



POTRAVINOVÉ
BANKY



HIGH-LEVEL PANEL

6 May 2021

Roberta Sonnino – Professor of Environmental Policy and Planning, Cardiff University

Full speech

Thanks, Laura, and good morning everybody. So, I decided to focus my brief presentation this morning on this concept, which is becomingly increasingly popular, the idea of Food System Transformation for a More Sustainable Future. I think there is a danger with these expressions: they are obviously very positive, they underline the urgency of actions that we need to implement, but at the same time, there is always a danger with fashionable expressions so that we lose sight of what exactly do we need to transform, why and most importantly, how?

So, let me start by defining food system transformation the way in which it is defined in the scientific literature. This is a sort of synthesis of how it is seen by scientists. It is a process of fundamental change in the structure of functional and relational aspects of the food system, that leads to more equitable relationships and more benign partnering, so interactions and outcomes. I think the key word in this definition is this idea of relationships. The target of system transformation is indeed provided by sets of relationships.

The issue is that when we think about the relations between food system actors and activities and we try to represent this, as some colleagues are trying to do, you end up realising what challenge we have in front of us, the complexity of the challenge at hand. Because food systems are very complex but also convoluted entanglements of relationships. And while some of these relations are visible and transparent, reciprocal, unfortunately, many others are not. They are hidden, hierarchical and exclusionary. And there is no doubt in my mind that it is the latter types of relations that we should try to reconfigure if we really are serious about food system transformation.



This event has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). For further information, please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social.easi>. The information expressed during this event does not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

With the support of





POTRAVINOVÉ
BANKY



I like to define food system transformation in this context as essentially a process of democratisation, a process that needs to blur the boundaries of accountability and power between the public sector, the private sector and civil society, a process that aims ultimately at socioecological justice. And I will offer some insights into the practicalities of such a process to conclude my presentation with some initial thoughts about the role of Food Banks in all of this.

Now, how do we go from the grand vision and the grand challenge of food system transformation to the practicalities of it? Well, I like to stress the importance for us all as practitioners, policy makers, researchers, to be bold and courageous. We need to adopt a normative stance and define at the onset of the process what are the desired outcomes of food system transformation. For me, there are four pillars that we need to keep in mind in this respect. We need actions and initiatives that bring together the social and the natural, and I will explain each one of them in the following slide. So, system transformation is about recognising the co-constitution of the social and the natural worlds. It is also about creating or strengthening the many positive flows and interactions that exist within but also between food systems. And here I am referring to flows of ideas, people, resources, knowledge. Speaking of knowledge, food system transformation is very much about pluralism, making space for a pluralism of knowledge, deconstructing (and this is something that I am sure many people in the audience would know what I mean) this dominant narrative, Western, white and middle-class narrative, that often implicitly condemn the strategies through which the poor cope with their marginalisation. And I will come back to this point later on. Last but not least, another important objective of food system transformation is about connecting food with other public goods, addressing the connections, though perhaps I should say the lack of connections, between what and how we eat and wider sets of public goods, health, wellbeing, the environment, the welfare system. Some of the speakers that preceded me have already touched upon this.

I am working at the moment on these four ideas, and I am trying to integrate them, as I see them very closely interconnected, into what I call the CLIC framework. The CLIC framework is simply a way of pointing in a direction of travel for transformative actions, which for me, as I said, should be aiming at four interrelated goals: the generation of co-benefits; the creation of strengthening of linkages, so this is the territorial dimension of food system transformation; and then of course, social inclusion and connectivity. Let me explain what exactly I mean with these four words and the CLIC framework.

The first letter of the CLIC framework spells Co-benefits. Co-benefits is a very popular expression in sustainability language. It means ensuring that activities that realise benefits in one sustainability dimension do not produce damage in other sustainability dimensions. So, for example, it is about recognising that sustainability strategies that have very specific objectives,



This event has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). For further information, please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social.easi>. The information expressed during this event does not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

With the support of





POTRAVINOVÉ
BANKY



they could be economic, social or environmental objectives, may impact other parts of the food system or other interconnected systems in a positive or negative way. In the first case, when the interaction is positive, we generate co-benefits. When the interaction is negative we realise and trigger trade-offs. And obviously, what we need to try and do is to maximise the synergies and minimise the trade-offs between sustainability dimensions. So, for instance, I'm trying to translate this into practice. We have this dominant narrative (unfortunately for me) that connects food system transformation in a very simplistic manner with increasing the production of food for the world's population. That in itself is not a sustainable strategy that takes us in the direction where we want to go. So, but rather than dismissing it on its own, we simply need to ask ourselves whether technological solutions to increase food production also create valuable opportunities for people, employment, social benefits, access to healthy diets and, of course, how they relate to local biodiversity. This would be one example of thinking in terms of co-benefits. Another example is urban agriculture, which is often is the type of activity that tries to produce co-benefits across the sustainability spectrum, enhancing social cohesion. There are many initiatives that are specifically targeting socially excluded people, trying to provide employment opportunities to reconnect them with nature and also, at the same time, increase access to fruit and vegetables. These are the type of co-benefits we should be thinking about.

