Handpicked: Stories from the Field

Season 1, Episode 5: “Change Worth Striving For”: International Agreements as Levers for Food System Change

Featuring a conversation with Alison Blay-Palmer, Barbara Emanuel, Theresa Schumilas, and Patricia Ballamingie

# **Transcript**

**Speakers**

Amanda Di Battista: **AD**

Laine Young: **LY**

Alison Blay-Palmer: **AB**

Barbara Emanuel: **BE**

Theresa Schumilas: **TS**

Patricia Ballamingie: **PB**

**AD**: Hi everyone. Before we get to the episode, we just wanted to check in about the current Covid-19 crisis. We hope you are staying safe and healthy.

**LY**: We are both currently working from home, so you may notice some changes to the sound quality in the next few episodes.

**AD**: This crisis has really shed a light on the precariousness of food systems in Canada. We hope that this moment gives us an opportunity to reimagine our current food system for the better.

**LY**: And a special shout-out to those who are working hard to keep our food system moving throughout this situation. We really appreciate all your work.

{[Intro Music]}

**AD**: Hi everyone, and welcome to *Handpicked: Stories from the Field,* a podcast from the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems. I’m Amanda Di Battista.

**LY**: And I’m Laine Young, and today’s episode is a big one!

**AD**: It sure is! Today we are talking about how municipalities can use international agreements as levers for food system change.

**LY**: Wait, wait, what are international agreements?

**AD**: Well, let’s get to that in just a second. First, let me give you some context and explain where this episode came from.

**LY**: Okay, sounds like a plan.

**AD**: A while back, the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems held an event at the Balsille School of International Affairs in Waterloo. The panel discussion—called “Levers for Food Systems Change: Food Security, Justice, and International Agreements”—looked at how municipalities can draw on commitments made at the international level, around sustainability, food, and the environment, to drive policy at the local level. This event featured a conversation led by Dr. Alison Blay-Palmer, {Alison: [Hi, my name is Alison]}, Director of the Centre.

**LY**: We talked to Dr. Blay-Palmer in our introductory episode, right?

**AD**: Yes, exactly! The event also featured three panelists who look at food systems and international agreements in their own work: Trish Ballamingie, {Trish: [“Hi, I’m Trish Ballamingie]}, is an Associate Professor from Carleton University whose action-oriented research focuses on food systems, and sustainable communities.

Barbara Emanuel, {Barbara: Hi, I’m Barbara Emanuel]}, is the recently retired Manager of the Toronto Food Strategy, led by Toronto Public Health - the organization that houses the world-renowned Toronto Food Policy Council. And Theresa Schumilas, {Theresa: [Hi, my name is Theresa]}, an organic farmer and research associate at the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, who looks at emerging digital economies, and grassroots food innovation. We had the opportunity to sit down with these four powerhouses of sustainable food systems research after the event, to pick their brains about how international agreements impact food system policy at local, regional, and national levels.

**LY**: Okay, so tell me what an international agreement is.

**AD**: Right. International agreements are commitments that are negotiated among international actors and usually highlight the need for greater coordination for change. International agreements can happen at a number of different scales between all sorts of actors or stakeholders.

**LY**: Can you give me an example? Did the panel focus on any particular international agreements?

**AD**: Well, in this episode of *Handpicked*, we talk a lot about the Sustainable Development Goals or the SDGs. The SDGS are a set of 17 goals created and adopted by United Nations member states. The idea is that these goals—which include things like zero hunger, climate action, and gender equality—will act as “a shared blueprint" for sustainable development around the world. So, this is an agreement between nations at the international level. We'll also talk about The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, and the New Urban Agenda. These two agreements, while international in scope, were developed in consultation with municipalities from around the world. As we move through this episode, we’ll explore how these international agreements can be used as tools for people to change their own food systems, and to gain access to better food security, and food justice.

**LY**: Really cool. I’ve often wondered how policies or commitments made by high-level leaders, can be relevant for folks working on the ground. Often, the local and the global seem so disconnected—especially when it comes to policy. Tell me more about the three agreements that you mentioned. I think that a little more information will help us think through how people can actually use them to create food systems change.

