

Matt Eastland:

Hey everyone, I'm Matt Eastland and welcome to the Food Fight podcast from EIT Food, exploring the greatest challenges in our food system and the innovators dedicated to solving them. Today I'm joined once again by my excellent colleague Lucy Wallace, who has kindly agreed to co-host the show with me. Hi Lucy, great to have you with me.

Lucy Wallace:

Hey Matt, thanks for having me.

Matt Eastland:

Brilliant to have you on. Lucy, what's on the menu today for the show?

Lucy Wallace:

So today, Matt, we're tackling the complex but critical topic of food systems transformation, specifically how governments can collaborate to drive sustainability in food and agriculture. Plus, we'll be exploring a fascinating approach that aims to shift mindsets through consciousness practices.

Matt Eastland:

Amazing. So what a wide ranging show this is going to be and what a guest we have to take us all through it. Joining us today is Andrew Bovarnick, who's the Global Head of Food and Agricultural Commodity Systems at United Nations Development Programme. Andrew is a leading expert in transforming commodity sectors and creating sustainable food systems with deep experience at the intersection of agriculture, the environment and development. Andrew, it's a pleasure to have you on the show. Welcome to The Food Fight.

Andrew Bovarnick :

Hi, Matt. Thanks so much for having me and nice to see you, Lucy, as well.

Matt Eastland:

So, Andrew, I know that you've spent the last two decades at the UNDP and your focus on transforming agricultural commodity sectors. And it's such a vast and critical area and something that we really want to get into. But first, I'd love to talk about kind of your story, you know, your own personal story. So first, as an economist, what initially inspired you to focus on the food and agricultural sector and how has it influenced your journey to date?

Andrew Bovarnick :

So I started at UNDP as an environmental economist, which is, I feel, very different from just a standard economist, very much focused on the links between economy and environment. And actually, in my early days, the first decade, I was the lead natural resource economist for UNDP, very much focused on looking at economic instruments, market-based instruments, economic solutions to bringing value when you're looking and working in conservation and environment, it doesn't take long to realize that the biggest driver of environmental degradation and biodiversity loss is our global food system. It is the production of agriculture. It is a conversion of natural habitats and forests to agriculture, be it cattle or other agricultural commodities. And so I decided to stop focusing on the protected areas and the habitats themselves and really start focusing my attentions upstream on the drivers of that damage and loss to the environment, which in this case Food systems. And of course, food systems, you know, I love working with food systems because they are not just a driver of environmental change or biodiversity loss, but they're also key, of course, to climate and climate change and climate solutions, and to health, because they're related to nutrition, and to livelihoods and incomes, because there are hundreds of millions of smallholder farmers around the world dependent on their income from farming. So for me, food systems is definitely the place to be working if we want to try to fix so many different things in the world.

Matt Eastland:

You're amongst very good company there, for sure. I know that with UNDP, you've been working across 170 countries where food and agricultural commodity systems play a dual role. As you said, not just as the backbone of economies, but also the key is about feeding their population. Can you give us an overview of the current state of these systems globally, how you see them, and how your work at UNDP is looking to transform them?

Andrew Bovarnick :

Yeah, I don't want to go into details. I think there's so much has been written about the state of play. But you know, I always like, unfortunately, the quote of the UN Secretary General, which is that our current food systems are broken. The current state of play of food systems have been developed over decades and have really focused on productivity and yield, which of course is important because we need to do our best to feed the world. But from my vantage point, our current food systems are not fit for purpose. They are the leading driver of environmental damage, biodiversity loss. They contribute to 30% of all greenhouse gases and climate change. And as I said, hundreds of millions of farmers basically still live in poverty. So it really is about trying to make our food systems fit for purpose for the next hundred years for people and planet. And what's so important and interesting when you think about food systems is it is not just about agriculture. It is not just about the production of the food. It's about thinking, of course,

