

Hired Farm Workers and Their Role in Community Food Systems

by Don Villarejo

I have been asked to speak about how farm workers can participate in community food systems. First, everyone who works on a farm and gets their hands dirty is a farm worker. This follows from the fact that whether they are farmers, unpaid family members or hired workers the tasks they perform are essentially the same. The focus of my remarks will be on hired workers.

Yesterday, while Gail Feenstra was describing the remarkable contributions of Joan Gussow, I briefly closed my eyes and saw in my mind another important leader of our time who was vitally concerned with issues of nutrition and health, was a staunch environmentalist, and, like Ms. Gussow, “walked the walk” because he grew nearly all of his own food in an organic garden near his residence. The person in my mind’s eye was César Chávez, who not only grew organic food for himself and his family but also provided vegetables for many of the staff of the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) at their headquarters, La Paz, near Bakersfield. His final resting place is adjacent to his UFW office and overlooks the garden where he worked, nearly every day, from 6 to 8 am before walking to his office. In my meetings with him I always felt that he had achieved that state of grace that Dan Kemmis described so eloquently yesterday.

Efforts to involve hired farm workers in community food systems have been initiated over and over again, but rarely reported in journals or news articles. For example, starting in the late 1960s and extending throughout the 1970s and 1980s, organizations composed entirely of hired farm workers in California built community food systems that many of us believed would implement an ideal to which we aspired: *la tierra pertenece al que la trabaja* (the land belongs to those who work it). Since hired farm workers, with relatively few exceptions, own no land, have no assets or savings of any kind, and usually have little of the management and marketing experience needed to operate a farm that can compete in today’s economy, it appeared to many activists that the only possibility was to build worker-owned production cooperatives.

By the mid-1970s eleven producer coops had been established in the Central Coast area of the state and two others had been started in the Central Valley. In the early 1980s CIRS assisted in starting another here in Yolo County, and in the late 1980s provided assistance to yet another that was being attempted in Fresno County.

Despite the commitment, and sweat, and, in some cases, small loans from the Federal Coop Bank, all of these production cooperatives eventually went out of business. The present-day Rural Development Center near Salinas is actually located on the very land where one of the coops had farmed strawberries.

In retrospect it is clear that the coops were not able to stay in business for many of the same reasons that small farms have great difficulty: low prices for the food they produced, inadequate capitalization, and the enormous difficulty of competing with very large and sophisticated businesses. In most cases there was also the burden of relying exclusively on rented land.

But we do not regard these efforts as failures. More than a few of these former coop members are today successful farmers, and they regard the experience they gained during their coop years as a vital component of their success today. It is worth noting that today fully seventy per cent of the strawberry farmers of the Central Coast region of California are of Latino/Hispanic origin. Miriam Wells, an anthropologist at UC Davis, has written extensively

about the experience of the strawberry coops near Watsonville and has drawn some useful conclusions.

First, the coops that were most successful in narrow economic terms were those that originated among the members themselves, and that also required a more-than-token cash investment from each member. Those that were least successful were the ones that originated with outside professional economic development specialists and to which hired farm workers were recruited. This conclusion is quite controversial for it calls into question the fundamental basis of rural economic development strategies being pursued by a variety of governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Second, the most successful of the coops were those that followed marketing strategies that were competitive with commercial firms. Having a hard-nosed production and marketing specialist, such as Obdulia Hernandez, manager of the most successful of the strawberry coops, was the key element in these instances. It is my personal observation that most hired farm workers, in common with a great many farmers, prefer to focus on the production process, on growing food, and are reluctant marketers. Often, this preference works ultimately to their disadvantage.

In a private conversation, I once asked César Chávez what he thought about the experience of the various hired farm worker cooperatives in California. He was well aware of their history and was keenly interested in what had happened. After some thought he said that it was his opinion that hired farm worker coops based exclusively on stoop labor would probably not succeed because none of the worker's children would look forward to a life in which the only option might be stoop labor. He thought that a better model was the experience of the Mondragon coops in Spain, where banks, insurance companies, factories and other businesses were integrated into a more holistic community.

Finally, it is my personal view that the entrepreneurial spirit is very strong among many groups of immigrants, not only in urban but also in rural settings. A possibly unrecognized component of the successes of direct marketing is that it is a key component of economic development strategies being pursued by various identifiable groups of new farmers, as was the case in the early days of the current surge of organic farming. But other groups of new farmers are using this strategy as well. Back in the late 1970s, as part of the Rural Economic Alternatives Project (REAP), Mack Warner and his colleagues started the first contemporary farmers' direct market in Stockton, a small city located in a county that is a major center of small-scale farming. At that time Stockton had received a large influx of Southeast Asian refugees displaced by the collapse of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. A surprisingly large fraction of the farmers who joined the new Stockton Farmers Market Association were these refugees, although most of these "new" farmers had farmed in their homeland before they were evacuated by the departing Americans. The Stockton market is a huge success.

A few years later, members of the REAP committee decided to survey farmers participating in the market to determine the economic role of direct marketing in their operation. The result was staggering. Roughly one in four farmers said that the income they obtained from their direct market sales was decisive in their ability to continue farming. For many Southeast Asian refugees, whether it is the roughly seven hundred families now farming in the Fresno area or those near Merced, Modesto or Stockton, direct market sales, including roadside stands, U-pick or farmers markets, have been a vital part of their overall economic strategy.