**AD**: Good call. Let’s start with the New Urban Agenda. This agreement was created in 2017 by the United Nations. It provides a vision for a sustainable future from the perspective of cities. It is an acknowledgement that, while urban spaces can contribute to some of the major crises we face globally, they are also where many of the solutions to global problems play out. Here’s Alison with more.

**AB**: The most appropriate paragraph with respect to the New Urban Agenda, is Paragraph 123. There are 3 things to focus on here. The first one centers on issues around social justice, access to food, and poverty issues. The second sentence refers to territorializing food systems, and what’s important here is the commitment to looking at food systems. So, the whole approach from sustainable food production all the way to waste management. The last sentence points to multiple considerations, so there’s lots of things on the table here including chemical use, so it reinforces the need for sustainable agriculture, but it also talks about things like seed diversity as well as health and transportation, water, and energy. So, here we also see the food-energy-water-waste nexus.

**LY**: So basically, food is a small but important part of the New Urban Agenda.

**AD**: Exactly. Even though food is only mentioned in one paragraph, that paragraph has become an important reference point that helps guide the work that people are doing. Unlike the New Urban Agenda, the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact focuses exclusively on the relationship between cities and food. By acknowledging that very complicated and place-specific relationship, the aim of the Milan Pact is to help cities make policies and decisions to create more sustainable food systems. Here’s Alison again.

**AB**: The Milan initiative was originally launched in 2015 in Milan, and had about 110 signatories in the first year. At this point, we’re at around a 180 cities around the world. These cities have adopted this initiative and are using it to move their planning agenda around urban food systems forward. The Milan Urban Food Policy Pact includes 6 central themes. The first pact theme focuses on governance, the second is about sustainable diets and nutrition, the 3rd issue looks at social and economic equity, and the last 3 dimensions focused on food systems. So, they integrate across the food system from production to food waste. So, here we see some similarities to the New Urban Agenda.

**LY**: Wow, 180 cities, that’s huge!

**AD**: I know, and the Milan Pact is continuing to gain traction. As of March 2020, there are 209 signatory cities. That means that there are growing connections among cities around the globe, all around food systems.

The third agreement that we talk about in this episode are the Sustainable Development Goals, or the SDGs. I mentioned the SDGs briefly a little earlier in the episode. The SDGs build on the Millennium Development Goals, which were created by the United Nations in 2000. These aimed to reduce extreme poverty by 2015, but when 2015 rolled around, it was clear that the work wasn’t finished, and that we needed a new agreement of some kind. So, the United Nations member states came together and created the Sustainable Development Goals as a global plan of action. In addition to the 17 goals, the SDGs include 169 specific targets that provide a framework for countries to use as they work towards sustainable development.

**LY**: So, the Sustainable Development Goals work more at the national level, rather than the city level?

**AD**: Yes, but cities play a large part in realizing the SGDs, because so many of the policies that impact development—like where and how cities can expand or how they manage waste—often happens at the municipal or regional level.

**LY**: Okay. So, the SDGs provide some guidance on what sustainable development looks like. But how does food fit into the goals?

**AD**: Well, let’s hear from Alison again.

**AB**: Of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the one we’re the most interested in, is the zero hunger or SDG 2, as this is the most central SDG to food related issues. This goal refers to achieving zero hunger, but also references other targets including sustainable production. That said, all of the SDGs can be integrated into a discussion about sustainable food, through for example, climate action, no poverty, gender equity, and sustainable consumption.

**LY**: Oh neat. I bet food can really be integrated into many of the other SDGs though.

**AD**: Yeah, and that’s what is so interesting—you can’t talk about food systems without considering gender, climate change, health. It’s all related. During the panel discussion, Trish Ballamingie gave an excellent description of how the SDGs are connected, and why it is important not to think of them as stand-alone goals.

**PB**: In reality, the UNDP 17 development goals, are all iteratively connected. So, for example, if u make progress mitigating poverty, (number 1), then you’ll necessarily mitigate food insecurity, and help achieve zero hunger, (number 2). The goals need to be understood as a performative matrix or interconnected web. Just and sustainable food systems are absolutely central to achieving all other goals. For instance, kids need to be properly nourished before they can benefit from, (number 4), quality education. Resilient urban food systems are critical to (number 11), sustainable cities and communities. Greenhouse gas emissions from the food sector, throughout the supply chain at each stage, must be mitigated to properly address climate change, and conversely, the food sector will need to adapt to the changing climate. Finally, the goals are laudable, but broad and bland. I believe in life on land, some are outcome driven, others are process driven, but all are seemingly as wholesome as apple pie, so the devil will lie in the details of how they get implemented, and the values that get normalized in doing so.

