

# Visions of Sustainability Women Organic Farmers

JENNIFER SUMNER

*L'agriculture mécanisée est très présente dans la crise mondiale du développement. Les femmes sur les fermes biologiques résistent à cette crise en instaurant des alternatives qui présagent de meilleures façons de vivre. Les femmes sur ces fermes travaillent avec des valeurs et des croyances de base, actualisent leur vision d'un développement durable et contribuent à une véritable durabilité du développement rural.*

The crisis in sustainability is reaching global proportions, and agriculture is at the heart of this planetary problem. Indeed, agriculture is the world's major environmental interaction (Zimdahl), making it crucial to any vision of sustainability. But since the second world war, agriculture has become increasingly industrialized, dominated by transnational corporations and supported by legislation and international trade agreements.

In her article "Resisting Globalization: Women Organic Farmers and Local Food Systems," Martha McMahon sums up feminist scholars who see modern globalized agriculture as a "classed, raced, and gendered project that produces inequality, hunger, and environmental degradation" (204). In contrast, governments, supranational organizations, policy makers, and transnational corporations promote such agriculture as "feeding the world," which McMahon argues is increasingly framed as a masculinist (and white) moral project that is ideologically in the service of international trade and hides the fact that globalized agri-food systems control much of the world's agriculture.

As corporate concentration increases, the roles of women in agriculture are being obscured, marginalized, or lost. In spite of this official invisibility, women are active in agriculture around the world, and in resistance to the increasingly globalized corporate food system. One form of resistance is organic farming. While in danger itself of becoming industrialized (Hall and Mogyoródy), organic farming still represents a sustainable alternative to creeping corporatization. This paper will explore the visions of sustainability of women organic farmers in southwestern

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Ontario and how these lived visions contribute to sustainable development.

## Two Paradigms of Agriculture

In 1990, Curtis E. Beus and Riley E. Dunlap put forward an argument for two paradigms in agriculture: the conventional paradigm of large-scale, highly industrialized agriculture and an increasingly vocal alternative agriculture movement which advocates major shifts toward a more "ecologically sustainable agriculture." In their paper, they sought to clarify and synthesize the core beliefs and values underlying these two approaches to agriculture. By comparing the writings of proponents of both paradigms, they

came up with six major dimensions: 1) centralization vs. decentralization, 2) dependence vs. independence, 3) competition vs. community, 4) domination of nature vs. harmony with nature, 5) specialization vs. diversity, and 6) exploitation vs. restraint.

Eight years later, two women researchers, Marta B. Chiappe and Cornelia Butler Flora, argued that while useful, the alternative agriculture paradigm devised by Beus and Dunlap was defined by male movement leaders and, therefore, reflected their gendered perspective and could be lacking elements that make it more useful for both women and men. They interviewed women involved in the alternative agriculture movement in Minnesota and not only confirmed the dimensions of Beus and Dunlap's alternative paradigm— independence, decentralization, community, harmony with nature, diversity and restraint—but added two more: quality family life and spirituality.

These core beliefs and values form the basis of more sustainable ways of living. They not only challenge conventional forms of development, including global corporate agriculture, but also represent new ways of thinking, feeling and acting in the world. These core beliefs and values create the visions, shape the worldviews, and drive the decisions of people involved in the alternative agriculture movement. Do Canadian women organic farmers also hold these core beliefs and values?

# and Rural Development

## Visions of Sustainability: The Voices of Women Organic Farmers in Canada

*When you go organic, everything changes.*

Women are active in the organic farming movement in Canada, as owners of small businesses, leaders of organic organizations, restaurateurs, members of CSA's and co-operatives, apprentices, food processors, consumers and, of course, as farmers. The 2001 Census in Agriculture included for the first time information on organic farming and revealed that one-third of all organic farm operators in Canada are women (Statistics Canada).

