

## Food Fight - S1E12 - Food in Crisis.mp3

**Matt Eastland** [00:00:06] Hi, everyone. I'm Matt Eastland and a warm welcome to The Food Fight podcast from EIT Food. Europe's leading food innovation initiative working to make the food system more sustainable, healthy and trusted. Today, I'm delighted to be welcoming back my brilliant co-host, Lukxmi Balathasan, who is back from maternity leave.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:00:27] Thanks, Matt. It's good to be back in the presenter chair and of course, like the rest of the world, were both working from home today and recording remotely over the net right now.

**Matt Eastland** [00:00:36] Yeah so...unfortunately, we're both reduced to pixelated faces on laptop screens at the moment, which actually having said that is probably no bad thing because I'm currently sporting my quarantine haircut.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:00:48] That's true. And, you know, in all seriousness, it's been a really unusual and challenging time for everyone, especially those working the global food system since the outbreak of Covid-19. For consumers, the industry, farmers and manufacturers, as well as all the startups and small businesses that make up our food system. We've all had to change habits and pivot in many ways. But over the last few weeks, I've also been really heartened by stories from across the industry and also from our very own EIT Food community. There's been great stories of organisations coming together to solve some of the problems we're facing currently.

**Matt Eastland** [00:01:21] Yeah, and on that, actually. Before we go any further, can we just make a massive shout out to all the key workers in the food system and everybody else out there who's working hard to keep the world fed and happy. I think that comfort food definitely means more to us than ever before now. So a big thanks to all of you out there. But yes, in this episode, we want to talk about some of the changes that are going on right now and to discuss the fragility of the global food system. So is it resilient enough? How businesses are evolving through the COVID crisis and the technology providing us with the solutions. With us to discuss these topics today. We've two fantastic guests.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:02:05] So joining us from Queen's University, Belfast, and also an EIT Food partner is Professor Chris Elliott OBE, so founder of the Institute for Global Food Security. Hi, Chris. Welcome to the EIT Food Fight podcast.

**Chris Elliott** [00:02:19] Oh, it's a pleasure to join us today. And congratulations, I think, on saying coming back from maternity leave, I'm sure that's a bit of a shock to your system.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:02:28] Yes. Yes, definitely a better and interesting experience coming... well, to be honest, I was at home and still at home. So it kind of feels like more of the same, to be honest. But yes, thanks very much. And our second, guest on the show today is Sylvia Lazarus. She's a journalist who's interested in the junction between philosophy, science and, of course, food. And she's written extensively on the ills of the industry, including food, sustainability and impact, particularly for our food science and tech platform. EIT Food's food unfolded.

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:03:00] Thank you. Thank you very much. I'm very happy to be here today.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:03:03] So first question, Sylvia. You've been writing about your experiences in self-isolation and the ways in which it's made you shift your thinking around food. So aside from shortages on the supermarket shelves, what would you say have been the biggest challenges you've encountered personally over the past few weeks?

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:03:23] So I have now been self-isolating for about six weeks. And from the very beginning of isolation, as we all know, it is very hard to find things on supermarket shelves, but also it was very hard to get deliveries from online supermarkets. So what I've ended up doing was I found out through some friends that there were some small farmers and small distributors who were normally supplying restaurants who were now becoming available to actually send vegetables and fruits and other essentials to households. And so I got in touch with them, literally just calling them on the phone and just ordering in in a very weird way, because you just order a box and you don't really know what's going to be in it. But anyways, so you order this box and then the box arrived and there were a lot of vegetables that I would not normally buy at the supermarket, something like a rutabaga or weird cabbages. And yeah. So I actually had to do some Google search to actually find out how to cook with these vegetables. But it was very interesting because well, first of all, I just kept doing that because it's the easiest way for me right now to source food. But I also have this sort of awareness that I'm helping small businesses in this situation and the food. It's actually pretty good. So, yeah, I think that's been my main shift. And I think that it will be really hard to go back to what I used to do. And I don't actually think that they want to because I don't know, before I would just, you know, everyday be thinking about how would a source food to, like, cook in the evening, and I would go to the supermarket, buy a lot of ingredients that maybe wouldn't even match again. And now I actually employ zero brainpower in deciding what to buy and all my brainpower goes into not wasting it and just kind of find ways to cook it and to put it together. So that's been really interesting for me. And I've also basically become vegetarian over these past few weeks because I ordered twice from a butcher, some chicken. But over the past six weeks, I've eaten meat three times. So, yeah, that's and it's seems to be going well.

