

## #FoodTalks – Summary notes from online discussion How food can save the world

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30<sup>th</sup> June 2020, 17.00-18.30



The overarching theme of our #FoodTalks in 2020 is '***We are all emergency respondents now.***' In [our first #FoodTalks of 2020](#) (in March), we explored the initial emergency response to the COVID-19 crisis. Then in [our second webinar](#) (in April), we discussed how to build resilience and how we can embed the positive changes we're starting to see amidst the chaos. [Our third webinar](#) (in May) explored **how we can widen out to address the multiple and intersecting climate, biodiversity, obesity and democracy emergencies**, and ensure they are not just firmly on the radar of politicians, businesses and food citizens, but are being addressed with the urgency they merit.

**In this Food Talks, we explored whether and how we can use the lens of food to save the world** - including how we can transform our food systems to tackle the climate, biodiversity, obesity and democracy emergencies – and other injustices. The purpose of the session was to identify opportunities to use the power of food to address some of the big challenges we are all facing.

In challenging times, it is important to carve out spaces to discuss the issues we face, share thoughts, experience and expertise, and work out ways to collectively move forward. This event was an online discussion, hosted by Dan Crossley, Executive Director of [Food Ethics Council](#), with contributions from:

- **Carolyn Steel**, author of *Hungry City* and *Sitopia: How Food Can Save the World* (keynote)
- **Safiya Robinson**, cook and founder of *sisterwoman* vegan
- **Abi Aspen Glencross**, Head of Grains, *Duchess Farms* + co-founder of *The Sustainable Food Story*

The event was aimed at people working to create positive change in the food system (including London Food Link members and members of Impact Hub Kings Cross), but was open to all. The following notes are a summary of the many questions, insights, experiences, and knowledge shared between the three speakers and c. 150 participants (joining from different parts of the UK, as well as from as far afield as the United States, the Netherlands, Canada, Germany, Pakistan, Sweden and Ghana). **The video recording can be found [HERE](#).**



#FoodTalks is brought to you by a partnership of the [Food Ethics Council](#), [Impact Hub Kings Cross](#), [Organico](#), and [London Food Link](#), part of [Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming](#).



## Finding hope during a crisis

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- Firstly, it is of course important to acknowledge the suffering and hardship many people have experienced during the pandemic. Not everyone is 'baking sourdough and learning the guitar'
- The Food, Farming and Countryside Commission survey showed that only 9% of people in that survey said they wanted life to go back the way it was before COVID-19. Those surveyed said they were valuing time with their families more ('living in time' as Carolyn Steel refers to it), discovering many/ most of us can work from home more, don't have to fly (so much or at all) etc
- Dashing in pursuit of a good life and trying to earn lots of money wasn't making lots of people happy – it is an outmoded model of what a good life represents.
- The number of people buying directly from suppliers e.g. through organic box schemes during lockdown has gone from a tiny proportion to a growing, larger proportion (albeit still relatively small)
- **The secret of understanding what a good life is, says Carolyn Steel, is to ask someone who thinks they are about to die.** At that point, they don't say "I just wish I could buy 100 new handbags". Instead they say they want to be with the people they love, they want to be able to hear birdsong, they want the 'meaningful stuff'.
- Ironically **during the lockdown, many of us have been given more of the 'meaningful stuff'**. Hopefully, some of that will 'stick' as we move out of lockdown.

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*"My favourite metaphor for a good society is one in which everyone eats well" (Carolyn Steel)*

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### What do we need saving from?

- **We need saving from 'an outdated idea of a good life'**. There is this inherited idea of a good life, which is over two centuries old, which is about harnessing fossil fuels and machinery to do all the hard work for us so we can gain wealth. This is no longer fit for purpose. All of the injustices, the despoiling of the landscape and the massive political crises that we face are related to the fact that we've forgotten to ask a critical question: **What is a good life in the context of the 21st century?**
- Instead of evolving to fit the world, we have designed a world we think we should live in - but we're actually not aligned to it. Hence, we've made an evolutionary mistake in Darwinian terms because the survival of the fittest is about adaptability to the actual environment you're living in and demonstrably we're not healthy in the environment we've created.
- There's a symmetry about it, so if our lack of a relationship with the environment we've created is the problem, then surely the answer lies in recalibrating our relationship with nature. If our problem with 'home' is that we no longer feel embedded in a place and we no longer have meaningful things to do, then the answer is to rethink how we inhabit land. And if we don't value life because we don't value food, the answer lies in realising we're mortal and that the planet is limited. The crux is re-establishing value at the core of our sharing mechanism, i.e. the economy. This is what Carolyn Steel refers to as Sitopian economics - using food as the basis of our value system and economy.

