

## 41 Childhood nutrition and health are we doing enough.mp3

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:00:06] Hi, everyone. Welcome back to The Food Fight podcast from EIT Food. Europe's leading food innovation community working hard to make the food system more sustainable, healthy and trusted. I'm Lukxmi Balathasan.

**Matt Eastland** [00:00:18] And I'm Matt Eastland. Now over the past year and through covid-19, we've been carefully tracking the different ways the food system has responded to the challenges the world is facing. So we've covered sustainability and supply chain resilience. But in recent weeks, a new and unlikely hero has emerged, in England football star Marcus Rashford. His campaign for free school meals to continue through school holidays, has brought to light an incredibly important conversation around food access and child food poverty during the pandemic. His efforts have been really applaudable and have certainly got us thinking. So inspired by that, we want to dedicate this podcast episode to the kids and ask childhood nutrition and health, are we doing enough?

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:01:06] So with us today, we've got two wonderful experts. We have Dr. Natalie Masento. She joins us today from the University of Reading, where she's a senior research fellow interested in the link between psychology and nutrition. You could say she's an expert in getting kids to eat more vegetables. More on that shortly, I'm definitely interested in that. Welcome to the show, Natalie.

**Natalie Masento** [00:01:27] Hi. Thank you for having me.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:01:29] And alongside Natalie, we've got Sarah Hickey from Guy's and St Thomas' Charity. There, Sarah is the Director of a ten year programme looking to reduce childhood obesity in inner city London. Thanks for joining us today, Sarah.

**Sarah Hickey** [00:01:41] Thank you. Pleasure to be here.

**Matt Eastland** [00:01:43] Thanks for being on the show, both of you. So just to kick this off, then, we mentioned Marcus Rashford, his recent campaign at the start of the show. So how do you think the covid crisis has affected access to good nutrition for children? It'd be good to get your thoughts, Sarah. Why don't you kick us off?

**Sarah Hickey** [00:02:00] Yeah, thank you. And yeah, I agree what Marcus Rashford is doing is amazing. I think covid has exposed and exacerbated something that has been there for quite a while, which is a real inequality in access to good food for different children in the UK. And I think that's an inequality based on income and based on where you live. When we set up the childhood obesity programme that we run at Guy's and St Thomas' Charity, we looked at that issue very fresh. And the first thing that strikes you when you just look at data on child obesity is the strength of the correlation between rates of child obesity and the average income of a neighbourhood. So if you grow up in a neighbourhood, the lower the average income, the higher your rate is of being obese. And I think that's the same side of the coin as food insecurity, because when we dived into kind of why, why is that the case? I guess what we found was that, yes, the families living in lower-income areas are more likely to be flooded with unhealthy food options, but also less have more barriers to access the healthy. So I think for the last ten years, there's been this inequality issue around access to nutritious diets for children and covid just exacerbated that because those barriers related to income, food security, have just got bigger because of the pandemic.

**Matt Eastland** [00:03:25] Tragic, really. And you know, Natalie, do you agree that covid is exacerbated these issues?

**Natalie Masento** [00:03:31] I mean, yeah, I think I completely agree with Sarah and I mean, I don't work in that space particularly, but I could see it for myself that, you know, we're seeing in the news and just in my community, there's just been... It's interesting, there's been a combination of both people being open about limited access, but then also kind of people really these incentives to support and help. So loads of local cafes in my area are supplying food and kind of trying to bridge that gap, which I think is so wonderful, but also quite awful that that has to happen. I know that from my kind of perspective as a researcher in this area, there is so many initiatives about like trying to get access to vegetables and good food from a public health perspective. But we've known for a long time they don't reach the right people. And I know that as a researcher, we know what needs to happen, but it's just about how we're reaching the people and engaging them and actually sometimes actually creating content that is relevant to people. And I think I hope that, yeah, in this whole kind of pandemic situation, we're realising how can we do that effectively? Because there's no point kind of a top down approach where we're kind of telling people, you know, just make sure you get your five a day so.

**Matt Eastland** [00:04:39] That's interesting.

**Natalie Masento** [00:04:39] Yeah.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:04:39] I guess, you know, you sort of started touching on some of the possible sort of solutions. But before we dive into that, Sarah, so I guess it's just sort of unpick a little bit about the complexity of the issue. So from your perspective, like why is childhood obesity is such a complex crisis at this time? And what are some of the factors at play here?