**Matt Eastland** [00:05:49] So the crisis has made you sort of more local, more adventurous and basically vegetarian.

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:05:56] Yeah, I mean, it sounds fantastic. Yeah, it's been quite good.

**Matt Eastland** [00:06:02] And what about you, Chris? How is your household had to adapt during this time?

**Chris Elliott** [00:06:07] I can't say I've had the same transformation Sylvia to be honest, I guess we keep buying the same stuff. And probably the biggest change, Matt, is we've had more time to cook. We're not rushing about as much. So we've got much more into buying fresh produce and cooking nice curries and all sorts of stuff, experimenting but like a good side there's some of your experiments work and some of them are a bit of a disaster. So which is the fun part? I certainly haven't become a vegetarian. I still very much enjoy eating the meat, but it's probably slightly different cuts of meat that we're eating now in slightly different ways.

**Matt Eastland** [00:06:48] Okay, so it seems like you've both personally adapted certain things about your life, some maybe more than others. But I guess what we're really talking about today is the resilience of the food system itself. And is it resilient enough? So Chris, you know, maybe you can start us off talking about, you know, why did you set up the Institute for Global Food Security and what does your work involve?

**Chris Elliott** [00:07:13] Thanks, Matt. So in terms of the establishment of the institute at Queen's University, I mean, this has been a very long term project for me. I think I started the idea about fifteen years ago and the institute formally started in 2013. So we've been operational for more than seven years now. I really have collected a enormous critical mass of researchers who look at many, many different aspects of food systems, which is fantastic. So very much driving the whole idea, but multidisciplinary research. And we can look at some of the big issues that are facing our food system. And in all honesty, a lot of them haven't changed. They're not going to go away. You know, you talk to our EIT Food and sustainability, you know, that is still key. We've got the challenges of our changing climate, which is, you know, maybe slow down a little bit, but we can see that. But that's probably only temporary. And all of the issues, actually, that COVID 19 is throwing up about the impact of really a bad diet and you know the bad diet is one of the biggest factors in terms of the number of fatalities that we're seeing for COVID. The correlation between people with Type two diabetes and deaths is quite staggering. So those things have not changed. And if anything we start to look for the positives out of what's happening now, it must be to focus on those big issues about sustainability, climate and health.

**Matt Eastland** [00:08:50] And so do you think that the this of COVID crisis is actually is it just exposing the fragility of the system that was already there?

**Chris Elliott** [00:09:00] I think that's probably a very good way to put it. You know, lots of us knew there were issues with the food system and, you know, ultimately a system that has to try to feed seven point five billion people 365 days of the year in a way that's cost effective, in a way that's ethical. All of those different things that we try to do, massive stresses and strains on that system. But now, we can see the real fragility kicking in now some of those issues that have hit us.

**Matt Eastland** [00:09:32] And, you know, we've seen a lot of those stories being played out in the media and I think, Lukxmi, you've got a few examples.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:09:38] Yeah. So, you know, hitting on what you talked about, healthy eating habits. You know, you've been seen in media talking about, for example, that Belgians are urged to eat more chips during lockdown to ease the stockpiles of writing potatoes. And there's obviously been widely reported there's been massive labour shortages for fresh fruit pickers and meat packers. So, you know, what stories have you been following closely? So I guess first star, Sylvia, I'll go to you for this.

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:10:05] Yeah. So actually, we've been reading a lot about this and there are a lot of issues. And as you were all saying, the COVID situation is definitely shedding light on certain paradoxes that we have in our food system, where in the West, for example, a lot of junk food and there's obesity on the one side and on the other side, there's small attrition and extreme acute food insecurity. But some of the things that we've been seeing in Europe is that actually the prices of foods are going up a little bit, especially because of these labour shortages. So labour shortages are determining that maybe there will be. And also issues in transportation around the world will determine that some perishable foods will maybe be found less in supermarkets or a bit more expensive. So the fruits and vegetables that we would normally be eating now and sourcing now. So this makes it an inequality issue, which people who can't actually afford to do more expensive food shops, for example, will have to resort to eating a more unhealthy diet. So the real cost of a healthy diet might become more expensive in this situation. But it's also

highlighting this fragility in the food system that was already there, which is we are now seeing that, for example, there is two hundred and thirty-three thousand deaths for coronavirus as of today, I think. But there are also at least one hundred thirty three million people who already suffered from severe acute food insecurity. So I'm just wondering whether this crisis will actually even make us as the public a bit more receptive to these numbers and bring some change in the way that we appreciate and empathise with the people who produce our foods in those countries.

