



## **Four observations about sustainability**

by Hal Hamilton

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First a note of background for these observations: the Sustainable Food Lab frequently gathers business and non-business people in the same room, including competitors in both groups. Many of these people don't agree about a lot, but they sit together within a common set of dilemmas facing the whole food industry, and some find ways to work together.

As we begin another year, here are a few reflections:

1. Many of the arguments between local and global, small and big, and organic and conventional become ideological and polarizing. The global food system is so complex that these dichotomies distract us from opportunities. For example, "local food systems" and "global food systems" are hard to tease apart in those circumstances when large distributors provide the most efficient logistics and opportunities for small farm specialty products to reach both local and longer distance markets.
2. People criticizing businesses for focusing on short-term goals need patience. Successful businesses create long-term as well as short-term value. Within businesses developing sustainability strategies, initiatives divide in quadrants from immediate to long term, and from what can be accomplished by an organization acting alone to what needs multi-organizational collaboration. The low hanging fruit, like energy saving, is immediate and single organization, and important because progress is quick and builds confidence. Other objectives like improved livelihood or sustained water supply in developing country agriculture can only be achieved through collaboration. Those objectives are long-term and difficult but necessary. Every portfolio of sustainability initiatives should include a mix of initiatives to build momentum while heading for the game changers.
3. We MAY be entering a supply-constrained era after 150 years of chronic over-production in agriculture. Commodity prices have increased and become more volatile over the last four years—increasing risk to the poor, creating supply scarcity in some crops and countries, and increasing returns

- to farmers in some situations. Is this a temporary situation or long term change? Nobody can be certain, but many signals point toward a shift.
4. Success at navigating emerging challenges and optimizing for sustainability requires not only technical and organizational savvy but also qualities of leadership capable of getting diverse players to work together. One person who inspired us was Bill Obrien, CEO of Hanover Insurance, who suggested that the results of an intervention are related to the interior condition of the intervener. We are each interveners—leaders in our organizations and projects—and the impacts of our work will be improved as we cultivate our own interior condition.