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THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER
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The challenge: Making good food accessible

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In a previous column, I made the case that enough wholesome, nutritious, and sustainably produced food is affordable for everyone (Ikerd, 2022). However, the fact that good food is *affordable* for everyone doesn't mean good food is *accessible* to everyone or easy to locate, acquire, and prepare. For many, accessibility is a greater obstacle than affordability, and those who face the greatest challenges of affordability also face the greatest challenges in accessibility.

As I pointed out in my previous column, farmers receive an average of only about 14% or US$1,120 of a typical US$8,000 household food budget. The rest, US$6,880, goes to pay the costs of processing, packaging, transportation, advertising, and other marketing costs (Ikerd, 2022, p. 3). Some of these marketing costs are necessary to transform farm commodities into finished food products and thus cannot be avoided.

Also, prices paid to local farmers may be higher because their costs of production may be higher than costs of industrial production. Sustainable farming is "management intensive," meaning that productivity depends more on farmers'

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*Why an **Economic Pamphleteer?** In his historic pamphlet* Common Sense, *written in 1775–1776, Thomas Paine wrote of the necessity of people to form governments to moderate their individual self-interest. In our government today, the pursuit of economic self-interest reigns supreme. Rural America has been recolonized, economically, by corporate industrial agriculture. I hope my "pamphlets" will help awaken Americans to a new revolution—to create a sustainable agri-food economy, revitalize rural communities, and reclaim our democracy. The collected Economic Pamphleteer columns (2010–2017) are at https://bit.ly/ikerd-collection*

management skills and less on purchased inputs, equipment, and technologies (Ikerd et al., 2021). Unlike industrial farming, the size of sustainable farms cannot be increased by simply investing more capital. The direct costs per unit of production may be less, but it is more difficult to scale up sustainable production. Thus, sustainable farmers often need higher prices to cover higher per-unit costs of labor and management.

Regardless, if fewer meals are eaten away from home and unnecessary marketing costs are avoided by buying more fresh and minimally processed food locally, even households that rely on government food assistance can afford enough good food. Home gardens can reduce the need to buy food and increase the affordability of good food acquired elsewhere.

However, the foods sold by local farmers typically are not as convenient or easy to locate, acquire, or prepare as foods purchased in restaurants and supermarkets. Even raw and minimally processed foods in supermarkets aren't as accessible as highly processed and pre-prepared foods. For example, it may cost anywhere from US$0.75 to US$1.50 to make a loaf of whole-wheat bread from scratch at home. A similar loaf would cost anywhere US$2.50 to US$5.00 in a supermarket or artisan bakery (Stephanie, 2017). However, the potential savings are irrelevant if the consumer doesn't know how to make bread or doesn't have an oven. The raw and minimally processed foods provided by local farmers or supermarkets is not accessible unless consumers have the capability to locate, acquire, and prepare food at home.

Economist Amartya Sen was awarded a 1998 Nobel Prize for his work in welfare economics linking individual capabilities with individual freedoms. Sen referred to "poverty as capability deprivation" (Sen, 1999, p. 87). His work documented that increasing individuals' capabilities increases their abilities to earn incomes, and abilities to earn higher incomes increase opportunities to further expand individual capabilities. However, simply affording opportunities for education and employment, for example, does not ensure access to education and employment. Many people with inadequate incomes are incapable of accessing the opportunities available to them to work or to learn. Individual capabilities depend not only on individual physical and mental abilities, but also on social, familial, and cultural motivation.

First, people must be highly motivated to change their individual food systems. Eating habits are difficult to break and food addictions even more so. Many people will not change their routines for acquiring and preparing foods unless they become convinced their current diet is threatening their health or actually making them sick. While it may be difficult to prove that specific foods are causing specific illnesses, there is little doubt about the link between changes in the typical American diet and increases in the rates of obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and other diet-related illnesses. Parents should be encouraged to ask themselves whether they are willing to risk sentencing their children to lifetimes of chronic illness rather than devote the necessary time and effort to change the family's food system.

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A lack of time is perhaps the most frequent excuse for not seeking out good food from local sources or preparing more meals from scratch at home. A lack of time is also a frequent excuse for not learning to process and prepare raw and minimally processed foods at home. However, a lack of time is actually a lack of the capability and opportunities to make effective use of time. Government programs should treat the time spent acquiring, processing, and preparing nutritious foods at home the same as time spent at work. In fact, the public benefits of time spent acquiring and preparing good food may be greater than that of the time spent earning money. Time spent learning to select and prepare nutritious raw and minimally processed foods should be treated the same as time

spent in job training—and may be even more important.

Home economics courses should be required in public schools to teach both boys and girls to select, process, and prepare nutritious food as well as to select, maintain, and use tools and appliances that empower people to do things for themselves. Affordable kitchen appliances, such as slow cookers, vegetable steamers, air fryers, and toaster ovens, make preparation of most basic meals at home far quicker and easier than in times past. New multicookers combine several different functions in a single appliance. Family mealtimes could be expanded to include food preparation—a time when family members share and practice their food preparation skills. Increasing individual and family capabilities for self-reliance not only reduces living costs, but also increases the self-esteem and earning capacities of family members.

Changes of this nature are currently not possible at state or federal levels, but they could be made within local communities. Government food assistance agencies and the large private food charities have been captured by corporate defenders of the industrial agri-food status quo (Fisher, 2017). They are unwilling or unable to tell the truth about the current food system and thus are unable to motivate fundamental, systemic change. However, people have the capability to change their own local food systems, if they choose to do so. As I have explained in previous columns, public utilities could be used to empower local communities to protect local food systems from the extractive and exploitative pressures of the industrial agri-food system (Ikerd, 2016).

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Increases in individual capabilities lead to increases in incomes, which lead to further increases in capabilities, which lead to further increases in income—in a virtuous spiral upward to nutritional and economic security, beyond the need for government assistance. A virtuous spiral to nutritional security could provide a template for increasing opportunities and capabilities to meet other basic needs for housing, transportation, healthcare, and other essentials for a desirable quality of life. The affordability and accessibility of good food for all could well be a key to ecological, social, and economic sustainability.

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