

PLACE-BASED FOOD SYSTEMS KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The importance of vision in food system transformation

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**PLACE-BASED
 FOOD SYSTEMS
 CONFERENCE:**

Making the Case, Making it Happen

August 9-10th, 2018

Submitted September 6, 2019 / Published online September 16, 2019

Citation: Anderson, M (2019). The importance of vision in food system transformation. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 9(Suppl. 1), 55–60. <https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2019.09A.001>

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Abstract

Despite growing calls for food system transformation, the need to develop a vision to guide that transformation is sometimes overlooked. Vision is essential to inspire, mobilize, and keep a collective of people on track toward their goals. Individual visions can be exhilarating, but the visions that create change are taken up by large groups or movements of movements. A vision is a beginning for transformation, but it requires policy that enables it to be enacted, ideally through democratic processes. The vision, buttressed by policy and democratic governance, is what determines where

people are able to buy food, how much they pay, whether farmers earn decent incomes, and whether the food is healthy. Without vision, policies are

Note

This paper is selected remarks from a keynote address on August 10, 2018, entitled *What Do We Need for Food System Transformation?*, given at the Place-Based Food Systems Conference that was hosted by the Institute for Sustainable Food Systems at Kwantlen Polytechnic University. The conference brought together community and academic leaders to share research and practice and to foster effective collaboration. More information is at <https://www.kpu.ca/pbfs2018>

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likely to be incoherent or to work at cross-purposes, as has happened in the farm bill and the European Union's Common Agricultural Policy. A range of visions generated at different scales, from autonomous community to state to region, can serve as examples for people committed to food system transformation.

Keywords

Food System, Transformation, Agroecology, Vision, Indigenous Cosmologies, Commoning, Solidarity Economy, Food Sovereignty

The need for fundamental food system transformation has become more urgent in light of growing evidence of the destructiveness of the industrial food system (IPCC, 2019; IPES-Food, 2016; Steffen et al., 2015). The dominant food system has contributed in major ways to each of the planetary boundaries that society has crossed (e.g., loss of biodiversity, disruption of nitrogen and phosphorus cycles), pushing us into zones where damage is irreversible. The question of what is needed for this transformation is big, but not impossible to answer. We can look to many other instances in human history in which people have achieved seemingly impossible victories, from the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the formal abolition of slavery (although it continues to exist in every country) to relatively modest successes such as smoke-free public spaces in the United States and being able to breastfeed in public.

Among the requirements for transformation is a citizenry that is sufficiently outraged by “business as usual” to demand change by electing people to public office who will support the public good instead of private interests, and then holding those officials accountable. That is extremely difficult to do now in the United States, given constant assaults on independent media, legislated restrictions on democratic process, and the dumbing down of the public through years of divestment in public education, privatization of educational institutions, and high prices for higher education. Many other “lock-ins” inherent to the food system impede transformation, including the expectation of cheap food, export orientation, short-term thinking, and the most common measures of

success, such as increasing yields and productivity (IPES-Food, 2016). But the likelihood of massive changes in society is high. The levels of inequality that we face in the United States today are unprecedented, and no society through history has endured for long when wealth and assets are so radically skewed by class and ideologies of race.

The biggest question about this imminent social transformation is whether it will be violent and deadly or peaceful. This is where our vision of food system transformation, and how it will happen, is vitally important. Humans need vision to inspire, to mobilize, and to keep us on the track of constructive action. The current crisis of the Democratic party in the U.S., which contributed to the election of Donald Trump, exemplifies what happens without vision. After the midterm elections, as a wave of young progressive legislators entered the House of Representatives, the Democrats faced another turning point of whether to adopt the Green New Deal or remain mired in “Republican lite” policies that continue to funnel wealth, power, and assets to benefit those who are already powerful.

My own food system vision includes healthy food for everyone as an accepted human right, healthy ecosystems that are not polluted by agricultural chemicals and fertilizer or soil runoff, decent livelihoods for everyone working in the food system, and opportunities for everyone to help make decisions about the kind of food system we have, and not to be outgunned by corporate lobbyists. I do not want my own food and health to come at the cost of other people being enslaved or impoverished, or having persistent toxins dumped into the ecosystem. But this is simply my own vision (albeit shared with many other people), and it has no power unless it is carried forward indefatigably by collective action.

As we think about visions of the future, it is important to acknowledge that continuing in the rut we dug in the 20th century with mechanization, synthetic fertilizers, and other labor-displacing inputs—i.e., industrial agriculture—is simply not viable. We do not have “world enough, and time”; the food system based on industrial agriculture is consuming resources that cannot be replenished and producing wastes that cannot be absorbed

without damage to ecosystems. Furthermore, it is producing food that is responsible for most of the major causes of mortality in the U.S.: heart disease, many forms of cancer, strokes, diabetes (The US Burden of Disease Collaborators, 2018). “Sustainable agriculture” became a popular term about three decades ago, but as a kind of fringe alternative that never merited the funding from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that went to other agricultural systems. Somehow the logical implication that this other agriculture is *not* sustainable was lost, and we did not embark on a national search for viable alternatives.