**LY**: So, if we think of the Sustainable Development Goals as integrated rather than discreet, they offer opportunities to prioritize one goal at a time, without forgetting the larger picture.

**AD**: Exactly, and that allows policy and decision makers to work on achieving one sustainable development goal—like Zero hunger, for example—while still recognizing that any efforts to make sure that citizens don’t go hungry, will also impact education, gender equality, and health.

**LY**: So, now that we’ve got a good sense of what an international agreement is, why don’t you set the stage for your conversation with Trish, Barbara, Theresa, and Alison. How does food fit into the picture for them in all of this?

**AD**: Well, Trish, Barbara, Theresa, and Alison, are all sustainable food systems researchers and advocates. That means they are interested in finding tangible ways to make our food systems more sustainable—so food systems that are more socially just, environmentally sound, supportive of local economies, and engaged with citizens. They see international agreements as potentially powerful levers for making change happen because, presumably, the Sustainable Development Goals, the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, and the New Urban Agenda, are important to the international community. Many nations and cities have put pen to paper to demonstrate those commitments, so we should be able to leverage them in ways that will result in real food systems change. Our conversation focused on 3 key themes around food and international agreements: the need for place-based solutions; the role of storytelling in imagining those solutions; and the challenges and successes in working with international agreements from a city’s perspective—and here we’ll look at the City of Toronto’s use of the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact as an example.

{[Short Music Break]}

**AD**: I opened up the conversation with Barbara, Trish, Alison, and Theresa, by asking them about the relationship between food systems, and the international agreements that we’ve been talking about so far in this episode. Alison Blay-Palmer, director of the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, started by telling me about how targets and mandates negotiated at the international level, can set the stage for work being done on sustainable food systems at the local level. Basically, by offering cities a framework they can work within, international agreements can help people put sustainable food systems on the agenda without having to legitimize that work ahead of time. They can say “look, the international community thinks that sustainability is a priority, especially when it comes to food—we should too!” These frameworks are not without significant challenges though. Here’s Alison:

**AB:** I think that the processes have to be at once global and at once local. So, there has to be a way of interpreting those international agreements locally. And I think that there’s a lot of initiatives on the way to make that possible and make that happen. I think it’s really important for us to realize that in the history of sustainable food systems, and the sustainable conversation globally, it’s quite new. So, I think that given how fraught the conversation is, we’ve actually made lot more progress at this point, than I would have expected. So, that’s, that’s on the good news side. In terms of thinking about where the barriers or the downsides to this process are, it is in the homogenization and the loss of the individual stories. And I think we’ve all had a conversation about that, over the last -- together as panelists -- over the last day about why that’s problematic. Because we are working in a systemic way, and if you're working in a systemic way, that’s also place-based, the solutions have to be specific to the place, so that homogenization becomes really dangerous, and we end up losing the very things that we need to fix the food systems.

**LY**: Okay, so it sounds like Alison is concerned that there is the risk of losing sight of the differences between places when you’re trying to work within international agreements?

**AD**: That’s exactly right. The food system in, say, the Northwest Territories, looks very different from the food system in Ecuador. In the face of that difference, the ways that we can make those food systems more sustainable, has to be place-based, and it has to be appropriate for the local context. That means that those solutions need to be determined at the local level by people living in that context, rather than solutions prescribed from somewhere else.

**LY**: But if you’re working within frameworks and targets that are developed at the international level, how do you account for local solutions?

**AD**: Well, that’s precisely the challenge—international agreements tend to be heavy on targets and commitments, but light on solutions. That means that there is a risk of those agreements becoming prescriptive. It’s easy to say, “well such-and-such solution worked over here to reduce hunger, so let’s apply it over there.” But there is also an opening here, because international agreements tend to focus on targets, there is wiggle room for communities at different scales to find solutions that work in their own places. At their best, international agreements provide a beacon for communities to work towards. And that work happens differently at different scales.

