

A Funder's Perspective on Terra Madre: A Monologue

We gathered in Turin October 20th to 23rd, some 5000 strong and representing 130 countries—small-scale farmers, wild food gatherers, artisan food producers, fisherman, herders, restaurateurs, food writers—for the first ever Terra Madre, a congress on food convened by the International Slow Food Movement to celebrate the contributions of small producers. Terra Madre was organized to counter the way that decisions on agriculture at the international level seem to take place—exclusive of small farmers and the grassroots production base. For many participants it was the first venture out of a home country and for most it was the first time to meet people from other countries who were producing or growing the same food. For funders it presented a unique perspective on strategies to the strengthen the movement.

Terra Madre was designed with a clear goal: to create a forum to connect those who seek to grow, raise, catch, create, distribute and promote food in ways that respect the environment, are economically and environmentally sustainable, defend agricultural biodiversity, support human dignity and protect the health of consumers. Key to achieving that goal was selecting the participants and financing their attendance. The organizers of Terra Madre, the principals of Slow Food, focused on “food communities”—the long chain of people involved in getting food to the consumer—that met the following criteria or were striving to do so:

- Had a product relevant for the economy in their geographical area or the culture of a local ethnic group;
- Carried out their work in a way respectful of environmental concerns;
- Had a quality product from an organoleptic and nutritional view;
- Gave fair compensation to the people involved in production; and
- Contribute to the defense of agricultural and food biodiversity.

Slow Food convivium from throughout the world were asked to raise funds to help pay the transportation of local food community leaders, but the major funding came from Slow Food International, the Italian Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the Piedmont Regional Authority and the City of Turin. The selection process and fundraising worked to bring 1185 food communities from the 130 countries: 164 from Africa; 188 from Latin America; 109 from North America; 140 from Asia and Oceania; 136 from Eastern Europe; 136 from Western Europe; and 270 from Italy.

We met, by design, a mile from the fifth bi-annual Salone de Gusto, the major Slow Food fair, a paradise of artisan foods that gave an opportunity to sample many of the finest cheeses, chocolates, smoked meats, preserves and wines made by small-scale producers in a sustainable manner in communities around the world. Very few of the participants at Terra Madre had a product of the caliber appropriate for Salone, or they were at an earlier stage of the food production line. Salone still presented a valuable message in what small-scale producers could achieve if given the right types of assistance—many of which are appropriate for funders concerned with sustainable agriculture.

The four days of meetings began in United Nations format when thousands of people, many in native dress, sat together in front of a stage filled with a flag and a delegate from all represented countries, with ear phones set to simultaneous translations in Italian, English, French, Spanish and Russian to be inspired and challenged by the international leaders of the field:

- Carlo Petrini, president of Slow Food, who defined the construction of a new society, “a society based on fraternity”, one where in order to defend the rights and land of producers all over the world, we must “become co-producers”.
- Miguel Altieri, a Chilean born ecologist and agronomist and champion of sustainable agriculture, who referred to Terra Madre as a “historical opportunity to challenge the false promises” of agriculture based upon “flawed scientific and philosophical assumptions” and detailed a program for food security.
- Vandana Shiva, an Indian born physicist and economist, who has dedicated herself to ecology, who commented that “food is the currency, the tradition and condition of life” while modern agriculture is the “residue of a war economy...the chemicals of warfare have been adapted for agriculture and now conduct a war against the earth and farmers.
- Alice Walters, founder of Berkeley’s Chez Panisse, who over three decades has modeled the restaurant as partner and developer with a network of farmers and ranchers of the small scale practice of sustainable agriculture, who defined food as “our common language” and where eating together “instills in us the most important values”.

The real action, information exchange and connecting took place in over 60 *Earth Workshops* that focused on strategies, resources, markets and specific food groups; small fringe meetings organized around projects, themes, food communities, books and regions in between the *Earth Workshops*; over lunch; in the instant communities created where delegates were housed in monasteries, agritourism facilities and hotels, homes and farms; and at the informal market place at the center of the Palazzo del Lavoro.

Throughout the conference delegates continuously used a large open room to create their own informal market place, setting up displays and tastings of products as diverse as yerba mate from Argentina, yak milk from Ladakh in the Himalayas, dried mangoes from Africa and cheeses from Italy. They also wandered with identifying products in hand, looking to meet others who grew or fished what they did, and then grabbed wandering translators as needed to help discussions once connections were made. Seated on the floor at one moment were a woman in African batik head wrap and robe, man in flowing beard with turban and another woman in western dress, each holding some form of grain in hand.

The many workshops and theme meetings had topics as diverse as Designations of Origin as a Means of Raising the Profile of a Local Area; Gathering Economies: Cultures to Defend and Protect Lands; Health Benefits of Honey in Developing Countries; Minor Cereals: Forgotten Food or the Food of the Future; and Mass Communication about Agriculture in the United States.

Consistent themes emerged that gave context for understanding the movement and values and principles to be applied in solidifying and sustaining it.

- Behind food there are thousands of years of tradition.
- Foods of the types represented at Terra Madre are produced by people where their cultures are important and there is a cultural context to what they do and how they do it.
- There is limitless potential from cooperation.
- Cultural integrity is our link to the future.
- Food rights are human rights.

- There must be intellectual honesty in the practice of sustainable agriculture, not something to be used by mercenaries for short-term gain.
- Food production does not have to be centralized nor industrialized to be successful and lucrative.

What also emerged from the various workshops, meetings and informal conversations with participants and facilitators were strategies funders can use to strengthen, grow and protect the sustainable agriculture movement. Underlying these strategies is the fundamental reality that the vast majority of small growers and producers are driven by what they know and value—the land: using it and saving it for the next generation; traditions; a set location; hands on approaches developed often because of scarcity not philosophy; and fundamental values of individuality and self-sufficiency. With that said, there is much that can be done and needs to be done.

