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# *Tasting Food, Tasting Sustainability: Defining the Attributes of an Alternative Food System with Competent, Ordinary People*

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Initiatives intended to create alternatives to the conventional, industrialized, global food system are now emerging. Conceptual framings of alternative food systems have been based principally on the reflections of academics and policy specialists rather than on the views of the producers and eaters who constitute the bulk of the food localization movement. At a conference hosted by the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, we explored the attributes of food system sustainability with 125 persons representing a broad cross section of the alternative farm/food community. Dividing into five discussion groups, participants were asked what the characteristics of a sustainable food system would be. From their statements we abstracted a set of attributes. Participants envisioned a sustainable food system as relational, proximate, diverse, ecologically sustainable, economically sustaining, just/ethical, sacred, knowledgeable/communicative, seasonal/temporal, healthful, participatory, culturally nourishing, and sustainably regulated. We explain these attributes and note their complementarities and tensions.

**Keywords**: sustainable agriculture, alternative agriculture, food systems, U.S.

*What we do about food is therefore far more crucial, both for the quality of the next generation, our own American children, and children everywhere, and also for the quality of our responsible action in every field. It is intimately concerned with the whole problem of the pollution and exhaustion of our environment, with the danger that man may make this planet uninhabitable within a short century or so. If food is grown in strict relation to the needs of those who will eat it, if every effort is made to reduce the costs of transportation, to improve storage, to conserve the land, and there, where it is needed, by recycling wastes and water, we will go a long way toward solving many of our environmental problems also. It is as a responsible gardener on a small, limited plot, aware of the community about him with whom he will face adequate food or famine, that man has developed what conserving agricultural techniques we have.*

Margaret Mead
"The Changing Significance of Food," 1970

*For many people, eating particular foods serves not only as a fulfilling experience, but also as a liberating one—an added way of making some kind of declaration.*

Sidney Mintz
*Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, 1996

## Introduction

Serving as executive secretary of the National Research Council's Committee on Food Habits during the Second World War, Margaret Mead was well-attuned to the central role food assumes in many dimensions of human social behavior. Still, her 1970 essay, "The Changing Significance of Food," is remarkably prescient in its evocation of the connection between the production and consumption of foodstuffs and what is today ubiquitously referred to as

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"sustainability." How we eat is now recognized as a major determinant of how natural resources and human labor are used and misused. In particular, Mead's linking of sustainable practice to scale and the embeddedness of production in a delimited community presages the work of a constellation of contemporary analysts who see the prospects for realization of sustainability in food systems as a function of the capacity to create or recreate alternative structures that are significantly local or proximate in character.

But "sustainability" is a contested term. Those interested in establishing or strengthening local food systems (Kneen 1989; Gussow 1993; Feenstra 1997; Gottlieb and Fisher 1998) or "foodsheds" (Getz 1991; Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson 1996) are reacting to processes of globalization that are as pervasive and extensive in the food sector as they are in any other area of production, exchange, and consumption. With "sustainability" having achieved canonization as a kind of cultural shorthand for "the green and good," the term is deployed by all sorts of organizations and actors who want to access the word's discursive potency but whose goals and interests are not necessarily compatible. Thus, both Monsanto and the Madison (Wisconsin) Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition (MACSAC) describe themselves as committed to sustainable food production (see Harpole 1995; Hendrickson and Ostrom 1996:6), though Monsanto's products (e.g., the company's herbicide-resistant soybeans, its interest in development of the "terminator" gene) are anathema to MACSAC's farmers and their affiliated eaters.

In *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, Sindey Mintz (1996:30) reminds us that the ability to name things, to bestow meaning, is a very important sort of power. Our purpose here is to explore what it means to name a food system "sustainable." Specifically, we are interested in what "sustainable food system" means to activists who are directly engaged in the creation of alternatives to an existing food system they see as too often destructive of human and natural communities. Indeed, we feel the kind of research we present here provides a critical perspective to this collection because it helps us move beyond the rhetoric provided by both sides in the debate about industrial agricultural and its alternatives and move closer to realizing how these forces work at the community level and how alternative movements can be viable.

