Farming for the future

Korea’s original organic community models sustainable living for the world

By Martha Vickery

The communities of the Poolmoo Cooperative are located in some of the prettiest farmland in Korea, in South Chungcheong Province, outside of the city of Hongseong.

In order to live in one of these 12 communities one must buy into a certain way of living and being. People have a variety of businesses and jobs there, but unlike an ordinary community, no one is there just to make a living.

The Poolmoo area seems idyllic with its earth-friendly homes, green technology, and gentle rice fields that stretch into the distance. It has become a center for new agricultural methods based on environmental sustainability, as well as alternative education, rural area revitalization, energy independence, and development of community-led business models.

(above) Planting the rice seedlings by hand.
(right) A little poongmul drumming helps with the harvest.
(upper right) Ducks doing their organic thing.

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Pursuing this dream life has a sharp edge of reality, however. The cost is giving up everything that other people compete for—prestigious houses, cars, educations, credentials, and the rest of that long list. The work of sustainable farming can include things like picking bugs off crops one by one, collecting pig poop, or strategizing with a sharp pencil on how to get organic produce into a new market and make it sell. No one can rely on a fancy credential. Lifelong learning is a requirement.

However, compared to the cutthroat world of farming in today’s unpredictable market, there is a gentleness to the Poolmoo economic model. Producers combine resources and selling power, which can get them through rough times. Cooperative arrangements allow individuals with limited resources to make equipment purchases and investments that would be more difficult, or impossible, on their own. They also allow economies of scale usually attainable by better financed entrepreneurs. In a cooperative, small farmers can be more competitive in the marketplace, and enter higher-return markets such as organic products.

Sustainability is not just about land at Poolmoo. It is also about creating the kind of livelihood that can provide a living wage to farmers and their families. However, it is never easy to be a farmer, and the life of Poolmoo is not insulated from the issues of global economies that plague commercial growers everywhere. Changing the global structure of agriculture today is also on the minds of Poolmoo experts.

Poolmoo is a global place that attracts experts from everywhere in sustainable agriculture; they come to do research, observe, learn, participate in the life, and share their own ideas. It is also a local place, where people who grow up in the area and attend the Poolmoo schools eventually join the cooperative and raise their children in the organic farming life, transmitting their skills to the next generation.

A KEY INGREDIENT — DUCKS

Each spring, more than 8,000 baby ducks hatch at Poolmoo, and at the right time, they are put in the rice paddies, where they can eat delicious (to a duck) rice paddy bugs and plants, and live in palatial (by duck standards) duck condominiums—sturdy boxes on legs constructed on the edges of the small rice paddies. They are not in an enclosure, however. The ducks like the environment and stick around all season. Sometimes wild ducks fly in to join the club. The 8,000 that can be raised at Poolmoo are usually not enough to supply all the rice fields, so more are brought in from an area hatchery.

Poolmoo rice farmers know how to make life luxurious for a duck.

This is important work, since ducks are key players in sustainable farming methods. With the right number of ducks per field, the rice paddy has no need of non-organic fertilizers, herbicides, or insecticides. The ducks do the whole job. At the end of the season, they are also organic, slaughtered and sold. The cycle begins over again in the spring.

Without the ducks, there would be no Poolmoo. Rice-growing here, as everywhere in Korea, is the cash crop of choice. The difference is that Poolmoo produces organic rice, which has a niche market base among environmentally-aware consumers, and sells for 25 percent higher, or more, than ordinary rice.

Poolmoo was the first place to develop organic agriculture in 1975. Today, in Korea, about 7.5 percent of all food products sold are organic, and demand is growing. Since the Poolmoo school’s founding more than 40 years ago, the community has been leading the way in Korea’s now-ubiquitous “well-being” movement. As the first organic farming effort, it
also had to promote the idea that Koreans will be healthier if they choose their food and their lifestyles more wisely.

For obvious reasons, the duck is a symbol of the Poolmoo idea; a giant statue of a duck stands outside one of the main buildings.

The rice and other organic produce are sold, primarily, through farming cooperatives which connect up with consumers’ buying cooperatives in a kind of a giant-sized subscription business. The crop is promised in advance to the cooperatives, and the quantity needed is known at the beginning of the growing season. The contract is executed and the price is fixed at that time.

This marketing method is designed to reduce crop shortages and surpluses, and put some price-stabilization power in the hands of the growers. They know their selling price long before the crop is ready to harvest, therefore they know the profit margin they need to maintain. They concentrate on farming, and the cooperative does the selling.

Some 2006 statistics from an academic paper described one of the cooperatives, the Poolmoo Agricultural Producers’ Green Cooperative as including 957 persons who are involved in 63 product organizations. Of these, 35 groups were rice growers, and there were 22 vegetable growing groups, and six livestock groups. There are some product processing facilities that also belong. The cooperative sells to three consumer groups, consisting of a total of 78 members owned local coops. One of these consumer groups has 70,000 members. They also sell to 50 “eco-friendly agricultural product shops” and on line (at www.palma.or.kr)

The cooperative model is also used in the community for schools, government, and even finance in the form of a member-owned credit union.

