Australian Agriculture & the Role of Youth

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***Summary*:** Australian farming has more or less followed the path of agriculture in the United States. That is, farms have become bigger, the numbers of farms and farmers have decreased, agriculture is heavily mechanized, there is a high dependence on chemical inputs, new technologies, and, in some areas, pumped irrigation, and agriculture is oriented towards export on the world market. Australian agriculture is capital and land intensive, but labour-scarce. Unlike the United States, the European Union and many other countries, farmers receive relatively little subsidies and other forms of income support payments. In recent years a small but growing counter-trend has emerged to this large-scale export agriculture, in the form of smaller and more labour-intensive organic farms that grow mainly for the domestic market.

History

Prior to the invasion of Australia by British colonialists in the late 18th century, settled agriculture was not practised in the country. The numerous indigenous populations who had arrived many tens of thousands of years previously lived on a nomadic basis, employing hunting, gathering and fishing to sustain their communities. Their accumulated knowledge and spiritual relationships with the flora and fauna of Australia is vast.

Farming commenced in the early 19th century as government-sponsored explorations began to reveal the size and extent of the country. Massive forest and bush clearances – together with violent dispossessions of indigenous peoples - took place in order to convert the lands, beginning from the coastal zones and going inwards, into pasture for grazing animals. Sheep grazing for wool was the earliest viable form of farming, and it has often been said that Australia 'rode on the sheep's back' to economic development and prosperity. With further explorations and the development of railways from the 1850s onwards, large tracts of suitable cropping land was opened up and wheat became another very important part of the agricultural landscape in Australia. Towards the end of the 19th century the widespread introduction of irrigation systems allowed greater diversification, particularly with beef and dairy cattle, but also into other grain crops as well as fruits and vegetables.

Australia's insertion into global agricultural trade came very early, as the country was part of the British Empire and as such formed an important part of the global free trade policies that Britain was developing from the 1870s onwards. While farms at this time were family-based, they quickly became fully commercialized and dependent on European export markets for their livelihoods. Agriculture monocultures predominated. The 1901 census recorded that around 14% of the country's total population were working in the agricultural and pastoral sectors.

Government subsidies encouraged agricultural expansion and increased production, leading Australia to become one of the world's main grain and meat exporters. This focus on growth in exports, increased production and increased mechanization – such as the introduction of the combine harvester and the scrub roller - has been the dominant story of agriculture in Australia through the 20th century and up to the present day. Significant changes over time include the substantial reduction in direct government support, and the disappearance of wool as a major export, to be replaced by dairy and beef.

Agriculture in Australia today:
As a sector, agriculture contributes around $35.6 billion annually in terms of gross farm gate sales, or between 3 and 4% of the country's total Gross Domestic Product.[1] There are around 295,000 people engaged directly in farming – either as farmers or as agricultural workers – approximately 3% of the country's total workforce.[2] While its economic importance has diminished over time, Australian farms still occupy around 60% of the total land mass. The country has 450 million hectares of agricultural land, and about 10% of that is cultivated with crops, grasses and pastures during the main growing season. Most soils in Australia are of moderate to poor fertility and generally have poor water holding capacity. Nevertheless, Australia is almost entirely food self-sufficient, producing 93% of its total food needs, and over 60% of agricultural production is exported.

The average farm size has increased significantly over recent years while the total number of farms has fallen. The trend is towards larger farms that are more capital and technology intensive, in attempts to exploit economies of scale. For example, over the 20 years from 1986-2006, the number of farms in the cropping sector dropped by 22%, from 39,000 to 30,500, while the average size of each farm rose 58%, from 450 hectares to 710 hectares. The total number of commercial farms in 2005 was 130,000, a 25% drop from 1985. As a result, the 'man-sown' ratio is extremely low, with less than 1 person per 100 hectares. Some diversification has taken place in recent years, with a 60% increase in the value of fruits and vegetables produced since 1985.

In the last couple of years Australian agriculture has received a boost with higher global prices for commodities. However the trend over time has been for worsening terms of trade for farmers, with the cost of inputs (fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, fuel, machinery, seeds) rising faster than the returns on sales of produce. This is the 'agricultural squeeze' faced by commercial farmers worldwide, and one result has been that many farmers struggle to make a living from the farm, so they turn to sources of off-farm income.

Compared to other industrialized countries, Australian farmers received relatively little government support in the way of subsidies and other payments. In 2005 such assistance amounted to 5 per cent of the gross incomes of farmers, compared to 32 per cent for EU farmers, 16 per cent for US farmers, 56 per cent for Japanese farmers, and 63 per cent for Korean farmers. Only New Zealand producers received less assistance, at 3 per cent.

Climate Change and Social Consequences
A particular challenge to farming in Australia is the climate, with prolonged droughts being an historical constant. Since only 5% of all agricultural land is irrigated, many farmers in much of the inland 'wheat-belts' are dependent on rainfall.[3] It is doubtful that irrigation is a sustainable long-term proposition, since the cumulative environmental effects are major: at least one-third of Australia's drivers are degraded due to high water extraction rates and nutrient run-offs, and the Murray-Darling system, which constitutes Australia's 'food bowl', is in a severe crisis.