**Matt Eastland** [00:11:55] Yeah. Thanks, Sylvia. And Chris, do you agree with that? I mean, do you think that this is going to be a sort of a constant problem or do you think we're going to be able to use this crisis in a way to try and unpick some of those big issues?

**Chris Elliott** [00:12:10] Yeah, so Sylvia made some really good points about some of the stresses in supply chains and those things about, who's actually going to harvest your pet crops at the moment is a massive issue. There is issues about transportation. There's issues about storage. A lot of different stresses right across the system. And there's also what's called commodity imbalances now as well. So there's things that are in high demand which were, you know, the world is really struggling to supply us there. Those things are being produced, which are a much lower demand now because of the changeover of how we eat. So just to give you an example of that, the most widely consumed food in the world is rice. OK, by the human population, 2.5 billion people in the world eat rice every day of the week. And I you know, I read stories were big exporters like India, Vietnam, Malaysia, have stopped all exports completely because they're protecting their own populations, which is exactly right. So there's going to be shortages of rice. Who's going to be the most impacted? I think back to Silvius point, that's about inequalities of food system. So it will be the people who can least well afford that. And then, for instance, milk as a commodity. So there is massive wastage of milk in a lot of different parts of the world now because the cafes, the restaurants are open and we're not drinking our cappuccinos and lattes anymore. So that's changed quite dramatically as well. I think I'd like to follow up on Sylvias point about, you know, those people in the world who are malnourished due to a lack of calories. And the last figure that I looked out from the U.N. said it was something like, eight hundred and forty-five million people close to one billion. And what I read now from Protect Me from the U.N. agencies, the aid agencies like the World Food Programme, they now talk about famines of biblical proportions. So it's not going to be one billion people will be malnourished. We could be looking at more than two billion people because of the inequalities of the food system. Unfortunately, you know, I listen to lots of news stories and media stories about COVID 19. I just don't see that being picked up at all. Yet the U.N. is screaming now to say the world is going to have the biggest crisis in the history of people being malnourished. So, you know, let's put that on to as many people's radar screens as possible.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:14:48] That's really an interesting point that, you know. The media's been really focussing on the local issues and not really looking at the global impact of the food system. And I just want to pick on the localisation and what you described about we're gonna be losing our experts for rice. Do you think this is a time where we will see a shift more towards local producers and reducing our food miles? I'd be interested to hear your perspective on that Chris.

**Chris Elliott** [00:15:13] Yeah.

**Chris Elliott** [00:15:14] And I do think, you know, cause Sylvia said, you know, she was working on able to source locally produced food, which I think is fantastic, as I can see that happening in lots of different places now. And again, one of the positives we can think about is people reconnecting with food systems and looking for locally produced food. I can see that happening in many, many places. Always what will dictate is that keeps happening.

**Chris Elliott** [00:15:41] Is the market OK? I talk about the market because food is generally driven by the cost, the price. You know, people will generally buy the cheapest food that they possibly can. At the moment, it's about availability and, you know, there's a willingness to pay that extra premium. Will the same thing be happening in six months or a year's time. I'm just not quite so sure about that. I think at a national level, there's going to be a lot more discussions about food security. Should individual countries be thinking about, well, should we be really importing 40 percent, 50 percent, 60 percent of all the food that we eat because of the issues that we are now seeing? So that's much more likely to drive change and individual choices, I believe, and governments will have to look at how do you start to think about introducing better subsidies for farmers? How can you drive industries that's very manual and you know will have to undergo massive changes in terms of innovation, in terms of the introduction of things like robotics, things that we've talked about for quite a number of years, but we actually haven't seen happening.

