

Creating Common Ground: Working Together for Food Systems Change

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“Can you explain the connection between nutrition and agriculture?”

This question was posed to me while attending a national funders meeting by someone who introduced herself as a health funder. As a “new kid” on the philanthropic block in 2003, I wasn’t even sure I knew what that meant: health funder. But the question really threw me. Had I heard her correctly? If she was involved in health shouldn’t she know how agriculture and nutrition are connected? Agriculture is the growing of plants. Plants have nutrients and are the basis of our food. Simple. Easy. Pretty straightforward. Or so I thought.

I looked up. She stood, smiling, waiting for my answer. I paused before responding, a milestone in itself. My mind churned with internal dialogue: “Does she really not understand this most basic of relationships? How am I going to explain this one? I can’t believe I have to explain this one!”

Then a second line of internal dialogue chimed in: “Really?? You think she’s asking basic questions? What about the 100 questions you’ve had in the last few hours about all the new concepts you are hearing today? Based on audience reaction, those concepts are pretty basic and obvious to them but completely foreign to you. This whole world – job, people, terminology, jargon, concepts – are new. So relax, be nice, she’s asking an honest question. Just start the conversation.” So I did. In the course of our conversation, I got up the courage to ask her some of my basic questions about various public health concepts, which she graciously took the time to explain. I explained food and agricultural concepts to her, and we both came out ahead wiser for the conversation.

In our professional lives, I believe we are at our absolute best when we are able to risk exposing our ignorance, our biases, and our blinders and just put forward our questions. At the same time, we also need to put forward the knowledge, ideas, and creativity each of us possesses. If we are to move forward, we have to be able to both give and to take.

CREATING COMMON GROUND – A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Increasingly a growing number of segments of the philan-

thropic community are paying attention to the food system and its interconnectedness with other major health, environmental, justice, and community issues. Specifically, the link between the food system and the obesity epidemic has been made clearer through the work of many across the country, and there is a keen interest on marshalling together the knowledge, expertise, and resources in an effort to move conversations forward in a more efficient, expedient, effective manner. What is absolutely clear is that our work toward creating a healthier food system for all will require greater coordination and far greater resources than any one group can deliver or provide. The question is no longer one of “So how do these issues relate?” but rather “How can we advance this work? How can we have a bigger impact? How and where can we leverage the good work? How can we together communicate the story that needs to be told?”

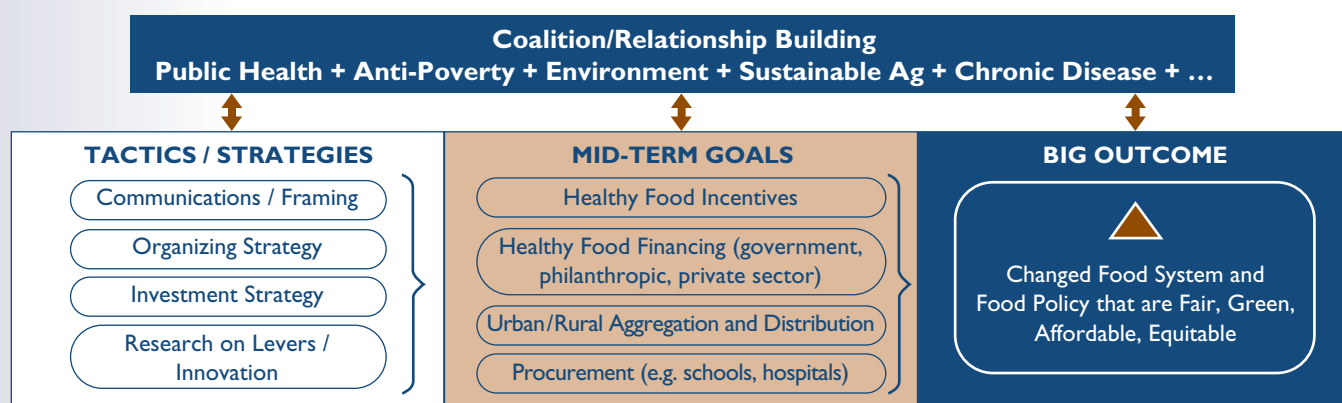
What we all do is significant in addressing fundamental problems. We know there is tremendous time and energy and funding going to support great work out there, and we both need and want to learn about it. We also know there is time, energy, and funding going into duplicative efforts because our work is not coordinated; the stories and lessons learned are not being shared. Given resource constraints and the very real need for large systems change, we need and can do better.

