

A recent, widely published op-ed by Jim Goodman

Is bigger better, or is smaller the future?

Bigger is always better, isn't it? Big cars, big houses, big business, big farms. If you were big, you made more money. Clearly, that is way of the world. When Europeans colonized the Americas, they wanted more land -- not some of it, all of it. Napoleon wanted more land. Nothing stopped him until Waterloo.

Perhaps we, the human race, have reached our Waterloo? Have we finally hit the wall with our never-ending desire for "bigness"? I decided years ago that I didn't want my farming operation to get bigger. I liked milking 45 cows, raising their feed and doing a little direct marketing.

I liked being small.

"Hopelessly behind the times," I was told. Local cheese makers were giving up; local meat processing was a thing of the past. Small farming was dead. The developing world couldn't feed itself and needed industrial farming systems.

Who could argue with the Green Revolution? Until the current food crisis. Not so much a shortage of food but a shortage of cheap food.

The poor can't afford to eat, and the middle class feels the pinch. Why wasn't industrial agriculture, farming fence row to fence row, feeding the world?

And there's the rub, feeding the world was never the intention. In the '70s, well-meaning researchers and eager graduate students, myself included, were convinced we could eliminate hunger in our lifetime. We had good intentions, but the big picture was always about making a profit.

Farmers, using cheap fuel, fertilizer and plenty of chemicals, could plant more acres, produce enough volume and generally make a profit.

This, of course, benefited the seed and chemical companies that long ago figured out small farmers saving their own seed and tending small acreages didn't spend much money.

The big meat packers and dairy processors anticipated the end of local processing. Their market share increased, and they grew. By breaking the labor unions, they could pay lower wages, bring in immigrant workers, increase profits and grow even larger.

It was a grand plan; agribusiness corporations were increasing profit margins quarter after quarter. The bigger they grew, the better it worked. Prices paid for animals, milk and grain fell as

farms grew larger and produced more. Small farmers couldn't compete as per-unit profit margins fell and only the larger producers could survive.

And it continued. Oil prices went up, and farmers were urged to grow more corn for ethanol. More land went into corn production, wheat acreage fell, pastures were planted to corn, speculation pushed prices up and food prices soared. The International Monetary Fund estimates that 50% of the increase in food price was due to ethanol production. Instead of feeding the world, industrial agriculture starves it.

While oil companies banked the highest profits of any industry ever, people lost their homes, jobs and farms and a world economy based on oil foundered. We had gotten too big, we had abandoned local production and marketing, given up on our local communities and become too dependent on globalization and the corporations that control it.

The corporations that brought us cheap food, cheap oil and the world on a string turned out to be parasites concerned only with profit. They convinced us growth would allow everyone to prosper, but their prosperity was their only concern.

Small is the future. We know indigenous farmers can produce more food using traditional farming methods. All they need is an end to wars and, as Frances Moore Lappé would say, "more democracy." The World Bank and the G-8 need to let them make their own decisions and feed themselves.

Western countries need to take a step back as well. We cannot continue to source our food from the rest of the world. We cannot continue to feed grass-eating animals a diet of grain, nor can we continue to fill our fuel tanks with grain. We cannot continue to encourage and subsidize industrial agriculture at the expense of small local producers.

What we can do is return to local and regional food production. We can allow the rest of the world to feed themselves by reining in the influence of multinational grain and chemical companies. We can redevelop local communities and keep local dollars local, rather than filling the coffers of offshore corporate bank accounts.

We cannot look at individual factors as causing the food crisis. Collectively, ethanol, corporate control and speculation are indicative of the failure of entire systems.

Waterloo is synonymous with defeat, but it was also a victory against empire. We need another victory against empire; we need to reclaim our sense of local and realize the necessity of being small and interdependent on community. We need to end thousands of years of thinking that bigger is always better.

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