**Matt Eastland** [00:16:53] Yeah, I guess I'm kind of listening to you talking there Chris, and I'm sort of thinking about this. The fact that this is such a - it's such a massive challenge or massive number of challenges to unpick. And I'm just wondering what we can do about the long term changes here and Sylvia, I know this is something that you've written about, specifically about. You know how in the long term we can change the food supply system? And I'm wondering if you've got something to say on that.

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:17:19] I mean, the work that I do is, you know, trying to find out information and providing people with information, but also trying to reflect on my own experience with food and trying to figure out how I can be a better consumer in this situation. So maybe I can give you a perspective from sort of the consumer level. I think that personally, I've been reading more and more about the intrinsic cost of production of certain foods and its impact on not only the environment, but also the communities where certain foods are produced. And I'll give an example. I recently wrote about the cost of production of avocados. But, you know, it could be with many other foods, but there's certain places where growing avocados doesn't cost much. And not so much water is needed because there is enough rainfall. But there's countries like Chile and in particular the region, Petorca region, where most of the avocado that is exported from Chile comes from where a thousand litres of water or even more are needed to produce a kilo of avocados. And so the course of water is been disrupted to go to these avocado plantations. And people living in those communities don't have fresh water with which they can cook, clean themselves. This is just an example. But the idea for me is that maybe what I can do to actually play my part. Looking towards the future, is that I can maybe try to focus more on buying local, locally produced food or buying Fairtrade foods, because in same thing in the avocado plantations, the producers are actually the people who earn the least from this whole production and consumption cycle. So I think what I can do is try to make more conscious decisions to ensure that the producers from which I buy and the distributors from which I buy respect and increase negotiating power with the original producers of food.

**Matt Eastland** [00:19:24] It's a really interesting perspective and I love the fact it's kind of bring it back to the consumer and what we can do personally and Chris I'm just wondering from a like a food industry perspective, you know what what is it that the food industry itself can do to change? How do we start to unpick it?

**Chris Elliott** [00:19:42] And the answer is not easily. Now I really like Sylvia's comments there because touched all us so many different aspects about integrity of the global food supply system, which I like to talk about, issues about sustainability, issues about ethics. And one of the big drivers will be having a much more knowledgeable public who can actually make these decisions, not have to go away and research my avocado came from Chile, it's bad. My avocado came from Spain, it's good. Now actually you know, within EIT Food you know, there's two projects going on at the moment which I'm following really closely and they're both about sustainability. And they are trying to develop what I call algorithms, mathematical formula that can actually tell you how sustainable the food is that you're buying. Collecting lots and lots of different data. And the idea Matt is that that will get converted into some really simple to follow food label in terms of a sustainability label. You know, it might be a traffic light system. It might be some other system. But I think that is a fantastic initiative because once that metric becomes available, once that labelling system becomes available, the pressure then actually goes on those people who sell food to use out labelling system. And therefore, whenever you go into your shop, your supermarket, your store, and you can look at those avocados sitting beside each other and one's got a red light and one's got a green cheque on it, that will drive consumer choice. I'm absolutely sure of it.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:21:27] And you know, Chris, you speak a lot about you think that consumers are going to be driving this change. And I myself, as a consumer, I've been a lot more aware of food waste and where my food comes from, and I'm also like Sylvia shopping more locally, getting food boxes from farmers. So during this crisis, what are some of the key steps we can take to leverage consumer power knowledge during this crisis to have an impact on changing the supply chain? Do you have any thoughts on that?

**Chris Elliott** [00:21:56] Always. Well, we can start to think about, you know, massive changes that are going to happen because of the situation we're in now. Always my fear is that once we start to go back to the new normal and the real normal - memories are short-lived and unfortunately, I've seen that happen many, many times before. So we can talk about massive changes to food systems but I think it's going to take, I think, a number of really key opinion leaders you know, some of the really big players to say, you know what, we are going to change how we source. We're going to get away from these multiple steps, supply chains. And think about what the impact that will have for their business, because with changing supply chains, you bring about maybe added risk to your business because local sourcing is fine and fantastic. What happens if the local crop fails? Crop failures happen all over the world, but in the UK we have a wet springtime and we don't have the potatoes, we don't have the cabbages, we don't have the carrots. Suddenly we will be expecting those to be in our supermarkets. And then you're saying to people well forget about that local stuff, just get my carrots from somewhere.

