

## Richmond Review Article – The Inconvenient Truth about Small Farms

By Stephen C. Mullins

In 2006, Al Gore released the book “An Inconvenient Truth” in conjunction with the film of the same name. The book and film raised the alarm about global climate change, and has since provoked much debate. One such debate occurred at the recent UN Climate Summit 2014 in New York City, where the world’s leaders gathered to politely discuss the problem. The Summit, in turn, inspired another significant event, the People’s Climate March, where almost 400,000 people noisily flooded the streets of New York to press the leaders to actually do something about it.

I think Al Gore hit the nail on the head with the title of his book and film. Sometimes a fact will be so inconvenient that the established order has a hard time accepting it, no matter what the evidence. Turns out, there is another ‘inconvenient truth’ that is becoming clearer to the world every day, but this time it’s about agriculture. More and more, it looks like small farms are the key to global food security.

Already small peasant farms feed about 70 percent of the world’s population. But that’s not the real kicker, it’s this – productivity per unit of land goes down rather than up with increasing farm size. This vexing “inverse relationship”, as it’s known to economists and development professionals, has been confirmed in study after study.

So why is this an inconvenient truth? To average people like you and me, it isn’t. In fact, it’s great news. But for the giant agribusinesses, research institutes and government agencies that have created technologies, subsidy programs and policies aimed at creating an industrial food system based on enormous farms that ship their products worldwide, it’s the last thing they want to hear.

For example, can you imagine the reaction of an executive of a mega-agribusiness like Monsanto to the news that in a small farm based global food system, products like genetically modified crops, even if they are proven safe, will have a minor role at best, and that most farmers won’t be buying seeds from the company anymore because they will have returned to the ancient practice of seed saving? That would be mightily inconvenient to their bottom-line, wouldn’t it?

Climate change is going to turn many cherished agricultural policies and goals on their head, because the more it worsens, the more it exposes the fact that our multinational food system is deeply flawed, often growing the wrong types of crops in the wrong places for the wrong purposes. Now, climate change is teaching us what really works in agriculture versus what we wish would work. And small farms work, so the sooner we start recognizing the leading role that they are already playing in feeding people, the better.

Does this mean the end of large farms? No, but it does mean we that if we start shifting our farming infrastructure, policies and subsidies to emphasize support of smaller farms instead of big agribusinesses, they will face stiff competition. Right now, many small farms are marginalized on poor land or have inadequate resources devoted to them, but when they start getting the support needed to establish themselves on decent land, they will out-produce the large farms that are working under similar conditions.

Here in Richmond, supporting the small farm solution to the global food security challenge isn’t a theoretical exercise, but one that will shape our city. There are currently 211 farms in Richmond, none of which are mega farms. However, much of the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) lands in the city are empty. This is prime farmland that should be under cultivation, but since this land is close to an expanding urban area like Richmond, it is becoming prohibitively expensive for small farmers to buy a plot to start a business. This problem has only gotten worse because of a surge in land speculation after

the announcement that the ALR would be reviewed for non-farm uses. Obviously, the city will have to come up with new ways to encourage and support Richmond farmers if they are going to thrive.

In my next article, I will examine exactly how small farms can fulfill their promise for securing food security. Hopefully, the farms in Richmond will be part of the solution. However, that future is cloudy. The survival of our farms will ultimately depend on us accepting our own local truth, which is that Richmond isn't a city that has farms in it, but instead is farmland that has some urban areas on it. Understanding that will go a long way towards ensuring that are local farms are celebrated as the precious resource that they are.

Steve Mullins is the communications manager for Richmond Food Security Society. We work to ensure that all people in the community have access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate foods that strengthen our environment and society. To contribute, check out [www.richmondfoodsecurity.org](http://www.richmondfoodsecurity.org) and find out how you can get involved.