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### The Degradation of the Small Farm and Its Transnational Effects

More and more small, family farms go under every day. They are out-competed, out-grown, and out-done by corporations who overwhelmingly possess more resources and by the governments which fuel this disparity. This research focuses on the mechanisms that wealthy, corporate farms use to undermine small farmers, who enables these corporations, and the role the resulting small farm crisis plays in topics of transnational concern such as immigration, global poverty, and environmental destruction. This is by no means a recounting of the whole story of the degradation of the small farm, and doesn't explain the full scope of the consequences. However, examining this issue through a transnational lense serves to broaden perspectives in terms of who is hurt, how, and why.

The legitimacy of the small farm crisis is constantly being diminished by those who benefit from it. For this reason, it is important to first recognize the facts set forth which prove that the status of the world's small farms is something worth being concerned over. One method of representing the crisis is through data which shows the number and size of farms. In the US (the total amount of farmland has stayed around the same), average farm size has doubled while the number of farms has decreased by more than 4 million since 1935 (Ferdman). The facts and figures available have yielded vastly different interpretations, mostly over what kind of farms are disappearing, and at what rate. Some argue that small farms have been on the decline at least since the Industrial Revolution, and the rate at which they are closing now is unprecedented.

Others say that this evidence shows that small farms have decreased in numbers minimally, and decreased in size by massive proportions. These analysts set up a spectrum of farm size and numbers which argue that small farms are getting smaller, large farms are getting larger, and there is a big hole in the middle with increasingly less medium-sized farms (Ferdman). Either way, these perspectives agree that (relatively) smaller farms are losing land and numbers to large farms.

Another way which the small farm crisis can be quantified is by looking at farmers' economic standing. For example, an article on financial indicators of the small farm crisis written by Alicia Harvie reveals that net farm income has dropped by 45% from 2013 to 2016 for small farmers and ranchers. This number is expected to drop even more. Additionally, farmers' debt-to-income ratio is extremely high, especially relative to the last several decades, meaning that farmers are making less and are less and less able to pay back what they owe. This is detrimental to small farmers who have to rely on credit for much of what they purchase, including seeds and fertilizers. On top of all of this, the farmers' land itself is losing value. Real estate values in some of the richest farmland in the United States (including the Corn Belt) are dropping (Harvie). Small farmers endure the economic struggles and more at increased rates, while the future is looking bright for large corporate farms whose profits are going up.

It can be difficult to fully understand this issue without definitions of the two main types of farms- small/family and corporate. An article from the Villanova University Environmental Law Journal describes small farmers as having a deeper connection with their land because for them, farming is not only an economic practice, but a "way of life." The same article defines agribusinesses as "industrial farming operations that are much bigger and produce significantly more products than smaller, family farms." This description communicates that the terms

agribusiness and corporate farm (used interchangeably) refer to the size of the farm, and its status as a corporate enterprise. It can be noted that this article's definition is vague in terms of assigning numerical values to "bigger" and "more." Due to the of the agricultural market and landscape, it is not possible to create a hypothetical boundary of the spectrum of acreage where small farms and corporate farms lie on either side of a specific integer. This concept will be key to understanding the global capitalist system's failures on the agricultural front.

From this information and more, it is clear that small farms are in jeopardy. They're losing their income, their land, and their livelihoods. Additional discussion on this topic reveals that even more is lost at local and global scales as a result. The three types of farms which have been identified by some as the hardest hit are wheat growers, dairy farmers, and cattle ranchers (Harvie). These groups' profits and product prices are taking a nosedive (they have been for a while) and agribusinesses are consistently more successful. While the combination of small farms' dire circumstances and corporate farms' dramatic rise to power presents an easy villain in this crisis, corporate farms are not the only ones to blame. There are several players and factors which have contributed to the problem.