**Matt Eastland** [00:23:13] And you bring up an interesting point, Chris, about like the kind of the impact on business. And I know obviously during this time that has been huge. I mean producers and farmers are really struggling. But on the other hand, you've got some retailers that have actually done quite well in terms of rolling with the punches. So I'd be interested to understand if either of you have your kind of ear to the ground on how the business of food is actually coping right now. So Sylvia, I wonder if we can start with you.

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:23:44] I've heard a lot about an issue with packaging for certain businesses. So, for example, in the UK and in many countries around Europe, there were huge shortages of flour in supermarkets. And I found out that actually the reason for that is just in the UK, only about four percent of all flour that is produced normally goes to supermarkets.

**Matt Eastland** [00:24:06] Is that right?

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:24:06] Of course, yeah. So the rest is actually packaged in these huge 16 to 24 kilos bags that go to restaurants and bakers and industry. So now it's a huge challenge because a lot of these millers and producers don't have the facilities to immediately convert and repackage in one kilo's packages that can go to the supermarket, for example. And that's the same for, you know, many other producers because milk is a very similar issue. The meat industry has been struggling because what they called the carcass balance. So for each animal that gets slaughtered, if you only sell to supermarkets and you will sell the most popular cuts. So instead, if you actually do have restaurants cooking with meat, then you will be able to sell all the parts of a carcass right? So that's a huge issue in the meat industry. And my perspective is there's a lot going on with sort of repurposing and repackaging for a huge shift in behaviour because, of course, restaurants are not open and there's a lot of pressing demand from households.

**Matt Eastland** [00:25:19] Yeah, that's interesting. I was actually reading today they're saying that, you know, mince demand for sort of beef mince has gone through the roof, whereas demand for like the more, shall we say, luxurious cuts of meat have really fallen away. So it's interesting how the food system has kind of had to shift in response to that.

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:25:38] Yeah. And you also have some good Brazilian stories from even, you know, restaurants. I've read stories of high cuisine restaurants just converting completely to try to use the same products to actually cook for vulnerable people and providing cheaper meals. And yeah, I mean, big changes in this period for sure.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:26:02] So I guess we've touched upon about how business of food is coping. So, Chris, what about farmers? How have they been able to adapt to become even more resilient during this time?

**Chris Elliott** [00:26:13] I think Matt when he introduced the podcast he talked about all of those people in the food system who's doing such a fantastic job to make sure we put food on our plates. And I think often the start of the food chain is with farmers and we owe farmers are massive debt. You know, they have kept working. They haven't thought about self isolation. They're just thought about keeping their farms going. And, you know, many of them are facing absolutely dire circumstances in terms of cash flow. I'll tell you. Incredible. But the farmers are doing a fantastic job in terms of working with the processing companies you know right across the world. And again, what are the aspects that I have picked up is the difficulty in harvesting crops because the amount of manual labour. It's also a very migrant workforce. So, you know, there are there is a group of people who tend to actually travel around the world, different seasons, picking different crops and different parts of the world. And you know, that movement has virtually stopped because of COVID so think about all of those individuals who actually can't make a living anymore. You know, wherever they were at the last time, they took the crops. They're kind of stranded there as well. So if we think about anything, I think it comes back to this whole thinking about the values that we place on our food system and all of the actors, all of the players in the food

system. For many years, myself, my colleagues, we have looked at we call the tensions that set in the food system. So processors and farmers are generally - have massive tensions with each other. They will argue about the prices and the costs of goods. And then there's massive tensions between the manufacturers, the processors and the retailers and the foodservice sector and there are those same tensions that sit within there. So if we really want to have a food system based on equality, then the amount of money made the profits made should be fairly evenly distributed right across those food supply systems. That will allow, I think, much more investment in farms. And some of those things that I talked about, like, you know, in terms of how do we start to think about introducing robotics? Can we start to think about maybe introducing some vertical farming systems into the country? So again I think these are some of the big things that we need to talk about and think about going forward, because inequalities have absolutely been exposed. There's no doubt about that.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:28:52] That's interesting we talk about the use of technology. So in your opinion, do you think the COVID 19 situation will push farmers to look into technological approaches and adapting technology to running their modern farms?

