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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

# Crisis on the family farm: ethics or economics?

Edited by S P Carruthers & F A Miller

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## Local produce for health

**Robert Hart**

Some months ago, the Government announced that it was launching a campaign to improve the nation's health. It is impossible to overestimate the seriousness of the national health problem, in terms of human suffering, lost production and expense. The present cost of the National Health Service is £100 million a day, and there is continual pressure from many quarters for further funds to be spent on vital projects.

What is health, and how is it built up and maintained? The following facts are indisputable:

- (i) 'We are what we eat and drink'. The human body, in all its complexity and sensitivity, is made of the food and beverages that enter our mouths.
- (ii) A basic essential for the efficient working of the human organism is a regular supply of oxygen. We cannot live for more than three minutes without air.
- (iii) The body is a psychosomatic system in which every part is connected to the brain *via* the nerves. That is why stress is recognised to be a major factor in disease.

In view of these facts, it can be concluded that the basic requirements for optimum health are pure, fresh, unadulterated food, water and air, and harmonious living conditions.

The most advanced nutritional opinion postulates that the best diet for positive health is one comprising the widest possible diversity of nutrients derived from natural sources. Therefore, the most effective, constructive and comprehensive approach to improving the nation's health would be a campaign to ensure regular supplies of fresh foods for all, and to improve the environment.

Widespread tree planting must play a major role in such a programme. Trees absorb the greenhouse gases and other pollutants while 'exhaling' oxygen, do much to conserve and beautify the environment, provide shelter, ameliorate the climate, and can be sources of nutritious food.

In view of the above, the main thrust of a national health-building programme should be a drive to revive the nation's agriculture and horticulture, in a framework of numerous shelterbelts, windbreaks, clumps of woodland and other conformations of trees, including the 'forest garden' (see Hart, 1996), and of the supply of a diversity of foods to local markets.

With such an approach, not only would much more fresh food be available for all, but there would be much less need for heavy transport, the fumes from which are a major source of pollution, and, therefore, of respiratory diseases and other forms of illness.

Farms and market gardens of all kinds would be required, but special emphasis should be placed on family enterprises, as they can play a unique role in promoting the nation's health and wellbeing. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the yeomanry were recognised to be the backbone of this nation; and certain Continental nations, notably perhaps France, Germany and Denmark, are still zealous in preserving the rights and prosperity of their smallholders.

For children to grow up in an agricultural environment is a form of education in basic essentials as well as a source of vibrant health. For the development of human health and all-round wholeness, the widest possible diversity of activities and experiences is desirable. Therefore, the mixed farm or market garden would be more appropriate to the new health landscape than the large monocrop enterprise.

A wide diversity of crops should be grown to provide balanced diets for the farm families and local populations. Even in temperate countries, such as Britain, there is enormous scope for breeding new varieties of fruit and vegetables and reviving old ones. Dependence on imports could be greatly reduced, thus improving the nation's balance of payments, if consumers could be introduced to some of the vast diversity of nutritious and delicious fruit and vegetables that can be grown in this country.

Moreover, non-food products could also be included. As in Scandinavia, many of the new farms and market gardens could have forestry components and thus help to reduce the nation's enormous deficit resulting from timber imports. Trees could also be grown for biomass energy and coppice crafts, while flax-growing, which flourished in Wiltshire and Dorset during the Second World War, could be revived.

Britain's two greatest under-used resources are her land and people. Vast areas of barren moorland, prairie and industrial wasteland could

be reclaimed, especially by the planting of hardy trees, which would provide 'nurse conditions' for more tender plants. At the same time, such an 'agricultural-horticultural revolution' would supply skilled and satisfying jobs for many of our unemployed, whose frustrating idleness tends to lead to ill-health.

Self-sufficiency in basic essentials should be a primary aim in every country if the over-riding importance of human health and wellbeing were recognised. Gandhi maintained that a policy on these lines would greatly reduce the risk of war, as one of the main causes of war is competition for natural resources.

Britain and other Western countries should realise that the best way to help the Third World is not by doling out charity and relief, but by getting off their backs, cancelling their debts and reducing our dependence on them for food and other natural resources. This often forces them to use their best land, which ought to be used for feeding their own deprived people, for the growing of cash crops to earn hard currency.

#### REFERENCES

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