#169 Alison Blay-Palmer, UNESCO Chair on Food Biodiversity a...

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**SPEAKERS**

Host Raj Daniels, Alison Blay-Palmer

**Host Raj Daniels** 00:47

Alison, how are you doing today?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 01:29

I'm doing great. Thanks, Raj. Thank you so much for having me.

**Host Raj Daniels** 01:32

Alison, I'm excited to speak with you. Before I dig into the topic of sustainable food systems. I have a question for you. What is a possible-ist, and how did you become one?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 01:42

A possible-ist is a word that I tripped across. A researcher in Northern Europe used that term—Hans Rosling—to describe what he sees as a middle ground between being a positivist and someone who looks at things very negatively. And that is being realistic about what can be done and being optimistic about getting there. And I really think that sustainable food systems offer us the opportunity to all be possible-ists because they give us ways that we can bring about change in our the world that needs a lot of help right now.

**Host Raj Daniels** 02:19

I love that definition. Did you know Hans personally?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 02:22

I did not, no. Unfortunately, he passed away in the last few years as well. He did some remarkable work with Gapminder, helping people to understand the issues around poverty, and how that intersects with people's access to things like food and health care and those kinds of things at a global scale. So yeah, I wish I had had a chance to meet him.

**Host Raj Daniels** 02:42

I don't think I've seen anyone display data as beautifully as he did and create a such a strong narrative. He was magical at that.

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 02:51

He really was. Yeah.

**Host Raj Daniels** 02:53

So you mentioned sustainable food systems? Can you describe for us? What is a sustainable food system?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 03:00

The way I usually like to address this, this question is to think about, first of all, sustainability. We usually use a definition that focuses on social issues: that we have equity, that we have economic viability, and that things are focused at the local level as much as possible. So that we have money circulating in local economies. In terms of the environment, it's that we're dealing with things in an ecologically regenerative way that helps us to protect and preserve biodiversity. So that's the sustainability dimension. The food dimension is that we do all of that in a way that allows people access to healthy food that's produced in a way that's consistent with their cultural needs, and that they can have reliable access to that. And in terms of systems—and I think this is where it gets really super complicated and difficult and challenging for people—is that we do all of this as much as possible at the same time, and we're looking at this as an integrated, coherent way of addressing the challenges that we face. And that's really the focus of all the work that I do.

**Host Raj Daniels** 04:10

So it sounds like there are a lot of moving parts to this idea of a stable food system. How do you get alignment on all the parts?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 04:18

You get alignment by gradually dancing things and moving things incrementally towards each other. There are lots of great examples around the world of different projects that exist that demonstrate this kind of coherence. There is a movement called agroecology, for example, that does take all of these different components into account. It is largely led by small-scale farmers in communities where they're able to protect biodiversity, so they're really stewarding the land. They provide food to their local communities. So this is not a global food system. This is a localized food system. And they're providing healthy food to people. And that's really important because right now if we look at the statistics, there are more than 3 billion people on the planet who do not have access to healthy and nutritious foods. So they may have access to calories, food that are calorie-dense, but not nutrient-dense. And because of the lack of availability of healthy food, we're seeing a crisis of obesity, rising cancer rates, and those kinds of things. So there are food related diseases that are on the rise. And at the same time, we also have people who can suffer from that kind of malnutrition, but also people who don't have access to the calories either. So when we look at the world, there's a huge opportunity for improvement. And I think the message that's loud and clear from those numbers is that despite the fact that we have enough food to feed everybody a healthy diet, or enough food on the planet to feed everyone, people don't have access to that food. And it's really an issue of not being able to grow the kind of food that people need to grow. So they're either being forced to grow for the global market, or they don't have the income necessary to provide themselves with a healthy diet. And this is not something that's unique to people who live in the global South. This is something that exists within the United States and Canada. There are many people who go hungry and who are not food secure. And this is particularly the case in communities of color and also in indigenous and Native communities. So these are issues that we need to think long and hard about for everybody in the world.

