

Reframing the debate about the Global Food System

A talk show host has invited you to appear on television to discuss your concerns about the industrialization of U.S. agriculture. He (it is always a “he”) begins by introducing you as an expert on sustainable agriculture and local foods and then asks you the following question....

Most Americans today believe that the modern agricultural system that we enjoy is the result of decades of scientific research and development and has provided us with an abundant supply of safe, nutritious and inexpensive food grown by the best farmers on the most productive land anywhere in the world. My goodness, we are able to buy anything we want every day of the year! How could it possibly be better than that!

If all of our food was grown by part-time, small farmers like those in my area, food prices would soar, poor people would go hungry, and we all would be eating nothing but kale and potatoes year round. Why do you want to replace the global food system that produces plentiful food year round with a bunch of hobby-farmers? That just doesn't make any sense to me....

Okay.... So you are on the “hot seat.” Take a breath.... And formulate a response – don’t react! We will practice using the iceberg to formulate a response to this “set up”. The talk show host has established the frame that the global food system is good - and if you react defensively, you will reinforce the frame. Try to follow these suggested guidelines for “reframing” the debate.

- Begin by “not arguing”.... that is “build a bridge”.... find something to agree with to de-escalate the tension! Focus on all the listeners “out there” – not the host who will never be on your side.
- Next, suggest a way the current system is not working, pointing out how it might be improved. This provides you with an opening among the listeners to the thought that there might be an alternative.
- Then offer a realistic alternative vision that reframes the question you were asked (here is where the iceberg comes in).
 - Start with a mental model including the values, assumptions, stories that are the foundation of a local agricultural system. This should be exciting and compelling. Keep it positive and believable. Tell a story about real people. Speak to the heart!
 - From there build a case for much needed structures that would support your vision (mental model). Give examples of organizations, policies, or physical structures that are consistent with these criteria. Make them realistic (believable).
 - Then describe the outcomes of these structures, that is, the patterns of behavior that will grow out of the structures that we build. Give examples.
 - Finally, give an example from real life of an activity that represents these patterns. Tell a story about a farm family that is making a change toward sustainability!

Have fun!