

## New Social Forms for the Farms of the Future

*(This article is based on presentations given by the author in Maryland and Vermont)*

Today we generally speak of two social forms in agriculture: the family farm and the corporate farm. The family farm is obviously in decline, but is still the "holy cow" of the agricultural discussion. In corporate farming the sole motivation of the farming activity is to make profit for the shareholders. By clear and correct definition we do not speak here of farming, but of animal and plant production. The profit is not intended for the people who do the work on the farm, but instead is for the asset holders. The family farm is supposed to work out of the same motivation, but often traditional values are part of the operation. Economically the family farm is inferior to the corporate farm business. This can clearly be seen in the fact that hog, chicken, and turkey productions have been separated from the fields that grow their feeds and have largely left the family farm. Huge animal factories have been built up with detrimental consequences for the environment and the food quality. The profit made in these cases by the shareholders comes with an enormous loss for the whole population.

I am excited about an excellent article by Tod Murphy in the *NOFA Notes* in which the author tried to come to a characterization of farming that goes beyond the traditional family farm and the industrial corporate farm, although it also includes many family farms. The reason one may describe the farm in a new way lies in the fact that more and more farms within the organic movement are run by unrelated independent individuals – a married couple is such a partnership of unrelated individuals – and not by traditional multi-generational families. These new farms are striving or already have developed new social forms of co-operation.

We can describe such farms in the following way:

1. A farm is an agricultural enterprise where individuals join together to care on a long term basis for a certain piece of land in such a way that it produces a sufficient amount of food for the local population without diminishing the fertility of the soil and with only minimal use of energy and substances from outside its borders.

And its economic goal is not profit but:

2. The economic viability of the farm is given when all costs of the farm are met, including the costs of liv-

ing for the families who work on the farm and with sufficient allowances for health care and savings for retirement, all generated through the sales of produce and/or through other income of the farm community.

How did this development of new social forms in farming come about? A healthy organic or biodynamic farm is a diversified farm with a variety of crops and at least one animal species. Since the middle of the twentieth century a great change took place. The farms were no longer able to compete with industrial wages. They were no longer in the position to hire help. The consequence was forced mechanization and the growing indebtedness with a more one-sided production, lacking diversity. Large biodynamic farms in Europe had no other alternative than to either give up farming or find new social forms. In order to make ends meet, all farms had to enter into direct marketing and on-farm processing. This led to an unbearable workload placed upon the typical family farm. Since hired help was no longer available, the need to place the heavier workload on more shoulders called for new social forms of co-operation. Employees were no longer an option, nor could they be adequately paid.

In addition, the employee status hinders an individual to provide the full input of one's personality. A full, unconditional input is however necessary to raise quality crops and animals. Due to these conditions, more and more partnerships were formed other than those of married couples, who by themselves were no longer able to run a diversified farm anyway. The author managed a two hundred acre farm in Germany in partnership with two couples who were unrelated to him; and in New Hampshire he worked with two partners for fifteen years.

What does a partnership mean in legal and factual terms? One thing is certain: It is a serious matter! In a partnership every partner is responsible and liable for the entire operation, even though the individual partner may be in charge of only a defined limited part of the operation. Based on twenty-eight years experience of managing farms in partnership with others, I can recommend the following:

1. Associate only with people as partners who have some expertise and experience in a specific field of farming. You cannot work successfully as equals in a partnership with people who have no skills and expertise.

2. Do not rush into partnerships. These days in my experience it takes at least two years to know and trust somebody. Out of immediate sympathy we may create relationships, and out of antipathy we may avoid them, and yet, sympathy and antipathy are deceiving. We should take a deep interest in those people we at first do not like. They might become valuable partners. Sympathy makes us forget to inquire whether a person has the qualifications that are demanded. You can enter into trusting relationships only if you know your future partner well. And that takes time. Often one year is not enough. We established the rule that upon meeting a qualified new person who is interested in farming, we would then hire that person as an apprentice or an employee for two years. After that period we would decide whether we would have the person as a partner or ask him or her to leave.
3. You can work successfully with independent partners only if every partner has a clearly defined task on the farm. At the same time, every partner should be able and be allowed, if necessary, to replace every other partner. A partnership on a farm works best, however, if the farm is structured in such a way that every partner has a clearly defined work responsibility (fieldwork, herdsman, food processing, or marketing).
4. Everyone on the farm should be allowed to do what she or he would like to do, because the work would be carried out with a great degree of interest, following however the strict condition that in a timely manner the intentions are made known to the others. This approach at first might sound unmanageable, but our real-life experience has taught us that we really do well only those things that we like to do. Such an arrangement works however only if we strictly obey or follow the second part of this recommendation.
5. Everyone in a partnership is spiritually, legally and economically fully responsible for her or his decisions. At the same time, the partners promise that they will help each other to carry the consequences of these decisions.
6. It is important to avoid creating legal claims against each other among the partners. Either you trust each other or you should not work together.
7. Everyone is allowed to leave the partnership without previous notice, but no partner can be forced out by the others. This might sound strange again. The reasoning behind this arrangement is that we feel it

accepts the idea of the free human being; we can leave any time without giving prior notice and no partner can push us out of the community.