**Host Raj Daniels** 06:56

So if we have such a robust agricultural program—United States, Canada—why do you think it is that people still don't have access to calorie-rich food or nutritionally dense food?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 07:11

The calories are part of the problem, but it's also the nutritional food that we need. So food that's grown in a way that is healthy and also food that is minimally processed. So while people can get access to ultra-processed foods that could be high in starches, sugars, salt, and it's very shelf stable, and so it can be shipped all around the world. That's not the foundation for healthy diet. So the challenge is that we've developed this globalized food system that that privileges those kinds of foods, and as a result of that, it ends up privileging profits over nutritional needs of people. And so we've got a food system that's out of kilter. And it's out of kilter for a lot of reasons. One of the reasons that's driving all of the challenges that we're facing, ultimately, is the existence of the food system now and the way it's conceived of as a profit opportunity. And really, when you think about it, food is like water. It's like air. And it is, according to the United Nations, a basic human right. And so if you think about food in that way, and not as a commodity that's an opportunity for corporations or major retailers to be making money, then we can conceive of our food system in a different way. But at the moment, at least in the global North, the food system is dominated by major retailers and by people who are promoting the growing of food through things like monocultures—soy and corn monocultures—that rely really heavily on fossil fuels. If we think about climate change—just to give you an example of how food can be a lever for changing things in a good or a bad direction, food contributes an estimated up to 37% of greenhouse gases. The globalized food system. Now, if we were able to ratchet that down in many different ways, that would help us address climate change in a really meaningful way. And the things that we would need to do to address the climate change issues also would help to provide more nutritious food to people. So that would be less ultra-processed food, for example. There would be less intensive agriculture, there would be less use of fossil fuels, and we would rely more on integrated agroecological growing systems. There would be benefits across across the table. The challenge, though, is that's not profitable. So there isn't a profit motive for moving in a sustainable food systems direction. And that's really the fundamental challenge to making this happen and why policy becomes so critically important.

**Host Raj Daniels** 10:01

How do we unwind the current food system?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 10:03

Well, there are lots of people working in the direction of unwinding it as we speak and have been for a long time. Fortunately, about 70% of the food that's produced in the world is produced by smallholder farmers who, in many cases, use what I've referred to as agroecological or ecological growing systems. And thanks to them, we continue to have the amount of biodiversity that we do in the world. But what we need to do is support these people more. We need to support them and empower them to continue doing what they're doing, to make sure that they're not threatened by the global food system, and also to give them enough presence that they can help other farmers who are not growing in this kind of way to produce food differently. There are lots of opportunities that we could access in the global North that would allow us to grow our food differently. And I'm not suggesting that we would have a food system where no one would have access to coffee, or tea, or chocolate. I, for one, could not live without chocolate or coffee, to be honest. So I think it's really important to be balanced in our perspectives. But right now, the vast majority of investment, in terms of how we're developing new crops, is going in the direction of high-tech. The vast majority of subsidies that are provided to agriculture are to support the global food system. And the preponderance is to use chemical and fossil fuel-based inputs. And those are all not necessary. There are other ways of doing things. It just means we have to shift gears. And the way to do that is to restructure. And this is not a simple thing. I'm not pretending that this is an easy thing to accomplish. We've just had the World Food Systems summit, which, unfortunately, did not produce the inclusive and rights-based approaches that people were hoping for. So there are constantly attempts to make this restructuring happen. But it's a big machine, the global food system, and it's very hard to dismantle.

**Host Raj Daniels** 12:11

Can you explain what the inclusive and rights-based system you were speaking about?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 12:15

