The Sustainable Food System Imperative;
Change is No Longer Optional[1]

John Ikerd[2]

We live in an ever-changing world. In fact, change is said to be "the only constant in life." However, some changes are not the ordinary or constant changes in life; some are truly "life changing." Over the years, I have come to the conclusion that people don't make big changes such as these unless three conditions exist. First, they have to become convinced that what they are doing now isn't working and isn't going to work in the future. It often takes a crisis to bring about fundamental change. But that's not enough. They also must have a clear concept or vision of what they could do to make their lives better. Without a clear vision of something better to change to, most people just keep on doing what they have been doing, even if it isn't working. Finally, they must believe that the "something better" is possible, even if not quick and easy. Most people do not pursue impossible dreams. They must have hope. Lacking any one of the three pre-conditions for change, most people will resist major changes in their personal lives or in society in general.

An imperative is something essential or urgent, of vital importance. Thus, the need for a sustainable food system may be accurately described as imperative. The creation of a new sustainable food system will truly be life changing. However, we will not make the changes we must make unless we are willing to confront the reality that today's global food system is hopelessly broken, that it is not sustainable. Sustainability, in general, is the ability to meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. The current food system is not providing enough food to meet the needs of many people of the world today, including many in the United States and Canada. And, it most certainly is not leaving adequate opportunities for those of future generations to meet even their basic needs for food. It is not sustainable. Change is no longer an option, it is an absolute necessity.

Nowhere is the lack of sustainability in food production clearer – yet less understood and appreciated – than in the United States. We are told by the agricultural establishment[1] that our food system is the envy of the world. U.S. consumers spend less than 10% of their disposable incomes on food, arguably less than in any other nation. U.S. supermarkets are filled year-round with an abundance and variety of fresh and processed food products from every corner of the earth. Our food is quick, convenient, and cheap. Why would we want to change our food system?

---

[1] Prepared for presentation at a special public event, "The Sustainable Food System Imperative; Cultivating Resilience Through Action," sponsored by Kwantlen Polytechnic University and Vancouver Food Policy Council, at Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, BC, October 19, 2013.

[2] John Ikerd is Professor Emeritus, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO – USA; Author of, *Sustainable Capitalism*, and *Essentials of Economic Sustainability*, http://www.kpbooks.com , *A Return to Common Sense*, http://Amazon.com, *Small Farms are Real Farms*, Acres USA , http://www.acresusa.com/other/contact.htm, *Crisis and Opportunity in American Agriculture*, University of Nebraska Press http://nebraskapress.unl.edu; and *A Revolution of the Middle and the Pursuit of Happiness*, online: http://sites.google.com/site/revolutionofthemiddle/ . Email: JEIkerd@gmail.com; Website: http://faculty.missouri.edu/ikerdj/ or http://www.johnikerd.com .

First, the current abundance of food has been made possible by the industrialization of American agriculture. While the industrialization of agriculture has resulted in tremendous increases in economic efficiency and productivity, it has had many unintended ecological, social, and economic consequences. . Industrial agriculture is inherently reliant on non-renewable fossil energy, chemically-dependent monoculture cropping systems, and large-scale confinement animal feeding operations. We see the ecological consequences in eroded and degraded soils, polluted steams and groundwater, depleted streams and aquifers, and the growing threat of global climate change. Industrial agriculture shows utter disregard for the other living and non-living things of the earth upon which the sustainability of food production ultimately depends.

We see the socioeconomic consequences in the demise of independent family farms and the social and economic decay of rural communities, as the farms grow larger in size and fewer in numbers. In addition, basic human rights of self-determination and self-defense are systematically denied to rural residents who are forced to live with the clear and compelling threats to public health associated with factory farms.[2] "Right to farm" laws were never meant to ensure the right to operate a polluting "farm factories." Industrial agriculture is driven by economic values, and there is no economic value in doing anything solely to protect society or nature – the foundations of sustainability.

Second, the so-called modern, industrial food system has been an absolute failure in its most fundamental purpose of providing food security for the nation. A larger percentage of people in the U.S. are "food insecure" today than during the 1960s, with more than 20% of U.S. children living in food insecure homes.[3] In addition, the only foods affordable to many lower-income families are high in calories and lacking in essential nutrients, leading to an epidemic of obesity and other diet-related health problems. Obesity-related illnesses, such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and various forms of cancer, are projected to claim about one-in-five dollars spent for health care in the U.S. by 2020 – erasing virtually all of the gains made in improving public health over the past several decades.[4] The irresponsible use of agricultural chemicals, growth hormones, antibiotics, and a multitude of additives in industrial foods add to growing list of diet-related illnesses. We simply can't afford the high and rising costs of more cheap food.

