

“Happy Hour with Carolyn Steel” Webinar Transcript

09 April 2020

Q&A session with Carolyn Steel, in which she answers audience questions from her presentation “Sitopia: Rethinking Our Lives Through Food” (<https://youtu.be/XRu293oJCYU>).

[00:00:01] The 2020 Informed Cities Forum in Lucca, Italy, was cancelled due to COVID-19.

Carolyn Steel, author of “Hungry City” and “Sitopia: How Food Can Save the World”, was scheduled to give a keynote presentation at the forum. Instead, she agreed to participate in a live webinar on the 2nd of April 2020, a first for both Carolyn and the Informed Cities Forum.

We scheduled a follow up Q&A session during the European lockdown with Carolyn as a happy hour so that she could answer more questions from the webinar with a glass of Italian wine. It was the closest we could all get to Italy at the time.

[00:00:35] Jessica Duncan: It could be a webinar series. Cocktails with Carolyn. I'm pitching it.

[00:00:54] Allison Wildman: So, what we're going to do this evening – for most of us – is, we're going to go through the questions that came out of the first webinar that we had - an Informed Cities webinar. And they were such wonderful questions. We just put them all in a package and we're going to go through them - just one through 30. And some are going to be clustered and others are going to be standalone. But Carolyn is going to answer and then Jess is going to contribute as a sustainable food systems professional to the conversation. So... Let's go!

[00:01:27] Question: Are there some examples of cities trying to re-establish this rural city relationship?

[00:01:33] Carolyn Steel: I mean, the short answer is yes. There are many cities that are trying to do this. I mean, the problem is often that they don't have enough power to do it as we would love to see them do it. But you probably know about the Milan Food Pact, which was agreed a few years ago, actually at the expo. I think that this was about three or four years ago, wasn't it? I've forgotten when it was. Anyway. A lot of cities came together and they made this declaration that they were going to try to make their food systems more sustainable and so on. You might know, Jessica, I think that there are about a hundred cities have signed up to this thing now. A lot of cities have.

[00:02:12] Jessica Duncan: Yes, much more than a hundred.

[00:02:16] Carolyn Steel: Yeah, which is amazing. So, what are they doing? I mean, there are some cities, for example, Toronto, which has been on to this for a long time. So Toronto was the first western city to set up a food policy unit within its city government. And it's brilliant because all the

other departments feed into it and they sort of say, OK, what is the impact of this new planning policy or this new health policy, or whatever it is, on the food system in Toronto. And they support a lot of local food charities and they try to strengthen urban rural linkages, you know, sort of food networks and stuff.

As I say, it's quite informal, even though it's embedded in the city governments. It's not like they have vast amounts of money. In fact, a lot of the people working on that unit for the first 20 years were unpaid. They were volunteers. But they did draw from a very wide group - a broad sector – and so they brought the kind of the “big picture” stuff into the city thinking. So it's a model that actually many other cities have subsequently tried to copy.

And there are many cities, for example, another one in Brazil. I know there's lots of efforts going on in cities like Belo Horizonte, for example, where they're explicitly trying to protect and strengthen the kinds of local linkages that feed food markets because they're very concerned about, you know, basically people being able to get access to affordable, healthy food. So there's a lot of emphasis going on preserving the markets.

That's also true for a city like Barcelona, for example, which actually has a regional food policy that they put in place about two or three years ago. And part of that is preserving land around the city. So keeping it and making sure it stays as farmland and also a lot of investment in the markets, in the city markets. So instead of expecting the markets to just be able to kind of make money on their own, like they do in the U.K., they actually understand that the markets are a social resource and a resource for the city and they invest in them and they subsidise the costs for stallholders.

So there are many, many examples. In the U.K., I should say, there's the thing called Sustainable Food Cities, which is an organisation - about 660 cities belong to that. Bristol and Brighton are two UK cities. They're doing a lot as well to support and try to coordinate, you know, the kind of the local food systems and trying to turn that into a - again - a vision for the city's relationship with its region. So I think it's an idea that's generally catching on.

But I would say where it hasn't generally caught on is at national government level. So, you know, what national governments could do, for example, is give the cities more power. Because I think, you know, this is the kind of thing I think I was talking about in the webinar about, you know, levels of governance and basically how we need more governance at a kind of city region level to allow these kinds of more powerful governance, I should say. To allow these kinds of initiatives to get more teeth. And I think there's many other questions that some of you have asked that will feed into this question as we go along. But, Jessica, you were saying that Lucca has got some interesting policies as well.

[00:05:42] Jessica Duncan: Yeah. Well, part of the ROBUST project that we're working on and that's co-sponsoring this webinar series - our “happy hour” - includes the city of Lucca. And what they're doing is working with a number of regions around Lucca to create a regional food policy, which I think is quite unique. We also, in the ROBUST project, have Ede, which is a small town near Wageningen - so an hour from Amsterdam. And what we're seeing in that region is that it includes a sort of urban centre and a lot of rural areas. And they've developed a food policy that tries to integrate the countryside with the city.

I think this question of integration is really key and it links to what you are talking about as well with the national level. So we see this sort of rural-urban integration, but we also need to see this

vertical integration. That's really key. I just did a quick Google and I will say the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact now has two hundred and nine cities registered.