**Sarah Hickey** [00:04:59] It is complex as you say and I think that complexity can sometimes lead to a bit of a freeze like in over what the solutions are, because you get lost in the complexity. And I guess I think what we try and do at our charity is to work out what all those practical building blocks to tackling the issue. I think from my perspective, I guess the first important thing is to really see as an issue of inequality. So, you know, there's a structural, fundamental issue there that's not about individual choice, really, as much as it is about unequal access. So I think that's the first fundamental. The second is, yes, we think we are thinking about obesity, obviously, but nutrition is obviously all about what you eat. So it's about food, what people purchase, what they eat, what they access. And then when we dive down into it, what we try and focus on in our area is what we call food environments. So essentially the spaces in which children and families spend their time, how are those spaces promoting or not healthy diets? And fundamentally, what that means to us is what literally are the food options that surround people in their day to day lives and how are they promoted, made attractive or made less attractive? So basically, we think it's all about looking at what is what are the food options, what is the shape of the food environment in these places that children spend their time, which are high streets, shops and food, retail environments, school environments, you know, their canteen and the food provision in those and early year environments as well. So, yeah, that's the fundamental building block. And really, I guess what we try and do is to find the decision makers who control those spaces. So when we're talking about food, retail, I guess who we're trying to work with is your supermarkets, your food manufacturers, your fast food outlets to say how can we reshape these spaces so that they still meet actually a variety of needs that people have when they're coming to buy something. But there's a healthier

outcome in terms of what they purchase and what they consume. So I think that's kind of what we try and focus on these spaces. And actually the whole system is complex. I think some of the solutions are less complicated. You know, there is an evidence base about what the things you can change in the food environment are that will have the most potential impact on someone's eating behaviour. So and the fundamental principle is put as little effort on the person as possible because we're all bombarded with, you know, hundreds of decisions about food every day. So it's very hard to make a kind of very active, informed decision each time. So how can you go with where people are already at where they go and how do you kind of put the least effort on them as possible at all? But that leads to healthier outcomes. So, for example, you know, reformulation is a perfect example. You've changed the makeup of a product that someone buys only to a point that they don't even notice. So from their point of view, nothing has changed. But actually what they are consuming is incrementally healthier. So I think there's some principles there that actually, for me, feel less complicated and help you kind of navigate what is, of course, a really complex system.

**Matt Eastland** [00:08:29] I love that.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:08:30] And it sounds, you know what you talk about food, environment, if you like, this is quite I was thinking about, you know, informed decisions and behaviours, and this is very much directly your area of research Natalie. So do you see a link between psychology and food environments and nutrition? Can you tell us a little bit about your thoughts on this and maybe link it a little bit to your research?

**Natalie Masento** [00:08:48] Yes, sure. So I guess the research that I do at Reading, we look at how exposure to particular foods does encourage consumption and how positive exposure. So we're looking at how just looking at pictures of vegetables encourages, you know, children to be more willing to try them and then actually eat them and like them. We've been doing that research for a long time and we've been working on a project called See and Eat, where we've created ebooks that are available in six languages where you can read these kind of ebooks and we've got evidence that they do improve vegetable consumption. And I think it seems like, again, it's a simple idea, but it's all about exposure in the environment. And we know accessibility as well as a psychologist, I know that there's so much about the bigger scale environment as we're talking about. So why is it that we have so many fast food areas in lower socioeconomic places? So where I live, it's a very diverse part of Reading. We've got various fast food places every three hundred yards and that's there on purpose, isn't it? Because they're popular. And so it kind of creates this cycle of reinforcing that those foods are available so people eat them. So then they're not going to be willing to try other things. So I think, yes, it's all about kind of the personal drives, but the food environment is complex and I think it's working against us. It's working against a healthy nutritional environment.