There are many potential sources of vision for our food system, some already being acted upon with positive impacts. Indigenous cosmologies are among the most powerful visions we can find of how we must live to sustain our lives on this planet. Robin Wall Kimmerer (2014) explained some of her learnings from the place she inhabits between membership in the Citizen Potawatomic Nation and being a professional botanist in a university, in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Indigenous cosmologies and wisdom often emphasize harmony and interdependence with nature, reciprocity, taking only what is needed, gratitude, the sacredness of Mother Earth, and respect for other ways of knowing beyond science.

U.S. institutions would do well to learn from Indigenous peoples and help to keep those teachings alive. Arundhati Roy (in *Walking with the Comrades*, as quoted in the film *Keepers of the Future*) explains:

Can we expect that an alternative to what looks like certain death for the planet will come from the imagination that has brought about this crisis in the first place? It seems unlikely. If there’s any hope for the world at all, it does not live in climate change conference rooms or in cities with tall buildings. It lives low-down on the ground with its arm around the people who go to battle every day to protect their forests, their mountains and their rivers because they know that the forests, the mountains and the rivers protect them. To gain this philosophical space, it is necessary to concede some

physical space for the survival of those who may look like the keepers of our past but who may really be the guides to our future.
(EcoViva & Lewis, 2017)

The brutal U.S. history of exterminating and enslaving Native Americans and forcibly removing their children to State-run boarding schools does not bode well for our ability to learn from Indigenous peoples. Although efforts to face revisionist history regarding slavery and racism are underway (e.g., the *New Yorker Magazine’s* 1619 Project; Newkirk, 2019), the U.S. has never apologized nor tried to discover ways to repair the relationship between settler society and Native Americans, other than isolated efforts such as the Maine Wabanaki-State Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Most of us in North America no longer have deep roots to place and a truly sustainable cosmology. This means that we have to make our vision. We do not need to start from scratch, however. People around the world are creating and implementing food system visions. As important as the original vision is how it is supported and kept alive. Each of the visions below is also described by how it is being supported through commitments by an organization or social movement.

Visions do not have to be concrete: some visions arise from abstract ideals. The concepts of social and solidarity economies integrate the economic, social, and political dimensions of life, and respond to emancipatory aspirations aimed at promoting global changes (Gaiger, 2017). Food and agriculture have been part of social and solidarity economies, expressed in ancient practices such as shared kitchens, community ovens, seed-sharing, and commensality. Today we see social innovations such as CSAs, “free refrigerators,” collective ownership and working of land, and revived seed exchanges (Carolan, 2018). It is only since industrialization that food and agriculture have become part of market economies that deal with food merely as a commodity.

Restoring food and agriculture to the commons and decommodifying food are also relatively abstract concepts that are receiving new interest (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019; Vivero-Pol, Ferrando,

De Schutter, & Mattei, 2018). Some of the innovations in societies that consider food to be a human right are close to commoning. For example, in Brazil, school children get healthy free lunches prepared from local food that is purchased from nearby low-income farmers. Purchasing local food by preference is a form of decommodifying: food takes on added value because it is produced in close proximity to where it is eaten. But commoning and decommodifying require social norms that respect and protect farmers' livelihoods as much as consumers' needs and preferences. This might be done through governmental purchase of food staples according to a quota system that allows farmers in each territory (established by a county, state, or region around a municipality) to grow abundant healthy food for its people. Farmers would be able to produce nonstaples in addition, and sell them at market prices, but the quota purchase price would be sufficient to ensure a profit margin over operating costs.

Tobacco production quotas are a precedent for this kind of system and help to explain why small farms were able to survive in tobacco-producing states longer than in other regions: supply control kept prices high enough that farmers could ensure a basic income from their tobacco crop alone. Of course, initial reactions to such a plan might well be resistance to government "interference" in markets, but those who cry loudest about the need to "get government out of agriculture" often mean that they just want governmental protections for their own interests. The government has constantly disrupted markets through tariffs, trade agreements, regulations, and other means. Furthermore, without some kind of coordination across farmers, each individual has incentives to overproduce, even to the point of land degradation, in our current form of capitalism where there are no supply controls and externalities are not internalized.

An example of a food system vision at the state level is Vermont's Farm to Plate plan, generated through discussion with over 1,200 farmers, producers, technical assistance providers, and farm and food-sector industry leaders. It is the most comprehensive state strategy in the U.S. and is supported by the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (functioning as a backbone organization) through a

mandate and funding from state government. After nearly 10 years in operation, the plan has achieved its goals of increasing local food purchases from US\$176 million in 2010 to US\$310 million, or 13.9% of total food and beverage sales. In the same time period, Vermont created 6,559 net new food-related jobs and 742 net new food businesses. And the percentage of food-insecure Vermont households dropped to 9.8% from 13.2% in 2010 (Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund, 2018). These achievements required steady work by a network of people and organizations across the state, meeting regularly in committees and annual summits, where they communicated with each other to share solutions to problems. The state legislature has approved another tranche of funds to support the next 10 years of Farm to Plate, and the group is rethinking its goals to accommodate what has been achieved so far.