[00:06:42] Carolyn Steel: Fantastic! Amazing. And this is very encouraging. Yeah, it is.

[00:06:46] Jessica Duncan: Yeah, it is indeed. And the other thing, just to respond a little bit more to Sebastian's question about city-rural relationships is: if you check out the City Region Food Systems website that's hosted through the FAO - the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations - they have a toolkit and a lot of resources, as well as really concrete case studies around cities that are that are trialing this approach of city region food systems. And I think that this idea of cities learning from each others is really exciting.

[00:07:25] Carolyn Steel: Yeah, I do too. Yeah. Great. Okay, well that's a big question, but we can come back on that.

Jessica Duncan: First one done! Whew!

Carolyn Steel: First one down! Twenty nine to go! Or whatever it is. No...it's 32 to go.

[00:07:40] Question: What is your opinion about projects like plenty (vertical farming)? Do you think it's a starting point for us or do you think we need to go the other way?

[00:07:49] Carolyn: So this is basically vertical farms and it's not accidental that they're funded by kind of tech giants. And, you know, big investors, which already tells you something wrong about them...in my opinion. Which is, you know, do we really want our food to be owned by Google kind of thing? That kind of conversation again. [coughs] I think I haven't got COVID-19, but I do have a sore throat, by the way.

The answer is that, you know, I think vertical farms can play a part in feeding cities in the future. I mean, they already are playing a part in feeding cities. But as I think I may have said in the webinar (or maybe I didn't), it's not solving the urban paradox, as it were in my terminology. And, you know, the reason is, if you think of the Von Thunen model again about the way cities are fed, it's the kind of inner ring, the kind of the market gardening ring, which they really represent, which is basically always historically has been a kind of luxury element to the food system. And, you know, I mean, vertical farms, the whole kind of model doesn't really stack up unless, you know, you're selling really, really expensive micro greens to kind of high level luxury markets, which is what basically they currently do.

Yes, they could probably expand to grow in slightly less elevated – haha - lettuces and so on. But, you know, you're never going to replicate the amount of land that actually feeds a city in a sort of tower block around the city. I mean, it's just not going to happen. I mean, I think that I worked out in the case of London that if you tried to replace the farmland that feeds London in London, you would need 2000 buildings, 100 metres by 100 metres and 20 stories high. And that would be even if you stop wasting any food and if you stopped eating animals. So that's basically gives you an idea of where those things are going. And I don't know who is going to pay for them. And I don't know who is going to own them. And for me, vertical farming raises so many issues to do with, as I say, the fact that, you know, if we can't even pay farmers to farm land, then the additional infrastructural cost of building buildings and LCD lights and all the rest of it to pay them just makes the food very expensive - more so than it needs to be, in my view.

Secondly, yes, it appears to be growing food in the city, but actually the nutrients are coming from somewhere else. So, you know, you're not really growing food in the city at all. It's a bit of an illusion. You're not joining the nutrient cycle up. Thirdly, the question of ownership. I mean, all the vertical farms I know have got millions of dollars of investment behind them from people like Jeff Bezos. And as I say, I don't really want my food to be owned by Jeff Bezos, thank you very much. So there's issues.

Having said all of that, it does make sense to grow some foods indoors. Of course, you know, we already do that in things - buildings known as greenhouses. We've been doing it for hundreds of years and that's not particularly new. Yeah, it's making more and more sense to stack the plants up in the greenhouse. Of course, it makes sense for the food to be near the city. That's all good. So, I mean, I'm not against these things. I just think they get way more PR than they really deserve. And they're just not they're not the answer. They could be part of the answer.

That's where I'm at on vertical farms, for what it's worth.

[00:11:22] Question: How are animals farmed and consumed in Utopia?

[00:11:25] Yeah, this is a brilliant question. I mean, they're all brilliant questions. Very interesting questions. The short answer: I'm going to actually point you in the direction of a book now, because I think it's the best book by far that I've read on this subject. And a lot of the thinking that I do in Sitopia was informed by it. And I've kind of followed his guide.

The book is by Simon Fairlie (F-A-I-R-L-E) and the book is called "Meat: A Benign Extravagance". And as the title actually tells you, what Fairley is arguing is that: A) we have to stop industrial scale factory farming completely - with which I entirely agree. So, Thing One: stop the industrial farming of meat because it's cruel, it's unhealthy, It's probably going to bring us our next zoonotic pandemic. It's just bad on every possible level. It pollutes, it's just ethically off the scale and ecologically off the scale bad, bad, bad. And feeding grain to animals that we could eat ourselves makes no sense in almost all circumstances - certainly doing it wholesale makes no sense as a model.

However, I do think animals have a place in the system because what I'm arguing in Sitopia is that we need to go back to a much more ... well, A) we need to start farming organically to the greatest extent possible. And if you're farming organically, then animals form a natural part of that system. In fact, they're verging on necessary because they are part of how you recycle nutrients. I mean, you know, we all know cows eat grass and we can't eat grass, but we can eat cows. So that's a beautiful loop. Yes, there's the methane problem. But actually, I mean, again, this is why I would just refer you to Simon Fairlie. I mean, what he argues very brilliantly is that if you just remove farm animals from grasslands and stuff, low and behold, if you read rewild grassland, other herbivores come back, you know. So unless you're going to start shooting deer and eating deer, then you you've got one herbivore or another herbivore, basically. And there's lots of grassland in the world that actually isn't good for very much else other than having animals moving and nibbling at it. So you might as well kind of have them.

