

Subj: The Other America: Global model for rural collapse
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From: AgBioIndia@agbioindia.org

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AgBioIndia Mailing List
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Subject: The Other America: Global model for rural collapse

Farmers all over the world are in deep crisis. Whether it is in America, Europe, Asia, Latin America or Africa, despair is writ large in the rural areas. So much so that farmers suicides are on an upswing. Mexico, Argentina, Zimbabwe, the Philippines, Malaysia, India, China, and Lesotho are some of the countries to name where the new economic policies have exacerbated the crisis on the farm front leading to further marginalisation of the farming communities. More and more farmers are moving on to the urban centres in search of suitable livelihoods. Farm lands have become unsustainable, ecological crisis has worsened from the intensive farming systems. Drug abuse and crime have suddenly taken over what at one time used to be a vibrant and healthy farming world.

All this, when distinguished agricultural scientists and institutes all over the world, continue to ignore the rural plight and in turn are busy hobnobbing with the agri-business industry. Nobel laureate Norman Borlaug, for instance, is no longer worried at the plight of the rural and agricultural communities but spares no efforts in promoting the biotechnology industry. The International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) too has shifted the focus to further the commercial interest of the American food

companies. The CGIAR meanwhile has degenerated into a service centre for the biotechnology industry.

The apathy and neglect is clearly visible, even in the land of dreams -- North America. We present below an article from the columns of New York Times, which brings out the naked truth. What has been said in the article holds true for almost all the countries. And still, the world remains indifferent to the agrarian crisis confronting the rural landscape. There is something terribly wrong. Still worse, no one cares. The Other America has become the global model for rural collapse.

Far away in India, the global model for rural collapse is driving farmers to commit suicide.

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Symptoms of Economic Despair Cutting A Large Swath Throughout the US

**By Timothy Egan,
New York Times**

Loup County, Nebraska, the poorest county in the nation, is down to 712 people -- a third of the population it had nearly a century ago. A four-bedroom house goes for \$30,000. But building a life is much harder. In Loup County, what rides on the unrelenting winds are symptoms of despair that have taken hold there and across a large swath of rural America.

It could be Chemung County in upstate New York, which lost people and jobs even in the boom of the 90's. Or Bighorn County, Wyoming, where some high school seniors say their only choices are to move out of town or take up with people cooking methamphetamine in a rusty sink. Or Dalhart, Texas, a Panhandle town of 7,000 people where the murder rate last year was more than twice the national average.

Around the country, rural ghettos are unravelling in the same way that inner cities did in the 1960's and 70's, according to the officials and experts who have tried to make sense of a generations-old downward spiral in the countryside. In this view, decades of economic decline have produced a culture of dependency, with empty counties hooked on farm subsidies just as welfare mothers were said to be tied to their monthly checks. And just as in the cities, the hollowed-out economy has led to a frightening rise in crime and drug abuse.

But unlike the cities' troubles, which generated a national debate about causes and solutions, the rural collapse has been largely silent, perhaps because it happened so slowly.

Crime, fueled by a methamphetamine epidemic that has turned fertilizer into a drug lab component and given some sparsely populated counties higher murder rates than New York City, has so strained small-town police budgets that many are begging the federal government for help. The rate of serious crime in Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Utah is as much as 50% higher than the state of New York, the F.B.I. reported in October.

Towns of 10,000 and 25,000 people are now the most likely places to experience a bank robbery. Drug-related homicides fell by 50% in urban areas, but they tripled over the last decade in the countryside. "We have serious drug crime in places that never used to have it," said Allen Curtis, executive director of the Nebraska Crime Commission.

Poverty was held in place somewhat by the boom of the 1990's. Still, the 2000 census found that the percentage of people living below the poverty level is nearly 30% higher in rural areas than it is in cities. Of the 25 poorest counties in the nation, five are in Nebraska, five are in Texas and four are in South Dakota, the Commerce Department found. In Loup County, the dead center of Nebraska, per capita personal income is \$6,606 per year, just 22% of the national average, according to a listing compiled by the Commerce Department.

Equally telling is a growing wage gap that finds people who work in rural areas making just 70% of the average salaries of workers in urban areas. The cost of living, of course, is much lower outside the big cities. But workers in rural areas are 60% more likely to earn minimum wage than urban wage-earners.