1. Convening. Most small producers work in isolation, caused by both geographic restraints and time constraints. Funders can create and fund opportunities to replicate Terra Madre at the local, regional and state level. They can also bring groups of farmers and producers together to discuss their experiences and challenges as an effort to inform their own grantmaking and, simultaneously, promote the development of new producer networks. Finally, funders can convene producers with consumers for the interaction producers rarely if ever have: the opportunity to hear from the consumer viewpoint what makes a product marketable.
2. Exchanges and Internships. Farmers and producers value the chance to visit and view other farms and production systems but do not necessarily have the knowledge of which ones will most benefit them nor funds to finance the visits. Funders can establish a formal fellowship program; make clear in their guidelines that such exchanges are an eligible activity; and develop and support organizations that develop and promote exchanges.
3. Production Infrastructure. There are many clusters of food producers—“food communities”—physically close to each other and growing the same product, but without the leadership and financial resources to build their own processing plants and storage facilities. To get to or use commercial facilities outside the local community adds costs that exceed benefits, limiting their scale of production, too often below what is necessary for long-term financial viability. This is an opportunity for funders to help with capital and technical assistance.
4. Technical Assistance. Small-scale farmers and producers need assistance in navigating systems, including but not limited to the paper work associated with becoming certified organic and applying for government loans and grants. Funders can help develop and fund capacity building organizations that provide direct assistance and promote them as resources that provide technical assistance and support.
5. Marketing. Producers and growers know what they do, but often do not have the knowledge, time, experience or resources to market their product. For some, training in marketing and assistance with developing marketing materials is all that is needed. Others need to be linked to a marketing system that will do their marketing for them. In other cases, there is a need for assistance with market development, whether through the creation of a farmers market or a coop or an effective distribution system linking farmers with restaurants and grocers. Funders can help develop, fund and make accessible marketing support organizations.
6. Communications and Publicity. While marketing assistance is needed to help with direct sales, an organized and sustained communications strategy will benefit the whole sustainable agricultural movement. There is clearly media interest about the movement and small producers,

as seen by radio and news shows, particularly on NPR and the New York Times, and in a recent spat of newspaper stories and articles in other major print and broadcast media. What if funders built upon the current patchwork with an organized and strategic communications strategy that highlights the movement and its importance? At the local level, this could be as simple as funding a writer to develop and place stories about particular farmers and growers. At a grander level, it could be as large as a national media campaign.

7. Public Policy. Developing and implementing public policy actions is complex and time consuming, but one that has a high leverage point for funder dollars. Such efforts are most powerful when the individuals in a legislative or Congressional district are the faces of the action. Funders can support organizing initiatives and the development of messages, materials and strategies to develop and support effective public policies that will benefit the sustainable agriculture movement.

Prince Charles of England challenged us in his closing remarks to put globalization in context and recognize that often “the consequence of globalization is greater unsustainability”, that, left to its own devices, it will “sow seeds of ever-greater poverty, disease and hunger in the cities and the loss of viable, self-sufficient rural populations”. He questioned whether genetically modified food would, on balance, be a contribution to the greater good of humanity. He identified the issue that the techniques used in organic production—such as inter-cropping, green manuring and biological pest control—offer less prospect of commercial gain to those who have money to invest. He linked the toll that the imposition of industrial farming systems take on traditional agricultural economies in destroying both biological and social capital and eliminating the cultural identity which has its roots in working on land.

The Prince of Wales has become through virtue of his values, position and commitment a visible and credible champion of the organic food movement and those who farm and produce in sustainable ways. Important as his speech making is in drawing attention, there is another more personal way he helps. He spends time visiting with artisan producers and small farmers, something he did in Turin at Salone, where he devoted time to visiting the organized and heavily promoted array of British food booths, talking one on one with the food representatives there, asking informed questions about their products, tasting, letting them know how he respected and supported what they were doing. While funders are not Prince Charles, they have the ability to apply some of his approaches in their work, ones as simple as showing by word, deed and attention how they value the contributions of their grantees.

Tommy Thompson, secretary of health and human services, became a potential champion by default. In announcing December 4th that he was resigning, he made an unexpected comment: "For the life of me, I cannot understand why the terrorists have not attacked our food supply, because it is so easy to do." What more direct call to action could there be for the sustainable agriculture movement and those who fund in this area?

Terra Madre was a critical step forward in organizing grass-roots growers, producers and advocates from around the world around “food communities” and then providing an opportunity to connect them. Funders can be the force that makes it possible for these food communities to leverage Thompson’s alert into public policy initiatives at the local, state and federal level that

will assure a safe, tasty, and sustainable food supply for consumers but one also beneficial to small-scale local growers and producers. That is a challenge and opportunity for 2005.

Jo Anne Bander, President, From the Source, Inc.
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JoAnne Bander was the president and CEO of Donors Forum of South Florida for nine years, following a 25-year career in the government, nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. Throughout the years she has been a frequent contributor to the editorial pages of South Florida newspapers and producer of reports, articles and newsletters on issues affecting foundations and the nonprofit sector. Upon retiring from Donors Forum at the end of 2003, she organized From the Source, a consulting firm focused on strategic philanthropy, advocacy, sustainable agriculture and artisanal foods. Bander is a graduate of Wellesley College and has an MBA from Florida International University. She was part of the international writing corps that covered Salone del Gusto and Terra Madre in 2004. Bander lives and writes in Miami and on Mid-Coast Maine.