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Indicators of a Healthy Food System

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What does an equitable food system look like, smell like, taste like, act like? Has anyone ever seen one?

Good-tasting food, full-time farmers (not needing off-farm jobs), variety for every consumer demand (ethnic foods, organic, kosher, halal, gluten-free, other allergy-free foods, vegan, vegetarian, grass-fed meat, storage crops, heirloom varieties, raw milk, etc.), reduced fossil fuel inputs, no dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, food scrap composting, emergency food reserves, farmland protection, brownfield re-use, biodiversity, real living wage jobs, obesity reduction, no food deserts, a farm state with a full treasury?

Yes -- all that and more. So....how do we get there? How will we know when we get there?

As food system work gets more comprehensive, more and more "measurement" scales are being devised. For the moment I use the list developed for California by Ecotrust in 2006 because it connects a lot of dots and because the authors frame their work as part of a long collective learning process.

Indicators and Cross-cutting Indicators of a Sustainable Food System

From *The New Mainstream: Sustainable Food Agenda for California*
Prepared for Roots of Change Council by Ecotrust (2006)

Indicators

The following is a list of 77 proposed indicators for 18 of the 22 goals. Four goals were added to the list after most of the indicator research had been conducted. All of the following indicators meet most of the criteria above. In addition, all of these indicators are easily updated.

1. Promotes food choices that lead to healthy eating

- a. Daily per capita servings of fruits and vegetables
- b. Obesity rate in adults

2. Provides easy access to healthy food from retail outlets for all eaters in California

- a. Distance (and distance distribution) from eaters to nearest full-service food store (urban and rural, those with/without cars)
- b. Number of farmer's markets that accept FMNP coupons (WIC), senior FM coupons, food stamps

3. Provides affordable food for all eaters in California

- a. Percentage of households that are food insecure/ food secure
- b. Percentage of population that is in poverty

4. Provides for meaningful livelihoods and opportunities for all food and farming workers

- a. Average wage paid to farmworkers
- b. Percentage of farmworkers employed through farm labor contractors
- c. Average wage paid to grocery workers (compared to other industries)
- d. Average wage paid to food service and processing workers (compared to other industries)
- e. Total number of ethnic minority farmers (Hispanic, Asian, African American)

5. Facilitates continuous entry for beginning farmers, fishers, foresters, processors, retailers, restaurateurs and ranchers

- a. Total number of ethnic minority farmers, farms, acreage (Hispanic, Asian, African American, American Indian)
- b. Total women farmers (principal operator) and acreage controlled
- c. Age distribution of farmers
- d. Number of commercial fishing licenses and permits

6. Provides eaters with foods produced and processed as close to home as possible

- a. Total direct ag sales to public
- b. Percentage of consumers now buying CA ag products more often than 6 months ago
- c. Number of school districts with farm-to-school programs

7. Encourages eaters to know where, how, and by whom their food is produced

- a. Total direct sales per capita, as % of total ag sales
- b. Number of certified farmer's markets
- c. Sales from certified farmer's markets
- d. Number of CSAs
- e. Number of farms that offer ag tourism
- f. Number of school gardens
- g. Number of farm-to-school programs

8. Supports deepening regional identities through food

- a. Number of counties and producers participating in "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" campaigns
- b. Number of restaurants participating in the Chef's Collaborative
- c. Number of Slow Food Convivia and number of members in the organization

9. Supports and increases biodiversity in plant and animal products (including marine species)

- a. Number of crops statewide for top 75% of the harvested acres
- b. Number of cultivars for selected CA commodities for top 75% of harvested acres

10. Conducts farming, ranching, and fishing activities so that water, air, forests, and soil resources are enhanced and biodiversity and wildlife habitat are increased — so that food production continues into perpetuity

- a. Number of organic acres in CA
- b. Tons topsoil lost/year due to erosion
- c. Total water usage (acre-feet) in ag
- d. Amount of water-quality-limited surface water with agriculture as a source of pollution
- e. Farmworker pesticide poisonings
- f. Number of areas in no-take marine reserves

11. Preserves farmland, forests, and oceans

- a. Number of acres prime farmland
- b. Number of acres of urban area
- c. Number of acres in Williamson Act

12. Provides incentives for waste recycling, reduction of petroleum and other non-renewable inputs

- a. Number of organic growers
- b. Number of organic acres in CA
- c. Number of composters accepting food and ag waste (current) in relation to total number of composters/processors of organic materials (mostly urban)
- d. Total tons of food and ag waste disposed; pounds per capita
- e. Number of operating Food Diversion Programs
- f. Fuel, fertilizer and chemical expense in agriculture; as % of total expenses

13. Employs humane practices in animal care

- a. Number and identity of humane animal certification programs
 - a1. Number of Certified Humane Raised and Handled animal producers (label)
 - a2. Number of AHA-certified animal producers (Free-Farmed Certification Program)
- b. Number of grass-fed animal producers

14. Provides opportunities for revenue from on-farm energy production, tourism, education, and other value-added services (in addition to food production)

- a. Number of farms engaged in ag tourism
- b. Dollars for renewable energy programs

