

Defining sustainability and sustainable food

Definitions of sustainability often refer to aspects of enduring environmental, social and economic well being. While the notion of sustainable food has evolved over time and continues to change with new evidence, there is a consensus that sustainable agriculture must be ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible.¹ Thus, a broad definition of sustainable food links agricultural production that safeguards soil, water, and wildlife with a nutritious diet that supports public health², and sees food as part of a just and economically sound society. In this view, a sustainable food and agricultural system is one in which:

- *The environment is protected.* The health of the soil is maintained, water quality is secured, the flow of energy and discharge of waste, including greenhouse gas emissions, are within the capacity of the earth to absorb, and biodiversity is protected and promoted.
- *Food producers are treated well.* Farmers and all other players in the production chain have fair, livable incomes, and safe working conditions.
- *The food we eat is of good quality.* Animal and human health is supported by a wide variety of nutritious and delicious foods, and is affordable and accessible for all.
- *Agro-economies are supported.* Rural communities are enhanced and supported, and are linked to urban communities through small businesses.
- *Fresh, healthy food is available to all.*

The industrial, corporate food production system prevalent today offers cheap food, but such low cost does not reflect the true costs of agriculture, including loss of crop biodiversity through monoculturing, soil erosion and depletion, contamination of water and air, antibiotic resistance, and heavy dependence on non-renewable resources such as petroleum, creating a less resilient and secure food system.³ Centralized control over our agricultural system limits consumers' ability to know how food is grown, how safe it is, and whether farm communities are enhanced or harmed.^{4,5}

Local, community-based, participatory food systems are an alternative to the global corporate models in which producers and consumers are separated from one another. A local food system encourages the idea of the consumer as active participant, or co-producer.⁶ This model focuses on relationships among the food producers, processors, distributors, retailers and consumers and increases knowledge about the characteristics of our food.³ The development of local food systems is not only about environmental impacts but also the social and economic benefits it promotes, which include:

- Diversity of many economically viable small family farms rather than huge factory farms
- Environmental outcomes that enhance our natural resources for future generations
- Robust economic links between urban and rural communities through networks of small businesses
- Preventive health of individuals rather than focusing solely on disease treatment
- Equitable treatment for all participants in the food chain

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¹ Ikerd, John. 2007. "On Defining Sustainable Agriculture." North Carolina Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program. <<http://www.sustainable-ag.ncsu.edu/onsustainableag.htm>> (Accessed 4/9/10).

² Hamm, Michael W. 2008. "Linking Sustainable Agriculture and Public Health: Opportunities for Realizing Multiple Goals." *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* 3:169-185.

³ Kirschenmann, Frederick L. 2008. "Food as Relationship." *Journal of Hunger and Environmental Nutrition* 3(2):106-121.

⁴ Barlett, Peggy F. 1989. "Industrial Agriculture" in *Economic Anthropology*, Stuart Plattner, ed. Pp. 253-291. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

⁵ Hassanein, Neva. 2003. "Practicing Food Democracy: A Pragmatic Politics of Transformation." *Journal of Rural Studies* 19:77-86.

⁶ Petrini, Carlo. 2007. *Slow Food Nation*. NY: Columbia University Press. pp. 227-237