

Getting Real About Food

... & about rebuilding our food system

BY SANDRA MARK, HERB BARBOLET,
& FRANK MORELAND

“It comes as little surprise that the World Trade Organisation’s Doha Round of negotiations stalled this past July. The vested interests of the Productionist Paradigm are very powerful. They are unlikely to give up easily the ‘business as usual’ scenario that serves them so well. This brief impasse could be a historic moment in which alternatives to a global trading system structured to serve multinational corporations can come to the fore. There is cause for optimism. Different perspectives and solutions to trade found a voice in Doha. In addition, issues relevant for food system sustainability – including the needs of artisanal fishing, forest dwellers and subsistence farming – were not totally sidelined. But there is the lurking danger that without an international agreement it will be a case of ‘divide and conquer’ as the powerful surge ahead at the expense of the agriculturally weak.”

Michael Heasman, PhD

The meta forces at work in the food system are the same as those influencing virtually every aspect of our lives. Globalization, corporate concentration, “free trade,” a fixation on high technology for addressing all that ails us – they’re all there. But in the food system, these forces are arguably more advanced and experienced more intimately than elsewhere.

Thus what is happening in food is a metaphor for understanding the dilemmas facing society as a whole, and for addressing those dilemmas. Values – subtle messages about health, community, property, power, and Planet Earth itself – are imparted with every morsel of food we consume. At present, those messages are dysfunctional for most of humanity and unsustainable economically, socially, environmentally, or culturally. They lull the Canadian public into complaisance as Food Wars rage about them.

Not so in the South, as the recent headlines out of the Doha Round of World Trade Organization negotiations reveal.



Southern countries are leading the challenge to a system of international trade agreements that have benefited transnational corporations and impoverished communities. It has taken disaster to awaken these countries to the Food Wars and get them fighting back. Must Canadians too experience a disaster to summon up equivalent creativity, co-operation, and courage?

The signs are mixed. Currently, even the doubts making their way into the minds of Canadian eaters get misconstrued. Outbreaks of Avian flu have concentrated public attention not on intensive chicken production (the Flu’s likely root cause) but on outdoor organic chicken production. In a like manner, emergency food planning – not to be confused with food banks and other charitable mechanisms – has been undertaken by some Canadian municipalities. But they only include contingencies for feeding aid workers, not the general population. The rest of us will have to fend for ourselves.

Still, there is reason for hope. In the past two years or so, we have seen mainstream interest and support for policies and programs that promote a healthier and more environmentally and economically sustainable food system. More impressive yet is the growing impact of the Conscious Consumer. Large companies have identified the buyers of ecological, local, and healthy food as niche markets worthy of investments in production, distribution, and marketing.

Now is the time to identify what is holding us back as a society. It is also the time for people dedicated to fresh food, grown locally and processed without harmful chemicals and additives – dedicated to *real food*, in other words – to *get real*. It is time to contend for the eyes, ears, and mouths of the body politic; and we will only contend if we *get organized*.

A Wealth of Community Action

As the chart “Canadian Community Response” (see pp. 26-27) and the contents of this magazine attest, community, CED, and co-operative organizations are taking a great range of practical steps to increase food security. There is plenty listed there to celebrate. There is also plenty of room for real concern.

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In particular, it is time to recognize that the five different types of response identified in the chart often have no linkage to one another. In some instances they appear actually to compete with one another. That competition may be ideological in nature, for example, over the relative impact of public monies, market revenue, and charitable donations on the performance of community initiatives. The competition can also be fiercely practical, as when organizations race each other to a diminishing government trough of short-term program funding.

What the chart depicts is not so much a “community voice” about the food system as a great many voices, many of them singing different tunes and in different keys. Yet the possibilities for partnership are also evident. Imagine a network of community initiatives that can appeal to the Conscious Consumer while at the same time underscoring the values of sustainability and inclusion!

What then will it take to turn these odds and sods of community-led action into a movement to achieve an ecological model of agri-food policy and practice?

It's not a matter of narrowing the definition of “effective action,” of that we can be certain. Canada's food system requires funda-

mental, comprehensive change. In an undertaking of this scale, social entrepreneurs and co-operators, private business people, and soup kitchen managers all have a role to play. Diversity in membership will be of crucial importance, given a common determination that our action realize a sustainable, secure, and just food system. It will also be necessary to overcome some formidable barriers.

Two things are particularly threatening. The first is the disconnect that prevails between potential allies and partners – between community workers and CED folks, food advocates, farmers, and industry actors. The second is the almost total absence of any over-arching planning process and strategy to give focus to our efforts.

