



# The Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Working Group

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## Getting Organized

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Lately I've been thinking about how we, as Northeast food and agriculture change agents, organize ourselves. I've been wrestling with sets of terms and relationships, and have focused on three. The first has to do with *who* we are, the second with *where* we act, and the third with *what* we do. Some of the following is over-simplified in order to encourage, I hope, further thinking and dialogue.

### I. Sustainable and secure

Sustainability and security have become catchwords to describe how people have begun to re-vision our food system. To me, sustainable agriculture and food security are flip sides of the same food system coin, and together have the potential to create real transformation. The food system (the world's biggest industry) can be described by patterns of (and the relationships between) production and consumption; "sustainable agriculture" has its roots in the former, and "community food security" in the latter.

Community food security (CFS) has been defined as "all persons having access to culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate food through local non-emergency sources at all times". It "has as its starting point the food needs of low-income communities". CFS's conceptual point of entry into food systems change is consumption. Many CFS activists also

look at a broader range of food system concerns beyond the food needs of the poor, including food production -- both urban and rural -- and access to a healthy diet by all consumers. To me, food security ultimately means an adequate, safe and satisfactory supply for all people (consumers) across all communities.

Sustainable agriculture's (SA) point of entry into the food system change arena has been production. Its original focus was on farming practices that harmed the environment, but before long broadened to address issues of economic viability, the structure of agriculture, social equity, food safety and diet. Even the USDA's (conservative) definition of SA as a "system of production practices that will satisfy human food and fiber needs, enhance environmental quality, conserve resources, sustain economic viability and enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole" -- while narrow in its rootedness in production practices -- hints at this wider set of concerns.

Each "sister movement" brings a certain set of constituents to the table. As a generalization, one tends to draw those concerned about agriculture, production, and rural communities. The other brings those concerned about food, adequate consumption, and urban communities. Each

advocates on behalf of certain under-served and disenfranchised populations. SA advocates for family, smaller, "sustainable", and minority farmers, farmworkers and rural residents. CFS advocates for low-income, minority, and inner city consumers and urban citizens.

Sustainable production and secure consumption are interdependent. People come to understanding and action through different doors, but once "in", are beginning to recognize the interconnectedness of the concerns. As "movements", CFS and SA have gone far beyond where sustainability means "fewer chemicals" and food security means "less hunger". Most broadly, food security and sustainable agriculture are conceptual and strategic complements, and as such, bring diversity and strength to our common cause.

Both CFS and SA embrace a systems approach, and are multi-disciplinary, holistic and alliance-building. Both promote policy (public)- and market (private)-based approaches to address the impacts that our centralizing and globalizing food system have on *all* people and on the environment. Both stress solutions based upon sense of community and sense of place.

Yet, not to be naive. There is inherent conflict between producers and consumers; farmers want to sell for as much as possible, and food customers want to buy for as little as possible. Poor consumers (in particular) will not be able to solve the problems of poor producers, and vice versa, and those who advocate on their behalf have different objectives.

On the other hand, a lot depends on how we understand the system we are trying to change. Take the NE Interstate Dairy Compact. Some anti-hunger advocates oppose the Compact because they believe that low-income families should not pay more *to producers* for milk. Given an analysis that argues that that money doesn't wind up in the

pockets of farmers, but goes to other players in "the system" on the backs of *both* producers and consumers, we can act not as adversaries, but as powerful new allies.

Together, CFS and SA offer an opportunity to broaden everyone's understanding of the issues and their interconnectedness, while simultaneously focusing our strategies for change. We need everyone to know and care that we lose 150,000 acres of farmland a year in New York state alone, that one out of six people receive federal food assistance, that 10 cents of every food dollar goes to Phillip Morris, that farmers are twice as likely to live in poverty as the general population.

But obviously, everyone can't work on all things, so as long as we don't work at cross purposes, each constituency's objectives form part of a whole. Strengthening the linkages between these sets of interests is a powerful first step. Beyond that, connections to other sustainability movements (development, energy, transportation, forestry, communities, etc.) as well as other social justice movements seems to me both promising and necessary.

## II. Local, regional and global

I've been reading a lot about "local food systems" and "community food systems", but have not come across any definitions of either. Like the terms sustainable and secure, "local" has come to mean many things to many people, and has taken on an allure that imputes far more to it than its mere spatial dimensions. Local has come to imply "good" (while global implies "bad"). A "community food system" similarly connotes both a small geographic place and a set of positive relationships.