At the regional level, a group came together in New England in 2014 to create a food vision that challenges the region to produce 50% of the value of food that is consumed in New England by the year 2060, while improving environmental impacts and fisheries and nourishing everyone. Food Solutions New England, based in the University of New Hampshire's Sustainability Institute, adopted this vision and built a network of people who want to implement it in their own states. Food Solutions New England has sponsored summits in all six New England states (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont) and promoted the vision through a website and publicity. Vermont is something of an exception, since the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan had been developed before the New England Food Vision; however, its goals of enhancing food security, consumption of local food, and environmental quality are congruent with the vision.

At the national level, Food Secure Canada was a leader in creating a broad-based food systems vision, published as "Resetting the Table" in 2009. While the vision was taken up by other organizations, Food Secure Canada continued to promote it and distill it down to specific policies that it urged the Trudeau government to adopt. In 2019, Canada's Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food and its Parliamentary Secretary announced the first

federal food policy, “Everyone at the Table,” after consultation with 45,000 food producers and processors, experts in environment, health, and food security, Indigenous groups, nongovernment organizations, and community advocates. The vision for the Canadian food policy is, “All people in Canada are able to access a sufficient amount of safe, nutritious and culturally diverse food. Canada’s food system is resilient and innovative, sustains our environment, and supports our economy.” The Canadian government has pledged CA\$134.4 million to a local foods infrastructure initiative, reductions in food waste and food fraud, a new school lunch program, and formation of a Canadian Food Policy Advisory Council, among other initiatives (CISION, 2019).

The process that Food Secure Canada led to create a vision for the Canadian food system has been replicated in many other countries, such as Australia, Scotland, Norway, and Bhutan. In the European Union, IPES-Food coordinated a Common Food Policy project, consisting of a series of roundtables on different food system issues, multiple working groups that developed specific policies, and a summit in Brussels in 2018 that brought together more than 200 food activists and was attended by high-ranking EU officials (De Schutter and IPES-Food Secretariat and Panel, 2019). This effort resulted in a promise to create a European Food Policy Council and announcement of a “Farm to Fork Strategy” for the EU by the new European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen. IPES-Food members are being consulted on policies regarding research and innovation, soil health, and adaptation to climate change.

One of the most striking visions for future food systems is food sovereignty, the call for self-determination of a community’s food system. Food sovereignty first came to public attention at the 1996 World Food Summit; it is now supported by more than 6,000 organizations and La Via Campesina, a social movement of 300 million small-scale food producers. This vision is especially important because social movements that include front-line defenders of human rights are advocating for it. This advocacy responds to often egregious abuses of human rights: Global Witness has documented that more than three people were murdered each

week in 2018, with countless more criminalized, for defending their land and environment from agribusiness incursions and other corporate interests. Agribusiness was the second deadliest sector in the report, following mining and extractives (Global Witness, 2019)

Through peoples’ organizing, food sovereignty has been written into the constitutions of countries including Ecuador, Brazil, Bolivia, Mali, Venezuela, Nepal, and Senegal. Constitutional recognition allows mechanisms for taking action if food sovereignty is violated. In addition, food sovereignty advocates have gained voice in international forums such as the United Nations Human Rights Council, meetings to review progress toward Sustainable Development Goals, and the Committee on World Food Security. A recent victory was the approval by the UN General Assembly of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (*La Via Campesina*, 2018). Just as the 1948 adoption of the visionary Universal Declaration of Human Rights paved the way for a steady expansion of the concept of human rights and whose rights mattered, so it is hoped that the 2018 Declaration on Peasant Rights will foster recognition of the human rights of marginalized people in the food system.

Making the Vision Real

A vision is a beginning, but it needs policy that enables the vision to be enacted, ideally through democratic processes. The vision, buttressed by policy and democratic governance, is what determines where people are able to buy food, how much they pay, whether farmers earn decent incomes, and whether the food is healthy. Without vision, policies are likely to be incoherent or to work at cross-purposes, as we have seen in the U.S. farm bill and the EU Common Agricultural Policy. A vision must energize us to overcome the terrors that confront us in daily media and “decolonize the public imagination from neoliberalism” (Gear, 2017, para. 7).

A vision for a healthy, sustainable food system will only succeed if it joins with visions held by other groups beyond food system activists: people of color, Indigenous, labor, women, climate change activists. The food system touches everyone, so it

can be a great organizing core as long as people are willing to work together and make compromises. The compromises must not be ones that lead to exploitation of any group or increased suffering, however; a vision must be big enough that

everyone can see how their life would be better within it. By becoming a platform for a movement of movements, vision can unite groups that had not previously dreamed of working together to achieve a future that benefits all (Lakey, 2016). 

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