There are, in fact, many formulations of what might constitute an alternative, sustainable food system. The formulations distinguish the hypothetical construct of the sustainable food system from the web of institutions and businesses and processes and practices that are constituted to manufacture the products Jack Goody (1997:338) has called "industrial cuisine." However, conceptual framings of alternative food systems have been based largely on the reflections of academics and policy specialists. While such formulations are surely valuable, they may not reflect the full range of understandings characteristic of the producers and eaters—the competent, ordinary people, as G. W. Stevenson (1998) calls them—who constitute the bulk of the food sustainability/localization movement. Such people are ordinary in the sense that they do not command exceptional amounts of economic or social capital, but the variety and quality of the competencies they bring to their work and advocacy make them principal agents of change in the effort to recreate the food system.

At a conference hosted by the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in the fall of 1998, we explored the meaning of food system sustainability with some 125 people representing a broad cross section of the alternative farm/food community. Breaking into discussion groups, we asked conference participants to complete the phrase: "A sustainable food system is one in which . . . ." From the resulting statements, we abstracted a set of attributes that differs in significant ways from the sorts of formulations commonly generated by academics and professional advocates. Collaboration with "competent, ordinary people" produced a distinctive sort of naming and—in Mintz's terms—a declaration of intent and agency by those without whom the food sustainability movement cannot grow and prosper.

## From Sustainable Agriculture to Sustainable Food System

The 1987 publication of *Our Common Future* by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development (better known as the Bruntland Commission) marked the stabilization of the term "sustainable" as a prominent component of the discourse on the global future. The commission (1987:8) defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Significantly, both the state of the natural environment and the issue of social justice were thus explicitly linked to the decades-old project of "development." However, the elements of this equation were phrased to permit the attachment of a considerable range of meanings to the concept of sustainability. Though it might be a common goal at the rhetorical level, the substantive pursuit of sustainability is for some to be found in the expanded application of markets and technologies, while for others it is to be sought in "finding alternatives to the [social and technical] practices that got us in trouble in the first place" (Orr 1992:24).

The semantic plasticity of sustainability is nowhere clearer than in its manifestations in the agrifood sector. Publication of *Silent Spring,* Rachel Carson's influential 1962 criticism of pesticides, gave agribusiness early experience with the manipulation of language in defense of its practices ("All life is chemical," ran early infomercials). Carson's work was nevertheless a catalyst for the emergence and growth during the 1970s and 1980s of an agricultural sustainability movement that focused on the social and environmental externalities associated with modern agricultural technologies (Dahlberg 1986; Buttel 1993).

The success that farm and agrarian activists enjoyed in deconstructing the legitimacy of industrial agriculture was reflected in a National Research Council (1989:vi) report,

*Alternative Agriculture*, which called for making alternative practices—many involving reductions of purchased inputs—"tomorrow's conventions." Faced with a growing consensus that substantial changes were needed in conventional modes of food production, corporate semioticians adopted a strategy that embraced rather than resisted the rhetoric of sustainability. For example, in a 1990 article entitled "Planetary Patriotism," two top executives of the Monsanto Corporation maintained that caring for the environment while meeting a growing demand for food "requires sustainable agriculture" and that "sustainable agriculture is possible only with biotechnology and imaginative chemistry" (Schneiderman and Carpenter 1990:472).

Despite their common appropriation of the term, there are, of course, substantial differences in the meanings given to "sustainable" by, say, the planetary patriots at Monsanto and the organic farmers of the Madison Area Community Supported Agriculture Coalition. In an effort to unpack the content of such distinctions, Beus and Dunlap (1990) proposed application of an analytical framework that distinguishes between "conventional" and "alternative" agricultures. They elicited the constitutive elements of these competing paradigms from content analysis of the writings of prominent and influential commentators on conventional alternative agriculture (see Table 1).