**Chris Elliott** [00:29:07] I think what we're seeing now is probably one of the biggest drivers for innovation in farming that we've seen for several generations. You can actually track back what the big drivers for change has been. And, you know, it seems like world wars. So I think we have got what we're called the fourth industrial revolution now and, you know, why not think about applying the fourth industrial revolution to farming? And that is the application of new technologies and digital sciences, huge opportunities there.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:29:38] I think what you're saying is going to resonate with a lot of our start-ups that listen to this podcast and they're probably really welcoming this opportunity to collaborate more with the farming community to test some of the approaches that they've been developing. So that's really great to hear that from you.

**Matt Eastland** [00:29:51] Absolutely. And, you know, you bring up our startups Lukxmi. I mean, you obviously work quite closely with our network and beyond. So do you have any, like, positive stories of start-ups doing interesting things during this time?

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:30:04] Yeah. Just like the businesses and farmers you know, I think a lot of our start-ups have been really pivoting not only within their own business models to support the food system, but also to support the health crisis. So for example, our rising food star, Swiss De Code, they're adapting their tech and experience in rapid onsite tests they do for bacteria and viruses related to food safety. They're now applying that to create a coronavirus test. So Coggs is a Start-Up who participated in one of our accelerator programs. They decided to waive all their fees for its platform and that allows people to buy surplus produce directly from farmers in the UK. So they're really supporting the food systems.

**Matt Eastland** [00:30:43] Nice.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:30:43] And more locally so this has been a collaboration of our community in Belgium. So between NGOs and some of the local producers, they've launched a new soup, which has got a really great title, Robin Food. It's a great story because the soup is made some fresh surplus vegetables from the farmers and local committees would find quite difficult to sell due to the coronavirus crisis. So their vegetables are made into soup at a social enterprise enVie and the soup is then



distributed to vulnerable families throughout food banks and social grocers. I think a lot of them, the food startups in the food community EIT Food have really shown adaptability and resilience at this time.

**Matt Eastland** [00:31:25] Yeah. I love back those sorts of stories, and I'm just wondering, you know, through trying to find the silver lining in everything we're doing, whether or not, you know, that that kind of entrepreneurship, innovation space is going to get accelerated through this. And I - my worry, though, is that, like you are saying, Chris, that he just drops off. So how do we... How do we keep scaling all the great innovation and technology that comes out of this time and make sure that that, you know, that's not seen as like fringe is actually becomes fundamental to the system. How do we keep this going from a tech perspective? Would you think, Sylvia?

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:32:01] I don't know. I think the technology aspect of it is on the one hand, there's robotics and technology introduced to harvest crops, for example. But on the other hand, there's this huge community building that is happening on social media that is happening through the creation of digital maps, for example, where people can - and I found this both in the U.K. and in Italy, which is a huge effort of pinning down on a map of the entire country where you can source certain foods directly from farmers, for example. And I just can't imagine us just throwing away all of this and just never using it again. So I think that the aspect of the creation of new apps, for example, to create more direct contact between consumers and producers, which could make it easier this thing that we thought would be so hard to source food locally, that could actually be a thing that sticks around. And I think that in general, this situation is, for example, a matter initiative that I heard about and a reporter of ours is looking into. Is this seed network exchange for which this very small group on Facebook became huge in San Diego, where people just started to exchange seeds and start gardening where they could. And I think that, you know, once you start going in that direction, I don't think it's gonna be so natural to go back to what it was before. Some change is already happening and I think maybe there will be a new normal. It's not exactly what we're living right now, but there are the basis, I think, for consumer behavior to change right now.

**Matt Eastland** [00:33:41] I hope so. I mean, one of the other things that I've always wanted to ask is this it's not just before COVID, but actually, it's something that's been on my mind for a long time. It's about this question of choice in the food system and the fact that, you know, you can walk down a supermarket aisle or certainly before COVID and you can have I don't know 200 different yoghurts. Right. And I guess the question has to be, do we need 200 different yoghurts? And, you know, you're both sort of saying now you get boxes of food where you don't even know what you're going to get, but you just kind of make do with it. So do you think that in the food system there's just too much choice? And actually, if by having less choice, does that mean we start to value food more?

