joint Agriculture and Environment Programme*) revealed that only 6% of all farms had an alternative enterprise. In the rest of the UK percentages

are higher, but alternative enterprises tend to be associated with larger farm business sizes (Dalton & Wilson, 1989; McInerney *et al*, 1989). Whilst there was no apparent association of this kind in the Northern Ireland survey, many enterprises were no more than long-standing sidelines: service or repair businesses utilising existing resources.

A look ahead at the attitudes to 'risk', in starting a new enterprise shows that this situation is unlikely to change. Again only 6% of respondents in the above Northern Ireland survey expressed any significant intent to diversify. However, age, and its association with a short education (many farmers over the age of 55 having left school at primary level), explains some of the problem; over 50% of farmers in the survey were over 55. Elsewhere, the survey suggests that, beneath the daunting practical problems of diversification, there is a receptivity to, and even a demand for, the facility to change. Over 60% of farmers below 55 were interested in training for new or additional skills. Likewise 60-70% also showed an active interest in information about alternative enterprises. Furthermore, nearly 70% were interested in joining a cooperative as a means to improve the circumstances for diversification and marketing, and felt cooperation between farmers was important.

I mention this latter point for two reasons. First, these positive attitudes to cooperation were significantly associated with attitudes toward risk, information about diversification and, in particular, toward training. Indeed, the variables used to gauge these attitudes cluster in factor analysis. Second, this association suggests a clue to an alternative view of farm diversification within a rural development framework.

DIVERSIFICATION THROUGH 'COMMON POOL' ADAPTIVE MANAGEMENT

Whilst cooperatives themselves have a chequered history, not least in Northern Ireland, the cooperation or coordination of activities between individual farmers may provide a key management approach to an area diversification programme. A number of strands of thought lead in this direction, including the above statistics. Dalton & Wilson (1989), for example, pointed to the advantages of an area approach to diversification, building a synergy through the coordination of individual farm enterprise developments. Many possible avenues for diversification, such as forestry, landscape and wildlife development, or integrated agriculture and ecology programmes, go beyond individual farm boundaries and strongly imply a coordinated management. Such an approach can minimise the extent to which individual farms must accept the costs of risk, capital and time.

Ostrum (1990) showed how management of a 'common pool resource' can be organised at local level for individual economic

returns. Batie (1992) echoed this in outlining the concept of 'adaptive management'. Both authors point to the 'trial and error', monitoring and feedback requirements of managing natural resources sustainably. This feedback, and the associated re-design, is a resource which could be provided by local actors, such that knowledge of local ecological and social systems is built into the development process. In my own work, I argue that this is a vital means to overcome the 'time, space, and detail' problem of information flow and management by external agencies. O'Riordan (1983) referred to this resource in calling for guidance from locally based rural resource management liaison panels, to overcome the lack of understanding about relationships between local socioeconomics, land management and the ecology, which hinder an approach toward sustainable utilisation.

Ecology and 'environment' have become part of the concept of development, along with social and cultural concerns. Todaro (1988) included changes in popular attitudes and institutions in his definition of the term, while the European Commission's (1988) communication, *The future of rural society*, points to its role in providing wider society with "new forms of production and consumption and maintaining an ecological equilibrium". Small farms are at once the victims of, and yet to some extent the escapees from, the processes of political economic development. They are found thus at a time when 'sustainability' and sustainable development are an increasingly important issue yet to be realised. As a source of the 'rural' in rural development, and as such, in helping to realise a wider definition of development for society as a whole, small farms should not be allowed to disappear.

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