Barbara Emmanuel and Trish Ballamingie both told me about how the goals set at the international level, can have real effects on the decisions municipalities make as they try to grapple with the impacts of climate change, and as they work to become more sustainable. Here’s Barbara, and then Trish.

**BE**: I think this isn’t about mega cities or large cities. This is about the urban environment, and it’s about how cities engage at the community level, at the system level, at the regional level; it’s not about big cities at all actually. And I think that the biggest impact will be in small to medium-sized cities globally. So, I think that has to become an intentional practice and strategy.

**PB**: As you were talking, I was thinking, you know, the Paris Accord, and but we may be frustrated with federal progress on climate change. But that accord is an international agreement, you know, parallel to all the agreements around food systems or sustainable development that we’re talking about. It serves as a beacon for other scales of action. So, whether it’s in the context of climate change, whether it’s Mayors coming together to take more progressive action than the federal government might conceive of. You know, it provides that beacon, that point of reference as something that’s worth striving for.

**LY**: So, what I’m hearing is that International Agreements do three things for municipal governments: 1, allow cities or regions to see themselves as part of larger the international community; 2, act as something for decision makers to aspire to as they create policies and programs; and 3, help keep the shifting political landscape at the local level accountable to larger goals.

**AD**: Exactly. As Alison puts it, International Agreements can serve as “aspirational reference points.” That means that governing bodies can use these agreements and the goals or targets they outline, to help set the standard for what cities and larger territorial regions should strive for. Here are Alison and then Theresa, to tell us more about how international agreements can inspire local action. Take a listen.

**AB**: One thing that didn’t come up this morning – I don’t think, that I would like to point to – is the way that these agreements can, with shifting governments and government priorities, act as aspirational reference points for how we engage in our world across a number of issues. And we’re interested here in sustainable food systems, but if we have governments that aren't inclined to support issues on sustainability, at least there are some reference points internationally that we can all point to, and use as levers for change.

**TS**: It also says to me that the discussion of these agreements in the local level, is the beginning and not the end. It’s the point at which, it’s the invitation for the discussion. It’s the framework to start the discussion with the knowledge that, that discussion will move into different directions than what the agreements say right now. That these are – while they are agreements – they are also fluid. If we are saying that there is local discussions and subsidiarity and sovereignty, then that is with the understanding that the agreements will change with response to that, over time.

**AD**: Theresa highlights the importance of seeing big, international targets like the SDGs, as a starting point for local change. But she also stresses that there needs to be some flexibility in how those documents are read and interpreted, and that they should, ideally, change over time in response to the way that people are actually using them. Theresa also talked about the need for people to see themselves as part of the story that international agreements are trying to tell. She told us that people only find solutions to things when they can imagine how they fit into the narrative. So, the way that change is being measured—often called metrics—becomes particularly important here.

**LY**: Yes! That’s one of the things I love about hearing from Theresa. She is so connected to the field, and is always thinking about how people are actually using these kinds of high-level documents on the ground.

**AD**: Yeah, and that’s a perspective on international agreements that we really need, otherwise they can seem a bit irrelevant to daily life. The disconnect between international conversations about sustainability, and the people actually working to make food systems more sustainable on the ground, is a problem that Theresa specifically identified in our conversation. Here she is:

**TS**: Well, I like what Alison was saying about the simultaneous conversation, cause that is what’s necessary here. And that process is what helps local people see themselves as experts who created the language, and being in the language; it’s not coming down to them. I think that’s a challenging, but an inevitable process that has to happen, that back and forth. What’s less clear to me is, I understand, I can imagine how all of these agreements, that conversation happens in local communities. As a person in a local community, might even be called an activist in a local community, I don’t understand how my conversation in the local community ends up being reflected in the global conversations. And unless I can understand that, I’m not likely to really engage in the conversation. For me, that’s a gap.

**AD**: Barbara Emmanuel, former Manager of the Toronto Food Strategy, picked up on what Theresa was saying about our inability to see ourselves in international agreements, and made a link to Alison’s concerns about the ways that these high-level documents can discourage local solutions. For Barbara, the language we use has serious implications for how sustainable food system advocates can do their work.