Strangers or Allies

Traditionally, community food action has been dominated by charitable organizations that make it their mission to feed the hungry. Recently, interest has renewed in CED circles in organizing and training around food. In helping to organize food co-operatives and food-based social enterprises, however, CED practitioners have frequently turned away from the charity model and discounted the social capital that it has built. Similar gaps of understanding and appreciation separate CED and co-operators from health practitioners, anti-poverty activists, environmentalists, ethical businesses, and consumer advocates.

The differences between these stakeholders are great. The possible points of connection are greater.

Health promotion and health spending provide a major point of common ground. The need to procure nutritious, local food for hospitals, schools, long-term care facilities, and prisons – and perhaps every other institution, ultimately – is already opening up avenues for lucrative food businesses. Co-ops and nonprofit organizations need to get ready to bid on these contracts. Their “unique selling proposition” is the linkage they may offer to associations of local and organic suppliers, as well as social value-added in terms of employment and training of the marginalized.

Few CED groups are anywhere near such a strategic position in the food chain. In part, this is due to a failure to commit to understanding and supporting those who grow or could grow our food. Although many community and CED food projects promote growing or buying local produce, many are beleaguered by low quantities of local food. If farmers continue to give up growing food because it makes no economic sense, local sources will soon be lost to us.

Inadequate farm income is a fundamental problem that requires understanding and solidarity between all of those working for food sustainability. CED initiatives must take pains to support existing farmers and to help “grow” more kinds of farmers, as exemplified by community gardening and urban agriculture projects.

Finally, CED groups need to address their disconnect with the mainstream food system.

Photos: currants (p. 49), Dufferin Grove Farmers Market (p. 51), Heirloom tomato salad (p. 52). Courtesy of Laura Berman, GreenFuse Images.

Under the present regimen virtually all government and corporate support goes to large-scale, commodity, or factory farm producers. While filling our stomachs with questionable food, they contribute to environmental degradation, heart, cardio-vascular, diabetes II, degenerative diseases, and obesity. They increase urban sprawl and threaten the family farm and rural communities with extinction.

Nevertheless, hundreds of small- and medium-sized food businesses thrive in Canadian communities. They have secured market niches on the strength of their ability to feature high quality and provide for specialty demands. They can prove to be strong and motivated partners for CED initiatives in the market square, matching their market savvy to our community savvy.

The Issue of Scale

These firms also remind us of the pressing need for hard-nosed analysis about the scale of enterprise within a food system that must meet the needs of 11 million Canadian households.

A secure, sustainable food system does not require that all food enterprises be small. Even if such a notion were realistic, it may not be desirable. (If “small” means less than 20 full-time equivalent employees and annual revenue less than \$5 million, many CED initiatives would best be termed “microenterprises.”) For nutritious food to remain affordable to millions of people, diverse in their ethnicity, ability, income, and location – and provide a decent return to the producer – economies of scale are essential.

Indeed, the food system need not be entirely local. The 100-Mile Diet promulgated by Vancouverites Alisa Smith and James MacKinnon is appealing on many levels. To decide to eat only food grown and produced within 100 miles of their home for a year, as they did, is an excellent educational tool for building food system awareness. But their location in British Columbia’s Lower Mainland, as opposed to Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, works peculiarly to the advantage of their Diet. It will take some time before it is practical, or even desirable, for all people in our population.

It would be wise to reflect long and hard on the experience of Italy’s Emilia Romagna region. There, effective information systems and multi-tiered co-operative structure leverage the products of micro- and small enterprise to serve large and distant markets. The market analysis, quality assurance, market positioning, and finance supplied by second- and third-order co-operatives in Italy deserve in-depth study by Canadians. Correctly executed, small can be practical and profitable, as well as “beautiful.”

Envisioning a Sustainable Food System

The second major threat before us is the lack of a common strategy. The vastness of our land means that citizens have to come up with a way of thinking about food sustainability that fits for us all. It will be a vision that embraces community experience across this country, is



“The local-food revival ... runs on passion: people’s desire for connection to the seasons, to the soil that feeds them, to powerful flavors that can’t be manufactured with chemicals or preserved over 1,300-mile delivery hauls.... Communities, & the nation as a whole, should figure out ways to collectively leverage the passion of these growers. Not through direct payments ... but rather through strategic investments in food-production infrastructure.”

Tom Philpott

“Eatin’ Good in the Neighborhood: Why ‘the market’ alone can’t save local agriculture,” *Grist Magazine*, 16 Aug 2006 <<http://www.grist.org>>.

informed by experience from other countries, and draws on theories of sustainable community development.

It will take a lot of work to integrate all of the issues that would make up this grand plan. Some communities have made a start. Following Toronto's lead, they are establishing Food Councils as a vehicle for comprehensive, if municipally-focused planning. Few Food Councils to date have displayed the ability or will to drive a sustainable food system, unfortunately. Those that receive their mandate and funding from government are often handicapped by bureaucratic silos and inertia. Those without government support or staff tend to be under-resourced and struggle to survive.