We know we can't continue doing what we have been doing; we have the first prerequisite for change. But, what should we change to; where is the vision for the new sustainable food system that we need and want to replace the old industrial system that we have? The new vision, or at least a hint of a new vision, is perhaps most visible and measurable in the rapidly growing market for organic foods. The modern organic movement began in the U.S. in the 1960s but didn't gain widespread support until the sustainable agriculture movement emerged in the 1980s. Organic food sales in the U.S. grew rapidly during the 1990s and early 2000s, averaging 20%-plus per year and doubling every three to four years. With the economic recession of 2008, growth rates declined and stabilized at around 10% per year, reaching $31.5 billion in sales in 2012.[5] While organic sales still account for less than 5% of total food sales in the U.S., organic fruits and vegetables now claim more than 12% of their market – an impressive accomplishment in a nation with a long history of industrial extraction and exploitation.

However, the organic movement has changed over the years. Contrary to popular belief, the organic movement was not just about eliminating pesticides and agrochemicals from the food

supply but was about replacing our mechanical, industrial agriculture with a biological, sustainable agriculture – a permanent agriculture for a permanent human society. It began as a group of small, back-to-earth farmers and small, cooperative natural foods retailers. As organic sales grew, economic pressures brought on a call for uniform national organic standards which opened up organic production and distribution to large, specialized farming operations and mainstream supermarkets. By 2007, the mainstream supermarkets had taken over 47% of the organic foods market. The large natural food chains, such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, and independent food cooperatives accounted for 46%, leaving direct sales at farmers markets and cooperative food-buying clubs with just 7% percent of the organic market.[6] Organic production also had become similarly dominated by large, specialized, "industrial organic farms."

The local food movement then emerged in response to the "industrialization of organics." Like the early organic farmers, many organic consumers are concerned about the overall ecological and social integrity of the food system, which defies a precise legal definition and thus cannot be certified by government. As organic production moved to larger farms and into mainstream markets, organic consumers increasingly looked to farmers in their own communities to ensure the ecological and social integrity of their food. The local food movement began with roadside stands, farmers markets, and CSAs. New food-related cooperatives were organized to facilitate the growth in local foods. Examples include food buying clubs, local food networks, food box schemes, regional food hubs, and a variety of farmer-owned cooperatives. A 2008 food industry study estimated that sales of local foods had grown from $4 billion in 2002 to $5 billion in 2007 and were projected to reach $11 billion by 2011.[7] Local foods have replaced organics as the most dynamic sector of the U.S. food market.

The growing popularity of local foods is most visible in the growing numbers of farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture organizations or CSAs. USDA statistics indicate the number of farmers markets in the U.S. increased from 1,755 to 8,144 between 1994 and 2013, increasing more than four-fold in less than 20 years.[8] Current estimates by the *Local Harvest*[9] organization indicate there were 2,700 CSAs in the U.S. in 2009, compared with less than 100 in 1990.[10] The 2007 Census of Agriculture indicated about 12,500 farmers had sold products through CSAs. This reflects the growing number of multi-farm CSAs or collaboratives, where farmers pool their production to better serve their customers in rural communities and urban areas. The local food movement is evolving to better meet the needs of more people – both farmers and consumers.

The future potential of the local food movement can be seen in the growing number of local foods cooperatives or collaborations between farmers and consumers in the U.S. Examples include, *Grown Locally*,[11] *Idaho's Bounty*,[12] *Viroqua Food Coop*,[13] and *the Oklahoma Food Cooperative.*[14] The Oklahoma Food Cooperative website lists 20 similar cooperatives in other states. The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service list more than 230 multi-farm "food hubs," although I have no personal knowledge of many of them and cannot personally vouch for their integrity.[15] By cooperating, farmers can offer a wide variety of local products with purchase and delivery options ranging from CSA shares to on-line orders of individual items. All of these organizations provide opportunities to link purchasers of local foods to specific farms and farmers. These new food systems range in scope from local to state or regional in size and from a

dozen or so to hundreds of farmer/consumer members. I believe these innovative *agripreneurial* organizations provide a compelling vision for new community-based, sustainable food systems.