**Matt Eastland** [00:10:08] So just thinking about this very specific environment in the home and, you know, I was thinking about because what you're basically saying is your e-books, you're exposing kids to images of vegetables earlier on is sort of my understanding so that they get more accustomed to it. And so is visibility then like one of the most important things? I mean so, for example, for me, I was a child of the 80s and, you know, it was my mom and dad were constantly trying to get me to eat things which were healthy, but they were always sort of hiding it in my food and things like that. I kind of grew to think that those sorts of things were bad for me. So is that the kind of thing you're finding?

**Natalie Masento** [00:10:46] Yes. The fundamental research that, I teach this actually at the university, that when it comes to encouraging good, you know, good, healthy diet, it's all about exposure, accessibility and also good modelling. So you want to be able to show good examples of having those vegetables in the home or good foods in the home. And you want to see your parents and your older siblings, your friends eating those things as well. And it's just those simple things that I think a lot of people do do that. But it's just, of course, the stresses of life also get in the way as well. But the research we have at Reading, we very much focus on. So exposure to healthy food sounds like a simple idea. But actually getting a child that's getting a little bit fussy where they don't want to eat broccoli, it's quite a strong flavour. Parents have reported they know it is hard to get your child to force them to eat broccoli. So actually, what we found is that visual exposures to just like pictures actually supporting that experience. So it doesn't have to always be, you know, using the aeroplane technique of trying to stuff it in their mouth. It can just be through simple images. And, you know, it's using these kind of things that I know that in school campaigns, even just having stickers of vegetables and magazines with vegetables, there is some evidence that that's another way to be effective. And we almost need it in our in our environment. I'm expecting a baby and I'm actually getting a little toy broccoli.

**Matt Eastland** [00:12:10] Congratulations.

**Natalie Masento** [00:12:10] Thank you. I'm getting a little toy broccoli and little toy avocados just to kind of as a way to kind of visually expose them to vegetables early on. Because, I mean, I can't say that there's evidence for cute little veg, but...

**Matt Eastland** [00:12:23] Just practising what you preach Natalie.

**Natalie Masento** [00:12:24] Yeah. Yeah, but simple things like that. But of course, not everyone has access to do that. But I think there could be a more supportive environment that helps achieve that.

**Sarah Hickey** [00:12:35] Yeah, it was so interesting listening to you Natalie, because I think the home environment is almost like a micro version of the world. The world that we then go out in and I think that idea of exposure and visibility, like, I would completely agree with that. And as you say, Natalie, then you step out from your home, you sort of have the most control, it's to some extent some control over your home environment. You step out and then what are you exposed to then? What's visible? And when we think about just I guess just an example, advertising spend. The size, don't quote me on these specific statistics, my colleague in the organisation mentioned it to me, but I think the principle is very interesting. So the Public Health England obviously doing big campaigns on eating healthy essentially and marketing and advertising campaign targeting families. You know, the size of that the budget for that campaign, someone mentioned that's the size of Werther's Originals advertising budget. Werther's Original is one tiny product. So if you think about the scale of advertising, which the majority, the proportion of advertising is for high fat, sugar, salt products. So, again, what that means in terms of what's visible to us, what's exposed, there's it's very much leaning towards the unhealthy. So just read cues upon cues that reinforce, I guess, our underlying food psychology, which is to eat high fat sugar options. It's a really hard tide to wade against. And then if you add in additional barriers, such as you've got a really constrained budget and additional barriers on your headspace as well, like the stresses that come from living in poverty, I think you can then start seeing, like, that's quite hard to withstand the food environment that is basically making the unhealthy, much more visible and attractive than the healthy.

**Matt Eastland** [00:14:29] Yeah, you introduce actually a topic we wanted to get onto, which is about sort of this cheap versus expensive and, you know, whether healthy weight is healthy food sit. So we had a debate last year, another podcast actually, where we asked a question around whether eating healthy is cheaper or more expensive. And it seemed to be one of those hard to answer questions. That depends on where you are in the world. So like South America actually eating cheaply is the same as eating healthily because actually they, everybody shops locally and that's where they get all the food from and also the circumstances. But one thing that we did agree on is that, generally speaking, if you are from a lower-income family, say, in the UK, you also tend to be time-poor and you perhaps don't have the resources to seek out nice recipes, food for information and things like that. So I assume you agree with that? Is that is linked?

