

Sustainability takes balance

Successful food systems and practices can maintain balance by being ethically grounded, scientifically verified and economically viable.

By CHARLIE ARNOT*

DRIVE through any emerging housing development or construction project, and you will notice a familiar shape over and over again: the triangle.

Engineers rely on the triangle in architectural design because of its incredible strength and load-bearing capacity. Whether in the truss of a roof or the span of a bridge, the triangle's ability to transfer loads through compression and tension make it a crucial part of design when engineers and architects take into account all of the pressures a structure must endure.

The triangle helps the structure withstand both everyday use as well as the extraordinary forces of nature. It helps make the structure sustainable.

The strength of the triangle is directly related to its ability to withstand substantial pressure by transferring loads to maintain structural integrity. If the angle for one leg of the triangle is out of balance, the load-bearing capacity is diminished, and the structure may collapse.

The triangle also provides a template to create a new definition of sustainability.

Today, the food system is experiencing mounting pressure to operate "sustainable systems."

There is growing concern about climate change, the rapidly rising cost of food and the impact of skyrocketing energy prices. Add to that increased interest in animal well-being, immigration, food safety, nutrition and obesity, and you begin to appreciate the incredible load these issues place on producers,

processors, restaurants and retailers across the food system.

To successfully manage the mounting pressure from these and other issues, we need to adopt systems and practices that maintain balance by being ethically grounded, scientifically verified and economically viable (Figure).

It is only by achieving and maintaining this balance that we can create systems that are truly sustainable. Each side of the sustainability triangle has stakeholders focused on maintaining the strength of that side, even at the expense of maintaining balance.

There may be times when stakeholders have to look beyond short-term self-interest to foster sustainability. When that doesn't happen, those of us in the food system have to manage the tension and compression from competing stakeholders to maintain the structural integrity of the sustainable system.

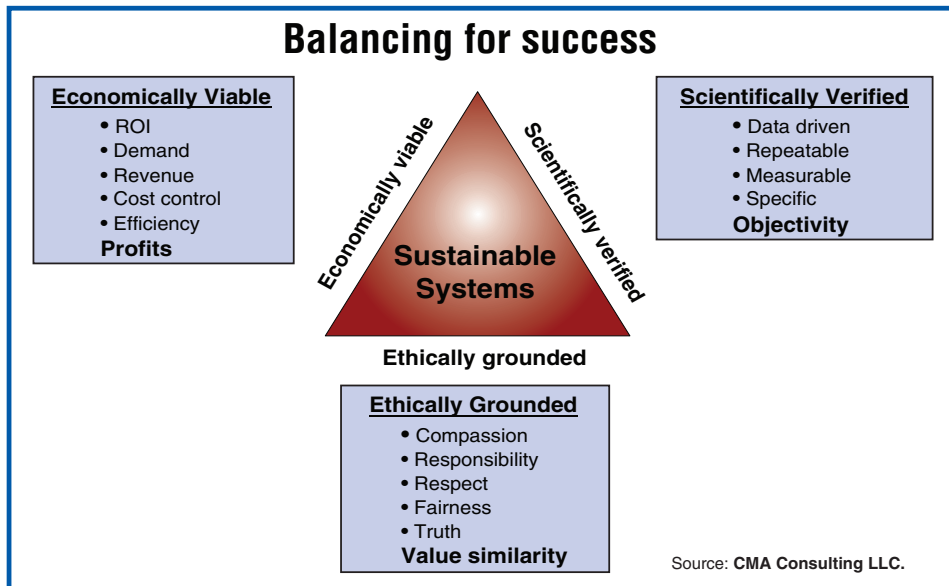
If food system practices are not ethically grounded, they will not achieve broad-based societal acceptance and support. If they are not scientifically verified, there is no way to evaluate and validate the claims of sustainability, and if they are not economically viable, they cannot be commercially sustained.

For a system to be truly sustainable, it has to be ethically grounded, scientifically verified and economically viable.

Ethically grounded

Those who focus on ethics want food system practices that are consistent with the shared values of compassion, responsibility, respect, fairness and truth. They want to ensure that our increasingly sophisticated and technologically advanced food system doesn't put profits ahead of ethical principles and that science is not used as moral justification.

When this side of the triangle is out of balance, critics claim that there is no scientific basis for the claims being made and that the ethical demands will jeopardize the economic viability of the system.



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Scientifically verified

Those with a primary interest in scientific verification are data driven. They want specific, measurable and repeatable observations to provide the basis for their objective decisions. They believe science can provide the insight and guidance necessary to make reasonable determinations about how food systems should be managed.

When this side of the triangle is out of balance, critics claim that the organization is relying on science while ignoring ethical considerations and that research may be done and recommendations made without consideration of the economic impact.

Economically viable

Those responsible for the bottom line are focused on profitability. They work every day to respond to demand, control costs and increase efficiency to maximize

the return on investment. They have to manage the increasingly complex demands of competing in a global marketplace with volatile commodity markets and ruthless competition.

When this side of the triangle is out of balance, critics claim that profits outweigh ethical principles and that business decisions are made without the benefit of scientific verification, placing those decisions at risk when questioned by those who value validation.

If we can't operate a system that maintains a balance of ethically grounded, scientifically verified and economically viable practices, it will collapse.

That collapse may subject producers, processors, restaurants or retailers to undue pressure that includes consumer protests or boycotts, unfavorable shareholder resolutions, uninformed supply chain mandates, regulation, legislation, litigation or bankruptcy.

The pressure on producers, processors,

restaurants and retailers continues to increase with the growing number of complex issues facing the food system.

The only way to maintain sustainable balance in this environment is to work together to maintain structural integrity by managing the compression and tension that come from being part of today's food system.

Maintaining balance is never easy. It will require the entire food system working together to transfer the tension and compression these issues put on each link in the food chain before any individual link collapses.

Success demands an increased level of communication and engagement and willingness to look for solutions that are ethically grounded, scientifically verified and economically viable for each segment of the food system.

Only by working together can we maintain the structural integrity of the sustainable system.