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DIGGING DEEPER
Bringing a systems approach to food systems
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Food system governance

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Following on my columns on *scale* (fall 2012) and *feedback loops* (spring 2013), I want to turn to another systems concept that is difficult and sometimes risky, but one that has to be embraced if we are to reach our goal of sustainable, resilient food systems. The concept is *governance,* which in general is understood as "managing, steering and guiding of public affairs by governing procedures and institutions in a democratic manner" (Pisano, Berger, Endl, & Sedlacko, 2011, p. 3). Governance has resonance in many different settings, but two are of particular interest: the first is the relevance and efficacy of organizational structures that we encounter and work with in attempting to change policy; the second is the governance of supply chains, which is so critical to any chain's success.

I'm echoing some of the ideas in a recent article by the Nourishing Communities research group out of Ontario, Canada (Blay-Palmer et al., 2013). I'm also impressed with the sophisticated thinking going on around governance and sustainable development, the objective of which is to achieve simultaneously the population' s economic well-being, environmental protection, and social equity (Pisano et al., 2011). The idea is that governments and other institutions have to be open and capable of "steering societal development along more sustainable lines" (Meadowcroft quoted in Pisano et al., 2011, p. 4). This is no small task because most democratic institutions are fixated on economic growth and not on the common good as represented in sustainability and social justice (Bosselmann, Engel, & Taylor, 2008). Of course

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governance exists at all levels — global, national, regional, local, and corporate — and tends to be challenging because comprehensive approaches to both sustainability and development require an integration across many sectors, stakeholders, and levels of politics (Pisano et al., 2011). Flexibility is another prerequisite. All the social and environmental "actors" are in motion all the time — so plans and strategies that aren't collaborative and adaptive will not hit the mark.

One of the challenges of governance in achieving sustainable development is that there is a lot of uncertainty about what the end goals should be. Secondly, people grappling with sustainability issues must engage a long horizon, when we all know that policy-makers usually have a short-term orientation. A third challenge is that success means figuring out how to get people to agree across multiple levels of functional administrative boundaries where there is little history of coordination and cooperation. Furthermore, sustainable development requires a balancing of economic, social, and environmental interests and policies to minimize negative effects and maximize synergies (Pisano et al., 2011).

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A good real-life example of one of these challenges is that faced by the Missoula Food Policy Council (Hubbard & Hassanein, 2010). As in most places in the U.S., land-use decisions are made at the local level (i.e., at the county or city level in the case of Montana, and towns or townships in many other states). The Missoula Food Policy Council has been trying for years to get the county to address farmland protection, with little success. The city is ready to do something, but most farmland, naturally, is not inside the city limits. These jurisdictional constraints limit the ability to address land-use, even though the farms and ranches producing food for the county and beyond cover a much wider region. Through a governance lens the task in cases like this is to identify a way to determine at what scale certain land-use decisions should be made in order to arrive at what could be a sustainable outcome. For example, it might be through a regional planning agency or through a new network set up to influence these decisions. One process that might be helpful is collective impact — a group of people coming together from different sectors with a commitment to solve a specific problem together. These collaborations, described in detail by Kania and Kramer (2011, 2013) are not plentiful yet, but look like they are worth pursuing under the right kind of shared leadership.

As to supply chains, without good, savvy governance they won't succeed. They need a governance *structure,* which is the way in which a chain is organized, its involvement with other organizations, and its legal status (for example an association, cooperative, or company). They also need a governance *process,* which is how the chain is governed, such as its decision-making procedures, contractual arrangements, and style of governance (e.g., a lead commander or a consultative process (Roep & Wiskerke, 2012)). Supply chains face many of the same challenges addressed above. These include the diverse goals, priorities, and values of the members of the chain (Geels in Hinrichs, 2014), networks across sectors and scales, power relationships among many different players in the chains, and other factors. There also must be flexibility in order to negotiate accommodations to different priorities. In order to enhance their viability, new and established food supply chains need to think about utilizing open governance processes as they start up and scale up. These are also called *reflexive processes,* in which people engage to discuss tensions regarding group objectives, recognize contradictions, and deal with differences in a respectful way (see DuPuis & Goodman, 2005; Hassanein, 2003; Mount, 2012).

This seems like a time-consuming task and a challenging undertaking, but there's useful

guidance in Phil Mount's article (2012) and also in his presentations. We have several examples of values-based supply chains that are utilizing these governance concepts.[1] And a new analysis out of England brings climate change into the discussion and underscores a need for more open processes, by pointing out that since global warming is affecting resource constraints such as water availability, companies not only have to increase the range of their suppliers but also need to build stronger relationships that will share costs and risks more fairly across a supply chain (Thorpe & Fennell, 2012; see also Miller, Anderson, Francis, Kruger, Barford, Park, & McCown, 2013). Furthermore, it has been suggested that food system organizations might call on colleagues in academic institutions or nongovernmental organizations with the knowledge and the time to assist supply chains in adopting more reflexive processes (Roep & Wiskerke, 2012).

Unfortunately there don't appear to be a lot of precedents for following a sustainable development and governance path in the U.S. Most of the political activity and research have been happening in Europe, and although there are institutions and individuals in the U.S. working on the question, most of this appears to be directed outside of the U.S.; virtually none of it is looking at food systems issues inside the U.S. in this framework. There is the great work of our Canadian friends I mentioned earlier (maybe their influence will rub off?). And a very new report by Forster and Escudero (2014) does include a chapter on food system governance. The authors are focused on urban areas and their immediate regions , and all of the examples in the chapter are international ones, but they have a useful discussion of institutional frameworks that "support dialogue, assessment, prioritization and new practices, which are often themselves the result of political will, charismatic local leadership and or policy design" (p. 30). I hope that there will be much more thought and research on food systems governance in North America, and I join others in looking for places where different models of governance are being tried so they can be evaluated and emulated.

[1] See http://www.agofthemiddle.org for other examples.

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