

How the multifunctionality concept can restore meaning to agri-culture

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The materialism that pervades modern Western culture is reflected in the agricultural sector, which has become a production-oriented industrial style of cultivation. Industrial agriculture has long been assumed to be the inevitable future of our agrarian landscapes. Indeed, agriculture's declining share of the labour force and concomitant increase in labour productivity has served as a measure of development achievement. Developed countries have less than 10% of the labour force in agriculture, and usually less than 5%. The US statistic is around 2%. Agriculture is a task that we no longer have to do; labour-saving machinery does it for us. We are also spared the burden of processing food commodities into food that we can eat. Agribusinesses process the food for us.

Disconnecting with nature is not merely a by-product of modern life, but a central intention of our society. Nature and culture are seen as opposing forces, in the Euro-centric worldview. Taming nature has been a way for Western Civilisation to highlight our achievements as a people.¹

It is bad enough that we Westerners have done this to ourselves, but in our Western way, we feel compelled to share it with the rest of the world, and we are busy cajoling developing countries that they too should adopt our industrial agricultural strategy. Food is a commodity, like water and land, that has no value beyond what the market recognises. Stop practising your silly religious rituals and social customs; overcome your aversion to economic risk; learn that agriculture is a business, that your household is really an economic unit, and you can improve the profitability of your farm enterprise. Or you can contract out your farming operation and go into another line of work that pays you more. Are you uncertain whether to farm or do something else? Let the economic analysis help you decide: which option is more profitable? That's your answer.

How did we get here?

How has it happened that Western farmers, and particularly European farmers who have inherited an unbroken indigenous cultural tradition, have accepted so easily the materialist worldview of agriculture? And how did farmers in developing countries so readily agree to the terms of the Green Revolution, that required them to exterminate

¹ Scott (1998) offers an interesting overview of this phenomenon in his chapter entitled, 'Taming Nature: An Agriculture of Legibility and Simplicity'.

friendly insects and contaminate their organic soils with chemical fertilisers and herbicides? What were they thinking?

Of course there are many reasons that farmers have given up many of their traditional ways, but I want to focus on the realm of worldview. How did that change? Here the term 'semiotic conquest' is useful. This term is borrowed from an anthropologist, Arturo Escobar (1995), who described the replacement of indigenous Latin American cultural values by Western (North American) capitalism. Instead of traditional culture and society providing the meaning to reality, the new semiotic regime puts the economy first and foremost, and society and culture have to fit inside the requirements of that economy. The economy provides the meaning to life that culture and society used to provide.

This description of semiotic conquest applies equally well to the indigenous farmers of Europe and Japan. In addition to the economic signals from the market, there were many other channels of communication all giving similar messages: the government itself through agricultural policies and extension messages, newspaper articles, political leaders, and even religious leaders. Producing more is a good thing. The means used in the production process were not questioned very much. In the modern (industrial) worldview, the traditional emotional connection to the land, and to one's animals is outdated. Modern life demands a new view of the world as a market, and the farmer's job is to grow products that can be sold in that market. The process of creating those products needs to become efficient. There is no benefit in feeling kinship with your cow if your cow is not an efficient producer of milk. Get rid of that cow and your profit margin will improve!

In the context of development assistance projects, there is a Trojan Horse quality to semiotic conquest. For example, the gift of new canals and diversion weirs, agricultural extension, and credits for agro-inputs also brings hidden gifts: new values and ideologies. There can be many levels and arenas of semiotic conquest. At a meta-level, the very introduction of any new approach represents a challenge to the status quo. When that challenge is supported by clear authority (education) and prestige (wealth, status), it has greater impact. And when the new approach is seen as one small piece of a much greater, and still unseen whole of what Western-style life can offer, the impact on indigenous values is all the greater.

Multifunctionality to the rescue?

The concept of multifunctional agriculture offers a powerful antidote to the ideology of materialist, industrial style agriculture, and more broadly to materialist paradigms of development itself. Multifunctional agriculture (MFA) refers to the multiple services (functions) that agriculture provides to society, beyond the immediate production function. These functions include environmental services (e.g., wildlife habitat, or in Japan, the flood control functions of paddy terraces are especially important), social services (rural employment), cultural and spiritual services (cultural identity, religious observances), aesthetic services (landscape), etc.