### **Contributing Factors**

The contributing factor which is possibly most prominently discussed is government allocated agricultural subsidies. Although the US is certainly not the only government to subsidize farmers (corporate farmers in the European Union are even more heavily subsidized), the US does have considerable global influence, and therefore a lot of potentially exploitable power, so it is beneficial to examine their history in this aspect (Rosenberg). Subsidies' place in the US Farm Bill introduced by President Franklin Roosevelt during the Great Depression was to prop up struggling farmers in the United States' collapsed economy (Carter). Since then, their

purpose and effects have changed drastically. No longer a social safety net for poor small farmers, subsidies go to the richest farmers, wedging apart an even larger disparity. The convoluted method by which agricultural subsidies are allocated is what generates that inequality in distribution.

Instead of apportionment of subsidy funds being based on the financial needs of farmers, they are based on type of crops grown and amount grown. This is problematic for a couple of reasons. First of all, “type of crops” means that farms that grow cash crops like wheat, corn, and soybeans (Riedl). While these crops are no doubt profitable, they do not include produce crops like tomatoes and potatoes which small farms traditionally grow to feed their family and community. The government’s ignorance of farming for people rather than exclusively for profit leads to agribusinesses which grow huge fields of just soybeans, and small farmers that can’t make ends meet while cultivating food for nutritious meals. Second, the fact that subsidies are awarded to those farms which grow the most very clearly favors large, wealthy farms. Farms with more land can grow more, and as data has shown, there are a select number of large, wealthy farms in the United States (Riedl). Additionally, the wealthier farms not only can afford heavy machinery which raises efficiency and cuts labor costs, but they can afford to lose money on risks which could provide them with more crops. For example, wealthy farms do not have to worry about germination rates to the same extent small farms do, because with that much money, taking a little loss here and there is not the end of the line.

The way agricultural subsidies are allocated by the US government not only contribute to the problem of small farms disappearing as large farms take land and resources, but they have created a cycle of the rich getting richer. Antitrust acts and others of the like have aimed to take down “captains of industry” in oil and manufacturing, so why are agribusinesses exempt?

Subsidies give corporate farms free money. And oftentimes, in this globalized capitalist system, money equates to power, which has certainly rang true in the agricultural arena. So another cycle is tipped off by richer getting richer- the rich getting more resources. They have the money to divide up the land in whatever way will allow them to reap the most benefit. Small farms with sustainable practices that serve the community and cooperate with the environment simply don't make as much money as those agribusinesses which bulldoze forests and will pay (often migrant) workers as little as they can get away with. But value in this system is based on profit, so the most profitable (and often the least sustainable, most abusive) farms get the most land. Exploitation and destruction are rewarded the government and by the larger agriculture market. There are many farm activists who place equitable land use planning at the forefront of their movement.

Thus far, blame has been assigned to wealthy governments and corporate farms, but there is another very important culprit responsible for the small farm crisis. That is grocery stores. In a National Geographic article celebrating small farmers, Kelsey Nowakowski tracks a history of grocery stores in the United States abandoning produce from small farmers in favor of that from corporate farms. Because the majority of people in the United States buy their food primarily from grocery stores, when grocery stores made the switch, some small farmers lost a major revenue stream. Though there is no doubt of economic motives behind grocery stores' transition, it seems that grocery stores' primary incentive was to obtain identical produce, without much variety of shape or size. This industrialized uniformity is something that corporate farms could offer. They act more like a factory churning out "organic" products, as opposed to the small farmers who cultivate an array of different varieties of produce because it's good for the land and

for people's diets. Additionally, it's likely that no two fruits will look the exactly same because nature doesn't work in commercial aesthetics (Nowakowski).

What is important to distinguish is that a broken system has not spawned the small farm crisis. The system is functioning exactly how it is designed to. As established, the global capitalist system driven by wealthier countries such as the US puts money above people, and will continue to do so as long as the strategy continues to reap profits. By consistently allocating subsidies to the wealthiest farms, giving the privilege of land use decisions to the rich, and by awarding industrialized uniformity in the agriculture retail market, corporate farms chug on, gobbling up land and resources and leaving decimated small farms in their wake. With this foundation of information on the causes of the small farm crisis, its role in transnational concerns such as immigration, global poverty, and environmental destruction can be better understood.