Beus and Dunlap initiated the necessary task of parsing the variable and even contradictory meanings that can be attached to the concept of agricultural sustainability. In particular, their distinction between the poles of "conventional" and "alternative" provides an effective, if rather broad, mechanism for engaging important differences between the competing claims made by corporate/bureaucratic and agrarian/activist perspectives. But because they drew on a restricted range of sources for their content analysis, the Beus and Dunlap framework does not adequately illuminate either the range of elements associated with agricultural sustainability or the complexity of meaning attached to the elements they did identify. Having noted that Beus and Dunlap's sample was entirely male, Chiappe and Flora (1998) interviewed farm women and found that gender not only affected the interpretation of elements of the alternative paradigm but also the number of elements elicited. To Beus and Dunlap's set, Chiappe and Flora appended "quality family life" and "spirituality/religiosity," and there is reason to believe that still more elements may be worth identifying.

**Table 1. Key Elements of Beus and Dunlap's Agricultural Paradigms**

| Conventional Agriculture | Alternative Agriculture |
|---|---|
| Centralization | Decentralization |
| Dependence | Independence |
| Competition | Community |
| Domination of nature | Harmony with nature |
| Specialization | Diversity |
| Exploitation | Restraint |

Although the "alternative" agricultural sustainability movement found its origins in farm environmental issues, globalization in the 1990s has prompted a broader approach to the social analysis of food extending far beyond the farm gate (see Grey's introduction to this collection). The failure of many proponents of sustainable agriculture to adequately treat social injustice (class, gender, and especially hunger) has engendered considerable criticism (e.g., Allen and Sachs 1991; Clancy 1993). Dahlberg (1993:75) called for an amplification of the scope and agenda of sustainability that would go "beyond the typical narrow focus on production (agriculture) to a broad analysis of complete food *systems*—which include not only production, but processing, distribution, use, recycling, and waste disposal."

Study and activism around food issues have generally come now to encompass the larger concerns of social justice and environmental interests in addition to traditional agricultural problematics. Those working for the transformation of the food sector now commonly frame their ambitions not in terms of sustainable agriculture per se, but as the realization of a sustainable food system: as, for example, a "regenerative food system" (Dahlberg 1993); a "local food system" (Feenstra 1997); or a "foodshed" (Kloppenburg, Hendrickson, and Stevenson 1996). Though the nomenclature may vary, formulations of these proposed systems share a number of important attributes (Table 2).

Table 2 suggests that advocates for a sustainable food system may not have described food system sustainability clearly enough to unambiguously differentiate their vision from that of corporate agribusiness. Chiappe and Flora (1998:372) appear to be correct in their suggestion that "there is growing consensus that sustainability embodies three imperatives: environmental, economic, and social." Indeed, in thinking through our own conception of "sustainability" for the Wisconsin Foodshed Research Project two years ago, we chose to express these three characteristics as "environmentally sustainable," "economically sustaining," and "just." But these formulations are semantically not very far from the DuPont Corporation's (1991) own trinity of "ecologically sound, economically viable, socially acceptable." What is socially acceptable is not necessarily just. But the relative subtlety of that distinction underlines the need for the set of attributes associated with sustainability to be sufficiently large or various to enable effective partitioning of the claims being made by the substantively different interests seeking to

**Table 2. Attributes of Selected Formulations of Sustainable Food Systems**

| Foodshed[1] | Sustainable Food System[2] | Regenerative Food System[3] | Sustainable Food System[4] | Sustainable Food System[5] | Sustainable Food System[6] |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Environmentally sustainable | Environmentally sustainable | Ecological | | Sustainable | Ecologically sound |
| Economically sustaining | Secure | Economic | | Sufficient | Economically viable |
| Just | Just | Equitable | Just | | Socially acceptable |
| Proximate | | | Proximity | | |
| Healthful | Health promoting | | | Healthy | |
| Diverse | | | Diversity | | |
| Participatory | | | | | |
| | | Ethical | | | |
| | | | Balance | | |