what we want to produce with the land that we have. It's about connections to water and water systems that, of course, is important for the production of food. But then it's thinking about the rest of the system as well, as we started to touch upon. You know, what is the nutritional value of the food we are producing. You know, when you think about wheat and bread and carbohydrates, you know, which are such a large part of global diets now, they have very low nutritional value. So we need to think about what we call nexus areas, the interface between food or agriculture and these other really important sectors like health, like the environment, like water. You know, we also need to think about fisheries, and blue food, and, you know, how we manage our oceans. And this is where I think UNDP really plays a role, because UNDP works across all of these different sectors, and we work a lot on governance, and therefore our clients are all the different ministries at the country level with governments, ministries of finance, ministries of trade, ministries of infrastructure, education, health. All of these ministries play a vital role in shaping our food systems. It's not just the ministry of agriculture. I think this is something that is so key. And gender, even just think about gender and the role women play in farming and empowering women. And so if you look at UNDP, We have gender teams, we have gender programs, we have governance programs, we have climate programs, and within all of these, We're using that technical expertise to support transformation of food systems. And so I think this is really key to be thinking about this whole of government approach and also recognizing that national governments also have their limitations. Yes, they influence policy legislation, but they're not necessarily directly engaged in what's happening on the ground. And that's why we also need to be engaging with the other dimension of governance, which is sub-national, provincial governments, state governments, down to municipal governments and mayors. And I think that's also something that we at UNDP try to do, is both what you could call horizontal connectivity between ministries and sectors, but then also vertical connectivity between national down to local.

Matt Eastland:  
Wow.

Lucy Wallace:  
You sort of mentioned some of those really sort of big global challenges that we're seeing with the food system. And a lot of them are associated sort of with those nexus regions, which I think is something we're understanding more and more about sort of, you know, over the past few years and at the moment. But what would you say sort of what the UNDP is finding are some of those biggest barriers to tackling these challenges at the moment?

Andrew Bovarnick :  
Yeah, thanks for that, Lucy. Challenges are abound, even as I, whenever I use the word transformation, I always shudder a little

because it's such an aspirational term. And whilst it's something we want to achieve, I think us along with, you know, the rest of the world, we really are limited by interventions that achieve incremental change. And that's actually one very important concept to think about when you think about systems. Systems have a life of their own, a complexity beyond our imagination. There's so many interconnected parts. And so even if you manage to move a piece of a system or one lever in a system, systems have a way of fighting back and resisting change. That's why they're set up the way they are. We don't live in a world of dynamic systems. They're not static. They're not static, but look at our institutions, religious, educational, government, health. They all take forever to change. So trying to really change a system, I think, itself is complex. The food system, as we've discussed, I believe, additionally complex because of everything we've discussed, because there are global forces in play that affect what happens at a country level, that affects what happens at a local level. And so that's the first complexity is how can any of us really conceptualize and strategize on how to transform a system And maybe we can't. And I think part of the challenge is to come to this with some humility and better recognize the uncertainty in what we do. And I think, you know, for me what's fascinating is having worked so long in this field on projects with, you know, traditional tools for designing interventions such as logical frameworks. We all have sort of used scientific thinking and linear thinking to assume that you make a change in the system here and this outcome happens. And I think more and more we've recognized and realized through painful experience that that doesn't necessarily happen. And so we need to be ready, we need to be very aware of the cause and effect that's happening and how what we contribute can work in synergy with other interventions in the system. We need to be thinking about collective action, I think much more than singular project approaches. And we need to be thinking about the resistance in the system that is really preventing changes happening. Because when we think about change, there are always winners and losers. I don't really buy into this idea of win-win. If something was win-win, it would happen. It's not just people not being aware of it. There are often winners and losers. There are distributional effects when you make change. And so I think one of the key challenges, in addition to just systems complexity, is for us to become more aware of and identify and be aware of what are the resistances in the systems, what are the power dynamics in play behind decisions being made about food systems at the policy level, at the corporate level, at the farm level, and how we better deal with those power dynamics. I could go on. There are so many more challenges. Perhaps maybe just one more to talk about now is this issue of collective action. I am a firm believer that we do need collective action if we want to try to understand and work with systems and systems change. And in the food system, when we think about collective action, that is not only the government ministries that I talked about earlier, but it is, of course, the farmers themselves. It's the corporations buying the products. It's the supermarkets selling the products. It's all the middlemen. It's the input providers. It's the governments and local governments who are responsible for land use plans and for all of these other areas.

So the challenges of trying to bring all of these different stakeholders together with different agendas, different concerns, different starting points, and to try to build trust and understanding between these stakeholders so that they can actually collaborate together. I think there are huge challenges there. And from my observations, it is an area that I think is continually underestimated. There has been in the last decade, I think, a plethora of roundtables set up, platforms set up, convenings set up where stakeholders are brought together with this assumption that once they're together, magic will happen. to build capacity of the stakeholders so that they can find a way to collaborate more collectively to embrace those systems change. I think that's another really, really interesting and important area for us collectively to be exploring how we help people work better together.