What are the core beliefs and values of these women organic farmers? Do they reflect the alternative agriculture paradigm or do they promote a different vision of sustainability? Interviews with women organic farmers in southwestern Ontario reveal adherence to the alternative paradigm put forward by Beus and Dunlap, confirm the additional dimensions of Chiappe and Flora, and add one new dimension to the alternative paradigm—conscious resistance to corporatization.

### Independence

*We have control from field to fork.*

In terms of independence, women respondents in the Canadian study emphasized the importance of skills, control, self-sufficiency and independence from the money economy, conventional medicine, and corporate inputs. Women organic farmers wanted not only to revive old skills, but also to share skills as well, which was seen as necessary "for a sustainable way of working." They also wanted to share knowledge, especially knowledge of the soil—which is central to organic farming. Control in setting their own prices, in choosing how they marketed their products and over their farming inputs was emphasized. Control was also important where food was concerned—many produced and preserved much of their

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own food. Both personal and family self-sufficiency was seen as a goal for some respondents.

Women organic farmers showed an interest in gaining independence from the money economy. Banks were not viewed favourably by most of these women, and many engaged in barter with neighbours and friends, including trading labour for labour, labour for goods, or goods for goods. One novice organic farmer who was just beginning to barter saw such exchanges as "part of the social support structure." A number of the respondents freed themselves from dependence on conventional medicine by using alternative medicine and practitioners. According to one woman,

"the children have never been to a doctor." And finally, most women worked to free themselves from dependence on corporate inputs. Some bought inputs from neighbours, including neighbours with on-farm stores. Others strove to reduce their inputs or produce their own inputs, seeing the ideal organic farm as holistic—where "everything is your own."

### Decentralization

*This farm is not a factory.*

In terms of decentralization, women respondents in the Canadian study emphasized the importance of smaller scale, family farms, local buying, selling and support, and local food production. Some respondents preferred to stay as small family farms: "My goal is not to get any bigger. I can see more demand, and my goal is not to meet it." Smaller scale was also viewed as important because "consumers like small farms." Organic farming was also seen as a chance to preserve the family farm and to give young farmers a chance to get into farming once again.

Making links at the local level was important for these women. One of the rewards of organic farming was seen as "talking to people who buy stuff and who are happy about what they bought." While many industrialized farms prohibit visitors, "organic farmers are not so con-

cerned with keeping people out and disease out—animals raised organically can stand more.” Women organic farmers bought both farm and household inputs as locally as possible. They also sold locally—“in keeping with sustainability and organic.” One respondent envisioned developing a local, one-stop source for organic information, products, and services that would not only be a marketing centre but also a community centre. Local food also played an important role in decentralization. Many of the women grew and preserved a great deal of their own food. In addition, one respondent summed up organic farmers’ relationship to food: “As producers of food, we have a responsibility.”

### Community

*Organic farming is much more than a job—it’s a way of life.*

In terms of community, women respondents in the Canadian study emphasized the importance of both communities of place and communities of interest. The importance of communities of place was seen in their interest in rural communities, neighbours, the role of the organic family farm in rural communities, and supporting local production and consumption. Overall, rural communities formed an important aspect of the value of community for women organic farmers, because “grassroots are tremendously important.” Without rural communities, “we’d lose our connection with nature—we’d lose our human being.” Many women mentioned their neighbours, and the help that neighbours give in difficult times. As one respondent declared: “Whenever anything is going on, they’ll offer to help, whether asked or not.” Some also recognized that if you were new to the community, you had to make an effort to go out and make neighbours because “in a community, it’s a two-way street.”

Most of the women felt that the organic family farm had an important role to play in rural communities. One suggested that the farm should be aesthetically pleasing, while another felt that organic farmers should maintain the rural landscape, including the cultural and social landscape. The farm was also a place to have children around so they could understand what their parents did for a living, as well as a place where all could help and find work. There was also an understanding that the organic family farm should provide a model for the rest of the community: “If the only way to change is to set an example, including an economic example, then we are an alternative. If the organic farm survives, then it’s a model for the future.”