**Sarah Hickey** [00:15:23] Yeah, I would totally agree. So we constantly, as part of our work, are talking to parents in the area. And, you know, having met a parent who doesn't say, of course, I care about my child's health and happiness. Yes, ideally I want to buy them healthy food options. But there's a number of other things I'm trying to solve for. So one is budget and price so as to be affordable. The other is, as you say, convenience, limited headspace for various reasons, the limited time and then linked to the price taste as well. And again, then I think it's about the volume of food options that are convenient, affordable, tasty, but unhealthy versus options that are convenient, affordable, tasty and healthy. And I think just as a, just so many more that are unhealthy that but on every other measure, they're easy to access, are affordable there. So, yes, I definitely think when we're thinking about is it cheaper or not to eat healthy, you need to take those things into account. I agree.

**Natalie Masento** [00:16:28] I think there was some research done by my colleague at Reading where she was looking at food poverty and interviewing people in South London. And I think even just things we do, it's not just about what you buy in terms of food, it's about the gas to use the cooker. It's actually do you own a microwave? You know, again, public health initiatives, research, we completely we just don't even think about that because we're not in that kind of space to you know, we're very fortunate. So it does remind you that it's not just the oh, your food bill is a bit more expensive. It's all those challenges. And I think also one thing, if you're going to give your child one meal, then of course you're going to give them something like fried chicken that, you know, is going to, in theory, fill them up rather than, you know, a broccoli that they'll probably half eat and it's gone to waste. So I think the whole argument about healthy eating against in a kind of food insecurity, I completely understand why there's this disconnect, because its priorities are completely different.

**Sarah Hickey** [00:17:24] The organisation, I agree that the organisation Food Foundation in the UK has tried to price the cost of a diet that basically aligns with the, what's it called? Basically the plate,.

**Natalie Masento** [00:17:38] Yeah, the Eatwell plate.

**Sarah Hickey** [00:17:40] The Eatwell plate, that's it. And found that the price of it is above what many people's household incomes is. So I think that's quite a stark measure about whether eating healthy is affordable or not for everyone.

**Natalie Masento** [00:17:55] Yeah. At the same time, though, as I was mentioning earlier, it doesn't have to be about getting Waitrose seasonal vegetables, you know, tinned

vegetables, frozen vegetables. I think there is enough about and things like whole grain is also a big thing. Vegetables are important. But I know there's a fibre issue as well that people are overlooking that quite a lot in terms of healthy diet and children as well. So it's a very complex challenge for everyone.

**Matt Eastland** [00:18:23] It is indeed, it is. And we'll get onto the responsibilities as well, actually. Sorry, Lukxmi.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:18:29] Yeah. Yeah, that's a really important one like that, who is responsible for this and I guess, you know, for children, the link between eating weight and mental health is a careful one to balance, especially when kids, you know, get to an age where they're becoming really self-conscious. You know to both of you, do you think their strategies need to change with kids at different stages? I know you mentioned the visual cues, which I'm totally going to take you up on that because I have an eleventh-month old who's discovered doesn't like broccoli. But, you know, what do parents need to be think about as child developments mature?

**Natalie Masento** [00:19:04] I guess, I personally don't like the term obesity. I think it's a very triggering word. And I think as soon as we start talking to children about obesity, you're creating certain conversations you're making, you're victimising people who are overweight. I think it's a very complex area because we also have, of course, the highest rates of low self-esteem and anxiety around around weight and self-consciousness about, you know, bodies. Yeah, so it's, i'd hate to be a teenager at the moment because it's just really a minefield. I feel that the conversation should always be about a balanced diet. I think the word healthy as well is also sometimes a little misleading. There's no one healthy food. So I think it's all about how we communicate, I think, to children and kind of present the information as clear as possible without making it targeting and personal, perhaps.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:20:00] And I guess to you, Sarah, similarly, when you're looking at the food environments, are you looking at different strategies for different age groups?