But that's again the large scale thing. For me the most important thing is, you know, the place of animals in small to medium scale mixed farming systems, which is what makes sense if we're going to farm ecologically, sustainably. And then basically the animals... I mean, the reason we co-

evolved with farm animals is because they make ecological sense. So pigs and chickens can eat our feed scraps. Cows and sheep can eat grass, which we can't. They can also eat crop residues. So here's where I borrowed Simon Fairlie's term.

I mean, of course, this is a hugely complex question and I'm not going to manage to go into the nuance of it here, unfortunately. But Simon Fairlie has this brilliant concept of what he calls "default livestock". So default livestock is the livestock that you can raise on a farm that is otherwise geared towards producing a plant-based diet for people. So you can raise a surprising number of animals in this way, because, as I say, they can eat crop residues, they can eat grass, and they can fertilize the land - most importantly. So basically, animal manure is a very, very important ingredient in inorganic fertiliser.

But if you look at the way we used to farm, traditionally, that was how we farmed. You know, there were a few farm animals that kind of were hanging on the side of an otherwise plant based production. That's what a lot of farming was. Not in certain parts of the world, of course. And that's where the nuance comes in. You know, the Maasai in Kenya live entirely on cows. That's what they eat. So in that, you know, in that place, I'm saying: they eat cows, let them get on with it.

But anyway, default livestock. So default livestock is the livestock that you can raise in addition to - without any extra ecological cost - on an otherwise plant-based diet. And I think it's a brilliant idea and he argues it very convincingly. So I recommend his book to you. And it is it worthy of the approach I've adopted and there is a lot more to say, but we don't have time – as ever.

[00:16:18] Allison Wildman: What about the consumption part? So in Sitopia, simply speaking, how many times per week do you eat meat? Or day.

[00:16:26] Carolyn Steel: Well, interestingly, I mean, I had got myself down to eating very little meat before COVID-19 hit. So, I mean, you know, once or twice a week, basically. What COVID-19 is doing to me is: it's making me want comfort food because I'm English and I grew up in the 1960s and Meat is my comfort food. So I have to admit, I mean, I don't eat bad meat. I always eat organic meat and meat from trusted local suppliers. But my meat consumption has gone up since we've been in lockdown, I must admit.

But, you know, normally speaking, I eat a plant-based diet with meat as a kind of a condiment or a luxury or something like that. So, I mean, I did, in fact, buy a chicken last week from, as I say, a very, very good local supplier who I know. And, you know, I kind of roasted it and had a feast, and then I kind of ate it again the next day. And then I made a pie out of it and then I made stock out of it. I mean, I was eating it for about a week. And now I've got some delicious chicken stock in my fridge. So that's where I'm at. You know, I, I would normally do that very rarely. But, you know, in times of stress, we tend to revert. So, I mean, I'm hoping I'm not going to be stressed the rest of my life. But, yeah, generally speaking, that's it. That's it. It's kind of plant-based with a bit of meat on the side.

[00:17:53] Allison Wildman: How do you reconcile the cultural or heritage aspects of meat consumption in Sitopia?

[00:17:59] Carolyn Steel: Yeah, I mean, it's a really good question and it's very, very difficult. And I mean, you go to countries like Germany or Poland and there are entire restaurants where literally

there is nothing to eat meat and that is what food is to them. So, I mean, it's certainly an issue. I mean, Britain is a very carnivorous country as well. How do you reconcile it? I think, you know, you educate people. I mean, cultures do change. Cultures have evolved through history. And I think for me, as I said, I don't have a problem with eating meat. But I think we have to go back to thinking of it as a luxury. And even in, you know, kind of the big meat eating cultures, you know, people didn't gorge on kind of five kilos of meat a week because they couldn't afford it.

So I think we have to encourage people to go towards more expensive and better - always. I mean, in my Sitopian world, there is no industrial meat production. Animals and meat becomes a lot more expensive, I'm afraid. That usually stops people eating it anyway. But of course, you then get the argument of, oh, well, that's just elitist and that's just creating class as well. I'm afraid a certain extent that is inevitable. I mean, rich people are always going to eat better than poor people. I'm arguing for a much more equal society, because I see that as important anyway, regardless of how people are eating.

But I think this is where meat substitutes also come in. So, I mean, I do understand. I mean, in the book, I'm very you know, for me, the whole fake meat question is a bit like the vertical farming question. I'm against it being the silver bullet and seen as THE answer. And I'm really, really against all of our food being owned by weird, faceless corporations. And I don't like the idea of fake meat. Me personally. I don't particularly want to live on it. I don't mind occasionally having, you know, a burger that's made out of kind of heme, you know, pea pulses and, you know, whatever concoction they've come up with to replace meat.

You know, on a personal level, I was at a conference a couple of years ago. And, you know, I do come from a carnivorous culture and there was this delicious, meaty burglary smell happening. And I thought, I would really, really would love one of those, but I'm not going to because I'm trying to be good and not eat meat. And it turns out these were fake meat burgers, you know, with... I mean, I can't remember what the company was. It was before Impossible were in the UK. ...And I had one of these things and it was totally delicious! So for in that context, in that moment, it was wonderful. But the idea that I'm then going to be eating that five days a week: no, I'm not. In fact, I haven't had one since. It was just a moment in time.

