

Local Sustainable Food Systems Network

2014 Annual Meeting Report

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The Third Annual Meeting of the Local Sustainable Food Systems Network took place Nov 12th and 13th in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The location for the meeting, the Seaport Farmers Market, was carefully chosen to align with the goals and practice of the Network and its members, namely, local sustainable food systems.

The meeting goals were circulated to participants in advance of the meeting and were:

1. To convene and connect Network members to strengthen the network and the relationships amongst its members;
2. To build individual capacity and to advance our collective work;
3. To enable the Working Groups (existing and any new areas that are identified, such as sustainable meat) to enhance and advance their work together;
4. To identify projects and begin work plans and fundraising plans for the year ahead for the Working Groups and for the Network as a whole;
5. To discuss the role and options for the future of the Network.

The Agenda was developed to meet these goals, recognizing that items 1 through 4 inclusive would also be met by essentially the continuation of Network meeting activities during the Food Secure Canada Assembly that immediately followed the Network meeting. Seven of the sessions at the FSC Assembly were organized by the Network Working Groups or individual members in addition to nine sessions delivering content of relevance to the Network members' activities and needs (see Appendix C).

Opportunities for Network members to meet face to face are rare and precious so the time together was focused on learning and knowledge creation, mostly drawing on the expertise that exists within the Network membership itself. As one participant stated, the meeting provided "incredibly credible speakers" drawing on "few 'external' speakers" (Evaluation #7). The evaluation comments (see Appendix D) reiterated that the diversity and knowledge that exists amongst those participating really contributes to the richness of the face-to-face experiences as well as the ongoing networking, learning and collaborating that takes place between meetings.

"Very well thought out program and panels that delivered a lot of value on the spot and in future connections – lots of networking opportunities. Thanks!!"
(Evaluation #6)

Criticisms of the Network meeting mirror the dilemma that challenges the Network itself, namely that some want more focus within the broad mandate of sustainable local food systems, while others wish for less, appreciating the exposure to the "diversity of people and perspectives present". (Evaluation #2)

The registration for the 2014 Network meeting was limited due to the size constraints of the venue. However, of the 29 people who attended, 11 were from the Value Chain program¹, 16 were from organizations that had representation at each of the annual Network meetings to date, and 9 were new participants. External experts were only brought in for two of the sessions: Julie Chaisson, the Executive Director of the Seaport Farmers Market gave a very well received review of the recent history of the market and how they had managed to overcome significant organizational and financial challenges; Chris De Waal, owner and operator of Get Away Farm and Butcher Shop participated in a panel on sustainable meat systems that demonstrated some very innovative approaches to accessing skilled labour – by enabling the training, even if it means working with a firm in the UK. All other presentations were from people who attended the full meeting, many of whom have a long history with the Network, including Ricardo Ramirez, who co-presented with several of the Network members on a measurement tool in development and who was part of the original Developmental Evaluation Team. Appendix A provides an annotated attendee list.

Each Network meeting to date has included a mix of returning and new participants. The “Food Systems Superhero” introductory round was intended as a playful way to get to know each other while also eliciting a sense of the key challenges that each participant faces in their food systems work (see Appendix A). The exercise broke the ice and pointed to some common themes in the challenges that people are experiencing in their respective work. However, evaluation feedback indicated that some means of learning more about the others in the room would be helpful, particularly for the purpose of making the most of the knowledge in the room. The challenge, with both new and returning people each year, is to find a way to enable people to get to know enough about each other without taking up too much of the short time together. The survey that was used for the first Network meeting in 2012 was referenced as an effective method for doing so: attendees completed a three-question survey, the results of which were provided to everyone in advance. The questions were: to provide an elevator pitch for their work, describe what would most advance their work, and a favourite adventure. This sort of tool should be considered for the next in-person meeting.

The Agenda sought to provide a mix of knowledge mobilization and networking. Network members were approached by the Co-ordinator to provide the bulk of the content for the meeting, organized into groups according to their expertise and experience relevant to the Agenda items. Similarly, the Working Groups were encouraged by the Co-ordinator to submit proposals for Assembly sessions, resulting in 3 separate sessions led by the Working Groups (food hubs, municipal food policy, and new entrant farmers) in addition to individual members leading sessions of relevance to the Network members and goals, including several focused on sustainable fisheries. While these sessions were encouraged and mostly originally convened by the Network Co-ordinator, they all developed and were delivered during the Assembly based on leadership assumed within each group. The effective collaboration and creation that the food hubs working group undertook to deliver their session was particularly inspiring, given the large number of eager participants in the delivery team, and the diversity of geographical locations and experience.

As with the Assembly, this Network meeting sought to integrate fisheries more fully into the food systems conversations and work. This Meeting was characterized by less “food and fish” statements, demonstrating the shift in understanding amongst the agriculturally-focused participants that fish is as much a food as a pig or carrot. This opens up new opportunities for

¹ Of the eleven Value Chain participants, all but one of them had a representative at each annual meeting. The only exception is CHEP / Saskatoon which missed 2013, likely due to staff transitions.

identifying common agendas in terms of policy and programming for land and aquatic food systems.

The two sessions on sustainable protein – meat and fish – deepened the understanding of participants on their particular challenges and highlighted shared issues, such as lack of local infrastructure, skilled labour and the ubiquitous *challenge* of always competing with lower priced imports or mass produced foods. The *Creating sustainable businesses* fish bowl, as well as the panel on collaborations between for-profits and civil society provided an opportunity for interaction with participants working on identical or similar initiatives. The demonstration of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework tool by Ricardo Ramirez, Justin Cantafio and Gord Enns showcased a nascent measurement tool that shows promise in measuring the complex indicators that are inherent in sustainable food systems work, across the social, environmental, human and economic spheres. Interest in the tool was sparked by the presentation, with six additional members approaching Ricardo to work on the tool.

A communications proposal based on the Regional Food Assessments undertaken by the Value Chain projects was presented by Beth and Abra and was well received. The Assessments are a rich source of information and landscape themes that will form the basis of a series of two-pagers on issues faced by sustainable food systems proponents. Intended as an educational and advocacy tool for policy makers, funders and others, the proposal was endorsed by the meeting.

Updates by the Working Groups and a review of the Network activities and path ahead were also integrated into the two-day schedule. The strong connections amongst members of the Working Groups and indeed, amongst the Network members generally, was evident in the dynamic conversations that occurred at each working group session and break, with the resulting positive challenge in bringing people back to the larger group each time.

The meeting reinforced the value of in-person meetings for strengthening the connections and highlighting opportunities for strategic collaborations and leadership amongst the members. Priorities for the year ahead include sustainable protein (meat and fish), food hubs, and scale-appropriate regulations / food safety. These priorities align with the groupings on the diagram of sustainable food systems work that was created over the two days of the meeting by Hayley Lapalme of My Sustainable Canada(see Appendix C). There was a broad consensus that the Network and the annual meetings continue, with offers to assist in fundraising and planning. From the evaluations of the meeting completed, the average rating was 8.3 / 10.