The most recent and very long-lasting drought – which many people attribute to the early effects of climate change - has taken an especially heavy toll on many farmers. The drought has played a significant part in the high male suicide rates which have been noted in rural areas over the past two

[1] The Australian Farm Institute and the National Farmers Federation claim that including industries 'closely related' to agriculture, the contribution of agriculture to the Australian economy is actually $103 billion per annum, or 12% of GDP.
[2] Including linkages to related industries, the NFF argues that agriculture supports the employment of 1.6 million Australians, or 12.7% of the total workforce.
[3] Water is a huge challenge for Australia generally – while only 5% of agriculture is irrigated, that 5% accounts for 75% of all fresh water usage in the country.

decades: while in 1988 the rate was 24.6 suicides per 100,000 population, this had risen to 30.1 by 1997. Comparable figures in the Indian cotton-growing state of Maharashtra are an average of 31.4 suicides per 100,000 people between 1996 and 2001. As in India, debt – which is worsened by crop failures - also plays a part in these increases.

Perhaps the most disturbing pattern is the 1000% increase in rates of suicide for young men living in rural areas, observed in the period from 1964 – 1998. One study suggested that part of the explanation lies in the distorted sex ratio of nearly 120 young males for every 100 females in rural areas. Young women have increasingly left the countryside to pursue work and education opportunities in urban areas, as well as to escape from male-dominated cultures and gender stereotypes, while young men are more likely to stay behind. This combines with higher rural unemployment rates as well as a 25% increase in lone parent households from 1986-1996, suggesting high rates of marriage and family break-downs. The isolation of life in many Australian country towns is another significant factor.

Alternatives do exist

We can see in these patterns how the drive towards economies of scale and the over-riding emphasis placed on profitability is causing major ruptures in the social fabric of rural Australia. In Australia there is a strong cultural tradition which says that men derive their sense of worth and identity from engaging in productive and satisfying employment, of being the 'breadwinner' for their family. While there are obvious difficulties with this narrative in terms of its discriminatory implications as regards the roles of women and men in society, it is undeniable that long-term unemployment is associated with a sense of worthlessness, higher rates of depression, and of suicide. The trend towards capital-intensive but labour-scarce agriculture only heightens these tendencies.

Organic farming

Some positive alternatives are emerging. One is the small but growing movement towards sustainable agriculture practices, particularly organic and biodynamic farming. The numbers of certified organic producers has grown by an annual rate in excess of 5% over the past five years, and in 2007 there were 2750 such producers, representing 1.5-1.8% of all farmers in Australia. Two-thirds of organic growers dedicate themselves to horticulture, which accounts for around half of all organic sales. The value of farm gate sales in the organic sector has increased by 80% since 2004 to $231 million, despite the drought; the total retail sales figure for 2007 was in excess of $600 million. The rise in this sector is consumer driven, with surveys suggesting that around 40% of all consumers buy organic produce at least occasionally.

It is interesting to note that the average age of an organic farmer is considerably younger than the average age of all Australian farmers, which has now increased to 54. However the sector is following the historical Australian trends towards consolidation and professionalisation, with the average farm size increasing.

Urban farming / community gardens

An even smaller-scale, but increasingly popular trend is the movement towards city farms and community gardens that has taken place in all Australian cities as well as several rural areas, including Bellingen. On the whole these are grass-roots initiatives begun by highly motivated groups of local residents – predominantly aged between 20 – 40 years old – in order both to rebuild a sense of community and connection to the land, and to tackle a wide range of social problems at the same time. City farms and community gardens are recognized as bringing many physical, nutritional and mental health benefits, as well as being places where people can form social networks and engage in

inter-cultural and inter-generational exchanges. They often have a strong educational focus, and have provided skills training as well as many small-business opportunities for unemployed youth.

Local and state governments are increasingly seeing these sites as centres where new attitudes and behaviours can be developed towards sustainable living and thinking. Virtually all these gardens and farms prohibit the use of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides and fungicides, and they adopt water-conservation and recycling measures. At a time of rising food prices and high unemployment, they will also have an important role to play in ensuring food security for several communities. At the same time, they represent groups of people taking back control over food production, and so they are an expression of food sovereignty as well. A key aspect of these gardens and city farms is that they rely heavily on volunteer labour, which can be seen as a strength but also as a weakness, in that gardens may suffer if many volunteers lose interest. Youth – both rural and urban - has a key role to play in the further development and expansion of these small-scale sites of sustainable gardening and agriculture.

A possible outgrowth of community gardens – and one that we hope to see develop in Bellingen – is the return of small-scale market gardens that are linked in to local economies of small towns and / or urban centres. This is already happening to some extent, with a rise in the numbers and popularity of farmers' and growers' markets in many places. As concerns continue to rise over food safety and as more consumers want to re-establish connections with the origins of their food, these are trends that we believe will increase. In Bellingen and the surrounding region we would like to help local people and youth especially to establish a number of these gardens and link them up with local businesses and even directly with groups of consumers. This is along the lines of the US model of Community Supported Agriculture, in which direct relations are created between growers and consumers, cutting out the role of the big supermarket chains which – due to their huge market power and dominance - take most of the value of the produce away from the grower.

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