**BE**: I think these global agreements provide a common language that we can all cohere around to a greater and lesser extent. And I think Alison makes a good point in terms of the homogenization or the potential for that. And I think you picked that up, Theresa, in terms of how do we get that community individualized voice into the discourse at a higher level? And I think we have to be extremely mindful of that; all the way through, and facilitate what I believe is crucial in storytelling, that captures at a systemic level, multiple voices and multiple applications of some of the innovations and the solutions, and the practice on the ground. At the same time these frameworks can actually help bring a theoretical and common discourse at a higher level, to policy makers, to decision makers, to funders. So, it’s got to be a top-down bottom-up approach all the way though. And we have to be mindful that the language may be different in different contexts, and mean different things in different contexts. So, one size doesn’t fit all. And yet, common language can be very powerful.

{[Musical Break]}

**AD**: Our discussion about how the language used in international agreements contribute to the way those agreements are used—or not—by people working at the local level, led to a conversation about storytelling.

**LY**: Really, storytelling?

**AD**: Yeah, it turns out that Barbara, Theresa, Trish, and Alison have all done a lot of thinking about the interaction between the stories that the international community is telling through documents like the Milan Pact, and the stories of people at the local level trying to put those commitments into action.

**LY**: But how can an international agreement be a story?

**AD**: That’s a really good question. When it comes down to it, international agreements are created by a bunch of people who represent different stakeholders, nations, or organizations operating at the international level. In setting goals, or targets, or commitments, they have to imagine what the future might look like, and then craft a story about how we can work together to get there. The trick is to enable people in vastly different environmental, political, and cultural contexts around the globe, to be able to see themselves as meaningful actors in that story.

**LY**: But if international agreements are written at such a high level, how can people working in specific places envision themselves in the stories that those agreements are trying to tell?

**AD**: Also, a great question, and I don’t think there is just one way to answer it. However, one of the things that came out of our discussion is that the ways that we measure those high-level goals or targets—so the indicators we use and how we talk about success—have to make space for people to tell their own story in their own way. I asked our panel how people at the local level may be able to see themselves in those indicators and what that means for their ability to leverage international agreements, in the ways that they’re creating sustainable food system change. This question provoked a lot of conversation.

**TS**: I think it works something like, I don’t know if anybody has seen the seed map, I think it works something like that, where, an individual who has their own stories to tell, without screening, without selection, that they feel says something, shares something, shares it. And they take the onus to share it and yes in that sense they need to commit resources of their own to do it. That’s part of being a participant in a democracy. Things are not done for you; you move your body and you do it.

**BE**: But good story telling is very complex actually. And to get a gripping story that people want to listen to, is an art and a skill, and requires you to get to the point and show the passion and all of that.

What are the supports that people need in multiple locations, to effectively tell their own stories, to have the courage to tell their own stories? To have the structure of how to tell a good story. And, to help people to use fewer words, more passion, and more clarity of language in order to get that out. But I think it’s very doable.

**TS**: I guess I’m thinking there is two purposes to these stories, in that sense. Cause when I first commented, I was thinking, the story is for the teller. It doesn’t matter if anybody listens to it because the story is my way saying, out loud, ‘I see myself here’, ‘this is mine’, ‘I have a right, I am a rights holder in this document. That’s what my story says’. It says that whether anybody ever listens to my story or not. But at the same point and time, we want people to listen these stories and learn from them and assess progress based on them. So, that’s two purposes.

**PB**: I think as a human society, we are fundamentally storytellers, you know. You look at oral histories and oral traditions, and we’ve passed on our wisdom and our life lessons through stories. Even now, you look at, what are we all hooked on? We are all hooked on Netflix; it’s a form of storytelling. And so, you know, as activists and as academics, if we start to think about one of the illustrated vignettes that bring life to a metric, I think that can be so powerful.

**AB**: I’m thinking about, I was at a conference in Brazil, with Laine and I were there a few weeks ago, and one of the things that struck me very strongly about the people in the room was the tension that between their desire to participate and their fear of participating. And that’s another thing, I mean, we are very privilege here in Canada. But for some people in countries, they can’t make an example of themselves, because if they do, they draw attention to themselves. So, there’s personal security issues as well around asking people to do this too. So, I think we have to be aware of facilitating that storytelling and making it easier, and making it accessible, and sometimes those are the best stories, and they are not getting told because they are not being enabled.

