

# **ORGANIC FARMERS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**A Research Report on the Links Between  
Organic Farmers and Community Sustainability in Southwestern Ontario**

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## Executive Summary

This research report presents the findings of a recent study on organic farmers in southwestern Ontario. In an era fixated on economic growth, public policy promotes an increasingly industrialized form of agriculture that caters to a global export market and bypasses rural communities. In contrast to this locally destructive form of agriculture, the study reveals that organic farmers directly engage with their rural communities and promote rural development by making a wide range of economic, social and environmental contributions. Economically, they contribute to their local communities by directly selling to local businesses as well as family friends, other farmers and a range of customers through farm-gate, farm-store or produce-stand sales and community-supported agriculture projects. They also make a deliberate point of buying from local businesses and fellow farmers. Socially, organic farmers contribute to their local communities by volunteering for community work, belonging to local clubs and organizations, supporting community cultural events and institutions, participating in local roundtables and panels, and engaging with municipal government. Environmentally, they contribute to their local communities by practicing a form of farming that lowers the chemical burden on the surrounding land and water, and builds up the soil. Beyond the farm gate, they follow strict waste management guidelines, belong or donate to groups or associations that promote environmental issues, actively support local environmental initiatives and speak to local groups and political representatives about environmental problems.

These contributions are crucial to rural community sustainability. But they are often neither understood as rural development, nor recognized by policymakers at the local, provincial and national levels of government. In a situation of almost complete policy void, their way of farming, and way of life, have been marginalized and their contributions ignored. It is time for public policy to acknowledge the benefits that organic farmers bring to rural development and to promote the kind of “small-scale on a large scale” contributions that organic farmers clearly make to rural communities.

# ORGANIC FARMERS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

## BACKGROUND

Rural areas have long experienced difficult circumstances, which have been further exacerbated by the impacts of globalization (Sumner 2005). Many who promote rural development have sought to improve these circumstances, but actually compound them because of their approach to development. Confusing development with economic growth, they end up benefitting a local elite or damaging the environment, instead of promoting overall sustainability. Separating growth from development helps us to understand a kind of development that is not growth driven, but community-centered.

### Growth versus Development

#### *The Growth Imperative*

Over the last fifty years, development has been firmly linked to economic growth. Around the world, growth, as development, is promoted by institutions like the World Bank, national and local governments, and chambers of commerce. Anyone opposed to growth is dismissed as being against progress or afraid of change.

This growth imperative has been studied by sociologist Harvey Molotch (1976), who developed the concept of “the growth machine” to describe how communities can be used by elites to transfer public wealth to private control. These elites band together to form what Molotch called a growth-machine coalition to advance their financial interests by promoting an ideology that advocates growth as the key to future happiness, well-being and employment.

At the community level, critical examination of the impacts of economic growth is prevented by a barrage of boosterism and the marginalization of those who oppose the growth imperative. Far from producing future happiness, well-being and employment, Molotch’s (1976) research revealed that growth often ends up benefiting only a small proportion of local residents.

Taking all the evidence together, it is certainly a rather conservative statement to make that under many circumstances growth is a liability financially and in quality of life for the majority of local residents. Under such circumstances, local growth is a transfer of quality of life and wealth from the local general public to a certain segment of the local elite (320).

Over twenty years later, Molotch (1999) added that the growth-machine coalitions erode the capacity to collectively solve problems. Researchers who used Molotch’s growth-machine model also found that it prevents alternatives from gaining legitimacy (Bridger and Harp 1990).

## *The Development Potential*

Molotch's ongoing research shows how economic growth can be a liability, not an asset, in many communities. For this reason, growth needs to be separated from development, so we can understand what development can really mean. Herman E. Daly (1990, 1), former senior economist with the World Bank, differentiates between growth and development when he argues that:

*to grow* means 'to increase naturally in size by the addition of material through assimilation and accretion.' *To develop* means 'to expand or realize the potentialities of - that is, to bring gradually to a fuller, greater, or better state.' In short, growth is quantitative increase in physical scale, while development is qualitative improvement or unfolding of potentialities.