No wonder then that the exodus from large parts of rural America is continuing, extending far beyond the long-suffering Great Plains. While the nation as a whole grew by 13% in the 2000 census, many counties in upstate New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Michigan and three Southern states, for example, lost nine percent or more of their population during the 1990's.

The pastoral farms of cider presses and pumpkin patches still exist, of course, but the ones that prosper are at suburban edges, or they are places with sublime scenery or an energetic college. Bonner County,

Idaho, for example, grew by 38% in the last decade, hooking its fate to outdoor amenities and second homes for early-retiring baby boomers.

Though the politicians who inveighed against moral and economic decline in the big cities have yet to weigh in on rural breakdown, plenty of voices are sounding alarms from this Other America. Some say that entrepreneurship has been stifled by central government subsidies to agribusiness, while the real problems of rural America -- which have little to do with farm policy -- have been ignored.

"The slide is not inevitable," said Chuck Hassebrook, director of the Center for Rural Affairs in Walthill, Nebraska, a nonprofit group that studies trends in rural areas. "We give a lot of tax breaks and direct payments to big agriculture companies that don't do much for the local economy, but rarely do we give anything to the little guy trying to start a business and stay in town."

In Nebraska, nearly 70% of all farmers rely on government largess to stay in business. Yet the biggest economic collapse is happening in counties most tied to agriculture -- in spite of the subsidies. Unaffected by the downward trends are cheap labs used to make methamphetamine, a synthetic form of speed that the White House calls the fastest-growing drug threat in America.

Nationwide, meth use has nearly tripled since 1994, and there are now far more regular users of meth than crack, according to the annual survey of drug use done for the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

In Wyoming, the least populated state, officials estimate that one out of every 100 people needs treatment for meth addiction. Users of meth tend to be white and rural. There were 300 times more

seizures of meth labs in Iowa in 1999, for example, than in New York and New Jersey combined, the Drug Enforcement Agency found.

Like crack, meth drives up all the other problems in these communities. Meth users tend to be erratic, violent and in some cases, borderline psychotic -- especially when on a sleepless binge or "tweaking" episode. Small-fry dealers steal and war among one another. Users abandon families, lose jobs and batter spouses and loved ones. "Meth seems to be everywhere in Nebraska right now," Mr. Curtis of the Nebraska Crime Commission said. "It's mostly Beavis and Butthead labs, with poor white kids making meth out of their cars."

Whether people would be less prone to using meth if there were more good-paying jobs in rural areas is an echo of an old question -- the one posed about crack and heroin use in gutted inner cities. But at least during the decline-of-cities phase, the topic was vigorously debated. By contrast, the problems of rural America were not discussed much in the recent national election, even in South Dakota and Missouri, which had close Senate races.

Instead, the issue was farm price supports. In South Dakota, which received \$3.2 billion in farm subsidies over the last five years and stands to gain an even larger amount in the coming decade, candidates of both parties swore to uphold the status quo. Supporters of subsidies say they keep entire counties from going under and ensure a cheap and abundant food supply.

But opponents say that the biggest checks go to large corporate farms and do little to stem rural decline. The farm bill signed in May by President Bush -- and backed by both parties -- will, over the next ten

years, distribute two-thirds of \$125 billion in payments to the top ten percent of farms, according to an analysis done by the Environmental Working Group, a conservation group.

These payments go to farm businesses that cannot make money in the global market without government help, or they are funneled to people who agree to take certain crops out of production. But farmers who are just getting by tend to be out of the subsidy loop. About 1.2 million of the nation's two million farms do less than \$10,000 a year in annual sales, the Agriculture Department reports.

In any case, with barely one percent of Americans living on farms, most rural jobs are nonagricultural. About 25% of those jobs pay wages below the poverty level for a family of four, said Representative Eva Clayton, a Democrat of South Carolina who is retiring this year, and who served as chairwoman of the Congressional Rural Caucus. Or, she said, more often the rural wage-earner makes a long commute to a minimum-wage job in the nearest regional hub city.

There are some bright spots on the open map. In some regional hubs, like Fargo, North Dakota., wages and jobs have increased. Across the Midwest, a number of communities have attracted enough immigrants to show population growth. But these immigrants come to work at meatpacking plants or corporate hog farms. And recent studies have shown those jobs tend to drive out other people who might normally stay in an area for its quality of life.