To assess what is happening and to look for ways to move this important work forward, the Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems Funders (SAFSF), Grantmakers In Health (GIH), and the Convergence Partnership began a series of conversations in late 2010. The first meeting, held in December in San Francisco, was followed by a second held in March in Los Angeles to coincide with GIH’s annual conference. The third meeting will be held June 20 in Minneapolis in conjunction with SAFSF’s annual forum.

What we hope to learn and accomplish in the Creating Common Ground partnership:

- **The Work:** What do we know about the work in this space? What has already been done? What is missing?
- **The Players:** Who is working in this space? Funders?

THEORY OF CHANGE



From the Food-Ag-Health Funders Meeting, December 2010

Advocates? Who is missing? Who do we need to still reach out to?

- **The What:** What might be done more effectively if we worked together? What is the “it” we are trying to promote?
- **The Plan:** How can we coordinate our efforts? What are our next steps for moving the work forward?

The meetings in December and March have affirmed attendees’ strong belief for the need to change the food system. There is a commitment to find ways that will enable us as a community to identify and lift the successes to date, and articulate the powerful opportunities for future collaborative work.

THEORY OF CHANGE

Out of a very rich, diverse, and complex set of conversations, a possible theory of change has begun to emerge to help synthesize the ideas.

The thinking behind the draft theory of change suggests that changing the food system is a big, daunting goal, and one that will require new partnerships, political coalitions, and other types of relationships. Funders at the food, agriculture, and health nexus can start by utilizing a handful of specific tactics and strategies designed to influence tangible, politically viable, and meaningful mid-term goals.

In turn, these mid-term achievements will have both direct and indirect effects on the “big outcome.” Directly, achieving the mid-term goals will start to reshape the system and demonstrate that a different food system is possible. Indirectly, bringing different parties to the table and creating shared successes will build relationships and the political constituency required for moving major policy goals that can drive a more fundamental restructuring of the food system. At the end of the day, the “big outcome” is to create a food system that is fair, green, affordable, and equitable.

COMMITMENT AND NEXT STEPS

We have had extensive discussions about the need to involve

grantmakers of different sizes and funding scopes with this partnership as we recognize that there must be a spectrum of experience at the table. There is strong interest and excitement about moving the work forward, but we have not yet come to absolute consensus around how best to do that together.

We encourage you to join us at our next conversation in Minneapolis on June 20 in our efforts to develop a long-term collaboration. It is important to note that simultaneous with the longer-term discussions, the Convergence Partnership will move forward to work on near-term federal policy goals. Funders are welcome to join the conversations.

Beyond June, we hope this group will play a key facilitative role in learning opportunities and discussions focused on such topics as:

- the 2012 Federal Farm Bill and its importance and impact on the health community;
- regional policy change and connection with federal policy;
- short-term goals that can move us toward our longer-term goals;
- resources that need to be developed to facilitate greater ease of entry into food systems work for the health funding community; and
- translating federal policies to regional policies and programs, to individual missions of funding organizations.

Ours is a learning process. We welcome funders who are working at the food-agriculture-health nexus to join us in conversation and help make our work going forward stronger, more resilient, and more targeted.

For more information contact: Virginia Clarke, SAFSF, vclarke@safsf.org, 805.687.0551.

VIEWS FROM THE FIELD is offered by GIH as a forum for health grantmakers to share insights and experiences. If you are interested in participating, please contact Faith Mitchell at 202.452.8331 or fmitchell@gih.org.