### **Transnational Concerns Attributed to the Small Farm Crisis**

In the United States, the so called "immigration crisis" of people migrating from Mexico to the US is a subject of much media attention. Many US media outlets and officials view these migrants with suspicion and apprehension and have panelled discussions on what the ramifications of their arrival are. What often fails to get coverage is why Mexican people are migrating here. For many of them, there is no other viable option after their farms have gone under due to the invasion of subsidized US farms. These US agribusinesses have wrecked Mexico's agriculture markets by pushing out local, small Mexican farms thereby creating a situation where a large portion of the country is dependent on US corporations which are foreign and powerful, for something as fundamental as food. Some have hailed this as a wave of pseudo-colonialism, especially because when those farmers can no longer support their family, they go to the US to work, strengthening the US economy (Gibler).

US agribusinesses are able to accomplish these acts of undermining because of their government-funded enabling. First of all, corporate farms' subsidized income allows them to do such things as sell corn for less than it costs to grow, an option not financially available to Mexican farms (Rosenberg). Additionally, policies set forth by NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) led to a "US-Mexico economic integration" which involves such features a sharp decrease in Mexico's government investment into agriculture and a decrease in interest rates in order to better appeal to foreign corporations. These neoliberal policies have laid a perfect groundwork for the takeover of US agribusinesses in Mexico. People whose livelihoods have been devastated by this migrate to the US to work and send money back to their families, having to leave the elderly and the young in areas which are rapidly deteriorating. The Mexican state, Zacatecas has had its population cut in half by working age people migrating to the US. What's left are the many "ghost towns" of central Mexico without schools, hospitals, and many other basic services. And with noticeably empty fields (Gibler).

It should be noted that although the problem started with the United States, the Mexican government is not doing much, if anything, to stop what is happening and help their people. The Mexican government has been observed to largely put its focus on further connecting itself to the US economically, by constructing major roads to the US border and concentrating what agriculture they have left on cash-crops, not grown to feed communities, but to be exported (often to the US). Moreover, the Mexican government benefits from their people working outside of the country. The majority of these people send home remittances to their families, which constitutes a major source of revenue for the Mexican economy. However, this depletion of Mexico's labor force has also significantly slowed production and diminished rural economies (Gibler).

While these are not the only circumstances under which Mexican people migrate to the US, it is a situation that many Mexican people are forced to cope with. With the US' continued occupation of Mexico's agricultural markets and the Mexican government's complicity in the issue, Mexican farmers and their families suffer. Those of working age have to go the US, only to be met with racism, unsafe working conditions, and continued super-exploitation by American corporations.

Mexico is not the only country and immigration is not the only subject of transnational concern to be feel the wrath of corporate farms. Agribusinesses and organizations which work in favor of them have worsened global poverty, especially in regions of the world which have already are already impoverished as a result of long periods of colonial oppression. However, many of the world leaders of wealthy countries have managed to divorce that history from popular understanding of today's global poverty epidemic, and armed with the capitalist "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" ideology, they employ some aid funds to poor countries to show a generous facade and with an aim to inspire these countries to "help themselves" with strategies the wealthy countries approve of.

One of these strategies is an emphasis on free trade. Corporations and their governments insist that if countries only break down barriers to foreign capital, their people will eat enough to fill their stomachs and their economies will be stimulated to their full potential. However, the facts are that a majority of the world's poor are rural (Rosenberg). Cheap food doesn't help those experiencing poverty if that cheap food shuts down the impoverished farms that can't compete. And although this breaking down of economic barriers betters the global economy by benefitting wealthy countries, extreme poverty persists in much of the world.