Yeah, sure. Inclusive would be that everybody has access to healthy food, regardless of ethnic background color or whether people are indigenous. Everybody should just have access to healthy food. And that's not the case. The case is, the people who have the money have the best food, and other people do not. They're malnourished in many ways. As I said before, 3 billion people don't have access to healthy food, to a nutritious diet. One of the things that's really interesting is—as we reflect on and hopefully come out of the COVID-19 pandemic—what that really showed us was the value of having localized food systems that are able to reach more people with healthy local food, as opposed to relying on the global food supply chains because we saw instances where those supply chains started to break down. And the result was that people started to feel the effects of not having the choice that they were used to having from the globalized food system. And that really made them think about how vulnerable where their food comes from is and how vulnerable their food security is. And when we think about it—and I'm not suggesting that we go back to the 1950s or 40s. Well, not the 40s. We were in a world war for part of that decade. But there are points in our history where communities were more self-sufficient, where they ate more culturally appropriate local food that was grown in a way that was in harmony with the local ecosystems and local landscapes. And the more we move away from that, the more we're diminishing our food options in the long run. If you think about the globalized food system, there are fewer and fewer options available in terms of the kinds of rices that people grow. There used to be thousands and thousands of rices that were adapted to microclimatic and micro-landscape conditions. And gradually that diversity is being eroded. And as we erode that kind of agro-diversity, what we're doing is we're eliminating our options to deal with things like climate change as well because we're losing that genetic heritage that has been developed over millennia by indigenous peoples. So it is not to our advantage to go in the direction of less options. It's to our advantage to go in the directions of more options and having a more fluid, dynamic, diverse food system. And if you think about what's happening with the retail space, if you think about what's happening with the landscapes that you drive through—in Dallas, I don't know if you drive out into the countryside or not, but you would be hard-pressed to find farmer's fields or more biodiverse agricultural landscapes. I think what you would find is that they're predominantly mono-cropped, and this soil may be even left bare for part of the year. So the soil is lost. And that's another problem that we're having, is the salinisation of our soils and the soil losses. Soil literally blows away. So if we're doing farming in a different way that respects and protects the soil and the water quality and biodiversity, then we're also helping to preserve our options for the future.

**Host Raj Daniels** 15:54

Have you read the book, The Wizard and the Prophet?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 15:56

I have not.

**Host Raj Daniels** 15:57

It's a story about Norman Borlaug and William Vogt.

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 16:00

Okay. Yeah. No, I haven't read that book.

**Host Raj Daniels** 16:03

I'm sure you're familiar with the work of Norman Borlaug?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 16:05

Yeah, of course.

**Host Raj Daniels** 16:06

So after I read that book, I was quite conflicted. He won the Nobel Prize for his research on plants around the world. And it came to mind because you mentioned the different kinds of rices that, depending on the culture where you are, different kinds of rice grow there. And I came away conflicted, because part of me felt like his research enabled us to go down this monocultural path. But the other part of me feels like, because of him, populations were able to grow and thrive. So just curious if you'd read the book.

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 16:35

I haven't. But thank you for bringing it to my attention. But I am very familiar with Borlaug's work and the fact that he won a Nobel Prize. And I think that that celebration of what we would call modernity, that technology is needed to solve all our problems, is a fallacy. I think that the work that Borlaug did was in many ways important. But it also took us down a path that has led us to where we are now, unfortunately. And I think that what we need to do is adopt a more balanced perspective. So instead of putting all of our eggs in one basket—we're relying so heavily on so few crops, soybeans, corn, rice, and wheat. Really, those are the key crops that our food system relies on. And so few animal breeds for people who eat meat. That doesn't make for a very robust, resilient food system in the end. And while it's important that we have wheat, and it's important that we have rice, they don't have to be grown in the kinds of conditions that we grow them in now. So I think there are lots of lessons to be learned from that work. And we need to actively examine the choices that we've made and not just assume that those are the right decisions for now.

**Host Raj Daniels** 17:57

I totally agree. Now earlier, you mentioned sustainable food system as a as a lever for change. And I had the pleasure of watching one of your other lectures, and you talked about having the right people at the table and also having their voices heard. How do you suggest we facilitate situations where we can get the right people at the table?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 18:18