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Many women supported their rural communities through local production and consumption. This support took the form of participating in community activities and shopping locally. As one respondent offered: “organic farmers feel bad if they have to go farther afield to get inputs.”

The importance of communities of interest was seen in their emphasis on both the organic community and other communities of interest. The organic community provides a support network, a learning environment and a social group for both new and established organic farmers. One respondent said that the organic community was “very important when relocating.” Another replied that they did not do “much social stuff outside the organic circle.” In summing up the importance of the organic community, one woman explained: “That’s the nature of organics—being there for people.” Women organic farmers also expressed the importance of other communities of interest as well, including a spiritual community, the native community, the farmers’ market as community and farmers in general.

### Harmony with Nature

*Nothing toxic goes down the drain.*

Harmony with nature was expressed by women organic farmers as belief in “the land,” concern for future generations, dedication to the environment, worries about health, emphasis on the soil and care for animals. In the words of one respondent: “We don’t do it perfectly, but if everyone farmed organically, we wouldn’t have the problems we do.” These women respected the land and farmed organically because “it’s good for the land.” There was also a sense of obligation to future generations, expressed as “it is important to get a piece of land the family could have and work it back to a sustainable condition.” One woman expressed her concern for the future when she said: “We are given this earth, this land. We must give it in good shape to the next generation.” The soil is central to organic farming: “it all comes down to knowledge of the soil in the end.” The goal of one of the respondents was “a healthy environment from the soil up,” while another recognized that “healthier soil leads to healthier food and produces more.”

The environment itself was central to women organic farmers’ visions of sustainability, summed up by one respondent as “making as light a footprint on the earth as I can.” One of the rewards of organic farming was knowing they were improving the environment and not pollut-

ing it. Some expressed a need for balance, with an organic farm that would “sustain me without harming the environment.” Others saw organic farming as working with nature and a means for “healing the earth and healing humanity.” For many, the environment was central to the decisions they made about farming. For example, one woman expressed that “I make decisions that are more environmentally based that might not make the consumer happy.” They chose to buy and sell locally because “the environment is better if it is local—no trucking.” This choice extended to the food they ate: “I’ll buy local, non-organic food before buying California organic food.”

Human health and the environment are intricately connected and women organic farmers recognized this connection. “I wouldn’t want to pollute the stream because I wouldn’t want to be downstream.” Many changed to organic farming because of health issues. For example, one woman enjoyed the fact that she no longer had to “warn the children about not touching the pink seed.” Respect for animals also figured in the visions of sustainability of some of the respondents. One of the rewards of organic farming was working with animals—“We have bonds with them. They are not just machines to us.”

### Diversity

*Your diversified organic farms give back so much.*

Most organic farms grow a range of crops and have some animals, and many organic farmers aspire to be as diverse as possible. For some respondents, the ideal organic farm would have a variety of livestock and crops, or would be “a mixed farm with livestock and cash crops, with a little store that the urban people can visit.”

### Restraint

*Organic farming is smaller and simpler. Women can do it because there is not so much machinery.*

In terms of restraint, women respondents in the Canadian study emphasized the importance of decisions for the long term, recycling and voluntary simplicity. Making decisions based on the long term included which trees and plants to grow and working with rare breeds of cattle. The majority of respondents reduced their production of waste and were stringent about recycling. While one respondent practiced “minimal waste in my shopping habits,” an-

other always volunteered to wash dishes when speakers came to the church, so they wouldn’t use plastic cups. In the words of one respondent, “I try to produce as little waste as possible and deal with it here.”

A number of the women practiced a form of voluntary simplicity, saying that they did not want to get any bigger or that they were not into organic farming for the money. Some didn’t buy many things for either the household or the farm, while another offered that she was “not in the

accumulation phase of life.” For some of the women, the ideal organic farm would be simple and self sufficient, with horses, on-farm energy sources and low inputs.