**Sarah Hickey** [00:20:08] Yes. In terms of we obviously look at where different age groups spend their time, whether that's, you know, younger kids in earlier settings, school age in schools and young people probably more independently moving in street environments. I agree with Natalie on what you say on the word obesity. Part of our programme and we have a specific workstream focussed on this, is we are trying to reframe public understanding of obesity, childhood obesity, specifically because when we started the programme, I guess we did all this evidence gathering about what obesity actually about in terms of what's the underlying problem and the solutions. And I guess what that was pointing to was saying it's less about, you know, individual willpower or knowledge so much as it is about the food environments, food options around us. When we investigate a kind of public understanding and that was literally everyone across income, education, public understanding, was well, when I hear childhood obesity, isn't that about an issue of parents knowledge and willpower? And therefore, aren't the solutions all about education? So I think there's something about reframing it as an issue, as a structural issue essentially. You know, who we're targeting, I guess, at least in our programme, who we're targeting is actually not individuals. So we're almost ambivalent about whether the young people are overweight obese, actually, who we're targeting and those decision makers shaping the food around these children and young people because we think they're the ones who really have a lot of responsibility because they just so fundamentally shape what's available to us as children, young people, parents or the public anyway so, yeah. So I guess I don't have much to say in a specific management targeted programmes,

because that's not what we do. But I think in general we need to reframe the conversation about obesity, because if we just keep talking about it as one of willpower, we'll never get enough energy onto the solutions that are actually more about food environments.

**Natalie Masento** [00:22:14] I guess also to add to that sorry, just about as a researcher, we do know that food preferences, so whether you're more likely to be someone who does actually like vegetables or a more balanced diet or whether, you know, a sweet tooth or whatever, a lot of that is formed when you're young. So I think that's why a lot of the work we do is about pre-school and about when when a child's starting to categorise, understand different types of food. If you can try and be balanced at an early stage, let's hope it kind of carries on.

**Matt Eastland** [00:22:43] That's super interesting and to that answer, a few questions for me, because actually as a kid, I was quite overweight and I've always wondered whether my kind of my greediness and my sweet tooth was kind of linked to those early formative years. So there you go. It probably was by the sounds of it. So you were talking about responsibilities actually I knew would be coming onto this. So open question then so whose job is it to be responsible for addressing the problems around childhood nutrition? And it can't just be the parents role, right?

**Sarah Hickey** [00:23:20] Yeah, absolutely. It's because it's a complex system that shapes our behaviours right? And there's lots of decision makers that shape, those systems. So, yes, parents. But then, as I said, kind of industry who shaping our food retail environments is where we buy most of our food, shaping a lot of the advertising around it. Government, which I think has a really powerful lever in terms of policy and regulation around that, as well as school policy and then obviously school leaders who manage that. So I think there's lots of people in who have a responsibility because essentially there's no single solution. I think certainly what we're trying to do in our little area in south London is basically to say, how can we kind of knock off every single, like all the things influencing the system and then basically hope for a cumulative impact on the healthiness of the food environment. Can we work with as many of the retailers, food retailers as possible in this area to make fundamental changes to their store environments at the same time as working with as many schools and school food caterers as possible to make changes there at the same time as working with nursery settings and kind of different things around those to basically add up to change. I think one of the difficult things is with complex systems where there's all these things that need to change is that inertia and almost and you can absolve individual players of responsibility because they kind of saying, well, it's not solely my problem. And that I guess the thing is to say, no, you single player cannot solve this whole issue, but you have a clear responsibility within it. What we're trying to do as a charity, I guess, is to help those players get a better sense of what good looks like. So we hope that, say, we work with supermarkets to change store environments in our area in South London. Then we sort of demonstrated for their broader national and international chains what good looks like further on. So they're not just hearing you've got responsibility, you need to do better. It's also like here is a practical you know, we've worked with your peers to practically work out what that looks like. I guess is sort of our theory of how to get there, to say lots of people are responsible. But let's help you think about your role in the system and yeah, what that looks like.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:25:54] Can you, is there any particular interventions that you've done or any examples of previous campaigns that, you know, worked well that you can sort of highlight?