From this perspective, growth is not synonymous with development. Molotch's research makes it clear that while growth occurred in many communities, development did not. At the individual level, there was little or no expansion or realization of potentialities for the majority of people, but just the opposite - a narrowing or elimination of possibilities as their quality of life and wealth were eroded by the actions of the growth-machine coalition. At the community level, public wealth, such as clean water, green spaces and personal security, was degraded or turned over to private control. All in all, happiness, well-being and employment were diminished by the growth imperative. Following Daly's perspective, rural development would look very different from growth-driven change. It would be more in line with Deborah Eade's (1997, 24) understanding that:

Development is about women and men becoming empowered to bring about positive changes in their lives; about personal growth together with public action; about both the process and the outcome of challenging poverty, oppression, and discrimination; and about the realisation of human potential through social and economic justice. Above all, it is about the process of transforming lives, and transforming societies.

Such development is already happening in rural areas, caused, in part, by the rise of organic farming. How do organic farmers contribute to this form of rural development?

## **ORGANIC FARMERS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

A recent study of organic farmers in southwestern Ontario reveals a form of rural development not driven by the growth imperative. The values of this form of rural development are captured by a simple sign on the side of a barn on an organic dairy farm: "Small is beautiful." These values are in direct opposition to the currently fashionable agricultural requirement to "Get big or get out." Agricultural policy has promoted this growth imperative, driving small farmers off the land, which is then amalgamated into large industrial operations. The predictable results can be seen in places like North Dakota, "where vast tracts of corporate farmland lay undisturbed by

farms or communities” (Qualman 2000, 3). In Manitoba, Clayton Bailey (2002, 22) wonders where all the people have gone: “The roads have been ploughed up. This means this field beside me may be four miles square - 10,000 acres.” Bailey goes on to observe that:

I look at this field. Its harvested food will belong to no one I can see. No one from this municipality, this province, or even this country. It is pre-sold on the futures market; the abstract chimera of a transnational will own this future food, and the food from all those fields I have driven past (22).

By any stretch of the imagination, this industrial form of agriculture is not rural development, although it does conform to the growth imperative. It does not enhance the potential of residents in the area, and does not improve individual and collective well-being. On the contrary, in her comprehensive study of 50 years of research on industrial farming, rural sociologist Linda Lobao (2000, 1) concluded that “the bulk of evidence indicates that public concern about the detrimental community impacts of industrialized farming is warranted.”

Organic farming, on the other hand, does have the potential to improve the well-being of rural residents. A recent study of organic farmers reveals a variety of forms of rural development that organic farmers initiate, participate in and support. In the winter of 2003, forty-one organic farmers in southwestern Ontario were systematically selected from a list and contacted. They participated in informal interviews in their homes, each of which lasted from one to three hours. Guided by an understanding of rural development that was not growth-driven, the questions focussed on their daily activities beyond the farm gate. Their responses, in conjunction with interviews with a number of key people in the organic movement and close observation at a variety of organic events, provide a rich data base from which to judge their preference for either the growth imperative or the development potential. In contrast to the current growth imperative in agriculture, the evidence clearly indicates that small-scale contributions of organic farmers can add up to large-scale development potential for rural communities.

## **THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF ORGANIC FARMERS TO RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

The results of this research indicate that organic farmers engage in a wide range of contributions to rural development, which are not driven by the growth imperative, but can contribute to individual and collective well-being. These contributions can be divided into economic, social and environmental categories.

### **Economic Contributions**

Organic farmers contribute to rural economic development in terms of both supply and demand. On the one hand, they engage in many small business ventures. The study reveals that over half (56%) are involved in direct sales to local businesses, while approximately one-quarter of the respondents engage in farm-gate, farm-store or produce-stand sales (27%), sales to family, friends and local farmers (26%), or run a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project

(21%). In addition, 14% sell their produce at farmers' markets.

On the other hand, almost all of the organic farmers interviewed (93%) make a point of purchasing both farm supplies and household needs as locally as possible. They patronize local feed mills, shop at nearby supermarkets, buy from regional organic suppliers and spend money at local health-food stores. In this way, they contribute not only to their own financial stability, but to the financial stability of their rural communities.

## **Social Contributions**

The social contributions of organic farmers can be subdivided into four categories: social, cultural, political and human development.

### ***1. Social Development***

Organic farmers contribute to rural social development in a variety of ways. More than three quarters of the farmers interviewed (76%) volunteer in their rural community. They help at local churches, schools and community events. Seventy percent of them belong to a local club or organization, such as the Lion's Club, the choir or the Women's Institute. And more than two-thirds (69%) of them engage in acts of neighbourliness.

Organic farmers also carry out the important community-development function of networking. They not only build networks among themselves, but also with their communities through CSA programs, farm-gate sales and booths at farmers' markets.

