

## TRADITIONAL AND SMALL FARMS

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### Summary

Events of the 1990s seem to have given the small farm a new lease on life. Organic agriculture offers a means of producing considerable profitability on very small areas even if many small farmers are of necessity only part-time farmers. Opportunities off the farm, however, have enabled owners of small parcels to farm them profitably, or at least sustainably. Urban agriculture is now a respected activity as many people try to produce food on small plots of land, in cities, that would otherwise be unused. Organic methods are now being practiced by people who have only a little land around their house. The small farm has also been shown to offer greater flexibility, enabling more environmentally friendly options than are available to large farms. Small farms will probably increase, not decrease, in both area occupied and relative importance.

### 1. Some Concepts and Definitions

The definition of a small or traditional farm will vary from place to place. Probably a limit of 25 hectares (ha) would be valid for most of the world but, in 1978, 90% of the farms in the tropics had less than 5 ha. The word traditional implies a lack of integration in the modern economy but there are quite prosperous vegetable and flower farms in many places that use little modern equipment or technology. Many small farms are now organic and the maintenance of traditional methods might be a matter of choice rather than of economic or cultural constraints. We would also have to consider as traditional the many farms in the eastern and midwestern United States whose owners choose for cultural or religious reasons not to use modern equipment. Some of these farms probably have more than 25 ha.

The classical definition of the family farm is a household that owns most of the land, supplies most of the labor, and subsists primarily on farm earnings. A more inclusive definition is any enterprise that is operated by a family proprietor.

Several characteristics of agriculture lead to family farming:

- The nature of land as agriculture's principal input.
- The biological exigencies of agricultural production such that the cycle of reproduction of capital cannot be shortened because it is linked to the seasonality of crops or to the reproductive cycle of livestock.
- The risky nature of agricultural production due to economic and economic vagaries.
- The limited scale economics.
- The nature of commodities produced by agriculturists.
- The difficulties associated with securing access to a dependable hired labor force to do highly seasonal tasks.

These factors combine to make agriculture relatively unprofitable and to discourage large-scale nonfarm capital from investing in direct agricultural production.

Food production is not immediately attractive as a commercial enterprise. Overproduction tends to drive prices down. Large farms will be favored in these situations. Vegetable production still tends to come from small farms. Much of the vegetable supply of developed countries now comes from developing countries and often from small farms.

## **2. Historical Background**

Although called a traditional life-support system, small farms were probably not where agriculture had its origin. The earliest agriculture was probably a communal or supra-family enterprise. Shifting cultivation, considered the most primitive form of agricultural production still in existence, retains many communal features and is rarely carried on as an exclusively family enterprise. It is generally felt that agriculture predated the formation of fixed settlements, so agriculture was probably a communal activity that had to be later adapted to the family structure. The home garden is probably the first family oriented agricultural system since it consisted of plants and animals produced around the family dwelling. Whether the family farm developed from the home garden or not is hard to determine. We can certainly envision the home garden as coexisting with other forms of activity such as hunting or farming communal land.

Shifting cultivation is not conducive to a family farm. The need to shift the farmed area frequently does not favor a fixed settlement. It is unlikely that increasing land pressure forced people to separate into farm units with enough area to leave 75%–80% of the holding in fallow in any year. However, such systems can be found in Central and South America today, although they often seem to result from land reform schemes rather than an intensification of shifting cultivation. Shifting cultivation led to a two-field system with one field left for fallow. In fact, the traditional and small farm can be characterized by its inability to provide much more than subsistence for a family unit and has tended to disappear or be less important whenever sufficient production was required to supply non-agricultural sectors of society. Demands for greater quantities of agricultural products always resulted in the development of large farms only rarely managed as a familial enterprise. Irrigation was another process that required organization on a supra-family level. Optimal farm size will depend on the nature of the products. Only vegetables and some high value crops could be produced in sufficient quantity on small

units to make them viable economic units. It is now generally felt that family units were not necessary for agriculture to begin.

Various authors have stressed the inefficiency of agriculture as opposed to hunting and gathering as a means of obtaining food. Agriculture may have brought about an increase in family size that was perhaps necessary to provide the labor for a family enterprise. As capitalistic models developed, the disadvantages of the family farm were generally revealed. The family farm is more efficient for subsistence production than for commercial production since wide availability of foodstuffs tends to push prices down and the large farm is more able to realize economies of scale to face reduced prices. Large plantations for export already appeared in pre-Roman times when deforested areas were used for grape and olive production. Wine and olive oil were traded for cereals produced on less degraded areas.

Most of the production came from large farms in ancient Rome, though there were probably small farms around the cities producing vegetables and other specialty crops. It is hard to explain why the large estate supplanted the small farm in western Europe while production of basic grains remained in the hands of small farmers in Asia, where large farms were rarely used for grain production. Rice production probably did not respond to more extensive methods but it is hard to explain why large farms did not develop for wheat and barley production in northern China.

There is considerable controversy over the importance of large landholders in Chinese agriculture and the Chinese economy in the Manchu period (seventeenth to nineteenth centuries). Consolidation of the production unit seems to be characteristic of Mediterranean farming, possibly because as soon as most of Greece was deforested and therefore suitable only for grape and olive production, grains had to be imported. This led to the establishment of colonies to produce grain, which was probably easier to do through *latifundia*.

Descriptions of large farms with hired labor and gleaning by those without land can be found in the Bible (Ruth). Jewish law provided for the return of all land to its original owner every 50 years—the jubilee—indicating that consolidation of land into large holdings was already a problem in Palestine in biblical times. “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is mine, and you are but strangers who have become my tenants (Lev. 25:23). It is uncertain whether the jubilee was actually ever really practiced, and the practice had apparently disappeared by the time the Romans conquered Palestine. Similarly, in India certain castes were not allowed to own land and had to work as laborers on larger estates.