**BE**: Stories can be told in so many ways. It can be music, it can be dance, it can be -- and we have to facilitate all those forms that feel right for whoever is telling the story.

**LY**: That’s beautiful. I hadn’t really thought about how people’s stories come through in the indicators of International Agreements.

**AD**: It is so important! And to Theresa’s point, if people can’t see themselves in the ways that international agreements measure success, it becomes really difficult to connect all of the amazing work that is happening at the local level to broader international discussions about sustainable futures.

{[Musical Break]}

**LY**: So, what I’m hearing from this discussion is that, there is no one size fits all approach to how municipalities or regions, put international agreements into practice or create food policy. It sounds like each country, region, or municipality has different needs depending on context. So, the development of food policies that help achieve the goals set at the international level should be based in and respond to local contexts.

**AD**: Exactly! And to get a sense of what that might look like, I think it would be helpful to hear an example of the dynamic between placed-based solutions, and international agreements.

Remember that Barbara Emmanuel, who we’ve heard from already in this episode, is the former Manager of Toronto Public Health’s Food Strategy. That’s the division of Toronto Public Health responsible for looking at how the food system can be a way to work locally to meet international targets. In the panel discussion, Barbara outlined the ways that Toronto has adapted the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, to help them build the Toronto Food Policy and to assess how successful that policy has been, in increasing access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate, and sustainable food in the city. Listen to what she has to say about the opportunities and challenges of drawing on the Milan Pact, for a large city like Toronto.

**BE**: In terms of the specifics of New Urban Agenda, SDGs, and the Milan Pact, I think what all of them help us do is integrate food security, and nutritional needs of the urban poor, or not only the urban poor, for the broader ones, and it also applies a broad food systems approach that recognizes also the impact of urbanization, which of course is a global phenomenon, and a need to facilitate strong urban-rural linkages. And cities, therefore, have a major role to play. I strongly believe that food is an element that connects all the SDGs. But certainly, in the city of Toronto, the SDGs are not explicitly talked about and acted on, but are sort of more embedded behind the different strategies and action plans. But the Milan Pact itself is directly applicable, because we are a signatory, and that we are lucky enough to have both a very strong food policy council to advocate for food systems issues, and food strategy. So, one of the big challenges around these big global agreements, but also about even a food systems approach, it’s really hard to explain to the powers that be, ‘what is a food systems approach?’ We struggle with that all the time. And decision-makers and politicians want a one-pager that says everything that we do in terms of the food systems approach, ‘explain it in a way that I understand, but that is evidence based, and that its actionable and all of that.’ So, we were issued a challenge by our politicians to describe a food systems approach. And what is this Milan Urban Food Policy Pact in real terms? So, we took on this challenge and we decided to be very intentional and strategic about reflecting on our progress on food systems transformation, by applying the Milan Urban Pact to our work, in a very systematic way. So, we did the 3 things where we reflected on our programs; we began a city of Toronto food initiatives mapping process, and that was a huge undertaking, it was really an interesting process. So, we decided to concretize our thinking and report to the board of health. And, a high level in going through this process, we were able to succinctly identify new priority areas, and those are: sustainable diets and nutrition, which, for us in public health, is a way of just approaching things in an ecological public health domain. We saw the importance of prioritizing resilience, and contacting Food Vulnerability Assessment of the city of Toronto, and we also see that we haven’t done nearly enough on food systems waste.