**Sarah Hickey** [00:26:03] Yeah. So we've just actually published a report with an organisation called Consumer Goods Forum, which is a partner we work with over the last eighteen months. So they represent a number of global consumer brands, which include both food manufacturers and like your big supermarkets. And what they did over a year in our area was to trial a load of changes in their store environments to try and influence what ended up in people's shopping baskets. It was really interesting, actually. And basically there were a number of changes that had a significant impact on what people bought, basically upped the nutrient rich products and reduced the high fat, sugar salt products, as well as not having actually a detrimental impact on profits in those stores. So, yeah, so I think there were a few things there. I mean, the most the successful ones were related to the principle of like Natalie says kind of visibility price. So playing with like what you're what are you promoting, what you putting a discount on and what aren't you. The thing that had less impact just in these trials were things around nutritional labelling, which is interesting as well, like what is it that cuts through in terms of a prompt? I think that's a great foundation and a piece of research, a trial that I think is worth building on.

**Natalie Masento** [00:27:32] Yeah, and I guess from my perspective, in terms of the responsibility question, I think, of course, we shouldn't lay it all on parents, but I don't think you want to avoid apathy that parents can do something, I think, and the work that we do at Reading with, for example, the See and Eat project where we've created tools that are to support families, to help do small things that they can do to encourage vegetable consumption and healthy, healthy diets is better than nothing, isn't it? And I think it would be so good to try and empower people to do the small things, because if we're all just kind of saying, oh, I'm not going to do anything because I can't help it, there's a fast-food restaurant at the end of my road, then nothing will change. So I think about behaviour change is all about trying to boost it people enough with enough options and confidence to try and give them ways to to make those small changes. So there's definitely some big people who run the country to sort some things out. But I think everyone can be doing the small bits as well. And I think there is there are a lot of materials out there to support that. It's just about how we how we frame that and get that get it to the right people as well. I've always thought that, for example, food banks, food banks do such a wonderful job in getting food to people. But sometimes what's available in a food bank isn't necessarily what is needed for people who often it's sometimes it's a lot of carbohydrates, a lot of white pasta, white rice. And I'm always wondering why there isn't a little bit more connection with nutritional advice there about or just leaflets and kind of almost appeals about can we try and get what people actually need nutritionally to communities? It's all about access it is what we've been talking about.

**Lukxmi Balathanan** [00:29:16] Yeah, absolutely.

**Sarah Hickey** [00:29:16] I mean, I guess speaks to, again, why covid exacerbated these inequalities around access to nutrition. So those households that were already at risk of a poorer nutritional quality diet, are then more likely to be accessing emergency food supply, which isn't always the best quality nutritionally wise either. So I agree that I totally agree with you as well that this idea that it's the food system, we need to change that that's not about us as individuals and that we also have agency. And like you said, there's things that we can do. Yeah, like resources you can give families now to help them navigate these unhealthy food environments. I think it's also about emphasising that ordinary people have a very important role in the food system as consumers and citizens, you know, they influence industry and government. And I think that's also part of the story. And when we think about resources for ordinary people, I think it's also about how do you help people use that, use that consumer power, use the citizen energy for pushing for change.

And I think you can see that at the moment with Marcus Rashford campaign, you know, it's got over a million signatures now, his petition. So that's a million people basically saying we demand better from our policymakers around the food available to our children in schools.

**Natalie Masento** [00:30:41] Yeah, it's just a shame it took a crisis for that to happen.

**Sarah Hickey** [00:30:44] Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely.

**Natalie Masento** [00:30:48] I was going to say is interesting about the voice element, because I think there's a difference between giving a voice and thinking you're heard by politicians and by policymakers and then also purchasing power. I think there's it's odd that it's often purchasing power that creates this change, not kind of campaigns. And, yeah, I'm slightly disillusioned by kind of policy and politics at the moment. So maybe that's just sort of a bit fed up of it. But, yeah, how could we know.

**Matt Eastland** [00:31:16] Do you think, just from the industry perspective, do you think the likes of food manufacturers are doing enough to support these initiatives, or do you think they're a big part of the problem?

**Sarah Hickey** [00:31:27] Yeah, they have to be part of the solution because they're clearly part of the problem. They're shaping the unhealthy environments. And as I said, we as charity both work, work, trying to campaign almost against them, as well as working with players in the industry. And I guess one thing we've seen from working, for example, with the Consumer Goods Forum project, it's a number of very big corporations. Very committed to making changes to support consumer health and family health. I think you can see that the differences in energy across different corporations probably shows and some that could do even more. But I think there's also a genuine barrier for them around the riskiness for a single industry player to experiment with fundamentally changing their offer, because it's you know, most of these markets are incredibly competitive. So there's also about risk appetite, I think, about experimenting like this. And I think what can alleviate that barrier is better regulation, basically regulation that would put industry on a level playing field saying you will have to do this, you will have to make these fundamental changes that would basically take away the riskiness of a single industry player who is competing against each other in the market.

