Agric Hum Values (2016) 33:501–502
DOI 10.1007/s10460-016-9714-3

From the editor

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Published online: 14 June 2016

Is sustainability a good thing? I suspect most readers of this journal will agree.

I recently read an interesting article by the president of the Business Ethics Society (DesJardins 2016), who suggested that claims about and advocacy for sustainability have become so ubiquitous that the word has lost its meaning. Worse, efforts to promote sustainability might prove counterproductive. DesJardins writes to the business community, but I think there is a more general wisdom in what he says.

Sustainability became a meaningful concept following the Brundtland Commission's 1987 report, *Our Common Future*. The objective of the report was to critique the existing model of economic development and to call for a new model—sustainable development—defined as "meet[ing] the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987, p. 15).

DesJardins observes that the word "sustainable" is now used "to modify an innumerable range of distinct and diverse activities, ranging from agriculture and architecture to zoning and zoos" (p. 117). Similarly, the word "sustainability" is both "a generic stand-alone concept, as well as a term modified by such diverse adjectives as economic, environmental, social, ecological, corporate, financial, global, human, and organizational" (p. 118). The word also has normative as well as descriptive connotations. The word is used to describe things that continue long-term. It also implies that what continues is a good thing—that is, that the thing ought to continue. However, there are clearly some things we do not want to be sustainable, such as pollution, poverty and inequality.

The problem with the ubiquitous use of sustainability is that seemingly desirable sustainability objectives can be incompatible. DesJardins gives several examples. One is when businesses use the term to advocate risk management strategies for economic and environmental concerns. However, what is good for business economically by promoting environmental sustainability might not be best from a sustainable development objective as envisioned by the Brundtland Commission, since the pursuit of sustainable development might require the business to move into a different direction, or disappear entirely. Another example is when efforts to promote environmental sustainability conflict with a need to improve human well-being, especially of the most disadvantaged members of society. According to DesJardins, "at its core, the environmental pillar of sustainable development rests on a conservationist environmentalism, which treats the natural world as a means to human ends, important ends to be sure, but human ends nonetheless" (p. 126). However, there are some environmental movements that reject the anthropocentric view as too narrow. To this end, DesJardin's asks, "what, exactly, is to be sustained by environmental sustainability?" (p. 127).

DesJardins argues that the strength of the term "sustainable development" is that it connects "the natural world to human needs" and therefore points in a direction where we can (and should) focus our attention. It also illuminates a "middle ground between the conservationist approach embedded in sustainable development and the preservationist approach of many environmentalist" (p. 131).

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The need for finding a middle ground when sustainability perspectives conflict is one reason why *Agriculture and Human Values* succeeds. It should, since the journal's title and scope emphasize human values.

This issue of *Agriculture and Human Values* contains the following articles. Clark and Inwood examine the extent to which the production of fresh fruits and vegetables can be scaled up to mainstream grocery venues in Ohio. LaCharite examines the evolution of university agriculture projects in the US. Soper reports on how indigenous peasant farmers in Ecuador prefer export markets over production for local markets and food sovereignty. Steckley shows how food sovereignty is related to class hierarchies and social preferences for imported foods in a study from rural Haiti. Suhardiman et al. use a case study in Laos to show why policies to promote sustainable intensification are difficult to implement. Guthman and Brown use the case of a soil fumigant and public comments that led to its withdrawal in California to discuss the nature of consumer activism. Phillipov uses a case study to explore how supermarkets use social media and other techniques to respond to consumer concerns about food ethics. Costanigro et al. examine how product labels and preferences for corporate social responsibility activities of firms affect consumer purchase decisions of milk products. Lehberger and Hirschauer use a combination of economics and psychology to examine how the preferences of German women to become professional farm managers differ from those of men. Montenegro de Wit critiques the debate about the nature and extent of agrobiodiversity loss. De Bont et al. examine how control over water resources evolves through a case study in Tanzania. Wertheim-Heck and Spaargaren review different ways Vietnamese consumers shop for vegetables and relate their findings to the historical development of supermarkets. Bonnave et al. explore how seed exchanges in Bolivia relate to crop genetic diversity. Shete et al. show how large scale farms affect soil health in Ethiopia. Ekers et al. examine the economic and non-economic aspects of non-paid labor on Canadian farms. Sardos et al. examine the biodiversity of root and tuber crops in Vanuatu. Book reviews and list of books received complete this issue of the journal.

References

DesJardins, J. 2016. Is it time to jump off the sustainability bandwagon? *Business Ethics Quarterly* 26(1): 117–135.

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