Lucy Wallace:

So what you're saying basically, Andrew, is it's not the interventions themselves, it's actually our approach to those interventions that could provide some of the changes we need into the system.

Andrew Bovarnick :

Yeah, I think it's so important for us to collectively reflect on what has been working and what hasn't been working and what triggers change and what doesn't. And I think there has been too much focus on technical solutions and interventions that aren't being adopted. You know, so many reports, so much analysis, so much training, yet are they really being translated and converted into the action we want to see to make food systems fit for purpose? And I think for me, of course, the answer is no. After two decades of seeing hundreds of millions of dollars of technical assistance and interventions being implemented on the ground, I don't think we're having the changes we want to see. Malnutrition rates are skyrocketing, climate change is continuing, so we do need to do things differently. I'm a firm believer we need to reflect and radically change the way we work, and I think it's exactly that. We need to look beyond the interventions themselves and better understand how decisions are made by the decision makers that are playing an important role here at the country level, at the global level. And that means really unpacking their interests, their agendas, and their values. And this comes down to mindsets as well, which I think we'll get into a bit later. But yes, we really need to start digging deeper into the real invisible reasons why interventions that we're all trying so hard to put on the ground are not landing and not taking off the way we continually hope they will.

Matt Eastland:

I'm liking where this is going, Andrew. And I'd really like to apply this to, so you mentioned governments and policy, and I know that you work with all of these actors. And obviously, this is one like,

you know, the policy lever is one big lever that in food systems, we're able to pull to see what happens. And you mentioned that sometimes these things work, and sometimes they don't. And I think you've said that at the start of the show that we need to go beyond the likes of ministries of agriculture, because that's just not enough. And we need to take like a whole government approach, which sounds incredible. But I imagine in reality is super complex and hard to do. And I wonder if you can, you know, based on your experience, if you can give our listeners a a view or an understanding of, you know, how do you even go about a strategy like that, which looks at engaging, you know, all governments? Where do you start with that?

Andrew Bovarnick :

I think this lends itself back to what we were discussing just now about, you know, bringing different people, stakeholders to the table to be having these discussions and the importance of really understanding where they're coming from, what their objectives are, and investing in the process of not only bringing them to the table, but then really supporting that dialogue. And so even within governments, you know, and we can think about the UK government as well, any government, you know, ministries do not naturally work together. They have their own objectives. And so they quite rightly go after those objectives. I mean, in very basic terms, and of course it's much more nuanced and tailored for each country, but ministries of agriculture are about increasing production. Ministries of environment are about conserving natural resources. So how do you reconcile two different objectives? So we could even just start with ministries of environment and ministries of agriculture, helping them work more closely together. But that doesn't just mean helping them, you know, find spaces where they can talk to each other, because they do that anyway. But it's then about unpacking, right, what are their mandates? What are their technical expertise? What are their instructions from higher up? You know, maybe this needs to involve officers of the president. you know, or higher up bodies that help coordinate across ministries, but really help them, you know, and find out what they need, what they want. Are they interested? You may find there are personality issues. You know, different ministers don't like working with each other because they just don't like each other. Maybe you find ministers that do. So it's really about trying to take the time to understand what different ministries might be interested in and how we as UNDP can help them come to the table, set up a process, and unpack structures and incentives so that they can be collaborating. Just one example, what we've done, we started this 10, 15 years ago, is we helped certain governments in countries that are major producers of commodities establish government-led, what we call national commodity platforms. that would be led by government and include all the stakeholders. And in many of these countries, on request by the government, we agreed to help them set up co-leads. So the Ministries of Environment and Ministries of Agriculture were both leading these platforms, which at least helped to nudge them towards finding and co-creating solutions together. And then, of course, you

can bring in other ministries. And it does take time. And I suppose that's one of my messages, is I don't think donors and funders often put enough emphasis on the need to invest in these types of processes to support policy coherence. There's too much of a rush maybe to do things on the ground and hope that they will all sort themselves out. But we know, you know, building trust, building collaboration even between ministries and civil servant and policy makers can take years. And so we really need to be investing more time and more expertise in how we can help them do this.

Lucy Wallace:

Is part of that then the different sort of time cycles that people are working in, for instance, sort of funding cycles for funders, you know, sort of election cycles or policy cycles for policymakers and decision makers in governments. Are those sort of at odds with each other and things like that don't really necessarily help or enable that collaboration to happen because we have those different understandings of what timeframes are and should be and need to be for reporting?