[1] Wisconsin Foodshed Research Project (1997)
[2] Toronto Food Policy Council (1994:4)
[3] Dahlberg (1993:81)
[4] Kneen (1989:16)
[5] Soul of Agriculture Project (1998)
[6] DuPont Corporation (1991)

shape the food system. Moreover, as Chiappe and Flora might remind us, if we have not engaged the spiritual or cultural dimensions of sustainability that they uncovered, how many additional attributes might we and the other organizations and analysts represented in Table 2 also be neglecting?

Further, just as Beus and Dunlap analyzed only the writings of males, and Chiappe and Flora interviewed only women, formulations of food system sustainability such as those represented in Table 2 are produced almost exclusively by academics and professional advocates. Although scholars and activist organizations play important roles in the movement, it is largely farmers and small-business people and workers and citizen-eaters who account for most of the activity in the ongoing effort to transform our food system. A definition of food system sustainability that fails to take their perspectives and standpoints into account is incomplete at best.

"Sustainability" is a key term in the continuing discourse on the future of the planet in general and the food system in particular. In this article we hope to contribute to the ongoing construction and elaboration of a robust, alternative vision of food system sustainability in two ways. First, we explore how a diverse set of food system activists, farmers, small-business people, and citizen-eaters understand and frame food system sustainability. Second, we generate a set of attributes of food system sustainability that reflect the complexity and subtle flavorings of those understandings.

## The Making of Meaning by Competent, Ordinary People

The Michael Fields Agricultural Institute (MFAI) is located in East Troy, Wisconsin. Its outreach materials describe it as "a public non-profit education and research organization committed to promoting resource-conserving, ecologically sustainable and economically viable food and farming systems" (MFAI 1998a:1). For the past eight years the MFAI has organized and hosted an annual urban-rural conference, which is intended to foster interaction and communication among individuals and organizations involved in "community-based efforts to build and sustain healthy, just, and local food systems" (MFAI 1998b). The conference typically features a wide range of panel discussions, keynote speakers, meals prepared by local chefs using locally grown food, networking sessions, artistic and cultural offerings. Providing diverse opportunities for both reflection and action, the conference has become a popular event that attracts a varied set of consumers, producers, activists, and other food system practitioners from throughout the upper Midwest.

The theme of the 1998 urban-rural conference was "Bucking the Trend: Local Food Systems in a Global Market." As a central component of the 1998 conference, MFAI's organizers decided to plan a working-group session in which all conference participants would collectively engage the fundamental question of what they were trying to achieve in "bucking the trend." How, in other words, did participants concretely envision a sustainable food system? MFAI staff approached the authors of this article for assistance in implementing this exercise at the conference. Since we of the Wisconsin Foodshed Research Project had been grappling ourselves with that basic question of definition, we agreed to facilitate the session. MFAI's organizers hoped that clarifying and sharing visions of sustainability at the conference might set in motion a process through which participants would engage each other in discussions and actions throughout the coming year. They intended the session to provide a broadly shared understanding from which to develop strategies for cooperation among those working to change the food system.

Some 125 people attended the conference, mainly from the midwestern states. Organic growers, community-supported agriculture farmers, and direct marketers of sustainably raised food comprised about one-fourth of participants. Others included community gardeners, chefs, students, artists, and members of nongovernmental organizations working in programs for pesticide reduction, healthy foods, direct marketing, and fair trade, farmers' market development, and food security. Though representing diverse interests and backgrounds, participants were self-selected and united in concern about some aspect of the food system, ready to act to move that food system forward toward their vision of a more sustainable future.