8. Difficulties will certainly arise. Take provisions never to end up in a public court with another partner by initiating ahead of time a mediation board that has the trust of all partners and whose ruling you promise to follow.

Two partnerships operating in this fashion may serve as an example:

1. The Temple-Wilton Community Farm had three partners. They farmed at two locations with two different breeds of cattle run by two of the three partners. The third partner was the vegetable grower, who also managed the store and bookkeeping. There was one overall budget made up of three individual budgets. There was only one checking account with only one checkbook. The budget was balanced through payments by the members of the Community Farm. These payments were not related to the amounts of produce taken out of the store. We may call these members associates.
2. A 350-acre farm in Germany operated by four families. The farm had five distinct areas of work:
  - a. Field management combined with the responsibility of the dairy herd.
  - b. Milk processing and cheese making.
  - c. Vegetable growing.
  - d. Raising and marketing hogs.
  - e. Managing the farm store.

There are five businesses here operating as one. The demand generated in the store determines the production. An interesting aspect of the operation is the way the store is run. In the year 2000 fifty families were associated with the Community Farm. These families came to the store to pick freely whatever food items they needed, while at the same time non-members purchased in the traditional way the products they desired. Until the end of the year 2000 the four families were not able to cover their needs through farm income. They expect however to achieve this in the year 2001. This partnership is running the farm in association with non-farmers who support themselves with food from the farm.

So, what is an association? What is an associative economy? The Community Supported Farm is a good example; it is a basic association. The production in this instance is adjusted to an existing demand of real families and not treated as commodity. The farm members have a direct influence on the size and the variety of the farm production. Another existing association are biodynamic

seed companies. Here we have an association of growers who grow the seed for the distributor and the seed company, including the growers who need the seed themselves. Growing, distribution, and consumption are arranged in advance by a close cooperation of independent people and entities.

Another example are four independent organic growers, living fairly close to each other, who initiate a cooperation with an independent baker to provide baked goods for their stores and farmer markets. Again, the baker produces for a known market demand which is created by the distributors (farmers). They, in turn, calculate a pricing structure that allows the baker to continue baking a new batch every week. The necessary basic attitude in an associative economy is to make the need of your associates the motive of your actions.

In the foregoing we described two major forms of a new economy: partnership and association. The word partnership we used for a group of independent, not employed people who work together on the same project, like a farm. It could as well be a school or any other institution or a business. The main focus is that there is no employment. The term association we use for the cooperation between any independent entities in the economic field, like a producer, distributor, or consumer, a relationship that is not based on self-interest but instead on the interest and the well being of the other associates.

In the future the new social forms for operating farms will comprise a team of farmers who are closely associated with groups of non-farmers. Such new forms for farming need to be established, beginning to replace the current and hopefully fading form of agro-industrial businesses geared for mass plant and animal production. The new forms will be based on partnerships between independent people, who are interested to fill the needs of the other people and abide by the laws of nature. The current farming structure is based on self-interest, shareholders value, and the exploitation of nature.

The new social forms will necessarily need a new relationship to land ownership. This can be exemplified by a true-life example. A well-established community farm managed by two farmers, who work filling the needs of ninety families, need a new land base. The farmers neither have the means to buy land nor wish to privately own farmland. People who are interested in this project, which requires about half a million dollars to implement, have to form a land-purchasing group. They will raise the necessary money in various ways and give it to a land holding entity (land trust) which then turns over the development rights to a well-established conservation trust. Thereby

the land is safeguarded for farming into the future. More and more we will need activate such land purchasing groups. For each and every acre of farmland we will have to find the last buyer. A time will come when most people will no longer accept today's land property situation, just as long ago people would no longer accept that human beings were kept as slaves.

Having described the various new social forms for the future of agriculture, the question must arise: What brings these people together and what keeps them together? We have to realize that striving for profit does not unite people, it drives them apart.

The basis for the new social forms applied to farming must be a guiding concept. It is the spirit that unites people, not economic interests. William A. Albrecht, who is rightly an icon of the organic movement, once wrote, "You have got to have a vision. Unless you do, nature will never reveal herself." What a deep, mysterious saying. It implies that nature reveals its true being if we approach it with the right concept. The earth as a living organism enables the farm to also become a living organism under the guidance of the farmer who is striving to create a farm individuality. These thoughts were outlined already in 1924 by Rudolf Steiner who made recommendations to farmers how to proceed. With new insights into nature and its relationship between cosmos and earth we will be able to create farm organisms that support themselves and us.

The community farm is only a first step in this direction. We have to bring farms more and more into an association with business, educational and care-giving activities. Only then can we overcome one of the greatest problems of our time: the disparity between industry and agriculture. It is easy to understand that these new social forms need to flourish and bring forth new attitudes of all concerned people. Following are words by Christopher Schaefer, Ph.D. worth considering:

"We have in our thought life to transform our critical thinking, our doubts into an interest in the other person.

"In our feeling life: Like and dislike into understanding and compassion with others.

"In our will life: Egotism into service for others.

"Or we need: Inner development, deep interest in nature and community building."

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