

Launch of the Food Think Tank



foodtank
THE FOOD THINK TANK

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Roughly a half-century after the Green Revolution—the first systematic, major attempt to reduce poverty and hunger throughout the world—a large share of the human family is still chronically without food, reliable income, and access to education. Ellen Gustafson and Danielle Nierenberg intend to change this through The Food Tank and its online resource, The Food Think Tank.

Gustafson is a sustainable food system activist, and founder of the 30 Project, a "think + do" tank changing the conversation about the global food system by connecting hunger and obesity. She also co-founded FEED Projects, which provides millions of school lunches to children worldwide. Former Peace Corp volunteer Nierenberg is an expert on sustainable agriculture and food issues, and the food security adviser for Citizen Effect, an NGO focused on sustainable development projects.

While talking with different farmers, farmers' groups, scientists, academics, and policymakers, Gustafson and Nierenberg discovered a need for an organization that bridges domestic and global issues. They consider circumstances in Thailand or Brazil not that different from those of industrialized nations, and problems such as obesity or malnutrition are the results of the same thing: a broken food system.

So one goal of The Food Think Tank is to highlight those problems and their connections and bring people together to solve them. Nierenberg wants more investment in small- and medium-scale agriculture, whether in sub-Saharan Africa or the U.S., and a greater exchange of resources and practices. As one example, she observes that the 2012 drought in the U.S. demonstrated the monoculture system doesn't work during extreme weather events. "As climate change and its impact take a bigger hold across the world, producers are necessarily going to have to find

different ways to farm," Nierenberg says. "Monoculture crops tend to be very water- and resource-intensive, and I think there will be opportunities for farmers in the U.S. to learn how to handle climate change from farmers in developing countries, who've been dealing with it for more than a decade now." She says there's always been talk about north-to-south sharing, or south-to-south sharing, and thinks there's great benefit to a south-to-north exchange. As Agriculture.com's John Walter reports, the Global Trends 2030 study from the National Intelligence Council reinforces the need for agricultural transformation.

Another goal of the organization is to modify the metrics of food production. "For so long, we've focused only on yield and on the amount of calories we produce," Nierenberg says. "We've forgotten that a successful and healthy food system should also contribute to environmental sustainability, and increasing biodiversity and protecting water and soil." Nierenberg's research with farmers in the Midwest revealed that some producers "feel stuck in a monoculture-based system. It's not something they necessarily wanted to do; it's something they felt forced into by loan and credit programs in the U.S. If you don't go big, you sometimes don't get access to the credit you need. And tax structures and subsidy programs aren't set up to support diversity." She thinks there are ways to make the business case for sustainable agriculture so some interested farmers can explore biodiversity throughout the food system while still generating profit.

The Food Tank definition of sustainability also considers the importance of maintaining farm culture. "Many farmers are the last of their generation. The average age is in the late 50s. So if you can explain to these folks that if they figure out a different way of farming, maybe their kids will want to be involved. They won't be forced into other professions," says Nierenberg. "The movement of local and regional food system is growing exponentially. There are ways that agricultural is both economically and intellectually stimulating, and young people get excited about this. There are more entrepreneurial opportunities throughout the food system, such as sustainable butchering practices, food marketing endeavors, and artisanal approaches."

Other initiatives for The Food Tank include addressing food scarcity and conversely, food waste. Gustafson and Nierenberg have a great deal of ground experience with these issues, and intend to use the organization as a clearinghouse for producers, foundations, and charitable groups to join forces and develop more targeted approaches to food scarcity worldwide. Food waste in the U.S. alone reaches staggering numbers: consumers throw away approximately 30% of purchased food, which equates to 34 million tons. Of that amount, 5 million tons are wasted during the winter holiday season. Currently, more than 50 million Americans require some form of food assistance, so Nierenberg states it's of vital importance for consumers to understand the moral and economical implications of food waste, and producers can help spread this message.

The organization's website, FoodTank.org, launches January 10, 2013. Nierenberg says it will include all the major agricultural and environmental reports so people can use it as a go-to source for information about the food system. It will also feature reader collaboration and results of university tours to provide more open access to information. Eventually, there will be an innovations database to allow producers, policymakers, and consumers to upload the innovations they're working with and see how they compare in environmental sustainability to other innovations and allow a more fluid exchange of ideas. ©