### Responding to a crisis

- We're far better at collaborating in times of crisis. This is no accident. The most visionary social programmes to come out of the US and UK in the past century, the New Deal and the welfare state, came in the wake of the Wall Street crash in the Second World War respectively, when we experienced common hardship. We naturally pulled together, becoming more empathetic, altruistic and visionary.
- Crises make us realise how precious our everyday lives are and help us appreciate what we already have. **Crises, in short, give us the chance to readjust our values.**

# Sitopia and the food journey from food to the universe...

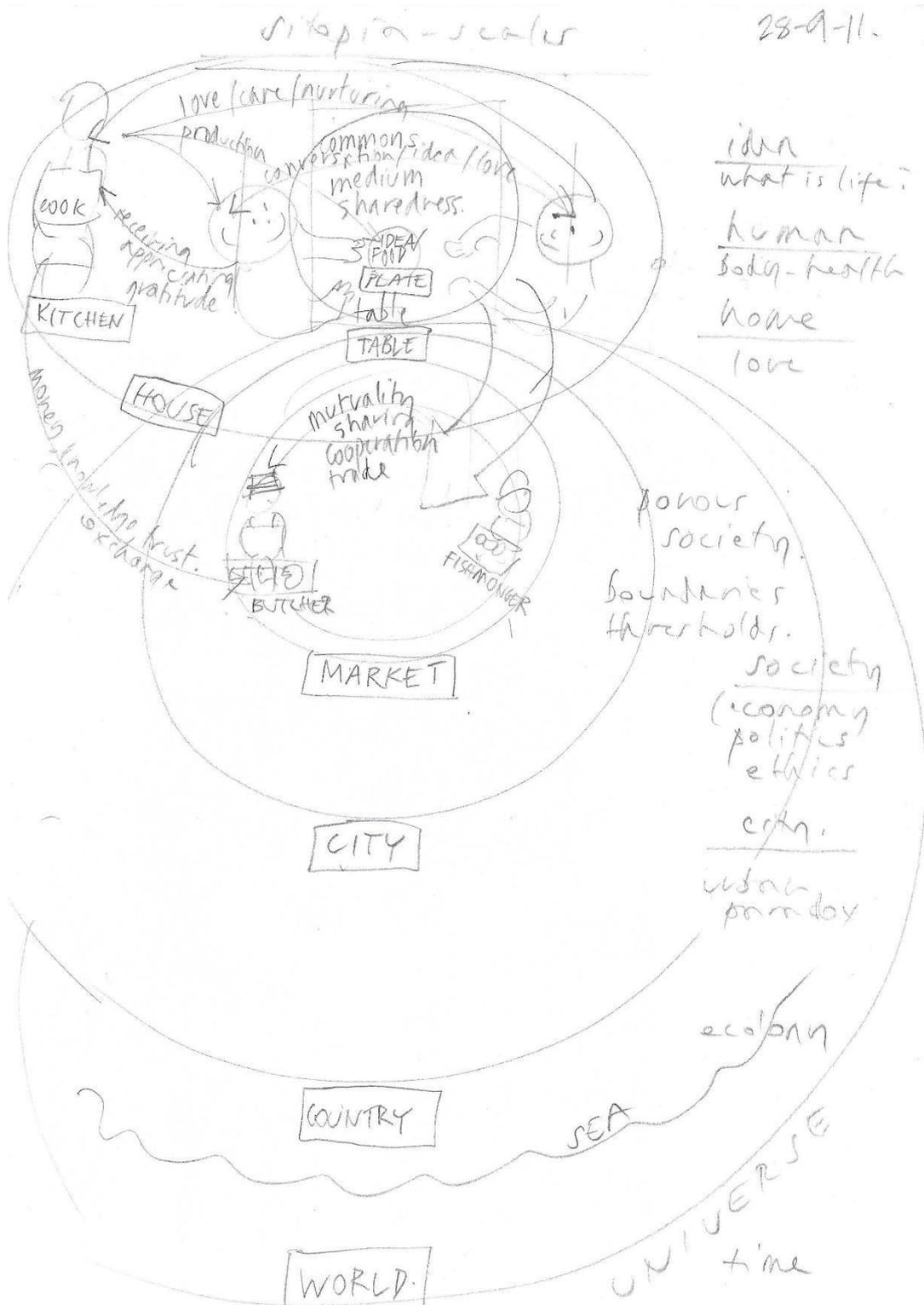


Image reproduced with kind permission of Carolyn Steel: this is Carolyn's original sketch when planning the structure of her book Sitopia. Please do not reproduce without first getting permission from Carolyn Steel.

