

Executive summary – Sustainable Food Systems

Local Food Northland seeks to support a shift toward sustainable food systems with attendant economic, social and environmental benefits. This aspiration resonates with the tikanga principles and values expressed recently by the Tai Tokerau Iwi Chief Executive's Consortium (2015).

Sustainable food systems will rectify some of the failings of current industrial food systems. An example is the 4.7 billion people, globally, impacted by either hunger, micronutrient deficiencies or obesity and weight issues (IPES-Food, 2016).

Progress towards sustainable food systems

Movement towards sustainable food systems can be observed at global, regional, city and local level. At the global level the World Health Organisation (2016) identifies that food security is linked to health, sustainable economic development, environment and trade. The International Panel of Experts on sustainable food systems provides a clear voice on the need for a paradigm shift (IPES-Food, 2016).

At regional, city and district levels Food Policy Councils have flourished, growing from 12 in North America in 2000 to 282 in 2015 (Center for a Livable Future, 2015). Food Policy Councils provide forums for policy development that support the development of sustainable food systems. The Center for a Livable Future, based at John Hopkins University is a research centre for sustainable food systems, a repository of knowledge and a communication hub for food policy councils. Their mission is “to promote research and to develop and communicate information about the complex interrelationships among diet, food production, environment, and human health” (Center for a Livable Future, 2016).

Food plans are another feature of formalised sustainable food systems. Evidence of these are clearly available in the English-speaking world, including Australia, and also evident in other nations (Agence D'Ecologie Urbaine, 2015). Vermont's Farm to Plate website has a comprehensive strategic plan for sustainable food worthy of emulation (Vermont Farm to Plate, 2016).

Most activity in New Zealand is confined to local initiatives.

The change process

Change initiatives to effect transition from the industrial to sustainable food systems will require a deep re-examination of the assumptions driving current systems at a

cultural level (Schein, 1985). Otto Scharmer (2013) points us beyond current socio-economic paradigms grounded in traditional authority, the free market and socialism to create a cultural shift towards a co-creative society. This is based on looking beyond personal interest to a wider systems perspective – what he calls “eco-system awareness”. In other words, rather than competing for a “slice of the pie” we need to work together to make a bigger and more sustainable pie. The necessary shift is supported by new insights into our empathic nature (The RSA, 2010) and observations about changes to our collective use of power (Heimans & Timms, 2014).

The iPES-Food (2016) report identifies eight lock-ins that perpetuate industrial food systems. These range from trade protocols, market dynamics, but most importantly, the quality of our thinking. This leads us to the challenge of envisioning an alternate future that generates better results for the seven billion people on the planet.

This in turn leads us to the challenge of engaging others in envisioning system change (Cammock, 2003) by creating greater cohesion and collective action. If successful the transition to sustainable food systems will be supported by enabling the voice of those not heard in the market place, enhancing democracy, trust and transparency, and fostering collaboration and co-creation.

Conclusion

While current sustainable food system initiatives in Northland are admirable, as yet, they remain relatively poorly connected. If this were to continue, such initiatives will remain as a counter-culture in the prevailing industrial food system. Local Food Northland believe that developing a Northland food policy council, founded democratically as a “grass-roots” initiative with the task of preparing a regional food plan and fostering greater connectivity is a desirable step toward a more sustainable food system.

References

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