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Extending Ethics

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Extending Ethics

Abstract

The primary objective of a series of workshops was to explore the ethical dimensions of Extension's role in achieving agricultural sustainability. A complementary objective was to increase participants' awareness of the ethical dimensions of agriculture. The workshops revealed that the ethics of agricultural practice is not a routine concern of Extension personnel. If the small sample from these workshops represents the view of the majority of Extension personnel, it is, at a minimum, interesting, and perhaps indicates a deficiency that should be addressed.

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Introduction

Each of a series of workshops encouraged Extension personnel to think about the ethical dimension of what they do and the contrast between what is and what ought to be. In general, Extension personnel thought that agriculture does not have ethical problems. Instead, agriculture's problems were viewed as the result of government policy and a poor economic situation. It was believed that agriculture's problems are economic not ethical. If this is a common view, then Extension programs and personnel would benefit from regular consideration of the ethics of agricultural practice. Ethics, at a minimum, is concerned with developing reasons that guide conduct--reasons that guide one toward what ought to be done, rather than just what can be done (Rachels, 2004).

The primary objective of the workshops was to explore the ethical choices related to achieving agricultural sustainability. A complementary objective was to increase participants' awareness of the ethics of agricultural sustainability. The workshops were supported by the Western Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. Four workshops in Colorado in 2002, three in 2003, one in New Mexico in 2003, and one in Montana in 2004, with a total of 218 attendees revealed that the ethics of agricultural practice is not a routine concern of Extension personnel. If this small sample represents the view of the majority of Extension personnel, it is, at a minimum, interesting, and may indicate a deficiency that should receive attention.

Ethics vs. Economics

A major conclusion of the workshops was that, for Extension workers, whether ethical implications of actions are considered is largely related to profitability. If an action has positive economic implications (profit), ethical consideration is appropriate. However, if anticipated economic outcomes will be unsatisfactory, then ethical questions are not considered. This is, of course, an ethical decision. For Extension workers, ethics and economics go together, but economic outcomes are primary.

Discussion of the importance of economic implications as a prelude to consideration of ethical questions is part of a more general debate about whether attention should be given to things that have intrinsic value (that which is valuable in and of itself) as opposed to instrumental value (that which is valuable because its use enables achieving intrinsic value). Things most participants

thought should be sustained were the environment, family farms, animal rights, and food safety. A common view was that there is no evidence that sustainability of these things had been compromised by present agricultural practice. The claim was that there is no lack of food in the world, but there are major distribution problems, and this explains why hunger persists.

What Is Sustainability?

Many participants questioned the definition of sustainability. Some thought that because it was a vague concept, it might be impossible to achieve. Thirty-seven definitions were suggested in nine workshops affirming that the concept is unclear. Most participants said sustainability cannot be achieved just by going back to the good old days. The definition accepted by most was: a sustainable agriculture must be economically viable, environmentally sound, and socially acceptable. Most agreed that it must also be politically achievable.

However, there was little agreement on what sustainability is or how to achieve it. All agreed it is a worthy goal, but most thought it was not something that demanded large changes in existing agricultural systems. Much could be achieved by tinkering at the margins of the system. As suggested above, it is not agricultural practices used by farmers that are viewed as creating ethical dilemmas, it is government policy (e.g., subsidies to large farms) and a poor economy.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the difficulty of achieving sustainability could be related to the programs of Cooperative Extension and Land-Grant Universities.

These organizations have done their job so well that over-production of agricultural commodities makes them abundant and cheap. This has helped drive family farms out of business and, in the view of some, (Comstock, 1987; Goldschmidt, 1998) has made traditional farming and farm communities less sustainable. Corporations produce cheap food and achieve large profits with little concern for sustainability of land or communities. Participants seemed to agree with Thompson's (1995, p. 64) claim that the central norm of agriculture is to produce as much as possible, regardless of the cost.

Several participants thought changing the nature of the relationship most people have with food production must be considered in discussions of sustainability. The majority of the U.S. population does not understand where their food comes from or how it is grown, harvested, and marketed. Participants agreed that achieving agricultural sustainability should be seen as an agricultural *and* a societal responsibility. Therefore, lack of public knowledge of the many links in the food system reduces the likelihood of achieving agricultural sustainability.

If a sustainable agricultural system is not achieved, the resources available to future generations will not be sufficient to produce enough food. If future generations do not have adequate food, then those involved in agriculture could be held accountable for lack of moral foresight. In addition to producing sufficient food, a sustainable system would help preserve local communities (Goldschmidt, 1998) and encourage environmental stewardship. These are ethical issues, but participants' comments revealed that they do not affect daily Extension activities.

Ethics in Extension Practice

When asked if their thoughts and attitudes regarding agricultural sustainability had changed as a result of the workshop, a majority said they had not. If anything, the workshop affirmed frustration with the current agricultural system and mistrust of government policies. Ethical discussion was enthusiastic, but participants expressed frustration with the persistent lack of success in moving agricultural practices toward greater sustainability. Most participants agreed that more education about sustainability and a greater understanding of agriculture's ethical/social conflicts was needed. But none acknowledged that they regularly engaged in such education as teachers or learners.

In general, participants thought decisions encountered in normal duties required consideration of ethics. However, although the moral implications of actions should be considered in most decisions, they seldom are. Several participants thought that agriculture did not deal adequately with the ethical aspects of major issues (e.g., pesticide use, noxious weeds, meat quality assurance, and antibiotics/hormones for livestock). Participants always concluded that ethical considerations will only enter the debate when agricultural profitability is assured (Thompson 1995). But they wondered if the above issues are really ethical dilemmas or just responses to sustainability issues. Some Extension participants said they thought about ethics, but all agreed they needed more education than one workshop was able to provide. They are surely correct.

Most participants thought an ethics workshop was interesting, but some thought such esoteric discussion was not particularly useful. All had a firm sense of personal ethics: truth telling, fulfilling family obligations, responsibility for one's actions, etc. (Rollin, 1999). There was agreement that a combination of a strong personal ethic and a strong social ethic (fulfilling community obligations, obeying societal mores, being a good citizen) define good people. A workshop goal was to encourage thought beyond the personal and social ethical realm to consideration of the ethical dimensions of agriculture.

The important question was not, are you ethical? It was, can you discuss and responsibly question

agriculture's and Extension's existing ethical foundation? That is, do Extension personnel have and use moral theories that are the result of careful thought and that are consonant with inner moral principles and available scientific knowledge (Comstock, 1995). This small sample suggests that consideration of ethical questions may largely be absent from Extension programs. Strong arguments can be made that it is only by examining the ethical foundation that actions can be defended when correct and changed when incorrect. Perhaps it is time to extend ethics.

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Discussion