**Matt Eastland** [00:32:45] That's super interesting. I've never actually heard somebody say that before, that the reason that potentially what's stifling innovation is just because the existing market means that anybody who wants to change anything is up against a disadvantage. That's really interesting.

**Natalie Masento** [00:32:58] Yeah, it's always a bit of a chicken and egg situation, I think, with food industry, isn't it? That they want to see consumer demand before they've even, you know, I think we're seeing that a little bit in kind of plant-based products and things like that, aren't we, that there's a demand for that. So suddenly food industry woken up and is providing more options. Yeah, it's a weird thing of how you create change in that way from because I think food industry have a huge role to play and they're you know, they're not always the big bad wolf because they do do a lot of I know that the big players do have a whole part of their business, in a sense, is about healthy nutrition campaigns and things. But actually, sometimes you often wonder, is that just a tick box or is it what do you actively doing? And I think regulation and holding them to account and is important as well. So I think it's it's not helpful to just blame food industry, but at the same time, they are

sourcing. They're giving us the food. So why can't they do it well within the kind of what we need rather than what's going to make them the most money in a way.

**Sarah Hickey** [00:34:01] Yeah, absolutely. One thing that we're doing, because, like you say, Natalie, is sort of chicken and egg. They're like, well, we need to see the demand, but the demand won't come unless it's kind of fundamental offer to consumers. One thing that we've invested in with some organisations called Big Society Capital Mission Ventures and Ascencion Ventures is something we called the Good Food Fund, which is basically investing in what we called healthy challenger brands. So basically these brands that do meet this need of being tasty, convenient, affordable, but also healthier than the current things that families are consuming. And I guess our theory of change, of investing in them is to try and show the demand. So we're giving them the kind of boost to get out to market, get in front of customers. And I guess the hope is that we will show bigger corporations, bigger food manufacturers and retailers that the demand is there through that by these brands effectively scaling and being purchased. So I think that's the way we're trying to get at it, obviously, through the levers that we own, trying to do a bit of the R&D, I guess, on behalf of industry.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:35:13] That's so interesting. So do you have is there any examples of some great challenger brands for us to look out for?

**Sarah Hickey** [00:35:19] Yeah, there's one called Insane Grain, which is basically like your healthy crisps, like a really tasty product, trying to substitute that really tasty, convenient snack for that, which is crisps. There's a number of others actually I like. I'll share, you know, the website details of the fun. I think there's just an initial crop, but we're hoping to attract more brands to the fund that have that kind of value proposition for customers, but that need support to scale.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:35:53] It's really nice to hear that you are supporting and funding and helping these brands, because I know margin is probably quite a big issue to level the playing field a little bit and be able to offer healthier products to customers. So just to say you know, it's been a really interesting discussion and we're almost out of time today. But I want to throw a big hypothetical question to both of you. So if you had the power to change one big thing about how the food industry works in terms of making nutrition better for children, Natalie, what would you do?

**Natalie Masento** [00:36:26] Oh, gosh, I haven't had time to think that is a big question. Is money an issue in this or is it just?

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:36:34] No, this is a hypothetical world.

**Matt Eastland** [00:36:38] No, go as big as you want.

**Natalie Masento** [00:36:38] Well, ok, I would probably provide a seasonal veg box to every family in the UK if possible. I think giving people access to vegetables and kind of healthy diet I think is a first step in. Especially if you bring it to their door, I think, or even I know that community gardens, I think just encouraging kind of vegetables in the area, I think is a is just from my perspective, we know that that is a first step and helps kind of change, change a bit of the bigger issues here. So I think that would be yeah, there's either a very expensive option or just community gardens with vegetable gardens which is more realistic.

**Matt Eastland** [00:37:18] And do you think just on the veg box, do you think that should be something which is sort of a social good and is free? Or do you think it should just be super heavily subsidised that everyone can have access?