Another strategy takes form in initiatives sponsored by the Global North like The New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition. This program is funded by primarily the US and the UK and aspires to decrease poverty on the continent of Africa. One of their methods of operation is to “modernize” African farming techniques, which means introducing unprecedented levels of chemicals to their processes, encouraging the growth of industrial farms (Global Justice Now). This is another instance in which the corporate takeover of agriculture markets and landscapes is comparable to colonialism. It goes back to the colonists’ notion that Africa was “savage” and must be conquered and “civilized” for their own benefit. Global Justice Now, an activist organization, points out that The New Alliance benefits the rich, as it makes it easier for foreign corporations to divide up and lay hold to African land for their development (Global Justice Now).

The corporate farming practices which contribute to an increase in people losing their farms and descending into extreme poverty or having to migrate elsewhere, also destroy the land. It has been well documented that the global poor are among the first to be impacted by environmental destruction and climate change (Center for Global Development). Corporate farming wrecks the Earth’s land, soil, water, air, and more through its destructive profit-first model.

One way this takes place is through sabotaging biodiversity both on the farm and in the ecosystem in which the farm operates. Because corporate farms receive subsidies based on what kind of crops they grow, they choose a couple of cash crops to grow exactly one species of over large fields, creating a monoculture. Monoculture practice not only makes crops more vulnerable to disease, but also makes it likely that once a disease takes hold, a crop is totally exterminated. A prominent example of this is the extinction of the Gros Michel banana in the 1960s. This

banana species was produced the world over in monocultures, and because of this they were susceptible to Panama Disease, a fungus which effectively killed the Gros Michel. Since then, the Cavendish banana has been adopted (the banana now sold in grocery stores), though scientists have acknowledged that although this species of banana has proved resistant to that specific strain of Panama Disease fungus, because the Cavendish is grown in monocultures, it is likely they will meet their end in the same fashion (Franklin). On the other hand, small farmers cultivate biodiversity, because small farms produce for families and communities. Families and communities don't eat only corn and soybeans, so small farmers grow a variety of crops to satisfy the different nutritional needs of a community. This is a benefit of growing to feed, not growing to only reap profits. There are also groups of farmers throughout the world, as in Bolivia, who strive to preserve their "ancient seed diversity" by growing a large range of crops (which their ancestors harvested as well) and building up a resource of the seeds which are accessible to the farmers in the area. These diversity efforts can actually save money, because it cultivates soil health and strength, not requiring as much fertilizer (Nowakowski).

Corporate farming undermines biodiversity in the ecosystem in which they function just as they do within the farms. To make room for more fields, these farms will demolish the habitats of local species with diminishes long standing natural biodiversity and impairs the ecosystems' balance and cycles. An example of this takes place on industrial farmland in Europe. Birds which have normally populated farmland in the past (a past filled with small family farms) have dramatically declined in numbers with the intrusion of agribusinesses. These birds' habitats now are home to crops and their prey is being erased by chemical pesticides, leaving them homeless and hungry. The massive decrease in multiple bird populations in the area is being warned as "a level approaching an ecological catastrophe" (Chung).

Deforestation is a practice which destroys habitats and can have even more dire consequences. While total amount of farmland in the US isn't increasing, it is expanding majorly in the tropics. Because the corporate farmers who have the money and power to do this cannot actually make more land to grow their crops on, they choose to brutalize the existing natural habitats. Between 1980 and 2000, 80% of the new farmland in tropical areas was created through process of deforestation. Since 2000, deforestation has slowed in some areas, but is far from stopping overall. This contributes to global climate change. When vast swaths of forest are cut down to make room for cash crops, carbon is released by every living tree killed. Even more carbon is released by their burning of the trees (again, to make room). So rather than these trees absorbing carbon dioxide and functioning as part of a productive ecosystem, they are slashed and burned, pumping immense amounts of carbon into an already warming atmosphere. Those gases are trapped in the atmosphere by the greenhouse effect, turning up the temperature on the planet from the inside out (Bergeron).