Andrew Bovarnick :

Yeah, I definitely think that adds to the challenges. We know governments normally have an election cycle of four years, maybe five years. Ministers change, ministers may then well change their higher echelon civil servants. But that in itself, I think, is not a deal breaker. I think we've, you know, as UNDP, we work with government and governance machinery day in and day out. And, you know, there are ways to mitigate or manage those risks by working throughout the ministries at different levels of decision making. So even if a minister changes, you may still well have the policymakers in play that continue. So it is a challenge. We need to work on that. I think donor Funding and donor priorities is also a challenge. You know, when projects are two years long, three years long, it isn't enough. But I think those are also choices that can be made. And again, where do you choose to put your money? And how long do you have to spend that money? Is it on the ground training farmers? Or is it upstream investing in these types of collaborative processes between ministries to really affect policy reform? And so I think that's what's just really important is to help investors, funders, donors reflect on really what are the most important leverage points in a system where funding should be targeted?

Matt Eastland:

And Andrew, you mentioned just then farmers, you know, where do they fit into this space in terms of, you know, policymakers, governments, etc, making all the decisions, but obviously, it's farmers and the communities on the ground who are actually being impacted by these policies and having to sort of work around them. So what's your take on where farmers fit into this?

Andrew Bovarnick :

I mean, for me, farmers should be front and center to all of this, at least with the decisions being made around production. As we discussed earlier, they may not be front and center for decisions made about health and diets, although at the end of the day, they are the ones still needing to produce the food that is deemed to be most suitable for the populations. And what I see is that farmers, particularly, let's face it, within farming, there are different segments. There's the agri-business. There's the big agri-business that do have the capabilities to engage with governments and do lobbying and do get involved with policymaking. But then there are the hundreds of millions of smallholders that may have an acre or two acres or hectare or two hectares, depending on your unit of measurement. who are disconnected from governments, from government decision-making. And as you say, they are the ones that are most vulnerable to changes. They're the ones that have to make the changes on the ground. So for me, they should be empowered to be fully part of these dialogues and part of decision-making in formulating policy so that those policies that affect them are the most appropriate for those farmers, along with whatever else the policy is intended to do. And that includes thinking through not only the policy itself, but how it can be implemented on the ground, how those farmers can then be trained up to be aligned with that policy. But I don't see that. I don't see in countries dialogue processes that do really connect smallholder farmers with these government policy decision-makings. Again, that was one of the ambitions and goals around the commodity platforms that we helped set up. But even those, you know, I have to be honest, they didn't achieve all of our aspirations of really making that happen because it is so complicated. You know, there can be hundreds of thousands of smallholder farmers in countries, and they can be not organized. In many countries, there are cooperatives and organization of farmers, but there's often not. So how do you find representation of smallholder farmers that are independent and that are remote? But these are things I think we really need to be working on, and we can do. How can we set up more democratic transparent processes where farmers are more involved in having a voice and sharing their interests and their needs. So I think it's absolutely key. I don't think it happens enough. And I think it's something, again, we should all be investing more efforts in.

Matt Eastland:

Yeah, it's, I mean, it's absolutely, I mean, we agree for sure. I mean, it's something that we're really focused on at EIT Food. And Lucy, given your experience, I wonder if maybe I can ask you a question on this, you know, is, do you reflect on what Andrew's saying? And do you agree? And do you see that complexity of making sure that farmers' voices are heard and they've got a seat at the table?

Lucy Wallace:

Yeah, absolutely, Matt. It's difficult because farmers, as Andrew



said, are extremely diverse. So you can't just have invite one farmer to a panel and expect that one farmer to be able to represent the views of all farmers. We need to find ways to be democratic about this. There are a number of sort of organizations that I know of within Europe that are doing this very well and that they're really sort of looking at the voice of farmers and how to enable farmers to be in the spaces where these decisions are being made. And it's something that personally I try and support whenever I can, you know, not trying to speak on behalf of farmers because I'm not a farmer, but using any spaces that I have access to and enabling access of people from the farming community to come and be involved in some of those discussions and give their views and ensure that decisions are made in context, they're not made out of context. But it's tough, it's hard, and there's always going to be people that you miss out. But it's definitely something we need to be more and more aware of and put more and more effort into. So yeah, absolutely agree with what Andrew says. It's a challenge, but it's also an opportunity. It's an opportunity to make better policy. It's an opportunity to make better decisions.