The local food movement provides a more compelling vision for a new sustainable food system than does the organic movement. The most frequently mentioned advantage of local foods is superior freshness and flavor.[16] Food safety and nutrition also are common reasons mentioned by those who buy local. Others buy local foods to support local farmers and keep their money in the local economy. Perhaps more important for sustainability, buying local also is seen as a means of regaining a "sense of community," of reconnecting with friends and neighbors, and regaining some "sense of place" or connectedness with the earth. The local food movement provides a clear and compelling vision of a fundamentally better food system for the future. With this new vision, we have the second prerequisite for fundamental change.

However, is there any realistic possibility of hope that it will actually be possible to replace the industrial food system with this vision of a new community-based, sustainable food system? Will it be possible to "scale-up" these local food systems to meet the needs of people nationally and globally? Will it be possible to scale-up without sacrificing food safety and quality? Will it be possible to scale-up while retaining the economic and social benefits for people in their own communities and without losing the essential sense of place? Is here hope for a "life changing" change in our food system?

With respect to sustainability, the most important characteristic of local food systems is that they depend on the integrity of personal relationships within local communities. The sustainability of food freshness, flavor, safety, nutrition, and of economic and social benefits for communities and societies all depend on sustaining the integrity of relationships among farmers, customers, society and their relationships with the earth. Relationships of integrity – creating and maintaining them – will be the greatest and most important challenge in transforming the current local food movement into a new sustainable food system for the future. A new "cultural imperative" of sustainability must be created to meet this challenge, meaning a new set of social and ethical norms and values, which reflect the essential principles of sustainability. Community-based food systems provide the ideal environment for creating this new cultural imperative of sustainability.

The evolution of this new cultural imperative of sustainability is primarily a matter of personal speculation. It is an important aspect of a future that has yet to be determined. I believe success in creating the new imperative will require developing food systems in which cooperation is given priority over competition. Both are essential aspects of human nature but they need to be kept in harmony and balance, while giving priority to cooperation. I think sustainability also will require "vertical cooperation," meaning cooperation among farmers, processors, distributors, and customers, rather than each competing for maximum individual advantage. "Horizontal cooperation" will also be necessary, in that farmers will need to cooperate with other farmers and consumers will need to cooperate with other consumers.

It's the vertical cooperation that makes sustainability possible. In a vertically cooperative food system, prices at the various levels within the system will be determined though cooperation rather than by competition within or among the various levels. There will still be

incentives for competition or economic efficiency, in that those who had lower costs will retain greater economic benefits. However, prices at all stages in the system will be set at levels that will not force anyone to exploit and extract to survive economically. Sustainability will take priority over economic efficiency. There also will be competition for customers among individual producers, based on the quality and integrity, but cooperation must be given priority over competition. Competition will exist within the context or bounds of cooperation.

The decision to give cooperation priority over competition must be rooted in deeply-held, shared social and ethical values. There will always be some point in time in a cooperative organization where it will be to the economic advantage for some members to compete rather than cooperate. As history has proven, a legal cooperative business structure alone will not ensure sustainability. Several successful farm cooperatives in the U.S. eventually evolved into large, industrial organizations with the inevitable negative consequences for land, people, and sustainability. Problems generally arise as cooperatives become larger and relationships become less personal and more difficult to maintain. Many cooperatives have broken up at this stage, due to dissention among member and leaders. Others have evolved into impersonal, purely economic organizations. Local foods cooperatives or collaboratives likewise have tended to succeed or fail based on their ability to sustain positive personal or social relationships among their members. Consequently, learning the art and science of human relationships could well be the greatest challenge in creating a sustainable food system, as suggested previously.

The key to sustaining the integrity of large cooperative organizations seems to be a deeply-shared organizational culture – an organizational imperative. One of the most successful large cooperatives in the world is the Mondragon workers cooperative located in Spain which has over 83,000 members. The organizational principles include: "Open Admission, Democratic Organisation, the Sovereignty of Labour, Instrumental and Subordinate Nature of Capital, Participatory Management, Payment Solidarity, Inter-cooperation, Social Transformation, Universality and Education."[17] These principles are radically different from the principles of most corporate enterprises. For example, the managers of local Mondragon cooperatives are limited to salary levels no more than five times as large as their lowest paid workers. Mondragon also considers capital to be subordinate to labor. While workers are rewarded for contributing to profits, their wages or salaries are not directly linked to their individual contribution to profits. Social equity, the quality of relationships, takes priority over economic equity.

