

## **Why are we here?**

*Cultivating Agriculture, Food and Health* will open a dialogue on the challenges and opportunities for agriculture, food and health. The goal is to provide a forum where participants can begin to forge the new relationships and linkages necessary for effective, health-oriented change in the agricultural and food systems.

Agriculture, food and health encompass broad systems and knowledge areas that impact nearly every facet of our society. The challenges that exist within these are many, but fortunately the opportunities are as well.

The list below represents a starting point for the discussion on agriculture, food and health. Participants are encouraged to review this list and to reflect on how it intersects with the challenges and opportunities they encounter in their own work.

## ***The Challenges:***

- There is concurrent widespread undernourishment and obesity in the face of a rapidly-growing human population.
- There is a high prevalence of, and a rapid rate of transition to, diets high in calories, processed foods and sugars, yet low in fibre, mineral & vitamin density (low in whole grains, fruits and vegetables). Salt and other nutrient imbalances are also health considerations.
- This transition is a major contributor to the increased incidence of chronic non-infectious diseases such as CVD, diabetes and diet-related cancer.
- This transition is most evident in low- and middle-income countries and within sub-populations of wealthy countries such as Canada and the U.S.
- The transition is not merely a result of individual choice. The prevalence and predictability of the transition are related to agri-food and health policies, economic drivers, changing socio-economic models as well as to cultural factors.
- Agricultural policy and nutrition, education and health policies are housed in distinct 'towers' in most jurisdictions.
- Healthy food production models in a region such as Atlantic Canada can sometimes be impeded by the necessities of least cost production and global trade models.
- Healthy diet policies may have unexpected and far-reaching effects on the economy of both the initiating country and others, given the nature of the agri-food system.
- Relatively little is known about the effectiveness of policy interventions to promote healthy eating and food production. Agri-food and health systems have wide reach and built-in inertia that can make them resistant to change.

### ***The Opportunities***

- The high prevalence of obesity and diet-related disease has increased public interest in food and nutrition, which in turn has increased the political interest and will to better link agriculture, food and health.
- Consolidation in the agri-food system means that theoretically at least, large changes are possible in short periods of time.
- Major food companies have shown leadership in providing healthier food options for consumers.
- If the political will is there, agricultural policy can be shifted to encourage the development of a healthier food system. Agricultural research investment can target sustainable systems for small and large farmers that support and complement nutrition and health initiatives.
- Agricultural bio-product innovation can result in new food products with enhanced nutrient and processing profiles that are more supportive of healthy eating.
- Public interest has supported the development of many diverse alliances across government and community groups interested in food, sustainability and healthy eating. This in turn has supported an emergence of local, direct-marketing agricultural production systems that complement the broader “industrialized” food system, particularly with respect to fruit and vegetable production and marketing.
- A number of jurisdictions have tried different policies to promote healthy eating – a wide variety of strategies are available for governments and communities to implement. All the provinces in the Atlantic region have health promotion initiatives through their provincial health departments – these include promotion of healthy diets, helping link food and health. The next step is agriculture!