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LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE NORTHEAST NETWORK PROJECT

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The Northeast Network began in 1986 as an effort on the part of the Northeast Region's thirteen State Extension Home Economics Program Leaders to develop a regional, multi-disciplinary public policy education project that addressed food, health and agricultural issues.

Because of the relatively large size of the Cooperative Extension staffs in Pennsylvania and New York compared with those in the other ten states and the District of Columbia, it was decided that Penn State and Cornell would constitute a "symmetrical" coalition for this project while the region as a whole would be related to these two dominant organizations in an "asymmetrical" way.

We carefully considered at the outset whether we wanted to involve one or more non-extension organizations in our coalition and decided not to do so because we wanted each site that implemented the Northeast Network Program to have an opportunity to build its own local coalition. To this end we place a great deal of emphasis in our training upon the identification and involvement of organizations that might be represented on a state or local Northeast Network Program Steering Committee. We have also included information on the need for local coalitions in our *Facilitator's Guide* and accompanying training video.

Lessons Learned

What lessons are we learning about coalitions from working within the Cooperative Extension system?

1. When individuals or organizations involved in a coalition are geographically separated, it is difficult to sustain the involvement of the less-dominant members of the coalition even when members are parts of an organization, such as the Cooperative Extension Service, that has a common mission.
2. Individuals and organizations whose very future is threatened are

likely to be more concerned with survival than with innovation or collaboration. We have also come to recognize that extension's three R's, (Reorganization, Reassignments and Retirements), make it extremely challenging to maintain inter-institutional ties and to create the organizational memory needed for effective coalition building within the Cooperative Extension System at this time in its history.

3. Communication and collaboration across traditional extension program area lines remain more rhetoric than reality at both the specialist and agent levels. The subject matter "boxes" into which extension specialists are slotted and the discipline-based promotion and tenure process through which they progress, make it very difficult to achieve the balance between content and process that Hahn has called for and that we firmly believe is necessary to build public policy coalitions within the extension organization.

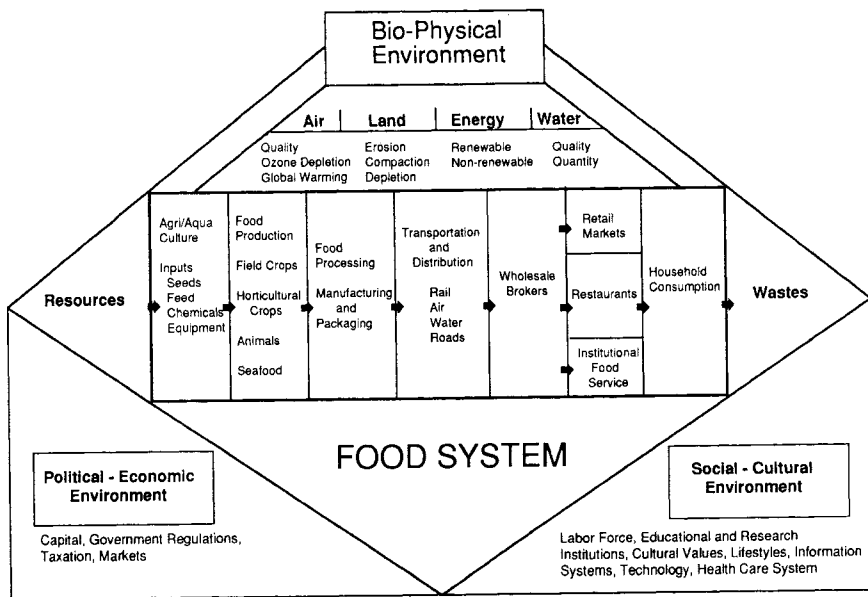
We have also observed that some extension agents with specific program assignments have a certain reluctance to bring together representatives of their different local clientele groups.

4. It is possible to bring together for several days in a neutral location a multi-state, multi-disciplinary group, comprised of extension agents, specialists and administrators, have them focus their collective attention on the food system and role-play individuals with very different perspectives from their own. When this process occurs, the reality of the need for a "new agenda" that reflects the interests of a concerned public as well as the opinions of an academic elite does, as Hahn suggests, become obvious.
5. The initial excitement and enthusiasm generated in a setting where people come together who have not previously had the opportunity to learn from and about each other and to compare their ways of thinking about food issues is, like the common cold, quite infectious. But we have also learned that people tend to recover quickly when they return to their real-world jobs and the "challenge of change" is very likely to be overpowered by a "conflict of commitments."

Need for Organizational Development

Hahn's second lesson addresses the need for attention to process in building coalitions. When we began the Northeast Network Project we were certainly focused on the content that would define the project. We identified that content as issues related to the cost and safety of the food supply and to the nutritional health of the population as influenced by that food supply. We chose to embed those issues in the context of the food system of the Northeast and to illustrate how that system meshed with the larger U.S. and global food systems.

