

At a Loss for Words

Ruth A. Rosenbaum, TC, PhD

In May 2008 the Immigration and Naturalization Services raided a meat processing factory in Iowa. The raid focused on the legality of the workers' documents. However, not long after the raid, national focus shifted from the legal status of the workers to the status of the factory, which was described as a "kosher" meat processing facility.

Over the years, the factory had been cited for labor violations, environmental violations, and others. So questions arose: How could this meat processing facility be kosher? While the word kosher normally means that the product is prepared according to a set of food-related dietary laws, doesn't it signify more than that? A discussion in the Jewish community raised other questions: Shouldn't there be a way to include how workers are treated and how they are paid? Perhaps the understanding of kosher might be expanded; or perhaps a new word has to be created, something like eco-kosher, and socio-kosher. Discussion continues in the Jewish community. That discussion raises interesting questions for all of us.

In my attempts to engage others in this conversation, I found that in the Christian tradition, we do not have any words, any terminology parallel to kosher in Judaism or halal in the Moslem tradition. Even more, there is no single word that we ALL can use to describe food that is grown, processed, prepared and provided according to healthy and just economic, social and environmental standards. How come?

So the question (and the challenge) has become: What terminology is needed to allow us to examine the standards for the entire system of actors (workers, work situations, etc.) that provide our food? We have words to describe violations that occur along the supply chain, but we have no single word, no single label that assures us that every link in that chain meets international standards for workers as well as the for the environment.

We began exploring the use of the word organic; thinking that maybe we could create econo-organic or socio-organic to address the vocabulary need. But that quickly fell by the wayside. No matter how we tried, organic meant without pesticides and herbicides, etc. When a product is designated "organic," and we seek to buy "organic," the implication is that we want to do what is good for the environment, and we want to do what is healthy for us. We are even willing to pay a little bit more for organic, and in some cases, a lot more.

"But what about health for the preparers, the workers, or the growers or the harvesters?" we asked. "Don't we need something, some word, that includes these people, and not only the earth?" The immediate response is: Who's going to pay for it? We don't ask that question when it comes to organic but the question quickly appears when it comes to improving things for the farmers and the workers, our sisters and brothers, somehow finding the willingness to pay the extra amount needed is a challenge.

Either intentionally or unintentionally, we lack language that has the same powerful significance as "organic" to use to apply to improved situations for farmers and workers, and that makes it even more difficult to explore the issue of who would pay for it.

In addition, there is the underlying question: "If we paid more to purchase the product, how do we make sure it's the workers who get the benefit?" But we have managed to solve that problem in terms of organic, and in terms of Fair Trade. What would happen if we brought the same willingness to change the way things *have been done* in providing our food to the way things *should be done*?

All of which brings us back to the question of language. How do we create a simple label that will say that this product, this food, this service, was produced in a way that provided sustainable living wages, and healthful working conditions for the workers, for the community, and ultimately for us and the world?

Let's return to the words "kosher" and "halal" for a minute. There is a certain asceticism, a certain discipline, in following the way of kosher, or halal. Both require refraining from foods or actions. For the individual, there are really two components under any of the dietary restrictions: the reasoning behind them (for example, the health implications.) and the discipline to accept the restrictions.

For the food producers, there is the discipline of undergoing inspection and verification in order for their food to be labeled "kosher." For the community, there has to be agreement on the standards to be met as well as the inspection and verification processes.

So for us as individual consumers, what would it mean if we agreed to those two components: understanding the reasoning for purchasing foods grown and prepared under conditions that are environmentally, economically and socially just; and accepting the discipline required to support those products by purchasing them even though others may be less expensive?

Understanding the reasoning would lead us to see the justice in wanting our food providers to be treated according to international standards of equity and equality. As people who work for peace, including economic and social peace, we would be willing to accept the discipline that says: "This is what we choose to buy; this is where we choose to shop; this is what we choose to use." We would be willing to exercise restraint in other ways in order to pay the extra amount, since we are assured that the benefit reaches the workers.

So how can this be accomplished? What word or phrase could be used to give us that assurance? And what verification systems are needed?

Here at CREA, it is rare that we admit that we are at a loss for words. But that is the reality of this situation. We still cannot think of or find short, focused, specific words that communicate the whole of what we are trying to describe. So we ask you to think about it, to talk about it, and to take a minute or two to drop us a note, send us an e-mail, or call us about your thinking.

Hopefully, together, we can find a word, or two or three that will meet these challenges. The comes the figuring out how to do it.