Matt Eastland:

I'm literally writing this down. This is gonna be another podcast at some point. How you can bring farmers' voices to the table and surface all those opinions. I think that is, sorry, excuse the expression, fertile ground for a podcast. Andrew, just moving into another section, which I'm really fascinated about, particularly, you know, kind of the journey that you've been on. So we've been talking about the sort of the tangible, technical, political solutions to transforming the food system and those that govern our food and agricultural sectors. But what I find really fascinating is the realization that you and your colleagues have come to through this work. So there's a really powerful quote on your website from the environmental lawyer Gustav Speth, which I think really captures this. So he says, And I quote, I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystems collapse and climate change. I thought with 30 years of good science, we could address these problems. But I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy. And to deal with these, we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. Really powerful stuff. And I know that that insight has helped you create something called the Conscious Food Systems Alliance. So where did this kind of idea come from to focus on the change at this, what I think you refer to as the inner human level? Where does that come from?

Andrew Bovarnick :

Thanks, Matt. And yes, people love that quote. It's brilliant. I see it popping up all the time. I sort of became famous for re-quoting it. But it sums it up. It's very powerful. And it's sort of what we started talking about earlier. You know, there are so many technical solutions and technical interventions out there, and they're not they're not making the difference we want or expect. And so, you know, why? Why? And if we look at the system that is in play, the

capitalist system, it's all about growth. It's about being extracted from nature. It is about being disconnected from nature. You know, as human beings, I think more and more we see ourselves as apart from nature, not part of it. Our urban lifestyles, our increased use of technology continues this disconnection of us as human beings from nature. And decisions are being made with certain mindsets and values that are about wealth generation, not necessarily equity, fairness, and protection of the planet. I think I learned so much of that through that first decade working on economic and economic instruments that no matter what economic instrument we came up with, we weren't really getting to the heart of changing that economic system that was still focused on extracting from nature and therefore degrading nature. And so what's become more aware to me is we need to really again, review and think about what are those values that go into decision-making. There was a great chapter in a book by IFPRI titled, Facts, Interest, and Values. And I think, to me, that just sums it up. We spend way too much of our time thinking that facts will influence decisions, but actually decisions are based upon interest and then values. If all of us as humans valued nature, if we valued each other, if we valued the next generation, decisions would be different. They would be. Current values are based upon short-term thinking. I do believe much more focused on oneself and not others, and also with a high value placed on money. And these really are at the heart, heart, heart of so much of our decision-making. So I do think, though, it's not about people being good or bad. It's about how we can maybe enhance those values or bring back certain values that people have into the way they make decisions and maybe help them bring more of their heart and emotions and care and compassion into these decisions that are being made. There's so much here we can unpack, but I think also with this journey, you know, there's an awareness that sometimes we, as human beings, we don't bring our whole self to work. And at home, we're all full of family value and family love. And then we go to work and we're like, no, no, we have to make profit. We have to do this. We have to do that. And do we? Why don't we question that? Could we be more of ourselves at work and bring more care and compassion into the work we do? So these are questions that interest me, and this comes from my own personal journey. Still have it. But you know, I realized that I started this career with service in mind. But, you know, I probably got corrupted as well with ego, ambition, and, you know, had to check myself. What was I doing at work? What were my motivations? and to come back to try to be a better person at work and connect more with others. And I think that helped me realize that, wow, how powerful would that be if we could bring this across the work we do, across the UN with others to help people be more themselves at work, but then bring that into the whole food system. So policymakers could really be more themselves and bring different values to their work. And for farmers, for farmers, you know, who are connected to the land, how to help them really connect more with nature. Consumers as well, you know, how often do we eat food and not think about where it comes from, or even think about the taste. You know, we're just too busy putting it in our mouths when we're on the run. So, you know, being a consumer, being connected to the food, I think would completely potentially change the way we all

make decisions. How could, in the end, change the food system? I think the question is, is this realistic at all, or is this just... you know, crazy thinking? Or is it me being superior and thinking that my values are better than other people's values? But I think it's definitely, again, it's worth exploring this. You know, why not? And I think, you know, our experience at Lucy has been part of this, that yes, it takes a lifetime to go through this journey and to maybe enhance our own internal values and consciousness. But it's also amazing the magic that can happen in a moment in the right experience, how we can really unlock our hearts and the way we feel. And so I have hope that we can design, you know, I call them immersive experiences, but we can design and bring decision makers to intense, immersive experiences in a few days or a week that can discuss these issues and help them unpack them and maybe reconnect with their hearts and bring that back into their work. So it may take a lifetime, but I think there is potential, again, using the word transformation to happen in short periods of time if we can get it right. And I think, you know, we've seen it. We've seen it happen in even two or three days, the way people can really change the way they view the world and their place in the world. So, yeah, very interesting area of work that is emerging. Excited to see where it goes.