The Food Commons project in California provides the best conceptual blueprint I am aware of in the U.S. for forming and sustaining a vertical food cooperative organization.[18] The differences between vertical cooperation and for-profit corporations are clearly reflected in their guiding principles. Their core principles include: fairness, sustainability, decentralization, transparency, stewardship, accountability, subsidiarity, reciprocity, and ethics, as well as essential economic principles. Their ultimate success or failure will depend on their ability to create and sustain an organizational culture that reflects these principles, giving shared ethical and social values priority over profits and growth.

In addition, the organizational cultures of sustainable collaboratives must respect the basic nature of the natural ecosystems and social communities in which they operate. The integrity of relationships among people and between people and the earth must be ensured not only through

personal connections among people within communities and also between people and the unique ecological nature of the places where they live. Thus, even as cooperatives or alliances expand regionally, nationally, and globally, they must remain community-based. Their first priority will be to serve the food needs of local communities. Needs that cannot be met locally will be met by trade among community-based organizations, within and among cooperative regional, national, and global alliances defined by shared social and ethical values. While trade will provide variety and convenience to local diets, external trade will not be essential for local or regional food security or survival. Local producers will benefit from providing local surpluses to meet the needs of non-local customers but will not depend on external markets for economic survival.

To be sustainable, these new community-based food systems must be resourceful to be efficient, resilient to survive short-run shocks, and regenerative to endure over time. They will gain resourcefulness through cooperation rather than consolidation into large corporate organizations. They will gain their resilience through interdependent, rather than dependent, relationships among its wide diversity of community-based food systems. They will gain regenerative capacity through non-economic investments in ecological and social integrity.

Over the long run, sustainable regional, national, or global networks of such community-based food systems will be able to survive only within the context of larger regional, national, and global cultures that embrace the essentials of sustainability: The new cultural imperative. Thus, the hope for a new sustainable food system then depends on developing a shared ethic of sustainability that transcends all local food cooperatives and cooperative alliances or networks.

Obviously, developing the new ethical imperative of sustainability will not be a quick or easy task, but it is possible; there is hope. Thus, we have the last prerequisite for change: We have hope. We have hope because the shared social values we see in local food systems can naturally evolve into the shared ethical values we need for a sustainable society and economy. Ethical values are a particular culture's interpretation of morality, meaning a code of conduct that a person applies to all people of all times. Admittedly, some cultural values may not be moral, but they nonetheless reflect a given societies interpretation of morality.

Cultural knowledge evolves over time from a society's collective experiences from personal social relationships. As social relationships become less personal, people begin to understand that the value of relationships arise not just from personal connections within their families and communities but also from being members of societies and of humanity. This is the process by which personal social values evolve into a sense of community, patriotism, and eventually into impersonal ethical values.

Ethical relationships are communal, non-instrumental, and impersonal. Unlike economic decisions, actions that are purely ethical in nature are not an instrument or means of acquiring some further ends. The ethical act is its own reward; the benefits are immediate. Ethical relationships produce nothing of economic value to exchange or be traded to anyone else. Thus, ethical relationships are clearly non-economic. Unlike social relationships, purely ethical relationships show no preference for specific individuals or persons – they are not personally discriminatory. Ethical relationships are communal in that what is ethically right or wrong in a

relationship with one person is right or wrong in relationships with other people, including all other people of both present and future generations.

The social and ethical values that sustain positive relationships within families, communities, and societies evolve into ethical commitments of responsibility, equity, and justice for those of future generations. Since ethical values are impersonal, they can also be extended to relationships with non-persons – to other species, air, water, forests, lakes, streams, rocks, to the earth. Stewardship of nature is an ethic that evolves out of direct human relationships with nature. Concerns for the whole of society and the future of humanity are neither economic nor purely social in nature but are fundamentally ethical.

Consequently, an organizational culture of sustainability that is sustained by personal relationships within local, community-based foods system is capable of evolving quite naturally into a cultural imperative of sustainability that permeates the entire food system, economy, and even global society. The challenge will be to sustain the social and ecological integrity of relationships among individuals with local food systems. In essence, the hope for developing new sustainable food systems depends on each of us doing our part to sustain relationships of integrity among people within our communities and between our communities and nature in our particular "places." The ultimate success in creating a new sustainable global food system will be achieved by each of us, one person, one community, one region, one nation a time.