The workshop took place during the afternoon of the first day of the conference. Participants were divided randomly into five groups of 20 or so people. The workshop sessions were facilitated by three of the authors of this article and by two additional colleagues. Through a nominal group process, the members of each group were asked to complete the phrase: "A sustainable food system is one in which . . . ." Responses were recorded on paper and tape until participants had no more elements to add. We recorded a total of 323 discrete responses. Subsequent discussions centered on clarifying the meanings attached to particular phrasings, assessing the semantic dimensions and possible clustering of various elements, and exploring the tensions that were sometimes apparent between responses.

After the exercise was completed, we met to discuss the dynamics exhibited in the groups we had assisted and to review and share our understanding of the meanings of the responses we had recorded. We then grouped the 323 data points into clusters comprised of responses with what we perceived to be similar or related meaning and intent. In an iterative process of category and label construction, we continued this process until we arrived at what we agreed was a plausible and relatively stable rendering of the semantic contours of the afternoon's discussion of food system sustainability. From the total set of elements generated by conference participants' responses, we abstracted 14 attributes of food system sustainability. These attributes are reported in Table 3 and are ordered according to the relative number of participant responses associated with each.

Of course, we do not claim that the attributes listed in Table 3 are the only, or even the most accurate, representation possible of the sense conference participants had of what a sustainable food system might be. The reduction of data points to attributes was accomplished not by the "ordinary, competent people" themselves, but by a small set of facilitators with university affiliations and definite preconceptions about the form and content of food system sustainability. Still, in undertaking our task we were conscious of the influence our own predispositions might have and we tried to be as faithful as we could to the meanings that conference participants conveyed to us.

**Table 3. Comparison of MFAI and WFRP Formulations of Attributes of a Sustainable Food System**

| MFAI Rural-Urban Conference Project | Wisconsin Foodshed Research Project |
|---|---|
| Ecologically sustainable | Environmentally sustainable |
| Knowledgeable/ Communicative | |
| Proximate | Proximate |
| Economically sustaining | Economically sustaining |
| Participatory | Participatory |
| Just/Ethical | Just |
| Sustainably regulated | |
| Sacred | |
| Healthful | Healthful |
| Diverse | Diverse |
| Culturally nourishing | |
| Seasonal/Temporal | |
| Value-oriented (associative) economics | |
| Relational | |

There is no doubt that to some degree our own prior "mapping" of the attributes of a sustainable food system did shape our construction of the attributes for the MFAI conference. Seven of the attributes in Table 3 corresponded closely to the formulation we had generated previously as part of our work in the Wisconsin Foodshed Research Project. However, while the labels for those seven attributes might be almost isomorphic with those of the WFRP, we submit that the packages of meaning associated with those labels are greatly broadened from the conceptions we ourselves brought to the conference. Further, in engaging the responses of the diverse sorts of people attending the conference, we identified *seven* additional attributes that neither we nor other academic/professional analysts had envisioned. To adequately reflect what we understood to be the perceptions of conference participants we had to expand the list of attributes to incorporate their more expansive imaging of a sustainable food system.

On the second day of the conference all those attending met in a plenary session. The workshop facilitators presented the list of sustainable food system attributes, along with representative comments from the working groups. Participants appeared to appreciate the "ordering" we had accomplished, and several commented on how their own views of sustainability had been expanded and enriched as a result of hearing the wide range of ideas the collective group had constructed. That afternoon, the reconstituted groups convened to discuss what actions might be taken to move toward realization of their collectively defined vision.