Lucy Wallace:

So I mean, that's where I first met Andrew, actually, was this retreat. And that was at Plum Village in southwest France. And it was a COFSA retreat. You know, I think Andrew's explained a little bit about COFSA, the Conscious Food Systems Alliance. And it was my first sort of connection really with what you were doing. I arrived there and I was I'd been doing a lot of traveling. I was extremely, like you said, you know, people turn up at things like Climate Week, at these big events, you're running about, you're hyper-stressed, you're not, you kind of really lose why you're there. You know, I turned up at the COFSA retreat and I was at that point where I was feeling, you know, pretty burnt out really, I suppose. I was, you know, kind of wondering why I'd committed to another few days away when I could be at home with my family. You know, I was feeling that I was a little bit, slightly lost, losing my reason for doing what I do. Arriving there in a place which was very, felt very sort of connected to nature, felt very grounded, with people who were also sort of seeking that type of experience as well, spending time sort of connecting with them, connecting with nature, you know, sitting in circles, doing things like meditation, which might, and I've heard you say this several times, Andrew, might sound a bit woo-woo. is actually something which is quite therapeutic, spending time thinking, spending time connecting. And so we did things such as conscious or mindful eating, sorry, mindful eating, which is a really interesting thing to do, where you eat in a large group. We sat, we were in the Buddhist monastery, we sat there for I don't know, about half an hour, and nobody, it was a room full of about 150 people, I think, and nobody spoke. So we sat in silence and we ate mindfully, and we thought about what we were eating, and we took all the experiences from what we were eating. And that was a very

sort of profound thing to do because, as Andrew was saying, you know, you run about, you're sort of, you're eating food as fuel. You're not tasting it, you're not appreciating it, you're not thinking about where it's come from. So that was something that was, you know, really quite useful and a very sort of interesting experience. And another one that I think a lot of people who went on the retreat spoke about as well and have mentioned since then was the mindful walking, which sounds like it's something that's fairly easy to do, but it's incredibly difficult to walk mindfully. and to appreciate where you are in the world, in space, and to really understand your place within the world as you're doing it. It's things like that. It's some practices which are maybe more consciousness or mindfulness practices, but it's embedding it within that food system and then using that as a as a mechanism to then start other conversations about, you know, where you go next, what decisions you're making, what impacts you can have on the world, but doing it from a place where you feel very connected, not doing it from a place of, you know, stress, modern world, lots of technology going from, you know, Teams call to Teams call to Zoom call, all of that. So it's, it's really about that reconnecting and then helping that to influence your decision-making.

Matt Eastland:

I see. Wow. How amazing. I mean, on an individual level, I mean, that's the kind of thing that I love to kind of get more involved in. And I have to admit, mindful eating, I am the worst at it because I've tried it and I tend to just go for it. So it's something definitely I need to work on. And Andrew, you know, all of this, as I say, an individual level sounds super rewarding. What are you expecting to achieve with this in terms of integrating these more sort of in a human level approaches into food systems? And how on earth are you looking to measure whether or not it's been successful?

Andrew Bovarnick :

I mean, in a way, I'm glad I started this whole podcast of talking about, you know, one of the important aspects is to be aware of systems complexity and to not be limited by linear thinking on cause and effect. So I feel more comfortable saying I don't really have expectations of where this will go. I don't know where this will go. I suppose I have some hopes. All I know is that I personally have benefited and trying to bring myself and my values and my consciousness into work, I believe that it will help others as well. And so part of COFSA is building a movement. And so I think the more we build this movement, the more members we get, the more others feel comfortable doing this too, the more others receive this information and training and participate in these types of events, the more this will just start emerging. And I think one of the pleasant surprises I've had from starting COFSA is how many people like yourself it resonates with. somehow having, you know, oh, UNDP is talking about consciousness. Ah, I've always wanted to, but I was a bit embarrassed. They're doing it.

Matt Eastland:

And I can do it too. You've given us all permission to talk about it.