GRANDFATHER OF POOLMOO

If there is a leader at this community of the like-minded, it is Soonmyung Hong, sometimes referred to as “Papa Hong,” or even, mysteriously “Papa Smurf” (the origins of this name are lost in Poolmoo history). He is a cheerful and very energetic senior citizen who wears a paddled traditional outfit in the cold weather and sensible, warmly-lined rubber shoes with lots of traction for the muddy Poolmoo roads. He has been both a recipient of and contributor to the kind of lifetime learning Poolmoo represents.

He talks local topics, about how the area farmers are leading the way, then switches to global food economies and politics for while with equal ease. He pushes baked treats on visitors, fresh from the Poolmoo bakeries, ready to discuss everything about this community. Discussion, after all, is another hallmark of the Poolmoo way. Hong is a respected elder, and still an active leader in the community. His expertise is not in farming, but in the other important aspect of the Poolmoo sustainability model — education. He also knows everything about the community since he has been there since almost the beginning.

Two years after the school’s founding in 1958, Hong arrived at Poolmoo and asked to be a teacher. He was 24 years old. At that time, Poolmoo was just a school, founded to offer Christian-based education to students and farmers in the rural villages. Before that, he had been a teacher at a senior high school. He was inspired as a teenager by the great Korean philosopher Sok Han Ham, who belonged to the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Seoul. Hong found out that a good friend of Han had founded a school based on Christian principles at Hongdong (the local village name) and “I resolved that I wanted to work with him,” he said. Han remains “Poolmoo’s spiritual hero,” Hong said.

Hong has taught at Poolmoo since. “Officially, I retired in 2001,” Hong said. “But I teach courses at the senior high and post-senior high. I am also the director of the kindergarten and the director of the school cooperatives.” Retirement, it seems, has been reinvented at Poolmoo along with many other ideas.

The Poolmoo community encompasses the farm families and students, teachers, and researchers who come to the community from the outside. It has schools for all ages: a senior residential high school where both local and non-local students are educated in regular high school topics, community building, and organic agriculture. It also includes the Poolmoo Community College of Organic Agriculture, which offers a two-year post-high course. Poolmoo high school graduates as well as mid-career professionals from all over Korea enroll in this two-year, hands-on course.

This global/local place has a population of about 4,700 divided into 12 small villages. The word “Poolmoo” refers to the name of the valley where the schools, cooperative businesses, and associated farms are located.

Hong describes the activities that happen at one building, a combination village store (no cashier — you pay by putting your money in a box) and lecture hall with tables. It is a busy place. Every weeknight, there is a lecture for college students and farmers, who, at the moment, are taking a course which relates history from the point of view of farmers. The teacher taught at the Berlin Folk University for more than 10 years. His course covers “How land was owned, how farmers’ status was throughout history, how this community helps improve farmers’ situation,” Hong explained. The class has also read some Chinese classics, he said.

Also meeting there is a book club group consisting of students and teachers from the high school who have recently finished reading Dante’s Divine Comedy. Hong seems amused that the students took on such a gargantuan work as a book club project, but they got a lot out of it, he observed. “Dante writes about Greek myths and history, and he handles very diversified topics, of politics and the work of the day.”

COMMON PEOPLE SHARING LIFE TOGETHER

Common people sharing life together is the motto of the school, Hong said. “This motto takes in a lot. ‘The common people, they are not particular about status, wealth and diploma. And common people make up a large part of our population,’” Hong said. Moving on to the idea of sharing, Hong pointed out that sharing is a very Christian idea, and that one can share best if one has had a generous and careful education. “Education develops our personal potentials ... Personal development must be connected to an active community development. Living together with ecology, and also with neighbor.”

In rural South Korea, as in rural areas of other countries, families are experiencing the flight of their youth from the farm to the big cities. The Poolmoo way of life, interrelated with education and community development, aims to combat that trend.

“We wish that, instead of going to a big metropolitan city, that people will work where they grow up,” Hong said. Cultivating minds to believe rural life is a possibility starts early. “During the school day, kids will grow vegetables and do some voluntary work at a community farm. And instead of pores over a textbook, they will do something like analyzing the quality of water flowing in the community and observe insects living in the rice puddle,” he said. “Here we emphasize that head, heart and hands must work...”
for wholistic education.”

This is a deceptively simple idea. Modern Korean life is anything but cooperative. Indeed, it is highly competitive in education, jobs, material wealth and many other areas. And the distractions of the many things in the big city are a real challenge. However, Hong believes that many people are pushing for “something beyond our competitive society, that we must build a society where life and peace prevail. Peace with nature and between human beings.”