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:34:27] Well, that was my personal experience for sure. I think that, you know, the moment that I had less choice and I couldn't I just couldn't really choose what would go into my box. I started to almost have this sort of gratitude feeling when I would open the box and see all these vegetables and I would feel so satisfied by being able to actually cook something with it. So I think it definitely brought me to appreciate food more. And that also led me to empathise a little bit better with these people who are actually, you know, working so much as Chris was saying earlier in the situation, when we're all at home and. And you really realise how many people that actually have to feed in this situation. So I think for me, if there were a new system where I have less choice, but I know that the, you know, the products that I find are well-sourced and environmentally and ethically

produced and cost not too much and it doesn't become sort of a hip thing that just a few people do because they can afford it. If there could be a new system in that way, I would definitely I would love that also because supermarkets, it would be interesting to look at, you know, how much food is actually - gets actually wasted every day in supermarkets and how much food do we actually need every day in a certain community.

**Matt Eastland** [00:35:54] Yeah. And Chris, do you think the food industry will ever swallow that as in, you know what if we all suddenly think yeah we don't need so much choice. Do you think the food industry is going to be okay with that? Or are they, are they just going to keep pushing more and more products onto us?

**Chris Elliott** [00:36:10] Yes, it's very interesting, this whole idea of choice. You know, the very big multiple retailers in the UK will have something in the region of 50000 SKU's sold every day. That's 50000 different food products. It's incredible what I've heard over the last couple of months, that number has been reducing and reducing and reducing okay. So probably we're talking about 30000 now. And that's because they have decided they can't afford the luxury of trying to source and get all of the distribution for all of these SKU's. And that's having a massive impact on a lot of small companies I will tell you and some quite negative impacts on that.

**Matt Eastland** [00:36:55] Right.

**Chris Elliott** [00:36:55] I think the bulk of retailers will actually very much like to reduce that choice.

**Matt Eastland** [00:37:00] That's interesting.

**Chris Elliott** [00:37:02] Well, they'll want to reduce the choice because if you look at what's happened across Europe and that's the big discounters, you know, the Aldi's and the Lidl's. There are a number of SKU's they sell is probably under 10000 okay. And the fact they will sell more in volume but less SKU's actually really helps drive the profitability of their business on the cost that they sell to people.

**Matt Eastland** [00:37:25] Is that right?

**Chris Elliott** [00:37:25] So don't think for a moment that the multiple retailers will not be thinking well this is an opportunity okay.

**Matt Eastland** [00:37:31] Okay. I was thinking it would be the reverse, actually. But that's interesting, actually, it's better from big retailers to sell more of the similar kind of products.

**Chris Elliott** [00:37:39] Absolutely.

**Matt Eastland** [00:37:39] And actually it's sort of not as useful for smaller companies.

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:37:43] On this point, actually, I was thinking that, you know, maybe it doesn't even need to bring less variety and because I understand this issue with small businesses, that could struggle a lot from this. But I was thinking, you know, it's more about this sort of direct connection between a certain person who wants a certain kind of foods and another person who wants a completely different kind. And maybe they don't necessarily need to sit in the same supermarket, but they can be sourced in a different way if it makes sense... So anyways.

**Matt Eastland** [00:38:15] No good good comments. You know, just sort of as we're going through this, I mean, obviously the situation at the moment is still unfolding with COVID and it's going to be a long time. So big open questions, I guess. So what are your predictions? Do you think as I've seen, you know, there's a number of commentators on Twitter are saying things like, you know, the COVID crisis is actually a once in a generation opportunity to truly transform the food system. Do you think that's right? What do you think, Chris?

**Chris Elliott** [00:38:45] OK.

**Matt Eastland** [00:38:46] Is the food system going to transform?

**Chris Elliott** [00:38:49] The food system will change. Let's have no doubt about that at all. Well, I think it's going to change for the better. I think really silly and quite crazy things that have developed, you know, due to globalisation, there will be a lot of thinking about do you know what, it was all about, driving prices down. It was all about having the availability of those multiple food products every day of the week. And I think this whole idea about resilience of the food system is going to be in vogue. Just to tell you, you know, virtually every day of every week since over the last month, I have talked with food companies about resilience. That's what they are really concentrating on, now massive shock global food supply system in the Western world will probably get away with it okay. The developing world probably won't. You know all of those issues that I talked about. I think one of the big things that we need to latch on now is this word of resilience okay. And where the resilience comes, all of those key things about thinking about our changing climate. Thinking about sustainability. Thinking about the qualities of food. So I think there could be a lot of great positives coming out of the crisis we're in currently Matt.