At the level of worldview, the multifunctional concept represents a re-thinking of the materialist paradigm. There are also other ways to view the MFA concept: as a justification for agricultural subsidies, as a strategy for negotiating with the WTO, for

example. The multifunctional concept is certainly motivated by both politics and economics, but from a perspective of ‘moving worldviews’ the political economics are largely irrelevant. Far more important is the opportunity presented by MFA to reassess the role of agriculture in society, the desirable future of rural areas, the meaning of development, and even the meaning of life itself.

Two separate policy discussions on MFA are taking place, and with little interaction: one discussion based in Europe, and the other in Japan. In Europe, the concept has evolved from negotiations surrounding the EU’s Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). MFA is now part of the official policy of the EU, articulated in the Agenda 2000 reform, and in the European Model of Agriculture.² During the past several years the EU has sponsored an active programme of research on MFA, most notably the Multagri Project (www.multagri.net).³ A parallel initiative has been the programme on Europe’s Rural Futures: The Nature of Rural Development (NoRD)⁴ with primary involvement from the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF). The debate in Europe is rich and broad-based, encompassing a great deal of social and economic analysis and stimulated by a larger debate about the future of Europe itself.

In Japan, the focus of MFA has been on paddy agriculture specifically and has taken a much more narrow focus, at least in the English-language literature. Multifunctionality is officially recognised by the Ministry of Agriculture as a basis for making investment decisions in the agriculture sector. There has also been an effort to coordinate a common position with other paddy producing countries in the region. One visible expression of this interest is the Japan-financed International Network on Water and Environment in Paddy Fields (INWEPF)⁵ which grew out of the World Water Forum held in Japan in 2003. The focus is on paddy-based agriculture in Monsoon Asia, where there is an acknowledged, historical ‘paddy culture’.

The (potential) significance of multifunctional agriculture

What does the emergence of the MFA concept portend for the future of agriculture and the evolution of a more sustainable worldview? Is MFA simply an expression of mainstream society’s regret at the loss of heritage, stimulating small corrective measures to preserve bits and pieces of that heritage through the equivalent of open-air farming museums? I believe that the MFA concept is far more significant; the logical implications of MFA offer a fundamental challenge to the prevailing materialist

² For an overview of policies, see *Evaluation of policies with respect to multifunctionality of agriculture; observation tools and support for policy formulation and evaluation: Summary Report* by Melanie Kröger & Karlheinz Knickel. (www.multagri.net/section/deliverable/exec_file.php?doc_id=372).

³ A related French programme conducted through INRA, Cemagref, and CIRAD has compiled a comprehensive series of reports on various aspects of MFA. See their website: www.inra.fr/Internet/Directions/SED/multifonction/

⁴ A report summarising this project can be downloaded at <http://assets.panda.org/downloads/nordiifinal.pdf>

⁵ The INWEPF website is maintained by the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries: <http://www.maff.go.jp/inwepf/index.htm>

worldview. How far will this logic be allowed to go? Let us apply this question to three different MFA contexts: (1) wealthy countries, (2) developing countries and (3) indigenous peoples.

The potential impact of MFA in wealthy countries

The multifunctional concept clearly offers a toehold for worldview reform, but with such high stakes, there is a very great danger that MFA will be defined into irrelevance. The strategy is simple: focus on the importance of traditional agricultural practices and specialty products as connections to cultural heritage and identity, and find ways of preserving this heritage in museum-like settings that will not challenge the status quo. Clearly, this is what the WTO should encourage! The tendency for European researchers to describe their agriculture as having entered an era of 'post-production' only adds to the marginalisation of the MFA concept. The connotation is that MFA is relevant only for societies that no longer need to produce their own food.

One scenario whereby MFA could pose a practical threat to the prevailing worldview hinges on the empowerment of local areas and sub-regions, where local residents participate in charting their own future (e.g., the 'Active Regions' pilot programme in Germany described in the paper by Knickel and Jahn in this workshop). Another interesting scenario hinges on national policy debates stimulated on one hand by the backdrop of EU integration, and on the other hand by inputs from research and advocacy organisations such as WWF and other environmental groups. If the media, intelligentsia, and political leaders were to take up the issues of rural development and MFA, then perhaps this could lead to real changes in the prevailing worldview.