So I think we're much better off if we can... I mean, there are many vegetables... Mushrooms are "umami-ish". Seaweed is "umami-ish". There's lots of things that naturally taste "umami-ish" and give you that hit that don't require you to have a slab of steak in front of you. So I think, you know, however carnivorous the cultures are, I think our job is to actually... if we steer away from cheap industrial meat, they're going to sort of self regulate anyway to an extent, because, I mean, ironically, industrial meat is going to end up - if we internalize the true cost of the food and this is obviously something that has to be done with taxation effectively - it becomes unaffordable anyway.

And, you know, my argument is that it unaffordable ecologically and ethically. So we may as well make it unaffordable financially. We'll just ban it, actually. Just stop doing it. So, it's not easy. There are no easy answers to this. But I think, you know, cultures do shift and it's just a message that we need to just be sharing and writing about and talking about and saying, you know, we're here and we need to get here. And there's lots of ways we can do it. And everything is part of an answer. But in the end, it has to be a culture shift that we're looking for.

[00:22:16] Jessica Duncan: Yeah, no, I also agree there should be no silver bullets. And what I think is important to really highlight from what you're saying is: this idea of these tensions. That we have to start addressing at a societal level because there are political decisions that need to be taken around: What do we value? What do we cost? Where are we going to put our money? And also this cultural dimension. I mean, this is something that's going to take time. And something I think that in a lot of food conversations doesn't get enough airtime - that we really ignore the idea that we have in these moments of tradition or these moments of crisis. This desire for something comforting.

[00:22:54] Carolyn Steel: Yeah. You know, it's always very interesting to me. Definitely my ability to sort of eat kind of "theoretically" and what my body is kind of wanting, is at the moment, in conflict, shall we say. And that's not normally the case. So it's interesting.

[00:23:22] Jessica Duncan: It's also interesting, I think, how hard it is to eat ethically. I mean, I have a PhD in food policy and I can stand at the counter of my organic store and try and decide what to eat based on my knowledge...and it's paralyzing.

[00:23:22] Carolyn Steel: You'd almost stop eating if you really start to think too hard about it. I have the same problem. I can trance. I can trance. You know, in front of food and kind of go: which one's better and which one should I... yeah. I mean, better actually to have regular relationships with food producers you trust. Then just let them feed you, rather than going into - as I do - into a kind of philosophical meltdown. Can do.

[00:23:49] Jessica Duncan: But I think that's also how the industrial food system works. I mean, when we buy this food because we trust it. It's about the types of relations that we build.

[00:23:58] Carolyn Steel: We need to start trusting different people.

[00:24:03] Question: How do we cope with the huge differences in access to land, knowledge for different social groups and between regions / parts of the world beyond the Western perspective? This is a big question.

[00:24:15] Carolyn Steel: I mean, they're all big questions. I mean, they're all great questions and we could talk for eight hours about every single one, so thank you for that one, Thomas. I mean, underneath this, I just jotted: Henry George. So one of the more exciting discoveries I made when I was writing my recent book *Sitopia* was Henry George. And Henry George was an American economist writing in the 19th century. And he witnessed -- he wrote a very, very famous book. Well, I mean, famous in his day. I think people have slightly forgotten about it now, but I think its time has come -- called "Progress and Poverty". Or it might be "Poverty and Progress".

I wonder if there's any way ... [leaves computer to look for the title]

So... you probably glimpsed my pajama bottoms there. So, he was living in San Francisco and he witnessed the railway being built. So the railway joining up the East, the West Coast in the States. And what he saw was a very, very small group of people getting very, very rich, kind of instantly. And a lot of people just kind of falling by the wayside. And he said the problem was that when the railway came - so he said before that San Francisco was a really great place - but when the railways came, what happened is it became very unequal. And he said that, [of] the people who got rich, it was kind of arbitrary; it wasn't necessarily the people building the railway. It was the

people who happen to own land near where the railway ended up. So their land suddenly became really valuable through an absolutely no fault of their own -- or no effort of their own, I should say.

So he proposed a land value tax. And the way that works, is that basically ... I mean, he argues (which I, by the way, totally believe, I agree with) that nobody should own land outright. All land should ultimately be owned by the community, society, et cetera, et cetera. Because, you know, as the true levellers once argued in the 15th century: anyone who claims private use of land is either a thief or the son of a thief or something. You know, basically in those days, people were doling out vast tracts of land to people who were prepared to raise only for the king and all this kind of stuff.

So it's a very pure idea. The idea is that society owns land. But then, of course, one does need private use of land in order to have a house or in order to farm or whatever. Fine. You pay a tax on the value of the land to the community. So basically in his world, if all the land had been owned by the community of San Francisco, as it were, and the railway comes along and some of the land suddenly is worth 10 times what it was the previous week, then the people who own that land have to pay a higher tax to the city for the sole use of that land. And you can set the rates of tax that they should pay. So it's not like they can't get any richer at all and everything's level. You could say, okay, you're going to pay the land value tax to the value of, say, 80 percent of the increase in the value of your land.

[00:27:41] Jessica Duncan: So is this just when you sell it?

