

Report on the Sorrento Gathering 2000

The second Sorrento Gathering was held September 6th to 9th at the Sorrento Centre, with about 60 people from all over the province in attendance, under the theme of building community food security.

A key goal of the conference was to further the BC Food Systems Network by bringing together the people who have been working on food policy issues in community-based organizations with people dealing with issues in community food security. This included participants in the pregnancy outreach programs and members of First Nations communities.

The purpose was to increase the capacity of these groups to work cohesively within a provincial network and to develop mechanisms for ongoing communication concerning initiatives, challenges, and opportunities.

The method was to develop a participatory framework and this was led off with a half-day training session on participatory evaluation, which included the principles of participatory evaluation and some specific methodology for evaluation which is based on the experience and judgments of the participants in a program. The theme was developed throughout the conference, as the conference agenda itself was held up to collective evaluation and decision-making on the second day. While this was a difficult and frustrating process for many of the conference participants, the strong consensus was that it was effective. A particular challenge was the wide diversity of people in the group, and ensuring that the quieter voices, particularly of the First Nations participants, were given space in which to be heard.

The context for discussion and networking around food issues was set by a keynote address from a First Nations elder, who challenged the group to see these issues in terms of relationships with land, animals, and other people(s). A panel the following day elaborated the context of the industrial food system and outlined some of the initiatives which have emerged from earlier attempts at networking on these issues. A later panel presented the issues of food security and sustainable agriculture from a farmer's perspective, and provided a wonderful model as the farmers on the panel treated one another with courtesy and respect despite substantial practical and philosophical differences.

The conference also included practical skills-building workshops which focused on project management, including proposal writing and reporting, and practical organizing and action on the local level. There was also training on using the internet links for communication and research. A highlight was a session on "building the web": a role-playing exercise which demonstrated how the network can work in practice. Written materials were made available so that the learning from the conference sessions could be passed on by participants to their organizations at home.