## Food as the great ‘connector’

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*“I drew a plate of food and then I drew a table around the plate and then people around the table. And I started drawing arrows, saying sharing, connectedness, family and so on. And then I drew a cook figure that could nominally be... a mother or father, someone who cares. And I drew arrows going love, nurturing, you know, maybe gratitude coming back the other way if you’re lucky. And that became the space of the home. And then I said, well, okay, the cook probably didn’t grow most of this food themselves. So where did it come from? Some kind of market... So, you’ve got more connections, knowledge, money, exchange, economy, trust and so on. Where does that market sit? It sits in the city, [which] sits in the countryside. Where does the countryside sit? In a thing we call nature. And where does that sit? In the universe.”*

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*Carolyn Steel explaining the interconnectedness of different elements of the food journey from ‘food’ to ‘the universe’ and how food shapes our world in multiple ways (that we’re not necessarily aware of).*

- We’ve forgotten that food is the most valuable thing in our lives, so we treat it as cheap. Food is at the core of everything and everything connects to it.
- We need to remember the true value of food and start treating it as though it's the most valuable thing in our lives again. Food can't do it all on its own. We need to act through the medium of food.
- Using food as our guide, we can save the world!
- Eating is always a political and an economic act of one sort or another. It's a social and cultural act. It's at the core of everything that we do.

*“Sitopia means a food place. It's from the Greek sitos, which means food and topos, which means place. I invented the word about 15 years ago as a practical alternative to Utopia. The basic idea is that we live in a world shaped by food; we just don't necessarily realise it. But if we did realise it, there is a huge amount we could do through it.” (Carolyn Steel)*

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### The role of public space (Carolyn Steel)

- Can we provide really attractive, really exciting, enticing spaces/ hubs to do with food?
- Farmers’ markets already exist, but they are normally in places like school playgrounds and are only open for a few hours a week. That is partly because farmers need to farm – which is of course fine.
- **There is a gap opening up for places that people can go to be social.** Aristotle called us political animals for a reason. We’re animals, which means we need nature, but we're also political, which means we need society and we need each other. And food is right at the core of those two sets of needs.
- It is a very interesting time to ask **what is the role of public space in the city now?** How do food and public engagement connect?
- How can we accelerate the peri-urban revival/ growing on the edge of cities to help connect the urban and the rural?

### To address food issues, we need to look beyond food (Participants)

- One of the key structural issues is the cost of housing.
- The loss of social/ council housing and so much of people’s incomes is now spent on places to live. We need remedies for housing to enable people on lower incomes to afford to eat well.

## Food and race (Safiya Robinson)

- There are a lot of conversations about food that Black people (and other racially marginalised people) are not included in.

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*“We (Black people) are disproportionately affected by food illnesses or diabetes, heart disease, obesity and due to white supremacy and racism, due to policies that are intentional about not allowing us (Black people) to be healthy.... Black people are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, particularly front-line workers. People are rushing to find a reason. It’s because investment is not put into our health, and particularly in the food that we eat.” (Safiya Robinson)*

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- There are lots of current and historical racial injustices manifest in our food system. Food is at the heart of lots of those injustices – and can be at the heart of promoting justice going forward.

## The need for an enabling community and environment (Safiya Robinson)

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*“I obviously push veganism and because it's works for me is something that has saved my world. But that's not that's not always the best case for everyone. Everyone needs to figure out their own way, but we need to have a community and environment that supports that.” (Safiya Robinson)*

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## The lens of food (Carolyn Steel):

- Food is a lens onto everything we do in life. When looking through the lens of food, it highlights tensions, from planning in our towns and countryside, to production and farming, to whether and how people can eat, and beyond
- We need to learn to see through the lens of food and to value the role of cooks, farmers and others involved in producing and preparing our food
- Our lived experiences have been shaped by food
- Use food as your permission to think big and see the world through food. If you value food and you spread that message, then we can make a better sitopia.