[00:27:44] Carolyn Steel: No, this is basically set every year. So if I buy this land and suddenly I've gotten rich because I can build a hotel, then charge whatever I like to people to stay there. The land has a value, you know, because I can make, say, a million dollars a year out of it. So he's saying, well, you know, you can keep, you know, whatever, 20% of that, 30% of that, but the rest of it you're going to pay to the community. So it actually has a sort of effect of the land itself is then not so valuable anymore. It's still a bit valuable, but not very. And it kind of works the other way, because if you have farmland outside the city, which is worth very little and always has been worth a little, there's very little rent to pay on it - so farmers can actually afford to farm.

And the brilliant thing that this does is it has the effect of densifying cities. Because if I've got a piece of land in the city that has a high potential value that I can get through rent, then I've got a big incentive to build on it and rent it, because otherwise I'm paying a lot of tax for land that's doing nothing. So, in a weird way, I mean -- again, it's another book that you have to kind of go and read to get your head around it -- it has the effect of, shall we say, intensifying cities and intensifying the countryside and levelling out the relative value of land. And it was one of the big ideas behind Ebenezer Howard's Garden City. And that's how I discovered it, in fact, I was reading about the Garden City and I came across Henry George.

And I think it's a brilliant idea. I mean, obviously, the devil is in the detail: how you actually would kind of put it into practise. And you have to do it sequentially, because we couldn't go from a totally landowning world to a totally, you know, the community owns the land type of world in one go. It would have to be gradual, but that can be done as well. I mean, in fact, it is part of the Green Party's (in the UK), it is part of the Green Party's policy. So I think that's one very interesting idea.

But you then said, beyond the Western perspective. Well, I mean, you know, I think one of the things I do focus a lot on the West, because I think, you know, a lot of the issues that we faced came out of this trajectory that we're on in the West. And then the question is, you know, to what extent those get replicated in the global South or to the extent to which the global South develops in a different way. I think there's huge amounts to be said for the global South not following the Western trajectory, shall I say. And we should be helping in that effort. But I mean, land value taxes make a lot of sense in the developing world as well. You know, people need access to land in order to flourish. It's basic. And if they only leave rural areas to go to the city because they can't survive, you know, because people don't -- I mean, if we can strengthen urban rural linkages and people can earn a living farming by feeding the city and we pay enough for food, then there is an incentive to stay in rural areas. And so all of these things are connected. But I mean, I think, you know, if the model works to the West, it works for the South as well. Anyway, it's an interesting idea that I came across that I think it could be a very, very valuable part of the puzzle.

[00:31:06] Jessica Duncan: So I think there's also a lot happening around Europe around "the Commons" now, which is pretty exciting with different groups trying to reimagine land ownership. I know in Scotland, it's got a lot going on. Italy. France. So this is also something I'm curious to explore.

[00:31:24] Carolyn Steel: Yeah. I mean, it's very much a partner idea to the whole idea of reviving the Commons. It sits alongside it very nicely. Yeah, a very, very good point. Good point.

[00:31:36] Jessica Duncan: I think that we also just have to say that there's a real gender dynamic, too, when we think about that access to land.

[00:31:41] Allison Wildman: A gender dynamic? No, go on. What do you mean - a gender dynamic?

[00:31:48] Jessica Duncan: Well, just all the research shows. Oh, maybe Carolyn...

[00:31:50] Carolyn Steel: Well, I was just going to say, I mean, a friend of mine who wrote a thesis on this in Kenya – Diana Lee-Smith – she was looking at a group of Kikuyu women in Kenya who were all migrating to the city from their villages. And she was trying to work out why. And she did a study. And it turned out, as you rightly say, Jessica, that women were not allowed to inherit land in their villages. Only men could inherit land. So if they didn't, you know, have to have a husband, basically, they were stateless persons sort of thing. And a lot of the women were saying they'd actually rather live in the countryside. They'd rather stay if they could own land and have a house. So she was actually working with the tribal elders to try to get them to, basically, you know, wise up and change the law so the women could stay. Yes, I mean, on that level, historically, there's been huge gender distinctions between who can and can't own land.

[00:32:53] Jessica Duncan: And I think we also see it in Europe with the farm automatically going to the eldest son. Or the boys getting the farm, even if the woman or daughter wants to still farm. A lot of assumptions and gender position of resources. Or when you marry the - yeah - maybe the farm goes into your husband's name. Don't do it ladies. Co-ownership. Get your name on that deed!

[00:33:27] Carolyn Steel: Yeah. Just treating humans as humans.

[00:33:31] Jessica Duncan: We're still working on that.

[00:33:34] Question: In your opinion, will COVID-19 help us reassess and revalue food in our society? What do you see as the biggest opportunity for change in the COVID-19 crisis?

[00:33:45] Carolyn Steel: Yes, I think it will. I mean, it's very interesting. You know, I've been saying - I did I actually say this is? I can't remember what I said in the webinar now - but I mean, I think, you know, with how our train has ground to a halt. It was going straight like this and I think was a really, really interesting crossroads. There's a set of points that we would have just blasted over, but now we can see them. And we have a choice as to whether we go this way or this way when the train starts again. And I see the next two, three months as absolutely critical time in which to make the argument that we go kind of this way, that way being: valuing food and basically doing all the things that, you know, as it were I talk about in the book about making good sitopia.