## Tasting Sustainability

There are now emerging many initiatives—such as community-supported agriculture (see Cone and Myhre in this collection), farmers' markets, small-scale processing (see Grey in this collection), and municipal food-policy councils—that are intended to create alternatives to the conventional, industrialized, global food system. The framing of this projected successor system has tended to be imagined in rather narrow, if consistent, terms, involving ecological sustainability, economic viability, and social justice (see Table 2). Additionally, in the last decade there has also emerged a widespread privileging of the transforming power of proximity: "As Dorothy of Kansas finally recognized (and we have yet to), 'There's no place like home'. . . . It is time, in other words, for us to go home again and to *eat locally*" (DeLind 1994:5). Although these four elements were indeed part of the terrain of sustainable expectation laid out by those who attended the MFAI conference, the range of attributes their hopes and desires encompassed was considerably richer and more nuanced than those articulated by academics and professional advocates.

Below we briefly describe the 14 attributes of food system sustainability that emerged from the working-group sessions at the MFAI Urban-Rural Conference. Each attribute is first expressed in a one-sentence statement that, for versimilitude to the MFAI exercise, begins with the phrase: "A sustainable food system is one in which...." This is followed by a paragraph providing a succinct elaboration of the attribute as reflected in the responses of conference participants. Phrases appearing in quotation marks are taken verbatim from the recorded responses.

### Ecologically Sustainable

A sustainable food system is one in which the health of the environment is sustained and enhanced for use by all beings and by future generations. Sustainable methods entail working with nature to replenish soil and other resources through recycling, composting, and use of animal nutrients. Ecologically sustainable production means creating farms that are "self-sustaining organisms" where "production...increases soil and water quality" and growers "take advantage of local environment and resources [like] local crops and seed." Ecological sustainability may involve organic and biodynamic methods, but more importantly is characterized by a philosophical relationship with the land that is nonexploitative and regenerative.

### Knowledgeable/Communicative

A sustainable food system is one in which accurate knowledge about the food system is easily accessible and widely distributed, and people have the resources and ability to communicate that knowledge. To act effectively and responsibly, people must be well informed. The term "education" appeared many times in many contexts in the responses of conference participants. School programs were seen as a promising vehicle for long-term extension of the community's understanding of food issues. There was concern that information be available from multiple, decentralized sources and that local/indigenous knowledge not be displaced by the discourse of expertise.

### Proximate

A sustainable food system is one in which "food is grown, harvested, processed, marketed, sold, [and] consumed as close to home as possible." An emphasis on locally grown food, regional trading associations, locally owned processing, local currency, and local control over politics and regulation is found within a proximate system. A proximate food system will have "grocery stores close to home which carry local items with little or no corporately owned products to compete," and would provide "specialty items that characterize the bioregion."

### Economically Sustaining

A sustainable food system is one in which local farmers and area businesses are profitable, capable of supporting a good standard of living for workers, their households, and

the community in general. Given the vital importance of food, producers and other workers in the food system would be guaranteed living wages and ample benefits. To assure that farmers and farming communities survive, farming must be as economically lucrative as is off-farm labor. This can be achieved by raising the remuneration to farmers and farmworkers, reducing the number of work hours necessary to keep the operation intact, and increasing benefits, such as health care and vacation time. To support self-owned small- and medium-scale family farms and businesses, "producers [should be] paid [a] fair price for their goods by reducing the number of intermediaries between them and consumers." Paramount among participant comments was that the pricing of agricultural products must reflect the cost of production. Farming would also be a career path that many people had the opportunity to follow, for a sustainable food system would "support more people financially rather than fewer."

## Participatory

A sustainable food system is one in which people participate directly in the operation and governance of multiple components of the food system in ways that are more complex and influential than simple market transactions. Most people now participate in the existing food system through their purchase of foodstuffs in stores and restaurants. But this provides only weak and indirect influence over the structure or operation of the food system. Participants felt a much more complex engagement with elements of the food system from "seed to consumption" was required for sustainability. This was perceived in two ways. First, there was a clear desire that all people, children to older adults, ought to have the opportunity to grow and process food themselves. Second, there was a more generalized sense that enhanced participation in the food system implied becoming activated as a citizen-eater: someone who is involved in democratic, decision-making processes.