That's a really good question, Raj. And it's not easy, because there are lots of power dynamics, and there are lots of vested interests. But one of the great things about food is what it can do and how it can be a positive game changer for people. So for example, if you're working in a city, and you want to address issues around land use, and you want to address issues around food access, and you want to address issues around water quality, you can bring together a group of planners and policymakers. People who are engaged in food production in the peri-urban and in the rural areas. You can bring together people who are the end recipients, the consumers of food, the eaters, and make sure that you're representing different communities. Bring those people to the table, and initiate conversations with them that help them to figure out how in their world, those issues can be addressed simultaneously. And there's lots of interesting work that's going on in that regard. I've been involved in a project with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, and RUAF, which is an urban agriculture, not for profit. And we've been doing work over the last few years on trying to figure out how to engage, or how to bring about, these multi-stakeholder groups so that people can benefit across different scales. It's hard work and it takes a lot of effort on people's part, but what they find in the end is that as the work unfolds and as people have these conversations, what ends up happening in many cases is that they find that they're addressing more problems than they anticipated. And it's sort of a positive spiraling of benefits to communities. So while it is hard work to make sure that that happens, it does provide some coherence. And it helps us to solve more than one problem at the same time, which is really what we need right now. We're trying to think about, what do we do with the terrible biodiversity loss that we're experiencing in the world, and the climate crisis that we're facing, and the fact that the pandemic took place? And how do we protect and deal with all of these shocks and hazards and protect communities and make them more resilient? And while food isn't the only solution, when you think about it in the context of where we get our energy from, how we protect our water systems, how we protect our ecosystems, and how we provide fair working conditions as well, for example, to people—we look at the flow of migrants. All of these things have very strong rootedness in food issues and lack of food. So by resolving those issues, by bringing many different people to the table at the same time with different perspectives, you can start to make progress. It's really silo busting, is what happens, and people start to understand that they're working in a system. And that if they don't work in the system, and make the system work for them, they're just going to solve one problem that's going to create another, in all likelihood.

**Host Raj Daniels** 21:38

I think silo busting is one part of it. Absolutely. I think another challenges is that quite often, when you're speaking to the people that are most affected by these issues, they don't have the time, the resources, or bandwidth to even come to the table. And what I mean by that is that, quite often other obligations, perhaps work, family, etc. precludes them from just showing up to, sometimes, these meetings that concern them, or will affect them down the road. I don't know if you've thought about some kind of incentive program—and I don't want to say people should be paid to show up. But I find it challenging sometimes to get those people to the table.

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 22:14

Yeah, absolutely. Right. You're absolutely right. And, for example, in some of the research that we do, we do pay people to participate if a person has to take time away from their family or their job. So if a person works in a government organization, for example, where they're paid to participate in the meeting, we obviously wouldn't compensate them. But if a person is coming to a meeting and giving their time to solving these problems, then they need to be compensated. Absolutely. And we do our absolute best to make sure that happens in the work that we do. It's not always possible because resources are constrained. And I know lots of organizations do that.

**Host Raj Daniels** 22:55

I think that's fantastic. I'm quite involved here in my local city and where I live, and I've noticed that the same faces keep showing up showing up to the same meetings. It's not because other people don't want to be engaged. It's just that they're constrained and they can't.

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 23:08

Absolutely. I think some someone mentioned to me once that maybe it should be sort of like jury duty, somehow, that people should get a leave from their work—paid leave, of course—to participate in community initiatives and community consultations. And maybe that's one way of handling it. I think one of the things that we saw in the pandemic were some pretty creative solutions to giving people support in a way that we hadn't really understood before. It was interesting to me that one of the very first reactions that countries in the developed world had was to make sure that people could could keep an income of some kind. And I think that recognition is something that could be built on, to enable people to participate as citizens, to really be active, engaged citizens because there's so much value in that. If we develop solutions without the people who are going to be impacted by the solution sitting at the table, they probably aren't going to be taken up. But we know, through things like participatory budgeting, for example, or participatory certification programs, if you engage people in that decision-making process, then the solutions are taken up because they're relevant. And that's really the key, is to make sure that you're developing solutions that that have meaning on the ground. Otherwise, what's the point?

**Host Raj Daniels** 24:39

And the people feel like they're involved.

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 24:42

Exactly. They're empowered.