One thing that COVID-19 has done is made food visible to people to whom it was invisible before. And I can't overemphasize how important that is. Empty supermarket shelves was just such a shock to people. The idea that, you know, entire supermarkets could be stripped out like this. We haven't seen it. I mean, in fact, we saw panic buying – I wrote about it in Hungry City, actually. About 15 years ago, when there was a fuel strike, lorry drivers struck? Striked? Struck? over fuel costs and deliveries weren't getting to supermarkets. And there was a bit of panic buying went on. It was minor compared to what you see now. So I think the fragility of the food system has become visible to policymakers - and this is really, really important.

But I think food has become visible to the everyday citizen as well. Not only because they've suddenly started to realise that they can't take full supermarket shelves for granted, but also they're stuck at home all day. And what are they doing? I mean, it's very interesting to me that you can't get eggs or flour for love nor money, because – low and behold! - people have rediscovered at-home baking because they're at home all day without very much to do. Well, some of them have got plenty to do. But you know, more people are at home with not much to do. And even though the foods that people run out of, that supermarkets run out of, at the beginning were dried pasta and pasta sauces. You know, it is a terrible indictment on the British diet that basically loo roll, dried pasta and pasta sauce were the three things that the supermarkets run out of. There's plenty of fresh food, but nobody wanted to buy that. So, ok, I do understand that it has to do with stockpiling and what's going to last if I can't get out for two weeks, etc. But nevertheless, I think people now are getting much more adventurous. I mean, you can see it on Twitter, I'm sure it's the same in the Netherlands and in Germany. Is it? I mean, the people that they're starting to rediscover cooking. And I think, you know, once the joy of that has kicked in again, people aren't going to forget it. So I think, you know, on that school, there's going to be a really positive potential outcome from COVID-19.

The government is talking about -- well, sorry, not the government, but lots of people who advise the government are already talking about -- we actually have to look again at how self-sufficient Britain is in food, because we've always had this free trade attitude, as I was describing, bringing it in from anywhere. And all of a sudden, you and I, we can't do that anymore. So I think that there will be a reassessment of how much food should be grown in Britain. Which, of course, you know, you could say is protectionist and isn't necessarily good, but I think just the idea ... I mean, literally, I kid you not, the Brexit nutters, a month ago, were kind of saying, "oh, we didn't need farmers at all in Britain". I mean, I don't think they're going to be saying that now. So, that's good.

But bad stuff can come out of it as well, because, of course, we're seeing small-scale producers struggling, small scale independent shops struggling. And I'm really, really worried, actually, that we're going to have a massive loss of the kind of the smaller scale, part of the food system leaving the field free for the big guys to take over. So the supermarkets are doing really, really well out of this. And they were already pretty powerful before. So, as I say, I mean, you know, I am doing my utmost to support my small-scale, local suppliers wherever I can. I think we all need to do that. And, you know, I think we will also need to make the argument that we need food back at the centre of our lives and, as COVID-19 has shown us, you know, if you stop running around and start taking time, there is a huge amount of pleasure to be had out of something as simple as growing your own food, cooking your own food, sharing food. You know, it should be at the heart of a good life. And I think many people will rediscover that. So I'm very, very happy about that.

[00:38:47] Allison Wildman: One thing that has been brought to my attention through this – sorry [no, go ahead Allison] - is how inflexible our systems are. Because you have retail markets that cater to supermarkets and have a certain packaging standard or whatever, and then you have commercial wholesalers. Now those are so inflexible they can't adapt in real time to the changing conditions. So you have farmers who are - I see on Twitter - throwing away thousands of litres of milk because they don't have a market to give it to, even though there's no milk in London. So it's this mismatch, too. So there's plenty of food - there's plenty of food - there's just not a way to put it in the right hands at the right time. And I think that there's an important structural issue, looking at these structural systems will be really important in the future as well.

[00:39:39] Carolyn Steel: Exactly. Exactly right. Yeah. I mean, I think it is going to, as I say, it's making food visible to everybody, including policymakers. And I really, really hope the politicians realise they can't just leave food to the market in the future. So that would be a really, really major win if that happens.

[00:39:58] Allison Wildman: Jess, just going to say something before I over-spoke you.

[00:40:01] Jessica Duncan: No, no. I over-spoke you. Yeah. I think the structural issue is really key and it's a real reason why people are starting again to reconsider the city region food system, which is sort of where we started. And I think that in 2007 - 2008 there was a food price crisis and a lot of thinker's around food thought that this will be a moment for system change - and we didn't see that system change. In fact, against our reinforcement of the power of supermarkets. And so I think we need to be very cautious moving forward to make sure that, again, as Carolyn hinted, we don't go necessarily that way. And I also just I couldn't let it go Carolyn, I'm telling you, I am someone who loves cooking. I take great pleasure in it. But I think we also need to recognise that, for a lot of people, it's a real crap job.

[00:40:52] Carolyn Steel: But I think we need to get back everywhere. I mean, that's all I'm saying, really. But not every night, and not expecting to pay nothing for it and not, you know, never thinking about the people who make your food.

[00:41:05] Question: Could you say something more on what kind of governance we need?