With this breadth of perspective (Figure 1) we sought to identify



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Figure 1.

technically qualified individuals from land grant universities in the Northeast who would be willing to make the time commitment to author and revise materials as necessary based on feedback both from pilot sites and from outside reviewers.

This initial attention to content was, to quote a phrase, “necessary but not sufficient.” Our pilot sites struggled with the fact that the written materials contained useful information but that the information could not be delivered to audiences in agent-controlled presentations. It was not easy for agents to understand that our modules on food safety, food costs and nutrition with their accompanying, television-quality videos were written “merely” to be used to generate meaningful local policy discussions and not to serve as content-based educational programs on these topics.

I watched the initial enthusiasm of a group in a pilot site fade when several agents, despite their apparent commitment to the program, failed to do the “up-front” work that was needed to breathe life into an emerging coalition. And at this point I began to realize that if we really wanted the Northeast Network Project to facilitate the development of local food policy councils that would engage in the demanding activity that Mathews calls “choicework” (and that we in public policy education have long thought of as the “identification of policy alternatives and their consequences”), we needed to equip agents with skills to do *organizational development in the context of public policy education*. Organizational development is not

generally a part of the public policy education process as we have taught it in extension, but I believe that we should be devoting considerably more attention to it in the future.

Democratic Dialogue

In his discussion, Hahn has suggested that the public policy education projects he studied could be classified as informational, dialogic or empowering. The Northeast Network, in my opinion has dialogue as a very important goal, but in our written materials and videos we have made a conscious effort to include the perspective of low-income consumers. In our training we also emphasize the need to involve in "democratic dialogue" (Yankelovich) individuals who are affected by policy decisions but have not traditionally participated in the process of shaping those decisions.

In support of the goal of empowerment, New Jersey has just submitted a proposal to the Northeast Rural Development Center to develop a coalition between the Northeast Network Project and the Family Community Leadership (FCL) Programs in New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and the District of Columbia. Through this coalition, local food policy groups would be trained, using FCL materials and methods, to address food system issues covered in the Northeast Network modules. We believe that we can encourage local public policy education projects to be more empowering by providing visible models in which empowerment is successfully occurring and we see a symmetrical coalition between FCL and the Northeast Network as a useful way to create some very interesting models.

Fostering Establishment of Councils

Hahn notes that both events-oriented and materials-oriented projects have encountered problems that, in retrospect, one might say were predictable. The Northeast Network Project may be unique in that we are neither events- nor materials-oriented. In implementing the project, our emphasis has been on the training of extension agents to use selected educational materials to foster the establishment of local food policy councils. These groups, in turn, will choose issues of concern to be addressed at the local, state, national, international or corporate level. These issues might include, but would not be limited to, those dealing with the cost, safety and nutritional quality of the food supply in the Northeast.

Our goal is to establish, nurture, and coalesce local food policy councils into a regional network of autonomous groups with a common, but loosely forged, link with Cooperative Extension. The networking will be facilitated by a quarterly newsletter called *Northeast Network News* and the use of Penpages, an electronic information system housed at Penn State. We will also be looking for resources

to partially underwrite the costs of a biannual Northeast Network Conference that will bring together members of local food policy councils to discuss their common concerns.

Helping People 'Come to Public Judgment'

In his recent book, *Coming to Public Judgment*, Yankelovich discusses the urgent need in today's complex world for systematic efforts to raise the quality of public opinion on the important issues in our society. His definition of good quality public opinion is one of the most profound and at the same time most functional concepts I have encountered.

He says simply, "*I propose that the quality of public opinion be considered good when the public accepts responsibility for the consequences of its views and poor when the public, for whatever reason, is unprepared to do so*" (p. 24).

The Northeast Network Project is attempting to set the stage to allow Cooperative Extension to help people come to public judgment and thereby to improve the quality of public opinion on a wide range of food system issues. This activity is something that I consider to be both a challenge and an opportunity: A challenge because I do not believe there are, at present, many extension staff who are ready to take on this role; an opportunity because I'm convinced the few who are ready to do so will be more effective if we can create a network through which they can share their successes as well as their failures.

Project Maturity and Expansion

Perhaps the most fascinating thing we have learned is how our concept of what is possible through the Northeast Network continues to expand as the project matures. I think we are now at a point at which the investment that the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the Farm Foundation, The Pennsylvania State University, Cornell University, and the other land grant institutions in the region have made in this project are beginning to show a return on that investment. The period 1992-1995 is a crucial time for our project because that is the Extension-Plan-of-Work period during which we will learn if the project is able to retain its form and focus as it becomes a part of the Cooperative Extension program in twelve different states and the District of Columbia. That is a lot to ask of a project. But, in addition to training agents, specialists and administrators from around the region, we know there are others who share our vision that extension must help make democracy work in a complex world.

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