Andrew Bovarnick :

Yeah. And I believe in it so much. I'm happy to do it. And it's actually been well received at UNDP. Because I think, you know, any practitioner who is really committed to change will realize that this could be an important option in our armory. I'm not saying this is the only way to go, but let's really think about it, consider it, and think how we can bring it to more people. I would like, of course, being UNDP and working with governments, I would like to bring consciousness and these approaches and these trainings and these experiences to government officials to help them bring themselves into their work, for them to have the courage to try to make change, for them to connect better with their colleagues in government so that we can get more effective governance and hopefully food system or food policies that are more fit for purpose for people and planet. I'd like to also be able to bring this work to farmers. To farmers' well-being, we have work streams around farmers' well-being. Farmers have the highest suicide rate in the world. Farmers really need help. We're dealing with all the problems they face, from pests to soil to prices. Let's include them as well, as we said earlier. Let's include the farmers in all of this and find out what they need. And again, I think the main thing is we want to really avoid being prescriptive here, but find out what we can do to help these different stakeholders, you know, empower themselves to bring more consciousness into their work, their decision making.

Matt Eastland:

It very much feels like this is a nice way to finish because of everything we've been talking about. But right at the top of the podcast, you spoke about power dynamics. Feels to me like these are very much connected. So being able to reflect, take the ego out, And yet within the food system, there are some serious power dynamics at play. You know, some stakeholders have got all the power, others like the small scale farmers, for example, have very little. So I'm just wondering if there's a way to kind of round this off in terms of what your perspective on power dynamics is in the food system and how, with the experience that you have, how we might go about unpicking this.

Andrew Bovarnick :

Yeah, thanks for that, Matt. And they are connected. There's connection between power and consciousness, but for me, there's a different type of connection. So again, going back to systems change, when we think about levers, of change. What I look at from my vantage point at UNDP is all the projects going on in the world

to support food systems or agriculture or rural development. To me, the two levers that are so potentially profound and powerful that are not attended to enough are these two, the one on mindsets and consciousness and the other one on power. So that to me is just one sort of connection between the two. Those are the two that I and my team have identified as two key areas that we collectively and we as UNDP want to spend more time on and thinking through what we can do to support ourselves, our own portfolio. I mean at UNDP we have over a billion dollars worth of technical assistance. focused on agriculture food systems that is not really taking into account sufficiently like power dynamics or mindsets and values. And so these are two, for me, very key priority areas for us to be looking at and how we convene others to help us build these initiatives out. And when you think about power specifically, Again, I'm under no illusion that we can change power dynamics in the food system. I mean, power by its very nature is powerful, and it's also invisible. We don't really see what's going on. You know, there's lobbying happening. Even within governments, there's different power dynamics. We all know that. The Ministry of Finance is more powerful than the Ministry of Environment. And so I think what it's about what we are starting to do because we're at the early stages we're like in year one of this initiative we've called it we have an initiative called food and power initiative to try to make this space is to start identifying where are those power dynamics, where are those power asymmetries within the food system? Where are they particularly prevalent and where are they particularly important? And then to start, you know, there are tools out there, but to start bringing them together, the types of tools that can help us and others map power, reveal power, unpack power to really understand what are the power dynamics going on. I think that's the first step. You know, as I said, it's an elephant in the room. Let's make the invisible visible. Let's put it on the table and then at least find ways to work with that power. Then maybe at that point, we can start having more serious conversations about what to do about that. Are there ways to disrupt it? Are there ways to adjust it? Are there ways to work? with those power players so that when change happens, they're not the losers in this system. Maybe there are better ways that we can make these transitions, but I think the first step is to really bring recognition to those power dynamics and not stick our heads in the sand and say, well, they're too complicated to deal with, so let's find something else to do because those other things may not work. So again, it's sort of like consciousness in a way that it's so complicated and it is pretty invisible. But yeah, to me, these are the areas that are worth spending time thinking about. And if we bring the right people together over sufficient time with the right processes, hopefully we can come up with some really interesting opportunities and ways to tackle these issues that are really, I think, limiting our current ability to to inject change into food systems.

Matt Eastland:

Fascinating. Yeah, you really must come back on the show when you when you've started to get some insights from this and tell us all

about that, because that just sounds really game changing. So so please do. We are now at the end of the show. And Lucy, I thought maybe you might have one final question that you'd like to ask Andrew.

Lucy Wallace:

So Andrew, if there's one sort of message that you want to leave with our listeners, something for them to think about, what would that be?