Apparently, the failure of a large industrialized urban class to develop, which put pressure on the rural sector to produce more, was what enabled Chinese agriculture in particular, and Asian agriculture in general to a lesser degree, to remain one of small farms. The whole administration and political system was designed to obtain small amounts of excess food from each farmer. It is probable that other slightly urbanized societies operated in a similar fashion. A greater concentration of people in cities forced the Roman and later the Muslim world to organize agriculture in larger units. Urbanization in the West and the East were quite different phenomena.

Political conditions may affect the viability of small traditional farms. Thus, they tended to disappear in the Dark Ages when people felt insecure living in family units dispersed over the landscape. Smallholders tended to associate themselves with feudal lords, even relinquishing title to their holdings in exchange for protection. Remnants of this heritage are probably responsible for farmers still not residing on their holdings in modern France and Italy, where it was deemed more prudent to live in villages for protection. Although this pattern can be consistent over an area such as French Canada, where farmers still live in villages and not on their farms, great variability can exist in other places over a small area. Thus, in the highlands of Guatemala farmers will live in the village in one town and on their farms in another a short distance away.

To find such variability in what would be considered a traditional society seems strange. However, there is probably a feudal heritage in both Mayan and European societies. Indeed, one finds both patterns in both ladino and indigenous communities in Guatemala. In both cases, farmers probably sought the protection of feudal lords. It is probably not common in Africa or Asia for people to live on their land. Furthermore, holdings are often divided, so it would be hard to determine on which plot to live.

Small farms were the norm in northern Europe, where the Romans were generally unsuccessful in establishing large estates. Following the barbarian invasion of the Roman Empire, it became common for small farmers to associate themselves with feudal lords for protection. Thus, the feudal system developed but farming of the demesne (the land owned by the feudal lord) by the peasants became less profitable and in the late Middle Ages it was more common for each serf to simply give a share of his produce to the feudal lord rather than work on the lord's land. Row crops were introduced in the late Middle Ages, leading to a three-field system in which one of the fields had a crop, usually turnips, that could be intertilled. Formerly, all grains had been sown. The Black Death reduced pressure on the land and resulted in pasture alternating with crops. These practices generally increased the productivity and profitability of small farms.

In the late Middle Ages, common lands were still mostly used for farming so it is probably misleading to speak of a small or traditional farm at that time. One would generally expect farmers to manage the same plot of land year after year, which is often not the case for many small farmers not only at present, but in the late Middle Ages, and this system persisted in Spanish colonization of the new world.

With the development of the wool industry in the late Middle Ages, common lands were often fenced for sheep grazing, forcing many people off the land. The development of the wool industry is generally considered responsible for the great displacements of population from rural areas to English cities and the development of an urban society in Elizabethan England.

Arab agriculture also favored the use of slave or hired labor on large estates. As Christian kingdoms re-conquered Spain, large grants of land were given to successful soldiers. Thus a system of latifundia existed in Iberia just before the discovery of the Americas. It was this system that was transported to the Americas by the Iberians, especially since the principal production systems taken to the Americas—extensive

cattle raising and sugarcane production—were already important in southern Spain whence most of the conquistadors came. Sugarcane raising by slave or a mixture of slave and indentured labor already existed in the Canary and Madeira islands in the mid-fifteenth century and it was this system that was transplanted to much of tropical America in the sixteenth century. Sugar became known in Europe in the late Middle Ages due to the Crusades. Its cultivation probably began in New Guinea whence it spread to India, Arabia, and Spain.

Spanish agriculture was always characterized by large farms or haciendas, probably due to the low productivity of the dry areas. The same structure was carried to the Canary Islands and hence to Latin America in the sixteenth century. Slave labor was already a characteristic of sugar production in the Canary Islands. Because sugar has to be processed, the processing plant becomes almost as important as the field in which it is grown. There was something more like a capitalist enterprise in sugar production. Already in colonial times, some small sugar producers sold to the sugar mills.

There would have been few small farms in the Americas in the sixteenth century since most of the indigenous systems did not depend on private land ownership. The Spanish at first tried to maintain some system of communal land ownership for the production of subsistence food by the Indians. There was little interest in the Spanish colonies in producing goods such as grapes and olive oil that were best produced on small farms because this would have competed with production in the home country. Very limited small farm production of these crops only occurred in the more far-flung areas of the Spanish empire such as Argentina and California, where there was little trade with the mother country.

It was only with the settlement of North America by British and other northern Europeans that there was some transfer of a small farm model to the Americas. The original idea was to extend the sugarcane culture that had been so profitable in the West Indies to North America. When sugarcane failed to grow in the Virginia colonies, other alternatives were sought, among them tobacco, cotton, rice, sugar, and indigo, although small farms for food production did to some degree coexist with these large plantations.

Tobacco proved unsuitable to plantation culture and became a small farmer crop; most of the small farms in the United States today are tobacco farms. Most farms in the American South before the Civil War had less than 25 ha. Food production on medium farms in the Mid-Atlantic States was allowed to be exported only to the West Indies, not to England.

With the inability of Egypt to keep up with the demand for cotton of British mills, cotton was introduced into the United States in those areas that were unsuitable for sugarcane but that were already producing tobacco, indigo, and rice for export. It was first introduced into northeast Brazil and the West Indies. Indigo and rice also became quite important plantation crops in the United States colonies. It was soon found that tobacco offered little advantages as a plantation crop and it became a small farmer crop. Many of the small farms in the United States today owe their livelihood to tobacco. However, until their independence, the sugar producing colonies of the West Indies

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