**Natalie Masento** [00:37:32] Oh, it's difficult, I mean, I think if it was I don't know, it sounds like quite a socialist idea. I think those that can afford it should pay for those things. And those that can't maybe should I think in a maybe in a perhaps possible world. I think if I think just important, the one thing is access. How you give people that access is the tricky thing, isn't it? But I think that that yeah. That is a I think one small thing that could be the case is just that bringing the good food to people closer to them is going to help in that kind of microenvironment. yeah.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:38:11] Yeah. And that'll probably go a long way in improving our health long term. That whole food as medicine concept, the prevention piece. And what about you Sarah?

**Sarah Hickey** [00:38:22] Oh yes. Big question, I've got two but I can't decide. I'm going to say them both.

**Matt Eastland** [00:38:26] Go for it.

**Sarah Hickey** [00:38:27] Breaking the rules. I think, just to build on Natalie's point, I'd reform the two big healthy subsidy food subsidy programmes we got in the UK, which are healthy start vouchers, which give vouchers to low income households with young children to spend on fruit and veg. And I'd reform free school meals and just make them both universal because making them universal is the best way, is the easiest way to make sure those who really need those things access them rather than all these eligibility criteria is which A, creates stigma, prevents people from accessing them, but also just creates loads of costs, trying to work out whether someone's eligible or not. So I'd reform those systems as well. And within that, in the school, I think, you know, make sure that all the incentives around school food are aligning to nutritional quality, not just price per meal. So that's one. I think the other one I would do is make mandatory disclosure by industry about the proportion of their profits that are coming from high fat, sugar, salt products versus healthier.

**Matt Eastland** [00:39:35] Interesting.

**Sarah Hickey** [00:39:35] And, you know, at the very least, just creating transparency and disclosure around that. And then I think, you know, to regulate, to do better. But I think just disclosing it in the first place, I think would be very enlightening and hopefully create competition to get better on that on that measure. And that's it. Sorry, that was way more than one.

**Matt Eastland** [00:39:55] No no, this is good. You had a bit of extra time to think about it as well.

**Sarah Hickey** [00:39:59] I did, yeah. Natalie gave me more ideas.

**Matt Eastland** [00:40:04] So thank you both so much for this. It's been a fascinating discussion and I know one that we could probably spend quite a long time on. We probably will. So thank you for outlining the issues and some of the solutions. So I just want to say a huge, big thank you to you both and looking forward to hearing a bit more

about what you guys are doing. So on that, where can people find out more about your work?

**Natalie Masento** [00:40:28] Yes. So as I said, the See and Eat project, we have a website where we have all our very lovely ebooks and activities for families and it's available at [seeandeat.org](http://seeandeat.org). Yeah. Available in six different languages. So it's if you want to try an Italian or English, you can do. And yet it's all the items are free there and it's all about it's all evidence based resources to support vegetable consumption.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:40:55] And if anybody wanted to get in touch with you, how would they do that?

**Natalie Masento** [00:40:57] Yes, so you're very welcome to email me at [n.a.masento@reading.ac.uk](mailto:n.a.masento@reading.ac.uk) or find me on Twitter. Just my name.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:41:06] Yes. And what about you, Sarah? How can people find out more about your work and the work at St Thomas's charity?

**Sarah Hickey** [00:41:13] They can go to our website, which if they just Google Guys and St Thomas's charity and then there's information about the programme there and also the huge portfolio partners we work with. I have to say, everything we deliver, we deliver through others. So we work with some amazing organisations to do that. But you'll find them on our website as well.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:41:32] And where can people find out about the challenger brands?

**Sarah Hickey** [00:41:35] Again, If you go to our website, it will be through to the Good Food Fund.

**Lukxmi Balathasan** [00:41:39] Perfect. Thanks very much.

**Matt Eastland** [00:41:41] Great stuff. Thank you both again, everybody. This has been the EIT Food Fight podcast. If you'd like to learn more about what we're doing, please go to [eitfood.eu/podcast](http://eitfood.eu/podcast) or hit us up on Twitter at EIT Food. Thank you for listening and keep fighting for better food future.

**Sarah Hickey** [00:42:00] Thank you.

**Natalie Masento** [00:42:01] Thank you very much.