## Just/Ethical

A sustainable food system is one that guarantees just conditions and ethical treatment for all workers and all beings affected by the food system. Participants in the working groups emphasized that the food system should be characterized by justice for producers both within the United States and in other countries. A just food system would assure that people everywhere had the opportunity to support themselves and to thrive through work in farming and in the food sector. For this to happen, people must have access to land to farm. Conditions of employment in agriculture and the food sector should be safe, enabling, and hospitable. Justice also includes equity, such that there is "universal access to good food." An ethical food system would also be respectful of species integrity, provide for humane treatment of farm animals, and treat the earth with respect.

## Sustainably Regulated

A sustainable food system is one in which regulations enhance environmental resources, protect a diversity of small- and medium-scale farm and production units, and provide safe and just working conditions while promoting production of healthful and nutritious food. Absentee land ownership and speculation in real estate value encourage unsustainable practices, yet are encouraged by current regulations and policies. Also, larger factory-farm operations are given privileges that small, diversified farms do not receive. Instead, government agencies should provide "direct monetary rewards" to farmers using sustainable practices. Further, regulatory structures might consider applying tariffs to food based on distance traveled, zoning laws should be "favorable . . . to promote/protect mixed land uses," and "NAFTA and GATT should be turned around."

## Sacred

A sustainable food system is one in which food is recognized as a sacramental medium for honoring and nurturing the spiritual well-being of all creation. To acknowledge the sacred dimension of food is to acknowledge the symbolic and spiritual values that food and food-based relationships should convey. This means valuing food beyond its economic exchange value and caloric/nutrient functionality. Sacred aspects of food reflect expressions of the human community in which people "spiritually feed each other" and affirm the gifts of life flowing from both human community and the rhythms of the earth. A sacred understanding of food resists the commodification of living beings.

## Healthful

A sustainable food system is one in which both the food itself and the manner in which that food was produced contribute to the health of eaters and producers. Considerable evidence indicates that some food now available is either not itself as healthy as it might be (e.g., meat recalls, pesticide and bacterial contamination of fruits and vegetables) or is consumed in quantities that are not healthy (e.g., meats, fried foods, candies, soda). In a sustainable food system the production and consumption of food would preserve and enhance the health and well-being of both workers and eaters. Quality, whole, nutritious foods would be available to all. Cooking would be for both sustenance and pleasure. Freshness and taste would be valued, and both production and consumption would contribute to maintenance of emotional as well as physical wellness.

## Diverse

A sustainable food system is one in which diversity is encouraged in the farm ecosystem, within agronomic methods, for crop and animal varieties, and for consumer choices

at the marketplace. This is reflected as unique crops and animals are preserved, a "diversity of food is distributed and produced locally," and "small-scale production, distribution, and marketing is encouraged." A diverse food system "relishes blemishes," invites increased opportunities for children, youth, adult, and seniors from many cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds, and increases participation of consumers.

### Culturally Nourishing

A sustainable food system is one in which the production, preparation, and consumption of food are respected for their capacity to express the cultural manifestations of self and community. In a sustainable food system, eaters are aware of the ways in which consumption can be an affirmation of their own status as subjects, of their community relationships, and of their cultural contexts. Responsible food production and preparation are viewed as art forms and the associated food professionals are accorded appropriate respect as bearers of cultural continuity and creativity. Sustainable food systems will be culturally diverse and will support the soul foods of a range of regional and ethnic communities.

### Seasonal/Temporal

A sustainable food system acknowledges and respects the seasonal nature of agricultural production and utilizes this seasonality to provide information and to enhance the association of food with place. Part of eating locally is eating seasonally and eating "in tune with the seasons [to] enhance sustainability." Within a sustainable food system, "new community celebrations...incorporating seasonal dimensions" would be established, and attention would be given to being "temporally tuned–[to] seasons, light and dark, birth and death."