[00:41:09] Yeah. I mean, this is really, really big one. I probably briefly said that I think we need nested governance and we were just talking about the commons. The reason I'm so excited by this idea is that it comes out of Elinor Ostrom's work in, you know, how shared resources are managed. And basically it is that idea that you have as much agency as possible at the local level.

So, you know, basically you let people run their own lives until they make such a hash of it that somebody else has to step in. So, for example, this would be... we were talking earlier on about cities having more power to plan their regions and their food systems, for example. You know, say I mean, cities already do have power, you know, to feed their schools and to feed prisons and hospitals and so on. So that could expand up. And I think, you know, we really need to give cities the power to look at I mean, spend, like Barcelona does, spend a serious budget on things like food hubs, maintaining local infrastructure, planning, crucially, you know, food planning, which is basically preserving land for farming and supporting the whole kind of network that goes with it. So that's really important.

But then at a global level, we also need much, much stronger governance. And this is a really tricky one. I mean, we've got the U.N. You know, we've got things like the World Bank and the IMF. As we know, these bodies are all compromised in one way or another. The U.N. has very little power and it keeps getting vetoed by countries who don't want anything kind of altruistic to happen. The World Bank and the IMF have a kind of capitalistic agenda. So basically, they often make loans to poor countries in exchange for a whole load of conditions which are not helpful to the local countries and so on. So I think we just need to acknowledge - as a world - that we haven't got the kind of cooperation at the global level that we need to tackle climate change. And COVID-19 is only going to feed into that because it's very, very clear that when something - a pandemic like this - hits and ... by the way, because of the way we farm and because of our relationship with wildlife and so on, it's quite likely that we're going to see more of these pandemics. So, you know, I think, you know, the idea that we're not in this together is pretty much it has been killed off by this virus, along with quite a lot of other people. So, a new body, that is none of the above, I would suggest, with the explicit agenda of dealing with global threats together.

Interestingly, Gordon Brown, who was prime minister in the U.K. when the 2008 banking crisis hit, he's already putting together a global consortium of leaders basically to fight COVID-19. And he's doing it because he says, you know, the current government is just, you know, they're very kind of buccaneering "go it alone". They don't get the need for global cooperation. That's very vague and woolly. I mean, you know, if I was a political scientist, I'd probably demand more detail on that. But, you know, that's the principle. More agency at local level, more cooperation at global level, and then a series of layers in between.

[00:44:44] Allison Wildman: I'd like to see that diagram.

[00:44:48] Jessica Duncan: I think that you would like to make that diagram.

[00:44:50] Allison Wildman: I think that I'd like to make that diagram.

[00:44:53] Question: Next year, a UN S.G. Food Systems unit will be organised. What needs to be a key focus for that conference?

[00:45:00] I mean, that's really exciting and that's brilliant. And I think, I often put - I did in my talk didn't I – the Lorenzetti inside the Sustainable Development Goals, because basically you can address everything through food. I mean, you can literally address every single development goal through food.

Key focus for the conference. I think the value of food, I think, you know, there's lots of ways in which the value of food is undermined by global trading and so on. And there's power games that

go on. You know, I think one of the things I would love my ideal global governance structure to address is the fact that rich countries kind of exploit poor countries effectively through the food system. So I think this has to stop. It's obviously what fair trade was trying to do. But, you know, it was it was a charity. I mean, we need to trade fairly across the world. And clearly, we need to, shall we say, pay developing countries not to destroy their landscapes, to earn money by feeding us. You know, which is, if you like, the palm oil conversation or the beef in Brazil conversation, most the money goes into despotic kind of bank pockets anyway. It is very rarely the countries that benefit from these kinds of ecological destructions. So I think we just need to kind of get real about this stuff.

You see for that to happen, western nations have to stop sort of funding their entire - basing their entire - social and political and economic structures around the existence of this fantasy thing: cheap food. Which doesn't exist, you know. So we have to just we have to put food at the centre and say this is the most valuable thing in all of our shared lives. And it is also the thing that we all share. And let's have a vision that we all eat well, globally, because we always eat together. You're always eating with everyone else and every human and non-human on the planet. I mean, that would be my vision. You know, it's just an enormous, ongoing, shared meal.

[00:47:12] Question: I am an architect and the son of a very sceptical farmer. I'm urging him to lobby for Sitopia, but he won't listen. What is your best argument to convince him it's the best solution for us all, especially for him?

[00:47:25] Carolyn: Well, I'd love to know, Enrico, thank you so much for this question. And congratulations for trying to persuade your father. I know that's very hard. I tried to persuade my parents about not buying industrially produced chicken. They went through the war, so cheap, cheap food was - they were hardwired to want it and to think meat was really important. So I'd get them to change their habits for a bit and then they'd sneak back when I wasn't looking. Anyway! So I get the problem. I'd love to know more about your father: Why is he sceptical? What kind of a farmer he is? I'm presuming, because he's sceptical, that he must be farming industrially in some way, probably using a lot of chemicals, lots of pesticides, etc cetera.

So what I would say to him is I get it. You know, you are in a culture where -- actually I didn't know where you are emailing me from. You sound Italian. So I don't know whether your father's farming in Italy, in which case he doesn't live in a place where people don't value food. So, I need more background to answer this question properly! But assuming that his thing is: ah, people don't want to pay for more for food, so you're never going to get them to change, so I'm just going to carry on doing what I'm doing. I would say that's just simply demonstrably wrong. Because there are so many examples.