**Host Raj Daniels** 24:45

Now, in one of your lectures I was watching, you very eloquently described how a sustainable food system would address many of the UN's SDG goals. Can you walk us through that?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 24:56

Sure. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are very complicated. There are 17 of them in total, and there are 167 targets that go along with the 17 goals. So it's a complex thing to get your head around, first of all. But on the surface, there are many goals that are incredibly relevant for food. So for example, the no poverty goal is obviously key. You need money to buy food, to buy healthy foods. So if we had no poverty in the world, then obviously that would go a long way to resolving the second goal, which is zero hunger. There are also goals around gender and education—women tend to carry the burden in many countries for providing food for their families, maybe through growing food, or through cooking or caring for land. In many, many ways, this burden falls—or this opportunity, depending on how you look at it—falls on women shoulders. So gender equity is very important. Education is very important. There are also goals around sustainable consumption, around sustainable urban spaces. There are goals around climate change, energy use, and preserving biodiversity on the land and in the waters. So clearly, all of those are connected to food. If we have sustainable waterways, sustainable land resources, landscapes, if we have no poverty, and we have zero hunger, then we're achieving those goals. And food has a lot to do with that. And I think that's really going back to what we were talking about before. It's really important to remember the systems approach and how things are all interconnected together, but how when you do one thing, it has either positive or negative spin off to other things.

**Host Raj Daniels** 27:00

You know, it does have a cascading effect. And as I listened to you go through the different SDGs, and the relevance to food, Maslow's hierarchy just rings so true in my ears.

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 27:10

Yeah, absolutely. And that is also why I have a lot of problems with food being a commodity, something that people invest in, where there's a futures market. And fundamentally, food is different. Food is not an automobile, or a computer, or clothing even; it's something that we need to survive. And by making it into a commodity, something that gets bought and sold, we lose sight of the value. In terms of culture, in terms of equity, we don't value the people who produce our food, we don't value our farmers, we don't value the people who go into the fields and pick the fruits and vegetables that get shipped all around the world for us. We don't pay those people a decent wage, a living wage, in many cases. They're not treated very well, in many cases. So I think it's really important to—as you were saying, using the word cascading—to really appreciate what that cascading involves and how things are so interconnected.

**Host Raj Daniels** 28:13

Absolutely. So my favorite part of the conversation is the why behind what you do. What moved you? What drove you to become so interested in food? Where did that come from?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 28:24

Well, it came initially from looking at what's going on in the world and understanding that food could be part of the solution. I've been very concerned about climate change for decades. I have children. I'm blessed to have grandchildren now as well. And I think when you're in that situation, and you look around and you see how inequitable things are, how the world is becoming very polarized in terms of people who have so much money and other people who have not enough resources at all. Billions of people don't have enough resources. What's going on in the climate. And in all of these issues, they really motivated me to look for a way to help make small changes in the world. So that was one thing. The other thing is I have a background, through my family, in farming and growing food. And I have firsthand experience of growing on an industrial-scale farm. And I know what that's like. And I know what farmers have to deal with, having done that. I have a lot of empathy for farmers. It's very difficult. They've been put in a really tough place in Canada in the United States in terms of what their options are. But I also know that there are lots of alternatives out there now. There are lots of ways that they could be the kinds of stewards of their land that they I'm sure would want to be, in most cases. The agricultural system is so vertically integrated. Now, farmers are at the bottom of a very precarious triangle, and all of the risk falls on their shoulders and very little of the profit does. And I think that we need to tip that in a different direction. And it's not just for North American farmers or farmers in the EU, but it's for farmers around the world. And I think if people could understand that and appreciate that there's the basis for solidarity around those kinds of issues, then maybe we would think differently about the kind of food that we eat. And I wish people had the space to be able to do that. I think that's really important. And it's terrible that we don't.

**Host Raj Daniels** 30:34

So coming from a farming background, obviously, you had an interest in food and growing food. But what pushed you specifically towards sustainable food systems?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 30:42

The idea of trying to find a solution to some of the challenges that we're facing. Sustainable food systems, to me, have the potential to answer and address many of the the challenges that we face. So for example, if we had a national school feeding program in Canada, that could be developed in a way that would allow—we don't have a national school feeding program. You do in the United States. There are a lot of challenges with it, but at least kids go to school and get a meal when they're in school, COVID notwithstanding, but we do not have that in Canada. And there is an opportunity there to connect and create viable markets for small family farmers, that would help feed into that demand stream, so that newly created supply chain. And that newly created supply chain could look quite different to the kinds of supply chains that we have right now. They could be values-based as opposed to value-based. So I think my interest is in trying to find solutions and trying to figure out how we can—and I mean, it's very Pollyanna-esque I and I apologize for that, in a way, but in another way I don't. I think we need to think about these things. And we need to look for solutions. And if we all can hold hands and do that together, then we're going to go in a positive direction, as opposed to not reflecting on it, not being able to act on it, and going in a very bad direction right now.