### Quality Family Life

*The ideal organic farm is a happy, working, family farm on an ecological basis.*

In terms of quality of family life, women respondents in the Canadian study emphasized the importance of both family as a whole and children in particular. For some women, one of the main goals of farming organically is to have a harmonious family life.

Some women didn’t want to get bigger because it might take away time from family leisure and social life. Children featured prominently for a number of respondents. One woman felt that “family farms offer children a balanced life where they become part of nature and nature is the base of everything.”

### Spirituality

*Organic farming is like a calling.*

Spirituality figured prominently in the lives of some of the women organic farmers. It was not only expressed in general terms but also in the sense of a calling, in a conventionally religious sense and in terms of nature, the earth or the land. Some women felt they didn’t want the farm to get any bigger because they needed time for the spiritual—“to keep the life stream flowing.” Others saw organic farming as a calling, and explained that they “followed an inner voice when changing to organic farming from conventional farming.” A number of women saw organic farming through the lens of their religion: “we owe it to the Creator ... we only borrow the land—we don’t own it.” Others related organic farming to nature, the earth or the land. One respondent offered that the values she held included Mother Earth, preserving the land base rather than destroying it, and borrowing from the land base rather than using it.

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## Conscious Resistance to Corporatization

*Multinationals are not what food, farming and life is all about.*

Virtually all of the respondents had a highly developed, conscious resistance to unsustainable practices promoted by transnational corporations and encouraged by governments. This resistance was expressed in terms of big business/big farming, conventional food, sustainable alternatives, corporations and government. In terms of big business/big farming, respondents decried agriculture being changed from a way of life to a business, and expressed regret that good farmland was going to big business. They realized that farming on a large scale with inputs did not feed the world and understood that large businesses were detrimental to the family farm.

On the question of food, women organic farmers did not trust conventional food production. According to one respondent, "I don't want to buy food that buys into the bastards' model." When it came to sustainable alternatives, some respondents wondered why the government was promoting nutrient management instead of more sustainable agriculture. Respondents recognized they were trying to make an alternative agricultural system, and realized that alternative forms of energy were not allowed to come into the mainstream.

Direct questions about the pesticide industry elicited responses such as "disgusting," "revolting," "crooks (to be polite)" and "find a better way to use up left-over chemicals of warfare." Questions about the fertilizer industry resulted in much of the same: "very polluting," "greed," "they make you dependent on them" and "I am flabbergasted by them." Agribusiness was seen as "greed," "biotech and GMOs," "dictating" and "immoral." The banks were seen as "pretty big bastards" and "powerful," with one respondent having given up on banks, while another banked with the family. And the federal and provincial governments were understood as not helping the environment, but helping Monsanto, and as "immoral."

## Conclusion

According to William Rees, unsustainability is an emergent property of the systemic interaction between techno-industrial society and the ecosphere. In other words, when techno-industrial society, including industrial agriculture, meets the ecosphere, unsustainability inevitably results. From here, we can argue that sustainability can be an emergent property of the systemic interaction between a new kind of society and the ecosphere. Those people whose values support techno-industrial society work from the belief that "the only sustainable agriculture is profitable agriculture" (qtd. in Beus and Dunlap 610). But another kind of society is on the rise, as suggested by Patricia Allen and Carolyn Sachs in their vision of sustain-

able agriculture: provision of adequate amounts of healthy food and fiber for everyone who requires it, with production for need, not only for effective demand; non-exploitative relations in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and species; and equal access to decision-making for those involved in all aspects of the food and agricultural system.

Women organic farmers are building this new kind of society. Their core beliefs and values not only represent active resistance to the corporate food system, but also contribute to rural development and offer solutions to the global crisis in sustainability.

*Jennifer Sumner is a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Rural Studies Program at the University of Guelph, and teaches in the Rural Extension Studies Program. jsumner@uoguelph.ca*

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