Andrew Bovarnick :

Wow, there's so much to talk about. But I think again, going back to, you know, the idea to recognize is that the food system currently is not working. And for all of us, and all of you and all of us, to just be very cognizant of that, as you do your work that is contributing to the food system. What is the type of food system we want to have for the next 100 years that really feeds the planet, tackles obesity, take away malnutrition, ensures that farmers really have living wages and prosper, and they're not toiling on the land, serving our consumer habits and not making enough money, that we can really produce food at the same time in harmony with conserving nature. So whatever your role is in the food system, business, government, consumer, it doesn't matter. Always just think about the type of food system you want and what you can do at any level. To not just think about food as something you put in your mouth as fuel and not something that is just produced as a raw material by a worker on a farm, but that it is part of our culture, it's part of our lives, and that we really can and need to change our food system for the better of ourselves and the planet.

Matt Eastland:

Wise words. And Andrew, what a call to action for our listeners. I love it. So thank you very much for that. Final, final question from us then, obviously, is where can listeners go for more information about you and the great work that you and your teams are doing?

Andrew Bovarnick :

Well, thanks for that. We do have a web page on UNDP, which we can put somewhere. UNDP facts and the Conscious Food Systems Alliance COFSA also has its own separate web page for the Alliance, [consciousfoodsystems.org](http://consciousfoodsystems.org).

Matt Eastland:

Amazing. Andrew, thank you once again for what has been a really fascinating and potentially life changing discussion. So I really appreciate that. And thank you. Thank you again. And can't wait to have you back on to share some more insights in the future.

Andrew Bovarnick :

Wow. Well, my pleasure. My true pleasure. And I really would love to come back again. So count me in.

Matt Eastland:

Lucy, what an amazing episode and what an amazing guest Andrew was.

Lucy Wallace:

Yeah, I know it was it was such an interesting conversation, wasn't it?

Matt Eastland:

It was not a space that we've ever really been to before, which which I love about the show. So some key takeaways, then let's do that for the listeners. So one from me was Andrew spoke a lot about the need to align governments and to get beyond like the ministries of agriculture in order to affect food systems change. And that actually, when you look at it, most government departments in most countries, their objectives are all different. So they're all going for good things, but they're not actually talking to each other necessarily. And they're not aligned in their objectives. And he's obviously done some amazing things with UNDP in terms of trying to get governments to align. So I thought for me, that was one big takeaway for me, which I hadn't thought about. What about yourself?

Lucy Wallace:

Yeah, no, exactly. And I think as well, the point he made about ensuring that farmers' voices were heard within that, especially around the fact that, you know, farmers, maybe smallholder farmers, which operate by themselves aren't necessarily represented within these spaces. So I think that's a big sort of thing for us to remember and remember in the work we're all doing is, is how do we ensure that farmers' voices are heard and the diversity of farmers' voices are heard?

Matt Eastland:

Yeah, absolutely, definitely. And let's do a show on that. And then the final takeaway for me was the work that Andrew's doing with COFSA that is, again, that whole thing around we've never been to this space before, that actually it's so important to bring values, consciousness, self-reflection, meditation into these discussions in order to affect better outcomes. So really, really interesting that Andrew thinks and has had experience with and has been on a personal journey himself of trying to do this in order to affect food systems change and personal change. So that was a real standout moment for me. And I wish him really the best with that. And any final takeaways for you?



Lucy Wallace:

Yeah, I mean, I think the other point that he made that was really, really interesting for me was around power dynamics. And it's not necessarily something I've thought particularly deeply about before. I think we think about political economy, but, you know, the power dynamics and what those mean within the full food system. Andrew mentioned that a lot of these are hidden and they're not necessarily recognised. So once we start to recognise them, just sort of imagine the insights we'll get on how decisions are made and what influences those decisions. So for me, that was a really, really key point and something I'm looking forward to sort of finding out more about.

Matt Eastland:

Definitely. Definitely. So thank you once again to Andrew for what was an amazing conversation. And thank you, Lucy, for joining me once again on the show.

Lucy Wallace:

That's no problem, Matt. Thank you for having me.

Matt Eastland:

Thank you all for listening in. This has been the Food Fight podcast. If you'd like to find out more, head over to the EIT Food website at [www.eitfood.eu](http://www.eitfood.eu). Also, please join the conversation via the hashtag EIT Food Fight on our X channel at EIT Food. And of course, if you haven't already, please hit the follow button so you never miss an episode. Thanks very much everyone for listening. See you next time.