**Host Raj Daniels** 32:11

You mentioned Pollyanna-based, but I feel like it's people like you in the world who have this possible-ist mentality and perhaps pollyannish thinking that are going to be making the changes going forward. So no, I appreciate that.

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 32:23

Well, it's lots of people doing the same work. And there's growing momentum. So that's what's important.

**Host Raj Daniels** 32:29

That is important. So you've been on this journey for quite a while now. What's the most valuable lesson you've learned about yourself?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 32:35

The most valuable lesson that I've learned about myself, I guess, is to be a possible-ist. Really, what you started off with, Raj. If you're if you're all you're looking at is the positive side of things, it's very discouraging. But if we look at what we can do, and do those things incrementally—and I'm blessed to work with wonderful people at the Lauria Center for Sustainable Food Systems and my colleagues that I work with around the world through various projects—and those people are identifying where the possibilities are, and we're, together, growing those possibilities, literally. Sorry, I didn't mean to use a corny pun there. That's the thing that I've learned about myself, is the idea that possible-ism is really my way forward.

**Host Raj Daniels** 33:29

I love the idea of possible-ism. Now let's move into the future. It's 2030. You have a magic wand. What does a sustainable food system look like to you?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 33:39

Well, first of all, we have increasing biodiversity on farms. Our soil quality is also improving. The water around farms is clean. There are fish in the streams. And there are many farms on the landscape, all producing different kinds of crops and animals. Those firms are connected into local processing facilities, local distribution facilities. I'm sure there would be some kind of online connectivity between people eating the food and people growing the food. There would be lots of good quality jobs in food processing, local food processing. There would be access to local food through things like farmers markets. There would be community kitchens where people could come together and prepare food themselves in a community kind of way. There would be community gardens where people could be in touch with the soil themselves. There would be accessible transportation so that people could get to the community gardens. There would be green spaces throughout cities that were also, in many cases, farms. Everybody living in every place has access to good quality, sustainably produced. healthy food, and that they have the income to be able to afford that. But that's nine years away, Raj. So I'm not confident that's going to happen. But that's the dream with the Sustainable Development Goals, right? So we have a lot of work to do.

**Host Raj Daniels** 35:16

The vision is beautiful. Do you have it mapped out?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 35:19

I guess I have it mapped out in my head. I don't know if I've ever been as explicit about it as I just was. But I guess that's something I need to do when I get off this call.

**Host Raj Daniels** 35:28

But I'd love to see the finished product when you're done.

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 35:30

Thanks. I'll share it with you when I have it ready.

**Host Raj Daniels** 35:33

Thank you. So last question. And something I'm gonna take away from what you said earlier, I just love the way you said it: values-based versus value-based. I think that there's such a distinction there. I just think it's so eloquent. I'm going to come away with this from from our conversation. But if you could share some advice, words of wisdom or recommendations with the audience, it could be personal or professional, what would it be?

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 35:55

That we need to see our food differently, that we need to appreciate food as a source of community, as a source of culture, as a source of personal well-being, and as a source of wonder and diversity in the world that we live in. And if we were able to see food that way, instead of something that we just grabbed and tried to do really quickly, food as fuel as opposed to food as nourishing, in all the senses of the word. I think that's a really important takeaway. And I know how busy people are. And I know that's a big ask, but I think the more we can do that, the better off everybody will be in the end. Also, also get your hands in the soil. Grow something. It's a wonderful thing to do.

**Host Raj Daniels** 36:40

Alison, I love the idea of seeing our food differently. I look forward to your vision of 2030 coming to fruition and catching up with you again soon.

**Alison Blay-Palmer** 36:49

Thanks for the time, Raj, I really enjoyed our conversation.

**Host Raj Daniels** 36:52

Thank you so much.