The Milan Pact indicator framework came up with 44 indicators. It’s huge, it’s overwhelming. And what we decided to really embrace this using this because there’d been a lot of thinking that’s gone into developing these set of indicators, why not use it, why not see what works and what doesn’t work? And so, what we did was, we went through each of those indicators, and some of them obviously didn’t apply to us, very few of them didn’t apply to us in the city of Toronto, but those indicators that might actually have some merit, we kept, and decided to do some research about where the data exists, or doesn’t exist for that. And, at the same time, we adapted the indicator framework, and we mapped on all the initiatives, and found that they all fit into the framework someway, and in fact, fit into multiple places in the framework. We were able to identify which was the responsible division or department, that, for each of those indicators, and what are the data sources? So, it’s giving us a very much more granular sense of where things are at, with the framework. And it was a huge effort, but ‘now what?’ ‘So, what?’ We’ve got this wonderful framework, we’ve got all this data, we’ve got all these metrics. What’s the significance of it? What stories can we tell out of this baseline data? What is it actually telling us about where we are? And what we have seen is that it’s a good starting point, really, to tell us where the gaps are and to begin the engagement process, with some folks to help us tell that story, so that this populated framework becomes more alive.

**LY**: I really like the idea that folks working with these agreements can make a sustainability framework come alive with data.

**AD**: Yeah, it's a really interesting way to think about something like the Milan Pact: it’s really just a document until people on the ground bring it to life through place-based solutions, and then record that life through data, so that they can speak back to the international community.

**LY**: That’s a lovely, cyclical way to think about the interaction between international agreements and people working to build sustainable food systems. There must be challenges and frustrations in this process though.

**AD**: Oh, of course. And Barbara outlined some of those challenges, including the ways that networks are created but often not supported, and how language can exclude certain people from engaging in these processes altogether.

**BE**: I also think, a note of caution about the agreements because what tends to happen is new networks get declared and established out of each of these agreements. So, absolutely you were right about the C40, and what was wonderful from a food perspective was that they recognized the importance of food in the context of climate change and established a C40 food network; and that was wonderful. But then there is the Milan Pact and the RUAF/ICLEI network. And those of us on the ground at cities are asked to join all these networks. And what it brings to mind is it each has their own inherent merit, but I think we’ve got to do some thinking and strategizing about how to network these networks. Because I think that we can find ourselves with multiple networks, associated with each individual agreement or strategy. And then they become quite competitive, and the language is quite similar but they’re just different enough where they want their own network and their own system. And it gets quite problematic; which one do you join, is there a merit in joining all? And for us, we just can’t provide a lot of support to multiple, and so which one is most important? And, I think there has been very little effort into networking the various networks, and I think we have to fix that. The other piece is, I think we’ve got to also be more careful using clear language in all of this. Because if we’re talking about engaging really grassroots folks, from multiple contexts, in multiple languages, multiple cultures, getting to a clear language place is actually a huge struggle. It’s much much harder to describe what we are doing in clear language and in short terms than it is to write long treatises. And I think it's got to be galvanizing, organizing principle, is that we have to at least seek to do that, and get the multiple perspectives to move things forward.

**LY**: Back to language again!

**AD**: Yeah, you can really start to see a pattern emerging in our conversation. That the language we use to talk about sustainable food systems at one level, will influence capacity to do that work at another level. Trish and Theresa had more to say about building capacity for better engagement with international agreements. Here they are:

**PB**: Barbara, I was thinking when you were – in the first part of your comment, so you’re expressing, you know, a potential lack of capacity to follow all of these, you know, somewhat nuanced networks. And you’re coming from a center that’s well-resourced in a Canadian context. And so, that would be even exacerbated in the mid and small-sized centers.

**BE:** Absolutely, for sure.

**TS**: Well, and it says to me, that, we need to be very strategic at the grassroots level. And I mean by that: cities, towns, whatever, who are looking to begin this work, or continue this work under the umbrella of one of the agreements, that we need to keep ourselves in a network with each other, so that we can say ‘well okay, I’m going to participate here,’ ‘I’m going to participate here,’ ‘let's make sure we exchange.’ To really make sure our resources are used as effectively as they can. We can't have every city that decides they’re going to be, you know, a sustainable food system city, signing on to one of the agreements to be single party operators; it’s not a possibility, right? We have to have; I know I’m saying like “an additional network!” but I think there is something about that.

{[Musical Break]}

**AD**: Before we wrap this episode up, I’d like to go back to something that Trish said at the very beginning. She told us that international agreements of any kind—be it an agreement that prioritizes food like the Milan Pact, or one that tries to tackle sustainability more generally like the SDGs, or even something like the Paris Accord, which tries to find a way forward in the face of the climate crisis—all of these agreements serve as a beacon for other scales of action.