The new cultural imperative of sustainability must arise from new personal imperatives of sustainability. We know what we have been doing isn't working and won't work in the future. Fortunately, to create the new cultural imperative we need only change our personal imperatives to reflect the historical understanding of the ultimate purpose of life, which is the pursuit of happiness or overall quality of life. Certainly, we humans are material beings. So, human happiness depends on having the economic essentials of life. However, once our basic material needs are met – food, clothing, shelter, health care, – the quality of our life depends far more on the quality of our relationships – friends, family, community, society – than on the quantity of income or wealth. Our happiness also depends on our having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Without purpose and meaning, there is no sense of rightness or goodness – or happiness.

Once our basic economic needs are met, the pursuit of happiness, well-being, or quality of human life is about developing the social and ethical dimensions of life, rather than striving for ever-greater income or wealth. For the vast majority of people in the U.S. and Canada, our real economic needs obviously have been met. It will not be a sacrifice to care for others or care for the earth, these things will improve the quality of our relationships and our sense of purpose in life and make our lives fundamentally better. All we have to do to create a new cultural imperative for a sustainable food system is to finally become "fully human." In this there is hope.

In the words of Vaclav Havel – philosopher, revolutionary, and former president of the Czech Republic: *Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is this hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new*

things, even in conditions that [to others] seem hopeless. Life is too precious to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love and, finally, without hope.[19]

We know creating a new sustainable food system will not be quick or easy, but we also know it is not optional; it's a necessity. Admittedly, there may be no logical reason to be optimistic about our success. But, we know that thousands, perhaps millions, of people all around the world are working and trying new things that could make it happen. In their work, there is hope. We know that working to bring about change is the only thing that makes sense, regardless of how it turns. In all of these things there is hope. Finally, even if in the end we fail, while daring greatly, always remember: Life is simply too precious to live without faith, without love, and finally, without hope.

End Notes:

[1] The "agricultural establishment" refers to the large agribusiness corporations, agricultural commodity organizations, the American Farm Bureau Federation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and state Departments of Agriculture.
[2] Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, "Agriculture and Public Health Gateway," Industrial Food Animal Production, http://aphg.jhsph.edu/?event=browse.subject&subjectID=43 .
[3] USDA, "Household Food Security in the U.S.," ERS, Economic Research Report No 125, Sept. 2011. http://www.ers.usda.gov/Publications/ERR125/ERR125.pdf
[4] Rand Corporation, "Cost of Treatment for Obesity-Related Medical Problems Growing Dramatically," *Rand Corporation*, Http://Www.Rand.Org/News/Press.04/03.09.Html .
[5] Organic Trade Association, "Consumer-driven U.S. organic market surpasses $31 billion in 2011," http://www.organicnewsroom.com/2012/04/us_consumerdriven_organic_mark.html
[6] Carmelo Ruiz-Marrero, 2004, "Clouds on the Organic Horizon," *CorpWatch* <http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=11712>
[7] *Packaged Facts*, "Local and Fresh Foods in the U.S.," May 1, 2007. >http://www.packagedfacts.com/Local-Fresh-Foods-1421831/>
[8] USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, "Farmers Markets and Local Food Marketing," http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/ams.fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateS&leftNav=WholesaleandFarmersMarkets&page=WFMFarmersMarketGrowth&description=Farmers%20Market%20Growth .
[9] Local Harvest, http://www.localharvest.org/
[10] Debra Tropp, "Current USDA Research on Local Foods," USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service, May, 2009, http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5077145 .
[11] Visit the *Grown Locally* website at http://www.grownlocally.com .
[12] Visit the *Idaho's Bounty* website at http://www.idahosbounty.org/ .
[13] Visit Viroqua Food Coop website at http://viroquafood.coop/ .
[14] Visit the *Oklahoma Food Cooperative* website at http://www.oklahomafood.coop/ , list of other cooperatives: http://www.oklahomafood.coop/Display.aspx?cn=otherstates .
[15] United States Department of Agriculture, "Working List of Food Hubs," http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSv1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5091437 .
[16] Vern Grubinger, "Ten Reasons to Buy Local Foods," University of Vermont, http://www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry/factsheets/buylocal.html .
[17] Mondragon Co-operative Culture, http://www.mondragon-corporation.com/ENG/Co-operativism/Co-operative-Experience/Co-operative-Culture.aspx/.
[18] The Food Commons: Imagine, Design, and Build <http://www.thefoodcommons.org/index.html>
[19] Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Random House Inc.), 1990, Chapter 5.