I mean, I'm going to give you one really interesting example. Knepp Farm, Knepp Castle Estate the UK. They were going down a black hole very, very rapidly. They were commercial grain farmers, but they were farming very dense, clay-like soil, and they just couldn't make money. You know, they were literally on the margins the whole time. And their landscape was monocultural and it was totally lacking biodiversity and stuff. And about 15 years ago, they just went, look, we can't carry on like this. We have to stop. And they just stopped farming completely. Just stopped. And then they were amazed to see wildlife started creeping back onto their farm. And it made them realise actually it was a totally different way of doing this. And they were one of the early adopting "rewilders" in the UK.

Now, I'm not saying all farms should be rewilded, because we would starve to death if that was the case. But they are now a global phenomenon. They've got huge amounts of biodiversity on the farm again. And they do farm to the extent that they have wild animals - pigs and - not wild animals, sorry! - wildly roaming domestic animals. So they have cattle and they have pigs wandering around in what is now a very rich, biodiverse, beautiful landscape. But the main income now is tourism, because they have people coming from all over the world, because we have - they've got really unusual - had gotten nightingales back, which are becoming extremely rare. They've got lots of birds and plants that are almost disappeared in the UK that are coming back. So, you know, simply by ... I mean, it's not impossible to change. And so, you know, to use a more farmer-friendly example, I mean, people who have gone from farming chemically to farming organically is a completely different market for organic food. and this is win win farming because you're feeding people who get it, who understand what high quality food is. And if you do it well enough and if you sell your story enough, there's always going to be a market for you. And you are going to feel good about what you do every day. And you're going to go to bed feeling happy that you've enriched the soil and that you've given a habitat for wildlife. And you make beautiful food that feeds people. And it's just - you're just - creating a beautiful Sitopia. So, Enrico, I would say: give me more information about your father. Tell me what his beef is and then put him on to me, and I'll sort it out for you.

[00:51:22] Jessica Duncan: I have a question for you about this, because two of your examples led to what we call multi-functional agriculture. So, it's about, you know, farming **and** being a knowledge centre or farming **and** tourism. And part of that worries me because it gives the impression that the only way to survive on a Sitopia farm is, is to sort of do this multi-functional agriculture, which requires unique skill sets. But it also means taking time away from food production. So, how do you balance that?

[00:51:56] Carolyn Steel: Well, I mean, I completely agree with you. I mean, I don't think farmers should have to have tourists on their farm in order to make money. But of course I'm saying we need to - we should - be paying more for food. We simply have to pay more for food so people can actually make a living feeding us. I mean, it's just insane that we don't do this. How could we not do this? And of course, there many farmers in the UK who make a very good living, just farming, you know. But they're at the high end.

Anyone who farms at a big scale or industrially is always struggling because that they're part of this kind of "race to the bottom" kind of model. I mean, the Netherlands is a classic example. I mean, the Netherlands has got some of the largest scale with most ruthlessly efficient industrial farms in the world. And these farmers, they have to get bigger and bigger and bigger, and they have to treat their animals worse and worse and worse, and they're making less and less and less. So it's always on the edge of just going out of business. This is lose-lose. So we have to totally turn the spiral the other way and start working up.

So we pay more for food. And more people go into farming who actually want to work in a good way with nature, you know, producing really, really nutritious food, hands-on stuff. And it's self-fulfilling in the other direction. We have to bring people with us. But, you know, we wouldn't convert everybody, as you rightly say, just like we won't turn everyone into someone who wanders around in a frilly pinny just wondering what to cook next. I mean, that's not going to happen. But you create, you make - take the small current and you make it stronger and you make it stronger and you make it stronger ... until it becomes the culture.

[00:53:42] Jessica Duncan: As part of that cultural transition, we also need to start talking about paying our food workers more. There's a lot of focus on paying our farmers more. But the people who are, you know.

[00:53:52] Allison Wildman: You mean the pickers and the processors or ... what do you mean?

[00:53:56] Jessica Duncan: Well, and the servers in our restaurants. The whole food system. The concentration of power and the concentration of wealth is shocking. And I think that redistribution of wealth within that system is key. So it's actually maybe not about paying more for food, but distributing where the money goes.

[00:54:15] Carolyn Steel: Yeah, totally. I'm sorry, everyone who works in food should be paid more. I mean, you know, if you value food, you'd pay anyone who works, who feeds you, more: whether they're bringing you - they're serving you - in a restaurant or they're canning your peas or whatever they're doing – for sure! And as you say, the value chain, you know, who gets what along that chain. I mean, it's really, really shocking. I mean, it's not it's actually not just farmers. It's everyone in that chain. I mean, food is the biggest employer on earth. So if you believe a good life is one in which you have a good job - good work - is rewarding and for which you are rewarded, then, you know, paying more for food is the low hanging fruit. But also divesting power in the food system. Spreading it out. But this also feeds into the kind of the more agency, more power, for those at ground level.

[00:55:12] Allison Wildman: Ladies, thank you so much. Thank you for giving an hour and a half of your time on your Thursday night before Easter. Thank you ...

[00:55:20] Carolyn Steel: Have a wonderful Easter! Do you have Easter plans?

[00:55:23] Allison Wildman: Yeah, we're going to be in Lockdown! What are you doing?!