Organic farmers build social trust on a number of levels, a critical component of sustainable communities. First, they build trust among themselves through sharing, learning together and socializing. Second, they build trust among neighbours through acts of neighbourliness (lending machinery, clearing snow and helping in times of disaster). Finally, they build trust with the public through their very existence. Consumers seek them out because of their way of farming. Repeat farm-gate customers do not seem to care whether organic farmers are certified or not - it is enough for them to know the farmer, observe their farming practices and share their concerns about environmental and human health.

### ***2. Cultural Development***

Culturally, organic farmers contribute to rural development by participating in the cultural life of their communities. More than three-quarters of the organic farmers interviewed actively support local cultural events and institutions. They attend fall fairs, watch school plays and recitals, participate in church-led projects and help their neighbours. All of these activities build and reinforce the cultural life of rural communities.

Organic farmers also contribute to maintaining the image of the rural countryside. According to

Joan Iverson Nassauer (2002, 49), the popular image of the countryside is a visual metaphor for human life in harmony with nature:

You know this image: A mix of crops weaves a varied field pattern. Livestock graze on the land. Woodlands and streams make sinuous borders along the fields. Tidy farmsteads dot the landscape. There are fish in the pond, birds in the sky, and wildlife in the woods. The air is clean. There is a small town nearby with a school, stores, and churches. You might not live in this landscape, but you would like to visit it, and when you did, you could stop and enjoy a friendly talk with the farmer and buy fresh produce you couldn't find in the city.

While this image can be dismissed as just part of rural myth-making, it still has merit. For Nassauer, it is “an intentional way to achieve popular support for serious ends: ecological health, agricultural production, and quality of life” (57). It is no accident that popular images of the rural countryside do not include pesticide sprayers, suburban development, intensive livestock operations or E-coli in the drinking water. Rather than dismissing popular images as false constructions, we can use them to raise questions, promote change and encourage a closer connection between image and reality.

Organic farmers help to contribute to rural development by closing the gap between image and reality. Their farms are family owned and often small. Their farming practices strive for biodiversity, include livestock, protect woodlands, streams and wildlife, support local towns and encourage visitors. Their organic philosophy allows them to revive a dying rural heritage and showcase it as a vital contribution to the cultural life of rural areas. They are, in essence, living examples of the popular image of the countryside.

### ***3. Political Development***

Politically, organic farmers are active in a number of ways in their communities. Seventy-one percent of the respondents had engaged with their local government regarding community issues, such as farm, land-use, severance and road issues, intensive livestock operations, and school and healthcare concerns. In addition, 61% of the respondents had participated in local roundtables and panels. It is interesting to note that only 29% of them had taken part in local elections (other than voting). Organic farmers also work on local committees to develop stewardship plans and speak at council meetings to promote environmental bylaws.

### ***4. Human Development***

Organic farmers are also active in the area of human development. For example, they are often involved in apprenticeship programs to train young organic farmers. Both CRAFT (Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training) and WWOOF (World-Wide Orientation to Organic Farms) offer internships on organic farms. In addition, organic farmers are involved in learning organizations, such as the Ecological Farmers' Association of Ontario. These

organizations sponsor kitchen-table meetings - informal teaching and learning sessions that are open to anyone interested in organic farming - and host farm tours, which offer direct engagement with organic farming issues. Operating from a grass-roots democracy, these organizations offer participants opportunities to speak, participate, mentor, lead and educate.

The organic farming movement as a whole provides spaces for the advancement of rural women. Women hold many executive positions in organic farming organizations not only at the local level, but also at provincial, national and international levels. Statistics Canada's Census of Agriculture posed questions about organic agriculture for the first time in 2001 and found that almost one-third of the organic farm operators in Canada were women.

### **Environmental Contributions**

Organic farmers contribute to rural environmental development in a number of ways. Organic farmers, by definition, do not use synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, thus lowering the chemical burden on the land and water. Protecting the environment is the primary motivating focus of their farming practice, backed by an ethic of leaving the land better than when they acquired it, thus building the common-wealth for everyone. They care for the soil like a living being and enhance it by such farming methods as composting, crop covers and crop rotation. Many organic farmers see themselves as stewards of the land, and actively promote biodiversity by planting trees, eliminating synthetic chemicals, encouraging animal corridors and avoiding monocultures.