Representative Tom Osborne, Republican of Nebraska, has been trying to get small "action" grants ---- somewhat similar to the ones the big cities used to go after -- as a way to jump-start businesses in western Nebraska.

In desperation, other rural politicians are looking to an earlier model.

Two major homestead acts were largely responsible for people moving to some of least populated areas to begin with. Now comes the New Homestead Economic Opportunity Act, introduced by Senators Byron L. Dorgan, Democrat of North Dakota, and Chuck Hagel, Republican of Nebraska. The bill would forgive student loans and provide tax credit for home purchasers in depressed rural areas and small towns.

History has provided us a model to help the communities that are hurting in the heartland, Senator Dorgan said. But history, at least since the end of the last homestead act around 1920, has also shown that people who live in depressed rural America have been going only one way -- out.

[This article appeared in The Agribusiness Examiner: <http://www.ea1.com/CARP/>]

2. More farmers seek solace in death

Deccan Herald, Dec 10 2002

JAIPUR (Rajasthan): A desert land notorious for drought and hunger, Rajasthan records one of the highest suicide rates among farmers. Nearly 2,000 farmers committed suicide in the State in the last three years, with over 500 such incidents occurring in 2001 alone, according to the National Crime Records Bureau. The toll of such deaths from 1997 to 2001 was 3,329.

Agriculture and animal husbandry have become increasingly unviable over the years, with recurring losses and mounting debt burdens. In Rasheedpura and Palthana villages of Sikar district, 150 km from this capital city, at least 15 farmers have reportedly committed suicide in the last four years. Economic reforms, spiralling costs of agricultural inputs, denial of the minimum support price for crops, persistent drought and mounting debt burden have all contributed to the suicides.

On occasions even a good crop has failed to check farmer losses. Take, for instance, the story that Amar Singh Shekhawat of Mailani village narrates about his cousin Gyan Singh, a sharecropper.

Gyan Singh got a good harvest of onions in 2000. He struck a deal with the landowner to sell the produce in Bikaner district at Rs 65 per 40 kg. But he got less than Rs 20 in the market, which was barely enough to pay for transporting the produce. As a result Singh had nothing left to pay the landowner. On his way back home, he consumed poison. The suicides have increased over the last two years, villagers say. Most incidents, however, are not reported to the police.

Farmers say their tales of woe began in the 1990s, when India took its first steps to liberalise, and worsened progressively from 1995. Costs of inputs like power, fertiliser, seeds and water have soared, while the prices of agricultural produce and animal products like milk and clarified butter have remained static or even fallen.

"An empty 'katta' (or sack) costs around Rs 15 but the other year, a sack full of 50 kg onions fetched Rs 9. Transportation alone cost us Rs10 per sack," said Girdhari Singh of Rasheedpura village. "Farmers threw away their onion produce. Others did not bother to lift it from the field." Two of his relatives have

committed suicide during the last two years.

"Inability to pay your children's school fees or get your daughter married, or get treatment for someone sick - all happen because you have no money. They drive you to suicide," he said.

In October 2000, the onion price crash proved the last straw for his cousin Amra Ram. He consumed poison and died, but his wife Sanna, 28, carries on with little scope of improving her life.

Sanna works as a labourer when she can find work. She has sold off some jewellery to pay creditors. A sinking water level has also forced her to install a deep bore well, with her father chipping in with funds. But there is reluctance to admit the suicides.

Said Girdhari Singh: "There is the element of prestige - no one likes to admit financial problems, especially if they have seen better times and have a reputation to protect. "Many are also scared of problems with the police. One major reason is, it might create problems in obtaining further loans," he said.

**[See also AgBioIndia bulletin: 'Political wrangling over hunger', dated Nov 21, 2002
http://www.agbioindia.org/archive_m.asp?id=130&mo=11]**

The AgBioIndia mailing list is an effort by the Forum for Biotechnology & Food Security to bridge the yawning gap in our understanding of the politics of food. We believe this mailing list will create wider awareness and understanding of the complexities of the crisis facing Indian agriculture and food security.

This list will keep you posted on the intricacies and games being enacted in the name of eradicating hunger.

It is a non-commercial educational service for non-profit organisations and individuals. Subscribers are welcome to contribute information.

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