Similar scenarios can be envisaged for Japan, with the difference that the government itself is strongly supportive of the MFA concept. The prevailing worldview in Japan is perhaps already more aligned with MFA than is the case in Europe, and certainly than is the case in the United States. There is a strong dimension of emotional and spiritual values associated with paddy cultivation in Japan, which is considered perfectly acceptable to incorporate into rural policies.

The potential impact of MFA in developing countries

The developing world has been suspicious of MFA, seeing it as yet another Northern strategy for agricultural protectionism. Where the MFA concept resonates best is with grassroots initiatives to revitalise local agriculture, where the multiple local benefits of agriculture are obvious to all concerned. But at the level of national policies, MFA remains an abstraction. In Asia, the few development assistance projects that use the term, 'multifunctionality' are JICA-supported, and the multiple functions recognised are tied to water saving irrigation practices, flood control, or community empowerment through water user associations. The more nuanced benefits of cultural heritage and landscape, while well recognised in Japan's domestic policies, have not filtered down to development assistance policies, nor have developing country governments themselves embraced the concept. Even in Bali, where agricultural tourism is a recognised part of the tourism industry, the cultural heritage values of the agricultural sector have not been well addressed in policies.

A similar lack of interest in the MFA concept appears to prevail in EU-funded programmes. The MFA policies that attract so much interest within the European

context have not found their way into development assistance policies, much less into the policies of the assisted countries. The operating (and unexamined) assumption appears to be that the MFA concept is incompatible with high levels of agricultural production. This is why it is so unfortunate for Europeans to define their own MFA as ‘post-productionist’. The agro-ecological approaches promising productivity based on indigenous knowledge offer a better role model for developing countries.⁶

Is there a MFA-friendly scenario for developing countries? If so, it will hinge on a willingness to question the prevailing agricultural model. The agricultural policies in developing countries represent the legacy of a long process of semiotic conquest. And that process continues. It is important for the North to acknowledge that in the realm of meaning, values and worldview, there remain very strong connections between the North and South (and the West and the East). The decision-makers in developing country agriculture ministries have – with perhaps a very few exceptions – been educated in the North, and proudly reflect the worldview of scientific rational materialism of Northern universities. Shifting the agricultural paradigm in developing countries will require efforts at two levels (1) within the North, where meaning is communicated through formal training, and through the policies embedded in development assistance projects, and (2) at the grassroots, where promising initiatives are well established which encompass MFA concepts without using the terminology.

The potential impact of MFA among indigenous peoples

The fundamental linkages between agriculture and the cultural heritage and identity of a society suggest that how agriculture is handled is also fundamental to cultural sovereignty. This linkage is motivating Japan to protect its agrarian heritage; for indigenous peoples whose culture is under threat from so many forces, their agricultural way of life takes on added importance. The MFA concept, however, is seen as one part of a larger struggle pitting indigenous peoples against the commodification of agriculture as prescribed in international trade agreements. Speaking during the Third Ministerial Meeting of the WTO in Seattle (USA) in November 1999, an indigenous leader outlined her views as follows:

...the whole philosophy underpinning the WTO Agreements and all regional agreements like NAFTA, MERCOSUR, etc. contradicts indigenous peoples’ worldviews, concepts and practices related to environment, trade, and development, the way we regard and use knowledge, and our core values and spirituality. The principles and policies they promote such as trade liberalisation, export-oriented development, trade barriers, leveling the playing field, comparative advantage, most-favoured nation and national treatment, and worst, the patenting of lifeforms are antithetical to most of our core-values and beliefs.⁷

While MFA would appear to be highly consistent with indigenous worldviews, the concept is seen as a second-generation issue. The first priority is to recapture lost

⁶ See, for example, Pretty (2002).