Another way that corporate farms damage the ecosystem is by polluting and depleting its natural resources, such as groundwater. Corporate farms install deep wells in order to pump enormous quantities of groundwater to water their crops (Kovacs 1-2). In time, this depletes the water table. At the rate groundwater is being pumped (not only by corporate farms, though they are a primary culprit) and the relatively slow rate at which it replenishes itself, groundwater is essentially becoming a nonrenewable resource (Chung). Groundwater is also contaminated by agricultural runoff from these farms, polluting whole reservoirs and aquifers. Both depletion and contamination of groundwater reserves affects people ( $\frac{1}{3}$  of the Earth's population) who rely on this as a source of drinking water (Chung). In addition, wetlands, an important ecosystem

component and one of nature's filtration devices are diminished when the water table goes down, and disrupted when the water itself is polluted (Rogers).

Corporate farms are fundamentally changing the structure and behavior of ecosystems for the purpose of beating them into submitting to agribusinesses whims of destruction. This contributes to global climate change and environmental destruction which eventually the whole planet will be faced with the ramifications of. In contrast, small farms have been found to be more apt to reverently work with the land, rather than against it. This is due to the fact that they nurture a closer relationship with their land because their family lives and works on the farm, endangering them to hazardous chemical contaminants used and most of these farmers do not want to expose the community to those hazards, as they benefit from the produce of the farm as well (Wender 3). When it is understood what the world is up against when it comes to industrial, corporate farming, people begin to talk about solutions to the issue. These conversations are already taking place

## **Solutions**

Because the small farm crisis is an issue with diverse and far-reaching consequences, the proposed solutions are being advocated for in different corners of the world and by a myriad organizations and coalitions. They call for different causes and execute action in different fashions. However, many of these solutions are rooted in a common concern for the land and for the people, above big business interests.

On the environmental front, the recommended solution to deforestation is two-fold. First, and probably most obvious, there should be an end to cutting down forests. That isn't enough, though. There also needs to be rehabilitation efforts in the areas already degraded by deforestation (Bergeron). Surrounding the problem of groundwater, some solutions aim to allow

industrial farming to continue, but to lessen its negative effects. This would include building reservoirs of water on farms, drawing from surface water, to prevent the need for groundwater pumping (Kovacs 3, 19). However, this proposal would stymie only one of corporate farm's methods of destruction and exploitation, and allow them to continue wreaking havoc in countries, economies, ecosystems, and communities. For this reason, an idea has emerged that instead of revising industrial farms, there should be a focus on helping small farms at the expense of agribusinesses. Because their practice almost always facilitates a meaningful connection to the land, small farmers do not cause the widespread damage to the groundwater that industrial farms do. Their family and their community often use that water to drink and to wash themselves, so they would suffer greatly if the groundwater reserves were contaminated (Wender 3).

One of the central solutions proposed by activists and analysts surrounding the damages the small farm crisis has perpetrated in the US and in Mexico is simply to stop, or significantly reduce, subsidizing wealthy corporate farms. Eventually, this would rejuvenate the competition between farms, allow small farms to once again rise to prominence, and correct the distortions in agriculture markets (Carter). Similar to the layered solution for deforestation, simply stopping the destruction is not enough. Whole regions have been financially ruined and others emptied out, so solutions must aim to lift small farmers up from where they've been pushed down. This includes giving small farmers the tools and resources they need to build local farming cooperatives and coalitions where they can financially organize and help each other when necessary.

To relieve corporate farms and their high-ranking proponents' worsening of global poverty, it seems that fair trade must take precedence over free trade. Free trade gives wealthy

corporations the option to move around the world freely, importing and exporting virtually whatever and wherever they please, while the countries they invade, most already destabilized by colonialism, are devastated and impoverished. What's left behind are conditions which could not truly be considered free. Alternatively, fair trade protects small countries, poor economies, and workers. They do this by setting restrictions on foreign exports and imports in order to invest in the country's own national, regional, and local economies. This means that small farms can operate without the imposition of corporate farms offering prices they cannot compete with.

The effects of the small farm crisis are felt around the world. People are losing their livelihoods, their lands, their traditions, and so much more. Any solutions that are undertaken must mirror the qualities of a good farm- ripe with complexity and teamwork.

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