At the same time it is sobering to measure the extent of farmer participation in direct

marketing. Every five years all U.S. farmers provide detailed economic profiles of their farms as part of the Census of Agriculture. In 1982, there were 143,492 farmers who reported selling crops and livestock directly to consumers. By 1992, the year of the most recent agricultural census, just 86,432 farmers reported direct sales. In other words, in ten years there has been a decrease of some 40% in the number of U.S. farms who reported participating in direct marketing. Equally significant, there was a 20% decrease in the reported total value of direct sales by farmers, from roughly \$500 million dollars in 1982 down to just over \$400 million dollars in 1992 (these figures are in nominal dollars, no account has been taken of inflation).

We do not have a good understanding of what changes in direct marketing have actually occurred in recent years. If the Census data is correct, have the number of farmers operating roadside stands, U-pick or other on-site markets declined, while the number participating in farmers markets increased? Perhaps most important, do we have a solid understanding of the economic role of direct marketing in today's agriculture?

On the consumer front there is some good news. Annual per capita consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables has now reached 300 pounds, a 45% increase in twenty years. In response, over the past twenty years, U.S. production of fruits and vegetables, measured in tons of product, has increased by 70%, driven largely by increased consumer demand both here and abroad.

However, as Popkin and colleagues have demonstrated in their recent publication, there is a sharp variance of dietary trends among population sub-groups, and the strongest variation correlates with socio-economic status. Generally, lower status groups show the smallest changes in diet over a 20 year period.

An important corollary of this trend toward more fresh fruits and vegetables is that many consumers today expect to have fresh salads and fruit available to them on a year-round basis. Even some fast food outlets now offer these choices and the food service sector has become an important area of growth for the produce industry. The conventional food sector has also responded to this heightened consumer demand by securing year-round supplies of fresh fruits and vegetables, triggering a globalization of trade in these items. We now import grapes from Chile during the northern hemisphere's winter season. California has benefited greatly from year-round production. For example, the west side of the San Joaquin Valley is the only place in the U.S. where commercial shipments of lettuce originate during certain months of the year.

Lastly, our thinking has yet to take account of the changes in U.S. agriculture that are occurring on with breakneck speed. First, and most important, our agricultural system has become remarkably concentrated in the last generation, and is becoming more so with each passing year. For example, in 1964, the biggest 100,000 farms in the nation produced about 1/3 of all U.S. agricultural commodities and earned about 1/6 of net cash income from farming. Today, the biggest 100,000 farms account for roughly 3/5 of all farm production and of net cash income from farming. As near as anyone can tell, this trend will continue.

As we learned in the case of the Stockton farmers market, community food systems - whether farmers markets, community supported agriculture or other innovations - may play a decisive role in determining whether specific small or medium scale farms are able to survive.

Corresponding to these changes in size concentration and in types of crop produced in the U.S., is a greater reliance on hired labor. While data for the nation as a whole is scant, California is one of the few states that does report employment data for both farmers and unpaid family members as well as for hired workers. Over the past forty years the share of our state's farm work performed by farmers and unpaid family members has declined from 40% to just 15%.

Today, more than 85% of all of our state's farm work is done by hired workers. In the nation as a whole at least 40% of all farm work is now performed by hired workers - there are even some indicators that suggest it is more than 50%. The overwhelming majority of hired farm workers in the U.S. are foreign-born, and in California the figure is more than 92%.

What are we to do to more directly involve hired farm workers in community food systems? First, we need to ask. That is, directly ask hired farm workers and their leaders about how they might participate. As the experience of the coops suggests, unless hired farm workers are full and committed participants from the beginning, we will have great difficulty in the long run. While this may seem to be a challenging task, given the linguistic and cultural differences involved, we can begin by including in meetings such as this the leaders of the forty rural and agricultural communities of the Central Valley where Latino/Hispanic residents, mostly hired farm workers and their families, comprise a majority: Parlier, Mendota, Huron and McFarland, to name a few. Surprisingly, as near as I can determine, few, if any of these communities even have a farmers market or community garden.

Second, we need to recognize that there are significant cultural barriers that need to be directly addressed and overcome. For example, especially during harvest season, Saturday is a work day for most hired farm workers in California. Thus, Saturday morning is not a very good time for a direct market strategy that is aimed at a farm worker population. An additional unrecognized barrier is that at least 40% of hired farm workers in California, and possibly an actual majority, live here year-round but do not own a car. Thus, transportation is a serious problem.

A possibly unrecognized cultural barrier is that Mexicans view markets as a place to bargain and negotiate over price and quality. Those of us who are accustomed to paying the advertised price may find negotiating to be uncomfortable. For American farmers, who are competing with both quality and price, bargaining may actually seem to be offensive.

Finally, we need to reflect on and understand dietary preferences and other life style characteristics of the hired farm workers population. In a discussion with César Chávez he was asked if he was a vegetarian. He said that he was, for many of the same reasons of which we are aware. But he added that he would never put forward his personal life style preference to other hired farm workers. He said that there were two reasons: first, most hired farm workers did not share his dietary preference so that it might be divisive to advance his personal view, and, second, there were many more important problems around which hired farm workers could be organized and united.

The challenges are great. However, the values of the leaders of organizations representing hired farm workers are no different than those represented in this room. Arturo Rodriguez, President of the United Farm Workers, and Frank Gallegos, President of Teamsters, Local 890, representing 7,000 workers at Dole Fresh Vegetables, have a solid commitment to the goals represented by the activists of the community food systems.

The question before us is can we build community food systems that are ecologically sound and economically viable but are also socially just? I believe that we can. Thank you.