Food Councils could achieve more local clout were they connected to a broader partnership of groups concerned about the food system nation-wide. Nancy Neamtan, President of Québec's *Chantier de l'économie sociale*, asserts that the *only way* to resist the dominant food system is through building a vibrant food social economy locally while working in solidarity with other local food and agriculture movements around the world.

But who are these "groups," "activists," "organizations," and "movements"? How are they (that is, "we") to identify one another and with one another, and together get to work at the system level?

The CCEDNet Food Policy Initiative


Canada needs a food policy that supports the efforts of we, the people, to feed ourselves. It needs an agricultural policy that supports Canadian farmers to make a decent income. Canada

needs a policy that is not predatory with regard to the food systems of the South, but strives instead to bring about vibrant rural communities and cities that are "salad green" to their very rooftops. Canadians want market squares in which prosperous enterprises offer fresh, local food plus good jobs and incomes to the people who grow it. Canadians want all people to be able to eat healthy, tasty food suitable to their culture or ethnicity.

Does any of the preceding paragraph sound like you? If so, there is a wonderful opportunity before you to help make that vision, or one like it, a reality.

The federal policy that governs Canadian agriculture and food is up for renewal by 2008. The current policy did not have community input. From this realization has emerged the Canadian CED Network's Food Policy Initiative. Its goal is to take on the system-level issues and bring the Community Voice to the federal policy discussion. Through this process, CED practitioners and others actively concerned about our food system can make sure that this Community Voice is clear, considered, and expressed with both grassroots authenticity and market savvy. (Significantly, the program of the Canadian Ministry of Agriculture and Agri-Food has contributed funds to support this project. Evidently, they are ready to hear from an "alternative national body" with a new view on food and agriculture policy.)

While clarity in this voice is important, it is also important that everyone has a way to contribute to it, wherever you find yourself located on the Canadian Community Response Chart – or not located. A Web Board has been placed on-line to collect the comments and analysis of practitioners across the country. (Go to www.ediblestrategies.com and click on "National



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Practitioners Dialogue.”) From that input, a small team will craft a message that resonates among our diverse groups, sectors, and regions, defining a clear problem and presenting clear solutions. Policy themes are then developed for discussion by a group of national representatives prior to the Conference “Bridging Borders Toward Food Security” in Vancouver, October 7-11, 2006. We invite you to use the Web Board to comment on and challenge these policy discussions.

In December a draft policy document will be crafted incorporating as much of the Web Board dialogue as possible. This draft will be posted electronically in early 2007 to all those who participated in the Web Board and any other discussions that CCEDNet sponsors on this subject in the meantime. After further Web Board discussion of the draft, we will present the final version of the document at the National Conference on CED and Social Economy, April 18-21, 2007 in St. John’s, Newfoundland. The growing number of movement members present there will also create an advocacy agenda for the next phase of this policy development process. We will ask the board of CCEDNet to endorse the policy statements and recommendations and to circulate the policy at a propitious moment. We will encourage CCEDNet members to launch the policy locally and regionally across the country – the more exposure the better.

In the midst of all this policy work we also need to keep learning about real food and discovering who our friends, allies, partners, and affiliates are. Take time to write your story and post it on the Web Board. Think of it as one of those “morsels” through which we tempt the pallets of the body politic for something much, much better than we all have grown too used to.

By sharing our stories, we can ease the tensions between us while creating a system that benefits all citizens. Our common ground could be an Agricultural Policy Framework that is comprehensive, that is useful both in the short term and the long term, and that integrates the insights of government, business, and civil society. This project can be a watershed opportunity to drop arms, join hands, and work together to stop the Food Wars.



SANDRA MARK and FRANK MORELAND are principals of Edible Strategies Enterprises Ltd. (ESEL), a consultancy specializing in the application of community economic development to issues of local food sustainability. Contact them at 250-335-3001 or ediblestrategies@shaw.ca.

HERB BARBOLET is an Associate with Simon Fraser University’s Centre for Sustainable Community Development. He farmed organically for ten years and was co-founder of FarmFolk/CityFolk, a nonprofit that works to create local, sustainable food systems. A champion of the sustainable food movement in Canada, he appears frequently on radio, in print, and on television, is co-author with Heather Pritchard of *FarmFolk, CityFolk: Stories, Tips and Recipes Celebrating Local Food for Food Lovers of All Stripes* (FarmFolk/CityFolk, 1998), and remains an active food consultant. Contact Herb at 604-833-1742 or herb@ffcf.bc.ca.

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