The L in the CLIC framework stands for **Linkages**. As I said, this is for me the territorial dimension of food system transformation. Thinking in terms of linkages means essentially to empathise the network interdependencies between the city and the countryside and between inland and coastal areas at the same time. It means remembering that sustainable processes of transformation are never territorially exclusive. They don't try to privilege the priorities, the needs, for example, of a city, at the expenses of the countryside. Focusing on linkages can help us to see the rural as an integral part of the city and of its metabolism and hence as a space that needs to be protected, rather than exploited. What does it mean in practice to think in terms of linkages? Some ideas. For me, it means to focus on food distribution channels such as wholesale markets, farmers markets, box schemes, community support and agricultural initiatives. Those initiatives that create opportunities for positive interactions between food system actors and at the same time build on local biodiversity and enhance the availability, accessibility and affordability of healthy and nutritious food for all citizens. And you may notice in this line I have italicised the word *all* because it creates a nice bridge with the next slide, which is about inclusion.

We've heard a lot about social inclusion from previous speakers and obviously I imagine many people in this audience know exactly what social inclusion is about, given the role that food banks traditionally play in this regard. But I want to bring onto the plate another form of inclusion that I consider equally important and it's inclusion in the sense of knowledge, in the sense of recognising that sustainability transitions often have a deeply political nature. And sometimes they are framed in ways that question, as I said earlier on, the coping strategies of



This event has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). For further information, please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social.easi>. The information expressed during this event does not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

With the support of





POTRAVINOVÉ
BANKY



the poor. One example here is the use of monolithic, universalistic notions of health and wellbeing to distinguish between good and bad food. If taken for granted, those notions can downplay the agency of minorities, of people on low income, they end-up for condemning the processes and the strategies for coping with social exclusion. So, let's pay attention to the way in which we frame transformative processes and let us make sure that we are inclusive also in the sense of actively and meaningfully involving all actors in food system transformation, bringing together different types of knowledge, I come back to this in the last line, and to create shared visions amongst all food system actors, including in particular those from the most deprived and vulnerable groups.

Finally, the final C of the CLIC framework is about **Connectivities**. It's about recognising the very simple fact that hunger, like all forms of malnutrition and food insecurity, is never an isolated problem. It's always indicative of underlying socioeconomic and environmental conditions that need to be addressed systemically, holistically. So, for me, Connectivities mean engaging with the rigidities, divides, gaps that are hampering coordinated action for food system transformation. Addressing the fragmentation of responsibilities across multiple departments, agencies, ministries, but also addressing the asymmetries of power, as I said earlier on, and between food system actors and the asymmetries of power, by the way, between different levels of governance. As well as, needless to say, the increasing corporate control exercised by agri-businesses and transnational corporations that are shaping food environments in very complicated ways, to go back to a point that somebody raised earlier on. So, let us work to try and connect food with other complex systems and policy priorities in the governance arena, health and welfare, housing, transport.

I'm sure people in the audience will have many examples in mind of how food banks can deliver the objectives of the CLIC framework, but in my last slide I just want to offer a few insights. I think food banks need first and foremost to be empowered, to be empowered to become active agents of change. And I like to look or to envision food banks as active agents of change, especially in terms of overcoming the neoliberal tendencies to individualise hunger and to dump the responsibility of hunger to a single individual and the solution of the problem to the civil society and the volunteers who do a fantastic job, but they are working necessarily more on the symptoms than on the causes of hunger.

In my vision for food system transformation, food banks are community hubs that are closely connected with other progressive, transformative initiatives going on at the local level, initiatives that try to improve the quality of the meals and to promote a more community approach to the meals. I like to envision food banks as community sites where people don't simply receive a parcel of food, but they could perhaps get together and cook and eat together.

And then my very last point... I think food banks also have a vital role to play in diversifying the knowledge base that we need for food system transformation. As I said, we need to be careful in the way in which we frame transformative processes and being careful means integrating



This event has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). For further information, please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social.easi>. The information expressed during this event does not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

With the support of





POTRAVINOVÉ
BANKY



different types of knowledge. It's not just scientific knowledge that we need to ensure an inclusive transformative process. We also need to value experimental knowledge,

embodied experience, and Food Banks have a lot to teach us all about those kinds of knowledges and, again, about the processes through which poor, deprived people actually, the strategies they put in action to feed themselves on a daily basis. Everyday forms of resistance, we need Food Banks to tell us about those everyday forms of resistance to capture them, to share them, because for me they are at the core of any process of democratisation, especially in particular, as I said, food system transformation.

And that's all from me today. Thank you very much. Back to you now.

Moderator:

We are used at looking at COVID-19 as an accelerator for change, but in your opinion, in your perspective, what does that concretely mean?

The key word if we think about the pandemic, the key idea for me is that it's given visibility to the problems. Problems, there's always a danger that they remain abstract, or they are considered abstract speculations. We have seen throughout the world during the pandemic how broken the food system is, to use Liz's expression. And I also agree with the idea of giving this ability to the food banks. Many people, thousands of people would have not survived the crisis during the lockdown without the support of food banks and other food hubs that were very quickly put together in cities. I'm thinking about Milan for example, you know, and the work they have done there.

Now, I'm stressing this because I said we need to empower food banks. Well, for me COVID-19 has, in a sort of convoluted way, empowered food banks. That is the time for food banks to start seeing themselves as an integral, an active part of food system transformation and of course, I'm asking policymakers to start looking at food banks with the same eyes as mine.



This event has received financial support from the European Union Programme for Employment and Social Innovation "EaSI" (2014-2020). For further information, please consult: <http://ec.europa.eu/social.easi>. The information expressed during this event does not necessarily reflect the position or opinion of the European Commission.

With the support of