A SCHOOL WITH SOMETHING MORE

There was an encouraging sign that people may be looking for something more at the time of the fall 2009 oral tests for new high school applicants. There was an abundance of applicants; the review committee could accept only 25 percent of the students who took the oral test. It is “regrettable” that they cannot accept more students for 2010, however, Hong said, it is a sign of how more parents recognize an unhealthy level of competition in the mainstream school system of South Korea, and want to provide their children with an alternative.

Choosing students is a complex process. “We don’t admit only talented students. There are mixtures, handicapped, and farm and city kids, all in together.” Not all students admitted to the school are expected to stay in the community, and not all choose farming for their career. However, the community needs a “network of good consumers who buy organic food” on the outside. It also needs people who are not farmers — artists, builders, accountants, and people who can do e-marketing and sales, on the inside. Cultural diversity is a major goal of the student selection process.

High school students get a lot of practical hands-on experience in organic agriculture, community building, and related topics in addition to regular high school subjects.

Students who go on the Poolmoo College of Ecological Agriculture have a typical morning schedule for a college student, and in the afternoons, they are working at the store or the cooperatives, driving tractors in the rice paddies, building houses, baking bread, and accomplishing many other practical tasks. “Many agricultural colleges, they teach only theory, not practice,” Hong observed. “After graduation, such students cannot be good farmers. They can only become middle managers and so on. So, community-based is very unique, and produces very good and capable organic farmers.”

In general, Hong believes, the Korean school system today has three weak points: It centralizes people into the large cities; it stresses earning a prestigious diploma over gaining hands-on experience; and it favors white collar professions over blue collar. Poolmoo’s educational philosophy is to resist that trend by encouraging rural life, stressing education by practical experience, and regarding people as equal individuals with specific strengths, not as workers in one category or the other.

The traditional village school, or sodang was conducted not to confer a diploma, but to provide education for human development, Hong explained. Some principles of sodang education are applicable to Poolmoo. Farmers learn Chinese classical literature and history as well as applied topics like microbiology.

This year, six graduates of about 12 or 13 in the class decided to remain in the community. The community college program began in 2001; the maximum number of students in the two-year college program is 25, and there are about 23 teachers, many of whom are also farmers. Some of the teachers have Ph.D. level degrees in various specialties, not only agriculture.

Some graduates have settled down in the community to be organic farmers. However, Hong pins his hopes on the promise of this college program and other such programs. “Soon, there will be a core of graduates in this community working with local organic farmers,” he said. Hong believes that more community-based agricultural colleges could “lead the regeneration of the rural community.”

One second-year student, Kyong-Nye Kim, quit her career as an elementary school dietician (jomyangsa) to spend two years learning a different way of applying her skills and experience in nutrition in a new way. She was “bored with institutional life,” being in an urban area and “living in a cement building,” she said through translation by Hong.

Poolmoo Community College was something totally different. Her studies included topics like literature and comparative study of religion in the morning, and organic agriculture and working in the field every afternoon. After her graduation in 2010, she said, she will settle down in the community and work for one of the school cooperatives as a bread baker. The two years at Poolmoo have been very happy, she said “and I will be sad to be graduated.”

Although, the program is small, it attracts a lot of non-student visitors who want either to practice organic or engage in research for advanced degrees. Hong estimates that 20,000 other people have visited and learned at the school and
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organic products is part of the solution to this issue. “That is how we can tide ourselves over these problems caused by the FTA,” he said, since the government seems to be insensitive to the plight of farmers. “The government wants to sell cell phones and motorcycles at the expense of agriculture.”

Korean farmers’ problems in the world food market are echoed similarly in the challenges farmers from the U.S. and other countries have with the global agricultural market. Hong said it is the same situation with small farmers in other Asian countries. He recently spoke to a South American farmer, he said, who explained that the profit margin is very narrow there because small farmers must compete with multinational corporations that keep crop prices artificially low.

Leading U.S. food industry reform thinker Michael Pollan writes in his In Defense of Food that the multinational food industry not only leads to production of unhealthy food, but also contributes to an unstable economy in which farmers must operate. Hong agrees with the theory, adding that community-supported agriculture offers an alternative to a crippled system in which food “trails” (distance from food source to consumer’s table) are high, and where food safety and consumer health can be compromised.

“Poolmoo” is the name of the valley where the school is located, but the word also refers to a bellows, a tool that blows air, an invisible thing, onto a fire, which can drive an engine or forge metal. “Thoughts and ideas, and principles, these are also ‘onshin,’” Hong said. It also refers to something that is necessary for life. “Without air, we cannot live,” he said. “Our school, it must also have onshin. That is the important part, more than just buildings or teachers.”

The onshin of Poolmoo — ideas that are used to fashion a lifestyle for independent farmers and create global sustainability in the future, will continue to be the important influence of this tiny community on the world, as well as on rural life in Korea. “All concrete things,” Hong said, “start from an invisible something.”