⁷ Statement by Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Director, TEBTEBBA FOUNDATION (Indigenous Peoples’ International Centre for Policy Research and Education), Presented at the ‘Human Face of International Trade: Health and Environment’, 29 Nov. 1999, United Methodist Church, Seattle, Washington, USA. (www.ratical.org/co-globalize/impactsOfWTO.html). The full text of the Indigenous Peoples Seattle Declaration can be found on the Tebtebba website: www.tebtebba.org.

land and water rights, and only then can the details of agricultural policies become relevant. From an outside perspective of development assistance strategies, however, the MFA concept becomes very much relevant in formulating development interventions that support indigenous values. Here again is an example of the need for donor countries to embrace MFA if the concept is to be adopted by indigenous peoples.

How can we operationalise MFA?

There are two basic levels at which the multifunctional concept can be put to practical use in our quest for a sustainable, humane world. The first level pertains to agricultural policies. MFA offers a way of repairing the damage done to traditional agricultural practices, lifeways and worldviews. I refer to this as ‘cultural reparation’. The other level for practical action is at the level of worldview – our own Northern worldview(s) and the worldviews of other societies and cultures. The MFA concept challenges the materialist worldview and provides an opening for new paradigms of agriculture and development to be considered.

Multifunctional Agriculture as Cultural Reparation

Indigenous farmers whether in Europe, Africa, or Asia (or New Mexico, or anywhere that indigenous farmers are found) have all shared the common experience of losing important pieces of their agricultural way of life. To some degree, all have experienced the conquest of a powerful, alien worldview, that has pushed them to renounce their traditional perspectives as outdated and embarrassing. Many have resisted, and the scene today is a complex mixture of resilient pieces of traditional worldviews blending with new ideas, new technologies, and new markets. The multifunctional concept offers a framework for galvanising these disparate bits and pieces of the old and the new into a dynamic agri-culture that serves the cultural (and production) goals of the societies concerned. In this sense, MFA has the potential to repair the severe damage that Western materialism has exacted on traditional agricultural value systems. The North has a moral obligation to its own farmers (and consumers) as well as to those of the South, to make cultural reparations for damage done. Multifunctional agriculture offers us (the North) a way of making those reparations operational through practical projects, policies, and programmes.

Multifunctional Agriculture as a Catalyst for New Paradigms

The multifunctional concept implies that it is important for people to feel connected with nature, and it is agriculture that provides that connection. Through the food we eat, we quite literally transform bits of nature into bits of culture. There is no need to resort to metaphor; we only need to interpret our own direct observations. If the MFA concept is taken seriously, there is a logical slippery slope that can lead to questions about ultimate meaning and purpose in life. Perhaps materialism is not the only value system imaginable!

Conclusions

The concept of multifunctional agriculture is very powerful. It has the potential to catalyse a successful challenge to the prevailing worldview of materialism. Realising that potential requires some or all of the following measures to be taken:

- The North has to take MFA seriously. If multifunctionality is relegated to merely being a way of adding a dose of cultural heritage to industrial agriculture, then MFA will have no real influence. However if the MFA concept serves as a catalyst to re-assessing the nature of agriculture and its role in modern society, then the Northern worldview will be open to change.
- MFA needs to be incorporated into development assistance programmes. Developing countries already accommodate a diversity of agricultural worldviews through their indigenous communities and grassroots initiatives. If development projects also place a priority on social, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of agriculture they will help legitimise these non-materialist perspectives and help open a healthy policy debate within the country.
- Indigenous peoples need to make use of the MFA concept in their own struggles over land and water rights. As multifunctionality becomes more accepted in mainstream policy discussions (and provided that the concept retains its core meaning of social, cultural and spiritual values), the term itself can serve a useful purpose. Not only can indigenous peoples refer to MFA in communicating with the outside world, but the MFA concept can also help to legitimise local agriculture internally (e.g., to the younger generation who are eager to be modern).
- Local communities/regions need to be empowered to make their own decisions about local agriculture and land use. Empowerment includes legal rights, access to information, and assistance in planning, strategising and envisioning the future.
- Consumers need to appreciate the multifunctional services of agriculture, and be willing to support producers, both economically and morally. This implies the need for partnerships (linking consumers and producers) and awareness campaigns.

Reaping the benefits of the multifunctional approach demands efforts in both the North and the South. The globalised world links not only our economies but our ideologies as well. It will take all our cooperation to reform the prevailing worldview of materialism, and we can all share the benefits of doing so.

References

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