Local or community food "systems" are critically important elements of the food system, but are not *in themselves* alternatives or solutions to the

problems accompanying our increasingly concentrated and globalizing food system. I want to decentralize or "relocalize" our food system by shifting the emphasis (back) toward producing, distributing and consuming as many food products as close to home as possible. We all recognize that reinvigorating elements of the regional food system saves farmers, farmland and energy, circulates dollars, provides jobs, improves diet, and revitalizes both rural and urban communities.

But purely local (and "alternative") food systems will never replace the global system. I want to make sure that in "creating local and community food systems" we do not merely, in the words of Fred Magdoff et al., "produce a minor irritant to corporate dominance of the food system", or worse, distract our own selves from necessary, fundamental, transforming change. To avoid this, I think it's important to articulate an overall strategy for fundamental food system transformation that is based on a larger framework that builds upon and connects local efforts.

Our inventions and interventions should be aimed at re-creating the food system at all levels. We need to shift the policy playing field and alter market conditions to attack concentration, to shift control, to demand choice at the local, regional, national and global levels.

The "foodshed" concept may help set a legitimizing context for food system transformation. When we place our local activities in a broader, regional context, we are better equipped to *understand and define* our foodshed, to trace what we produce, who consumes it, what is needed and what is possible. To me, the regional foodshed is a powerful and effective unit of analysis.

The regional foodshed concept links local community action with broader trade, transportation, dietary, climatological and economic considerations

that must be a part of the change equation. It will also help us overcome the disconnections between producer and consumer, and between urban and rural that can interfere with the creation of broader alliances. And, it will help pave the way for innovative and alternative "trade" relations with other regions.

Daniel Kemmis laments that government programs foster the illusion of urban and rural *independence* from one another. He says, "[the city] bears to its surrounding region an organic relationship that is the very essence of a successful economy; real economies turn out to be nothing other than the organic relationship of cities and towns to their [rural] surroundings". We need to develop "a sound understanding of how city center, suburbs and rural surroundings might together operate as an effective engine of economic prosperity" The well-being of one is essential to the well-being of the other.

As we gain a deeper understanding of the Northeast's food and agriculture system, we can sharpen our strategies according to the strengths and weaknesses of our region. A recent Wallace Institute report predicts a two-path agriculture, one consisting of larger, highly specialized, vertically integrated farms, with the second path characterized by smaller, intensively managed, diversified operations, many using organic methods. What about the Northeast's agriculture?

### III. Builders, warriors and weavers

Ultimately we share a common vision (the "beautiful future") of our food system -- one that addresses, in William McDonough and Michael Braungart's succinct words -- ecology, economy and equity. We share grief and anger about how we've come to feed ourselves, about how we're harming our environment and perpetuating social injustices. But, depending on our points of entry and our passions, we have different shorter term

objectives: some focus on conserving the environment and natural resources, or the elimination of hunger, or safe food, farm viability, community revitalization, improved nutrition and diet. Some of us pull a plow; others push a pencil. Some negotiate with the corner market, others with USDA.

Such divisions of labor are a strength. I am grateful to Steve Stevenson (University of Wisconsin) and his colleagues for introducing a creative way of thinking about our work, and for tying together the "who's, where's and how's" into a coherent framework.

"Builder work" has to do with "creating new productive structures based on alternative forms of socio-economic relationships". To me, this is the work of *invention*, often at the local level, often in or with strong ties to the private sector.

By contrast, "warrior work" attempts to influence the structures of governance and shape social rules and regulations". Warrior activity creates the political space (*intervention*) in which builder activity can occur. It reshapes the landscape, remove barriers and creates new opportunity.

I would add a third. "Weaver work" describes those activities that focus on connection, on the critical networking, organizing, linking, and communicating that bring builders together with builders and warriors together with warriors, and builders and warriors to each other. Weaving happens, and must happen, at the local, regional, national and global levels, and it provides both structure and momentum to our individual efforts.

In reality, most of us work on some of each. Every action that chips away at what Michael Rozyne calls "the beast" and every action that helps connect and unite us is important. I think we are truly getting organized, and I think we are really making a difference.

#### References:

Magdoff, Fred, Frederick H. Buttel and John Bellamy Foster, "Hungry for Profit" Monthly Review, Vol 50, July/August, 1998, p. 124.

Kemmis, Daniel, "Focusing the Countryside" in Community Food Systems: Conference Proceedings, University of California/ Davis, October 1996, p.24.