## What are we incentivising in our farming systems? (Abi Aspen Glencross)

- We have a farming system where fuel and chemicals are subsidised more than labour. So arguably we are subsidising completely the wrong things. In farming, farmers have been subsidised for having land and doing nothing with it – people can get money for owning land.
- Why do so many crops go to feed animals? One of the reasons we heard was that it is deemed to be ‘a consistent market’. One farmer told us that “some years, it pays more than it cost to produce”.
- If you are a small farmer growing organically with a lot of labour, your outgoings are likely to be large, and with subsidies as they are, everything is skewed (unfairly)

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*“I started my career as a lab meat scientist. So, I actually came to this save the world paradigm through biotech, which is quite controversial because it included GM and that sort of thing. And I was really bought into the ‘we need to grow more food and produce more food to save the world’. And I believed that for a long time, as a lot of us still do. And then I learnt a lot about the amount of food that we feed to animals and the way we waste. And I realised that maybe I was just putting a plaster on this gaping wound that is our food system. I was saying I was going to solve everyone’s problems when actually there’s so much more and we have to solve our own problems. So, I actually left to be a farmer.”*  
*(Abi Aspen Glencross, first generation farmer)*

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- How can we move away from high input, chemical-dependent farming?



## The need for the power of food to be unleashed...

Mentimeter is a tool for audience interaction during online events. Using a separate browser or smartphone, participants responded to questions and fed in ideas to the discussion.

### How much do you agree with these statements?

Mentimeter



## Remaining questions

- What does a good life look like in the 21st century?
- How can we recentre food as our value when we live in a capitalistic society and when people don't see production and profit in this value?
- How can we reimagine the role of public space?
- How can we change the context of where we can find good food and make it easier to do the right thing? How can we move beyond what we buy to shaping our food environment?
- How can we accelerate the peri-urban revival/ growing on the edge of cities to help connect the urban and the rural?
- How can we build community (food) resilience?



## Useful resources

### Sitopia: how food can save the world

- ❖ 'Sitopia: How food can save the world' – by Carolyn Steel – book available here: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/109/1097397/sitopia/9780701188719.html>
- ❖ Jellied Eel article with Carolyn Steel: [https://www.sustainweb.org/jelliedeel/articles/jun20\\_sitopia/](https://www.sustainweb.org/jelliedeel/articles/jun20_sitopia/)

### Other useful resources

- ❖ Sisterwoman vegan – <https://www.sisterwomanvegan.com/>
- ❖ Duchess Grains – @DuchessFarms and <https://www.duchessoil.co.uk/>
- ❖ Sustainable Food Story – @TheSustainableFoodStory and <https://www.thesustainablefoodstory.com/>
- ❖ Our Field – <https://www.westonparkfarms.co.uk/ourfield>

## Key insights that participants told us they took away

### What insight/s have you taken from today's Food Talks?

Mentimeter

Women are powerful	Build communities around food markets	Diversity is key in all industries
A name for my new ethical, sustainable, people-focused farm!!!!	We need change now.	Lockdown given people the meaningful things, and we like it
Lots but using food as a lens and starting from right to eat well	need a radical change on food supply chain	Look at everything through a lens of foodCommunity is key

### What insight/s have you taken from today's Food Talks?

Mentimeter

We need to advocate for a change in mindset around food	Food is a powerful lens through which to tackle issues!	People really want to know what to do, we need answers
Global food system needs sorting so that health for all!	Major reflections on the rural/urban balance. And we need an architect/food producer manifesto for public space!	Local communities humanises the spirit
Whenever we talk about food poverty it comes back to house prices and fossil fuel prices!	We need community Food Hubs	Access to good non -processed food is a key thing to be addressed in policy

### What insight/s have you taken from today's Food Talks?

Mentimeter

We can't achieve anything positive without equity	Food production is heavily political	Politicians need to think beyond the tried and tested
What is a good life?	Food is community.	The opportunity that COVID has brought for a rethink
Despair re: current gov	That we need to connect the different amazing food initiatives to work together to make change	Food can fix it

# What insight/s have you taken from today's Food Talks?

Mentimeter

Restructuring our relationship with food, growing and consuming

Using the lens of food will help us realize it is connected to everything. food AND housing is everything\*\*\*\*

Capitalism has conned us into thinking that health and wellness are luxuries

communities need to know where their food comes from

Start small and it's a global solution that will take a mind shift and policy, systems, environment change

The need to find some immediate practical solutions for individuals and communities

The need to continue to focus on the meaningful stuff as lockdown eases

Food is every aspect of life

People and shared values - more dialogues needed on this.

# What insight/s have you taken from today's Food Talks?

Mentimeter

The true power of food

Scrap capitalism!

Can't wait to read the books mentioned. So interesting and would love to learn more. Missed the last part of talks due to a call.