**Matt Eastland** [00:40:04] Love it.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:40:05] And looking to you, Sylvia. So obviously, some of your habits have already changed due to the crisis. So what is going to be your key takeaway and impact that's going to have on you that you will follow through after the crisis?

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:40:19] Well, the main thing that this crisis has actually shown me across the board in many different fields is that things can change so quickly and we can have a say in how things change during these particular crises. And the other thing, you know, is we are also as as Chris was saying, we're not now we're in this coronavirus crisis, which is attracting all of our attention. But there's been this underlying climate crisis that's been going on for a long time. And I think that more and more we will become conscious that we have to change things quite quickly to address these other crises, too. So I think the main take-home message for me was, you know, I thought that it would be so difficult to change a system and so difficult to change my behaviour. But actually, what all it took was sort of necessity and enough willpower to do it really. And enough people who believe the same thing. So if we're enough sort of wanting the same thing, it will probably happen.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:41:18] And sort of in terms of your advice. What one thing do you think that we can all do to ensure that we continue to build a more sustainable food system?

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:41:27] If we can, we can try to source food a bit more locally. And I would say the main thing, which is always evergreen, let's try to waste less. And so to do

our food shops in a way that are a bit more thoughtful and so that we can match all of the ingredients in a good way and be a bit more creative in the kitchen, I guess.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:41:52] Brilliant. And what about you, Chris? One key takeaway for all of us back at home listening. What can we all do? Post corona crisis to ensure that we build a more sustainable food system?

**Chris Elliott** [00:42:03] Well, I guess it's the reconnection that a lot of us are doing well with the food that we eat. Think about where it comes from, how it was produced. You know, the nutritional value of it. And let's all enjoy cooking a lot more than we used to. I certainly do.

**Matt Eastland** [00:42:20] Same.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:42:20] Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. That's definitely been a big impact on me. Definitely cooking more and wasting less.

**Chris Elliott** [00:42:26] Yeah.

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:42:27] Yeah.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:42:27] Brilliant. So well I'm afraid we're running out of time today and it's been brilliant to have you both here on our food fight podcast as guests. So before we go, it'll be good for people listening at home to know where they can get in touch and following your research throughout this period. So, Chris, how can people get in touch with you?

**Chris Elliott** [00:42:44] I'm very active on Twitter: Q U B Food Prof. Love to engage with people on Twitter. I like to argue, debate, discuss with people.

**Matt Eastland** [00:42:52] Ahaha I saw that today Chris.

**Chris Elliott** [00:42:54] Thank you ahaha...and also, you know, just Google my name and you'll find e-mail addresses. And I love to engage with people in as many ways as possible.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:43:07] Brilliant. Thanks for that. And Sylvia, what about you? How can people get in touch with you?

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:43:12] That's actually the same for me. So Twitter or Facebook, I guess you'll be able to see my name written somewhere, so I don't need to spell it. But you can also find me on the food unfolded platform.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:43:22] Brilliant. Thanks very much.

**Matt Eastland** [00:43:24] Amazing. Thank you. So, Chris Elliot and Sylvia Lazarus, thank you both so much for joining us today. It's been an absolute pleasure.

**Sylvia Lazarus** [00:43:33] My pleasure.

**Chris Elliott** [00:43:33] Lovely to talk all of you, all the very best.

**Lukxmi Balathanan** [00:43:37] To follow more stories about food resilience at this time you can also read the news pages at [eitfood.eu](http://eitfood.eu) or [foodunfolded.com](http://foodunfolded.com). We've also just recently launched a free online course, The Future Learn platform, featuring our very own Chris Elliot from today's podcast on the impact of panic buying during crisis to check that out. There are also plenty of other ways you can get involved in these efforts. So do you reach out via Twitter at EIT Food or with either of us directly. Thanks again to everyone today. And I want to wish everyone working in the industry at the moment our very best. Thanks for listening and we'll be back very soon.