### Value-Oriented (Associative) Economics

A sustainable food system is one based on an economic system that favors environmental sustainability, relationships between farmers and consumers, fairness and equity, and strong communities over the profit motive. Throughout the discussions of the working groups, a pervading and recurrent theme was the need to redirect the economic system to reflect values other than the ability to compete in the market with greatest efficiency to generate the greatest profit. Participants talked about associative economic systems, which value sustainability, justice, equity, beauty, culture, self-determination, and other ideals. The food system can be a starting point for associative economics. It "creates the conditions for alternative and associative economies" by devising many ways for people to have access to food—through purchase, trade, barter, or growing one's own.

### Relational

A sustainable food system is one in which farmers, consumers, processors, and other participants have relationships, either through direct contact and/or through networks emphasizing responsibility, communication, and care for each other and the land. While the dominant agrifood system is characterized by anonymity, a relationally oriented system would focus on "more direct face-to-face contact between producers and consumers," risk-sharing, "tamed consumerism," and the establishment of mutual support networks.

We of the Wisconsin Foodshed Research Project were excited and energized by the formulation of food system sustainability that emerged from the rural-urban conference, which was significantly richer in both quantitative and qualitative dimensionality than any other we had encountered. Surprisingly, the spiritual (sacred), cultural (culturally nourishing), and informational (knowledgeable/communicative) spheres are domains that have not been much explored in contemporary debates on the future of the food system. That academic and official discourse has been so empty of concern for these elements is perhaps testimony to the need for further engagement with the viewpoints of competent, ordinary people to break professional analysts loose from their limited perspectives.

This is not to say that those attending the rural-urban conference were monolithic in their outlook. Though they shared many attitudes and stances, their responses also revealed the tensions that derive from the embeddedness of alternative initiatives in an overarching dominant system. While there was a broad commitment to an "associative economics" that did not look simply to price as a measure of value, so was there a simultaneous sense that "economically sustaining" ought to apply in the context of the existing market structure. Lockeretz (1986:293) has made the point that "alternative agriculturalists vary considerably in how they balance pragmatism and commitment to an ideal," and that central tension is clearly manifest among alternative food system actors as well.

## Conclusion

"Sustainability" is now being deployed by many different interests, in many different constructions, and for many different purposes. Those of us who are not willing to trust the transformation of our food system to the self-styled planetary patriots of the agrifood transnationals must be committed to constructing and promulgating our own robust and persuasive version of food system sustainability.

In doing so, we must be attentive to the full range of understandings and perspectives of those whose compass headings are similar to our own. Too often, formulations of food system sustainability have been constructed around a narrow set of elements, by a narrow set of analysts. The 1998 Michael Fields Agricultural Institute Urban-Rural Conference provided an opportunity to explore how a broad

cross section of people interested in working toward a sustainable food system would collectively define such a system. The meanings expressed in the responses of conference participants were mediated through facilitators, which is why the title of this article refers to the definition of the attributes of an alternative food system *with*, rather than *by*, competent, ordinary people. The collaborative process that was employed produced a set of attributes that were novel and illuminating.

It also produced a set of attributes that may prove resistant to cooptation by the proponents of a "conventional" sustainability. We have seen that the ubiquitous mantra of "environmentally sustainable," "economically sustaining," and "just" can be translated by DuPont as "ecologically sound, economically viable, socially acceptable." Associating a broader range of attributes with food system sustainability provides more dimensions for distinguishing between competing versions of that notion. Indeed, simple insistence upon inclusion of the term "healthful" in a vision statement was sufficient to provoke the withdrawal of the conservative American Farm Bureau Federation from a coalition of groups that have now joined together to work for a sustainable food system in our own Dane County, Wisconsin.

We do not suggest that the attributes we have described here are authoritative. Indeed, our point is that people from many backgrounds and social locations are participating in initiatives and movements for food system sustainability. It is through honoring and understanding the multiple dimensions of motivation and intent that people bring to the transformative project that it can actually be brought to fruition.

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