

6-18-2014

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## Recommended Citation

Kolodinsky, J. (2015). The UVM Food Systems Summit makes more room at the table. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 5(2), 3–5. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.052.017>

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## 2014 UVM FOOD SYSTEMS SUMMIT GUEST EDITORIAL

### The UVM Food Systems Summit makes more room at the table

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Published online March 29, 2015

*Citation:* Kolodinsky, J. (2015). The UVM Food Systems Summit makes more room at the table. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development*, 5(2), 3–5.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2015.052.017>

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This special issue of the *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems and Community Development* highlights the best of the 2014 Food Systems Summit held at the University of Vermont. The Summit focused on local-level responses to globalization through the following themes: the impact of our *geopolitical context* on our food system, the *biophysical constraints* we face for food production globally, and the implications of *behavior and culture* for our food system. Using a format of refereed presentations and keynote speakers, and allowing for a dialogue between and among scholars, practitioners, policy makers, community activists and interested citizens, the Summit provided a space for lively pushing of the envelope by highlighting constraints and problems with our current food system and offering thoughtful, evidence-based solutions for improvement. Several presenters took the opportunity to go through the referee process. Five of those papers are included in this special issue, along with three commentaries written by the three keynote speakers.

What is unique about the UVM Food Summit is the complex web of inquiry, discussion, openness, and questioning of the status quo by stakeholders in the food movement who don't often come together in the same venue. Conversing about one of the presentations or at the Taste of Vermont reception held on one evening of the Summit, one might find the Vermont secretary of agriculture interacting with a full or assistant

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professor, a staffer for U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy or Bernie Sanders, the executive director of Vermont's Farm to Plate initiative, and a dairy producer or small vegetable grower. In order to foster change that can improve working conditions of farm workers, provide tasty and healthy meals to schoolchildren, improve the economic conditions of farmers, and insure food access for now and into the future it is necessary for a wide range of actors to have a seat at the same table on an equal basis. That was and remains the goal of the annual UVM Food Systems Summit. What made the 2014 Summit even more meaningful was its place as a preconference event to the joint meeting of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society (AFHVS) and the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS)—further expanding the audience across many disciplines as well as organizations.

Despite increasing evidence that our current food system is severely challenged, including climate change that threatens food production, population growth that threatens food security, monocropping that threatens crop diversity, and globalization that requires attention to individual economic constraints and choice, discussion of big-picture issues often results in heated debate and standoffs that do not lead to viable solutions. In the U.S. and abroad, the only voices at the table are those with the power, as noted by the keynote commentaries included in this special issue. As the commentaries and several of the papers make clear, until we understand how and why a food system must make room for a variety of scales, production methods, value chains, and distribution methods, solutions will not be found to global problems that are manifested in local decisions (or the lack thereof). The commentaries and peer-reviewed papers included in this special issue all provide context and examples that illustrate why we all need a “seat at the table.”

Rosamond L. Naylor, William Wrigley Professor, Environmental Earth Systems Science, and director of the Center on Food Security and the Environment at Stanford University, provides a global perspective on food systems. Her essay expounds on how a “growing appreciation for the biophysical and socioeconomic complexities of food systems is enabling communities throughout the world to manage agriculture in ways that promote healthy food products, rural income growth, and environmental services.” Implicit in her commentary is the need for a coexistence among scales and diversity in agricultural production—all with an eye on environmental and social sustainability.

Nicholas Freudenberg, Distinguished Professor of Public Health and director of the doctoral program at City University of New York's School of Public Health at Hunter College, brings the focus into the realm of consumption in his commentary on *Choice, Responsibility and Health: What Role for the Food Movement?* He argues that food system change—clearly a historical challenge—requires collaboration among the food movement, policy makers, consumers, and industry. Freudenberg highlights the necessity for people to continue to remain involved despite push-back from industry and a less than warm reception from federal policy makers.

Eric Holt-Giménez, executive director of Food First/Institute for Food and Development Policy, focuses his commentary on food (in)justice, pointing out the necessity of continued food activism at all levels of the food system. Giménez has perhaps the most extreme and passionate voice of the keynote speakers, underscoring the role of true activists who aim to make change in the food system. He clearly points out the smoking gun of our industrialized food system as a major cause of many of the things that are broken in the food system.

The first two refereed papers highlight **biophysical constraints**. Nathaniel Foust-Meyer and Megan E. O'Rourke write about the (low) technology high-tunnel approach to increasing local food production in climates that do not support agricultural production year-round. They provide evidence that even relevant production methods are part of a complex system of biophysical constraints *and* market, policy and socio-demographic characteristics of a region. Simply expanding production capability does not insure a sustainable local or regional food system.

Sheryl Breen's paper compares and contrasts two seed conservation projects. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault preserves seeds from across the globe, while Native American seed-saving efforts in the U.S. promote cultural heritage and food sovereignty at the local and/or tribal level. What is fascinating about Breen's discussion is that the preservation of seeds and therefore cultivar diversity presents conflict between strategy

and ownership...so between *people*, even when the larger goals are similar.

The next paper highlights the **geopolitical context** of the food system. Kevin Cody presents a case study of the local food movement, specifically an organic farmers market in Peru. Even in the developing world, where we might expect to see more direct-to-consumer food distribution venues, we find “alternative” food systems. Cody compares an organic market in the global South to those in the U.S. and concludes that there are entrepreneurial opportunities in the direct-to-consumer market for rural producers in Peru. But there are also issues of food access and privilege.

The last papers in this special issue relate to **behavioral and cultural considerations** in the food system. Philosopher Beth Dixon challenges us to rethink our charity work. While many of us would believe that our volunteer time at a food pantry fulfills our obligation to help others who are food insecure, Dixon nudges us in a not-so-subtle manner to understand that volunteerism is not a substitute for activism that will change the system—activism that will result in a food system where the need for food pantries disappears.

The paper by Erin Roche, David Conner, and me brings this special issue back to Vermont, where the Summit took place. We examine the farm-to-school movement, specifically local procurement of food. While many assert that providing fresh and (even) local produce in a school setting cannot be accomplished because it is simply too expensive, Roche et al. provide evidence that pricing is only one of many complexities in farm-to-school food programs. The social networking component of a community food system is equally important.

Together, the papers in this issue clearly point out that food systems that produce enough for all, provide access to all, and are environmentally sustainable and resilient are more than farmers producing food and selling it wholesale or retail. They are more than food producers adding value to food. They are more than the resources it takes to produce food and move it to the point of distribution. They are more than a consumer’s ability to find an access point and pay for nourishment. All of these papers point to the human aspect of the food system. Whether local or global, biophysical or geopolitical, or behavioral or cultural, PEOPLE are the key to a sustainable and equitable food system. The UVM Food Systems Summit that provided the impetus for this special issue was and continues to be one of the “tables” where people across many disciplines as well as organizations can come together with ideas that spark interest in developing and taking steps that will result in what the Summit organizers call “the necessary [r]evolution for sustainable food systems.” 

### **Acknowledgements**

There are many people at the University of Vermont who worked diligently to ensure the success of the 2014 UVM Food Systems Summit and this special issue. Cynthia Belliveau, Doug Lantagne, and Thomas Vogelmann chaired the executive committee; Alison Nihart provided assistance, from planning and execution through follow-up; and many other faculty, staff, and students participated as hosts, discussants, and reviewers.