The Conversion to Sustainable Agriculture


Lakhwinder S. Hundal*

W e are confronted with an increasing number of signs that our global food system is approaching a condition of crisis. The world is now facing a significant rise in food prices and increases in malnutrition and hunger. Food riots are breaking out in many places worldwide where people no longer have access to sufficient food. Environmental degradation, water scarcity, rising gasoline prices, and the agrofuel boom, with a resulting diversion of food grains to meet the global demand for energy, have compounded the condition of global food crisis. These are some of the facts that the authors of this book point out to emphasize the need for conversion to sustainable agriculture.

The Conversion to Sustainable Agriculture outlines the guiding principles and highlights the steps that farmers, ranchers, and policymakers must take for making food production systems sustainable for all parts, people, and scales of the global food system. Each of its 15 chapters offers a highly diverse and unique perspective of challenges faced by producers at various locations, as well as approaches used by researchers to address these challenges while applying the conversion framework within social, cultural, and economic constraints. Chapter 3 presents a history of the organic agriculture movement, and Chapters 4 through 6 discuss how organic certification helped farmers transition to alternative production practices in the United States. Chapters 8 to 14 present specific case studies from various parts of the world, giving a global perspective to the challenges and needs for conversion to sustainable farming and food production systems. The book demonstrates how farmers’ needs and initiatives, consumers’ interests and dietary habits, and researchers’ approaches and focuses are converging to promote the transformation of our global food system to ensure sustainability.

The last chapter discusses a paradigm shift in U.S. agriculture. The USDA census released in 2009 shows a dramatic increase in the number of farms and farmers from 2002 to 2007. The data indicate that the number of farms in the United States grew by 4% and that operators continue to become more diverse. The data also show a 30% increase in the number of principal farm operators who are women. The growing awareness of connections between health, food, environment, and sustainability are drivers for change. The concept of locavorism is emerging, with its focus on eating locally grown food, and the consumers now play a crucial role in the conversion process by demanding sustainably grown food.

The book is very well written and will be useful for students pursuing careers in agronomy and sustainable agriculture and food systems. Planners and policymakers should read this book, especially the last chapter, to learn how to achieve the “Level 4 Conversion”—establishing a direct connection between grower and consumer to create sustainability that takes into account the interactions among all components of the food system—in the United States and other parts of the world. I also recommend this book to young farmers who are interested in converting to sustainable agriculture and food systems.