



Is small still beautiful?

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David Frost

Consultant, lecturer, organic grower

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In a blog, "*Reducing the price barrier for organic food*", I argued that the 'two-price system' which operates in some organic shops in Europe, offers the better off an opportunity to pay a little more for their food order to help the less well off. There are other ways in which the price barrier might be tackled of course and one of these would be to change the whole system of subsidies paid to farmers.

It's now nearly fifty years since the Mansholt Plan proposed that agriculture in Europe should be modernized and that small farms should be forced out and the land amalgamated to make holdings of increased size - but it's also forty years since the publication of E. F. Schumacher's, *Small is Beautiful – a study of economics as if people mattered* (Schumacher, 1974). Schumacher was a leading critic of Dr. Mansholt's plan. He believed its effects would be rural depopulation, the breakdown of rural culture and the increased exploitation of irreplaceable natural assets. So in contrast to Mansholt's policy to accelerate the drift out of agriculture, Schumacher called for policies to reconstruct rural culture and for more employment on the land. He also argued that economic policy was doing nothing to help the poor but in fact had "*the result of making those already rich and powerful, richer and more powerful.*" (Schumacher, 1974 p 72)

Although hostile reaction to the Mansholt Plan meant that many of the proposals were whittled down (Stead, 2007), the drive to modernization was under way and the trend toward larger-scale agricultural units accelerated. Over the ensuing years we have seen a fall in the total number of farms across the EU but this overall trend masks the process of consolidation (aka mergers and acquisitions), which has seen the swallowing up of small-scale farms by large-scale farms. Between 2003 and 2010, for example, the total number of European agricultural holdings fell by 20% but the fall was only in the number of smaller holdings under 50 ha because the number of holdings over 50 ha increased - by 4%.

Small Is Still Beautiful

Ian Pickup



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