

huge interest

Kath Dalmeny, policy director of Sustain, talks to David Parker



Kath Dalmeny has a special interest in food, sustainability and climate change, especially how local food systems can help create resilient local economies that reduce their impact on the environment.

Food is such big business – can local food networks really make a difference to local economies?

Very much so. I'm involved with Growing Communities and that has proved that it's possible to run an ethical local business that provides good incomes to farmers and good food to local people. And it really gets people involved. We get a very big turn out to meetings

How do you see local food networks developing over the next 10 years?

The whole sector is getting more professional in its outlook. We're beginning to realise that we can't depend on grants and charitable input. Projects must be financially sustainable. We really need to take a close look at financial viability of local food networks. Another key priority will be to greatly reduce our dependence on oil. This means developing very local supply chains.

What role do you think supermarkets could play?

There are different approaches. The Co-operative and Waitrose both have a co-operative ethos and are involved in farming. The Co-operative is the UK's biggest farmer and Waitrose has close links with specific suppliers. These are sustainable practices.

Some other supermarkets have not behaved so well. Unethical practice towards producers is not a sustainable way of providing food. Producers in developing countries are often treated very badly - the Fairtrade movement has done a lot to expose this. Some supermarkets also pressurise UK producers. The Competition Commission says that the voluntary agreements are not working.

How important is democratic ownership and control of local food enterprises?

I'm learning, as many of us are, how important this is as the movement grows. In many projects the attitude has been 'Give it here – I'll get on with this'. Now we need to understand about proper structures that will keep things running properly beyond the initial enthusiasm. Governance is becoming an important issue.

Farmers markets and vegetable box schemes are perceived as middle class interests – how can we ensure that all sectors of society benefit?

I think that's partly to do with the way the media tends to cover this. Maybe it began that way. But now there are a lot of projects that work with specifically with lower income communities. Community Food Enterprises in Newham, East London, and Food Chain North East in Newcastle are two good examples and there are others.

Many of these projects are working with local authorities and other agencies to promote health benefits of fresh local food. So in some cases the cost of the vegetable boxes is being subsidised by another funding programme. If you make the effort you can make it work for low income people.

Do you think local food networks will suffer during the recession or are there opportunities?

Bit of both. It's going to be tough but I'm optimistic as long as there is investment - both cash and training. There needs to be visionary funding because right now there's a huge upsurge in interest in local food. There's been a fantastic response to the Capital Growth campaign to create 2,012 new food growing spaces in London by 2012.

What can ordinary people do?

Use our power as consumers. We know that it works. Shop at a farmers' market, participate in a vegetable box scheme.

There are lots of ways you can get involved in local food networks. You don't have to grow own food. The movement needs people with all sorts of skills – finance, marketing, teaching. We've got a big task ahead and we need all the help we can get.

find out more ...

Campaign to Protect Rural England

Charity advocating positive solutions for the long-term future of the countryside.
www.cpre.org.uk

Country Markets

Co-operative that organises over 400 weekly markets selling home-produced food.
www.country-markets.co.uk

Federation of City Farms & Community Gardens

Federation of community-managed farms, gardens and open space.
www.farmgarden.org.uk

Making Local Food Work

Initiative to explore community enterprise approaches to connect land and people through food.
www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk

National Farmers' Retail & Markets Association (FARMA)

Co-operative of farmers, food producers and farmers' markets who sell direct to the public.
www.farma.org.uk

Plunkett Foundation

Educational charity which supports the development of rural group enterprise world-wide
www.plunkett.co.uk

Soil Association

Membership charity campaigning for sustainable food and farming
www.soilassociation.org

Sustain

Alliance of about 100 national public interest organisations with an interest in better food practices
www.sustainweb.org

Co-operative advice Co-operatives UK

www.cooperatives-uk.coop

Co-operative Development Scotland

www.cdscotland.co.uk

Wales Co-operative Centre

www.walescoop.com

Social Economy Agency Northern Ireland

www.socialeconomyagency.org