That idea is very important for the conversation we've been having here. And it’s worth reflecting on what it means for international actors to come together and create shared goals, and then put those goals out into the world. Here’s Trish.

**PB**: When the values embodied by a goal are progressive and emancipatory relating to equity, equality, sustainability as fraught as that term is, and rights broadly conceived, then the potential for progress, and transformation remains. But when the values embodied by a goal inadvertently normalize the very constructs that have resulted in our current ecological crisis, our enclosure and privatization of the commons, our obsession with growth, our dependency on extractivism, and our uncritical embrace of neo-liberalism, then clearly the globalization of values can be fraught.

**LY**: So, Trish believes that the values we use to create targets or commitments at the international level, will have a direct impact on how they can enable meaningful change at the local level?

**AD**: Yes. For Trish, it’s critically important that international agreements are built on values that center the wellbeing of people, and the planet.

If international agreements are built on the same values that have gotten us into this mess in the first place—values that prioritize the individual, profits, privatization, or resource extraction, among other things—then the potential for us to use international agreements to facilitate meaningful and lasting change is undermined.

{[Musical Break]}

**LY**: What an interesting episode, I think that we all learned a lot about each of the international agreements related to food systems, and food research.

**AD**: We sure did, and if I can just sum it all up, I think that two major themes came out of our conversation with Theresa, Barbara, Trish and Alison. The first is that the nature of implementing progressive change to the food system, is placed-based.

**LY**: Yes, and I think that it was really helpful to hear about how Toronto is working with the Milan Pact to address sustainability in their food system. It certainly gave me a better understanding of some of the successes, and frustrations of doing that kind of work.

**AD**: The second theme that emerged is how important it is for people to be able to see themselves in the goals they set, and the ways they measure success. Trish, Theresa, Barbara and Alison told us that it’s critical that the indicators available for assessing work on sustainable food systems at the city-region level, actually allows people on the ground to tell their stories of change in a meaningful way.

**LY**: I think that the key thing for me is that allowing space for people at the local level to capture stories of food system change, enables them to then inform the creation of agreements, goals, and targets at the international level. I think that the role of language and story in how we imagine a sustainable future, and how international agreements and local solutions interact, is just fascinating.

This episode has me thinking about international agreements in a whole new way. {Amanda: [me too]}. I hope the listeners have taken as much from our conversation with Trish, Alison, Theresa and Barbara as I have.

{[Outro Music]}

**AD**: Thanks so much for listening. Stay safe and well everyone! We hope that you'll tune into our next episode, which looks at the relationship between digital and food sovereignty. Please subscribe to the podcast wherever you listen, and maybe share it with a friend! We’d be so grateful if you could write us a review on iTunes so more people can find the show!

**LY**: Also, you can follow us on twitter at @handpickedpodc, search our name on Facebook to join the group, or send us an e-mail at [handpickedpodcast@wlu.ca](mailto:handpickedpodcast@wlu.ca)

A special thanks to Alison Blay-Palmer, Trish Ballamingie, Barbara Emmanuel, and Theresa Schumilas, for participating in this conversation.

**AD**: And thanks to Elena Christy for organizing the event.

**LY**: This episode was hosted and produced by us, Laine young, {Amanda: [and Amanda Di Battista]}, with research and editing by Adedotun Babajide, Chiamaka Okafor-Justin, and Jake Bernstein. Our music is composed by Keenan Reimer-Watts.

**AD**: *Handpicked* is produced with support from the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems, Wilfrid Laurier University, the Balsille School of International Affairs, and the Centre for International Governance Innovation.

**LY**: Please check out our show notes for a bibliography, teaching tools, and links to other relevant information that we used to produce this episode. Make sure you check out our website for other ways to engage with us. We would like to acknowledge that this episode was recorded and produced on the lands of the Neutral, Anishinaabe, and Haudenosaunee people. We encourage you all to click the land acknowledgement link in the show notes to learn more.

**AD**: As always, I’m Amanda Di Battista.

**LY**: And I’m Laine Young, and this has been an episode of the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems podcast, *Handpicked*.

**AD**: Make sure to tune in next time for more freshly picked stories from the field.