The farmers in this study also took their environmental ethic beyond the farm gate when virtually all of them strictly followed guidelines on waste management (100%) and soil management (98%), and belonged to or supported a group or association that promoted environmental issues (93%). The majority sold their produce locally (88%), rather than add food miles to their products, actively supported local environmental initiatives (79%), and spoke about environmental issues to local community groups (69%) and their political representatives (55%).

Overall, organic farmers contribute to rural development in a multitude of ways. Economically, socially and environmentally, they engage at the local level by active choice. Their contributions help to build the development potential in rural communities, not the growth-machine coalition that can often decrease or destroy individual and collective well-being.

### **CONCLUSION**

Small is beautiful is an idea developed by E.E. Schumacher (1979). In his book of the same name, he challenged the growth imperative and advocated a simpler, smaller-scaled way of life. Helena Norberg-Hodge (2002, 63-64) promotes this vision when she discusses the global monoculture:

Efforts to rein in the runaway global economy need to be international - linking grassroots social and environmental movements from North and South in order to pressure

governments to take back the power that has been handed over to corporations. But long-term solutions to today's social and environmental problems will also require a range of small, local initiatives that are as diverse as the cultures and environments in which they take place. Promoting "small-scale on a large scale" would allow specific, on-the-ground initiatives to flourish - community supported agriculture (CSAs), community banks, local currencies and trading systems, rediscovered traditional knowledge and more. These small-scale steps require a slow pace and a deep and intimate understanding of local contexts and will best be designed and implemented by local people themselves. Over time, such initiatives would inevitably foster a return to cultural and biological diversity and long-term sustainability.

Organic farmers in southwestern Ontario are implementing Norberg-Hodge's suggestion for long-term solutions by promoting small-scale on a large scale. Their on-the-ground initiatives include starting CSAs, opening farm stores, resurrecting traditional farming knowledge, joining co-operatives, engaging in barter and actively participating in a social movement that links men and women, rural and urban, North and South.

In Canada, however, the rural development initiatives of organic farmers take place in a policy void. Generally speaking, government policy promotes high-input industrial agriculture that specializes in exports, and has a long-standing commitment to move farmers off the land to facilitate the expansion of large, corporate farms (Epp, 2002). In terms of organic farming, sociologists Alan Hall and Veronika Mogyorody (2002) describe how the federal and Ontario governments did virtually nothing until the late 1990s. Both agribusiness, especially the powerful agrichemical industry, and the state have marginalized organic farming, with agribusiness in particular working to render organic farming as invisible as possible. The influence of the agrichemical industry and other corporate farm lobbies is so great that government definitions of sustainable agriculture do not include organic farming. Even now, federal government policy statements and funding programs remain focused on sustaining the farmers' commitment to corporate agriculture rather than encouraging a major shift to organic farming. Hall and Mogyorody conclude that, from a policy perspective, it is as if organic farming did not exist.

And yet it is clear that industrial farming does little in terms of rural development and actually causes a great deal of harm. In a book called *The Fatal Harvest Reader: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture*, Debi Barker (2002, 250), deputy director of the International Forum on Globalization (IFG), lists seven main problems associated with industrial agriculture:

1. Local, self-reliant food systems that provide food and livelihoods for millions and a secure food supply are replaced by corporate, often foreign, control over farm inputs, energy, crop commodity prices, food production, and food marketing.
2. Biodiversity - of micro-organisms, plants, insects, and animals - is replaced by monoculture.
3. Pollution caused by industrial agriculture's use of pesticides and chemicals increases on a planetary scale, destroying soil, water, and air and causing harm to wildlife and humans.

4. The import/export-driven model of globalization requires a huge increase in transport infrastructures, often constructed at the expense of nature.
5. The massive movement of agricultural commodities requires additional fuel usage, packaging, etc., and fosters exotic species invasion, and the spread of viruses, bacteria, and disease.
6. Control over and access to essential elements of life - the commons - are being stripped away from local communities and given over to corporations.
7. Genetically modified organisms and plants further destroy biodiversity and bring unknown, potentially catastrophic danger in the form of biopollution.

While this form of agriculture promotes growth that benefits transnational corporations, it does not contribute to development in the sense of improving individual and collective well-being in rural areas. Given the development deficits caused by industrial agriculture, it is time that government policy reflected the positive impacts on rural development that organic farming provides. Instead of supporting an industrial form of agriculture that undermines both ecological and human communities, it should champion organic farming as a tool of rural development and a vehicle for the betterment of rural life.

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