15. Rewards farmers, fishers, and ranchers for conservation services

- a. Total dollars paid to CA for conservation practices; number of contracts
 - a1. Total dollars paid in NRCS EQIP program
 - a2. Total dollars paid in CSP (Conservation Security Program)
 - a3. Total dollars paid in WHIP (Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program)
- b. Total dollars paid to CA for retiring farmland
 - b1. Total dollars paid under Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)
 - b2. Total dollars paid under Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)
 - b3. Total dollars paid under Grasslands Reserve Program (GRP)
- c. Total acreage in Williamson Act

16. Provides opportunities for food, fishing, and farming operations to be profitable

- a. Farm production balance
- b. Net farm income
- c. Number of farms by size/sales category
- d. Personal income generated by farm, manufacturing, retail food and eating/drinking establishments
- e. Number of workers in various food sectors
- f. Number of retail food businesses by size classes (number of employees)
- g. Number of food manufacturers by size classes (number of employees)
- h. Retail price spread
- i. Number of federal and state inspected slaughterhouses
- j. Income/employment from commercial fishing and processing

17. Characterized by many locally owned and operated food and farming businesses

- a. Total number of farms by size classes (by sales volume and acreage)
- b. Total number of retail food businesses by size classes (number of employees)
- c. Total number of food manufacturers by size classes (number of employees)
- d. Percent of CA farm debt held (by various types of lenders)
- e. Aggregate income earned by workers in various food sectors
- h. Total number of workers in various food sectors
- i. Number of fish retail licenses/transfer tickets

In addition, the following four goals were recently added to the roster of Vivid Picture goals. Their addition came too late to devise corresponding indicators.

18. Honor and draw on the diversity and richness of different food cultures.

19. Encourage business structures and forms of capitalization that provide investment and ownership opportunities to workers and community members.

20. Promote efficient markets that share information and proceeds equitably among all players in the food chain.

21. Allow businesses of all sizes to participate in the system as long as they are abiding by sustainable practices and principles.

Cross-Cutting Indicators

BACKGROUND

In addition to the recommended indicators, 5 preliminary cross-cutting indicators have been selected. These are indicators that, as a set, measure progress toward economic, environmental and social equity issues. Their small number makes them easier to consider than the entire list of 63. They address multiple values and goals

at once and serve to give a quick yet selective pulse of the state of the food system. These indicators are prioritized from the existing list of recommended indicators, and are intended to simplify the evaluation of a sustainable food system by presenting a subset of indicators.

The list of cross-cutting indicators represents a first cut and should be considered a preliminary selection. Over time, data for indicators on the wish list may become available and they, or even other indicators, may better serve to measure progress toward the 22 goals of a sustainable food system than the 5 suggested here. A note of caution: it is important to keep in mind that such a small set of indicators can likely never be a good proxy for whole system change. With such a small set, it is important to ensure that efforts are not overly focused on achieving these five indicators at the expense of broader system change.

The selection process for the cross-cutting indicators was similar in some ways to the process for the main set of indicators but more cursory because of time limitations. The cross-cutting indicators were selected to meet the following criteria:

- Address ecological, economic and social equity/health
- Be sensitive to food system change (i.e. if the food system became more sustainable, these indicators would show us to what extent)
- Be understandable and straightforward
- Be informed by the Vivid Picture analyses done to date
- Be few in number (ideally 3 – 5)

FINDINGS

The following list is the preliminary set of cross-cutting indicators selected by the team with a brief analysis for each.

1. Percentage of households that are food insecure/food secure. We consider this indicator a key gauge of the health of the food system in general. It addresses economic, social and health concerns simultaneously. Unfortunately, it does not address nutrition to the extent we would have liked.

2. Average wage paid to farmworkers. This indicator addresses economic concerns and social equity. Because farmworkers are at the bottom of the economic ladder, this indicator serves the 'canary in a mineshaft' function of an early alert to change. If worker wages go up, we can assume wages are improving across the board. Unfortunately, it does not address other aspects of labor such as what proportion of workers actually get paid.

3. Total direct agricultural sales to public; percent of total ag sales. This indicator reflects economic, environmental, human health and social concerns and actually could serve as a direct indicator for a large number of the goals. One primary limitation is that it does not reflect other marketing outlets that form part of a sustainable food economy. Also, while currently not a problem, direct sales marketed to distant regions over the internet could be a growing portion of direct sales, which runs counter to some of the goals of a sustainable food system. This could affect the usefulness of this indicator in the long term.

4. Total number of farms, food retail establishments, and food processors/manufacturers. This indicator addresses a range of economic concerns and, as such, is a good indicator of a healthy economy. The more businesses there are, the more local economies gain a boost from the food sector. We can also assume that more capital remains local and is more evenly distributed. This also indirectly indicates a stronger social fabric, as community is supported by local business. Finally, we can also assume that a greater number of food businesses means that outlets are closer to the communities they serve.

5. Number of organic acres in California. A higher number of organic acres indicates economic as well as environmental health. We can assume there is a direct reduction of agricultural chemicals and that farming is more in harmony with the environment. Furthermore, it would indicate the economic success of sustainable agriculture. This indicator, however, can be considered the "sore thumb" of the indicators from two perspectives — those producers who consider themselves "beyond organic" and those producers who do not want to associate themselves with organic production for a variety of reasons. In addition, the indicator is not a very good measure of organic animal production. Nevertheless, given the limited available environmental data, we considered this the best available indicator of the environmental health of the food system.