

[CALM MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: Today on *Trending Globally* I sat down with Anna Lappé and Dawn King. Anna is an educator, an expert on food systems, a sustainable food advocate, and the author of *Diet for a Hot Planet*. Dawn is the Director of Undergraduate Studies and a lecturer at the Institute at Brown for Environment and Society. She specializes in the study of local food policy and politics, US energy policy and politics, climate change, and agriculture. We discussed the present and future state of local food economies in the US and beyond and the role policy plays in them.

Thank you both so much for coming in today.

ANNA LAPPE: Thanks for having us.

DAWN KING: Thanks for having me.

INTERVIEWER: So let's talk first about the intersection of health, public health, ecology, the economy, social justice. Anna, let me ask you first, what is real food and how does it connect to climate change and all those other things I just said?

ANNA LAPPE: Yeah, well, one of the things that I love in talking about food is that in talking about food you're talking about it all. You're talking about social justice and inequality, you're talking about how the economic system works and who's shut out and who's brought in, you're talking about health, you're talking about the environment, certainly climate change. And what we know is that the dominant industrial food system is really dominant here in the United States and the industrial food system globally is one of the key drivers of some of the worst crises of our time.

The environmental impacts of the industrial food chain are huge, it's about one third of all greenhouse gas emissions are coming from the food sector. We know that agriculture in the US is one of the largest sources of water pollution, a source of the incredibly huge dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico. But we also know, certainly in the US, that the food sector is also a huge driver of economic inequality. Seven of the ten lowest-paid jobs in our economy are in food. Food workers tend to be the most exploited. Women in the food sector tend to be the most sexually harassed.

So to me, real food is really talking about, how do we flip that? How do we actually make the food system the source of environmental health? How do we make the food system a source of really nourishing food, good jobs that respect workers, and how do we really turn it around? And what gives me a lot of hope is seeing the movements all around the country and the world that are a part of really trying to make that happen.

INTERVIEWER:

In discussions of food policy and food justice, "food economy" is a term that gets used a lot. I asked them to explain what exactly a local food economy is and why it's important.

DAWN KING:

Well, local food economy really has anything to do with building up economics in the food sector. So some of it can be, it's fast food workers, it's bussers, it's folks who drive to warehouses. So all of that is part of local food economy.

But I think with state and local politicians or at least organizations like the Rhode Island Food Policy Council, we really try to lift up local food producers, local food processors that, and no pun intended, it's kind of the low-hanging fruit for local economies because food goes bad. It has a shelf life. When you're shipping it from Chile it's going to lose nutritional value or you have to spray it with something before it gets there because it takes a long while to travel here. So it makes a lot of sense. It's not like computer chips where those could be made anywhere and shipped anywhere.

But local food, it's-- there's this idea of vertical integration. So what do you do? Well, you vertically integrate. So, well, what happens if we put a cheese stand, right? What if we start making cheese? And what happens if we grass-feed our cows because that actually makes better cheese? And what if we have a value-added product? And so there's vertical integration of product where if you're a farmer all of a sudden that product that-- those apples can turn into apple cider or applesauce and then there's shelf life. And so we see a lot of that going on and a lot of support for local food.

Will it solve all the problems? No. There's only so much we could do locally, there's only so much we could do in the state, and I constantly question my students who have a very romanticized idea of local food, of urban agriculture. As is right now a lot of it is very upper middle class, it's upper class. I-- I love getting my market share, my

CSA. I go to the farmer's market, I know the farmers and it's wonderful and it's organic and it's amazing. But that doesn't mean that low income residents of my city have that same access to that same food. So--

INTERVIEWER:

So what do you say to that?

DAWN KING:

I-- I say just stop saying it always increases food access because it doesn't increase food access and oftentimes it doesn't increase food access to the people that you're actually referring who need more food. But then I turn the corner on it and say, but there is something really amazing about local food which like community gardens or backyard gardening.

I work with an organization called the African Alliance of Rhode Island and these are refugee women from Africa, many of whom don't speak English or certainly didn't speak English when they first moved here five to ten years ago. And the founder of the organization said, well, what do you-- what do you do as a refugee? You sit in your house, you sit on your couch. And I wanted to start a garden because if anything that would get them outside in the sun with a little activity. And one thing led to another and this small plot of city land that they were gardening on turned into two plots and then three plots and then four plots and all of a sudden they're selling at farmer's market and they're selling African crops and we have a lot of foodies in this state and we enjoy food we've never seen before.

So there is a cultural relevance to that that absolutely ties you to your home. It doesn't matter if you're from West Africa or if you're from southwest United States like myself. There's always-- part of home is the food that you can grow. So it's culturally relevant. But then also many of these women start learning a little bit of English. They learn how to use a credit card machine, they learn how to-- that they need to market and write recipes and show people how to use their vegetables and it's incredibly empowering. And so in that sense it does increase their access to food.

But again, at the same time, gardening is really hard.

INTERVIEWER:

Mm-hmm.

DAWN KING:

You have to get out every day in the sun and pull weeds and make sure that you're watering every day and if you love doing that it's a wonderful way to increase your

food access. But again I say, don't tell everybody, you should just go out and garden because it's difficult.

INTERVIEWER:

Do you get the sense that people are making the connection? Because I think of eating local, buying local as sort of a food quality privilege, almost. How are you sort of communicating this interconnectedness?

ANNA LAPPE:

Sure, so I've been talking and writing about these issues for almost two decades now and I have really seen a huge shift in consciousness across the country around these issues. When I first started working and talking to folks in communities around the country, you know, often people weren't really curious about where their food came from beyond, I'll eat in the grocery store, or if they were curious it was very much this personalized, you know, how is this going to make me stronger? Or how-- you know, how will this affect my body? And what I've seen is a real consciousness shift where now when I say the term "food systems" people's eyes don't glaze over. They can think about a system.

A huge number of us don't have access to good, nourishing food. A huge number of us have food-related illnesses and so for a lot of people this isn't this abstract conversation. This really touches down in their own lives, and then thinking about these intersections doesn't become this complicated, abstract thing. It can really feel tangible to people.

INTERVIEWER:

What exactly is preventing all American people from eating and interacting with food that is both healthy and nourishing?

ANNA LAPPE:

Yeah, well, it's a great question and one I think about a lot. And I think in a way that the story of how that's playing out is in a way unique to the United States, although it's also expanding globally. But because globally when you actually look at the numbers, about 70% of all food globally is being produced by small-scale farmers, most of that in the developing world outside the United States.

But in the US what we've seen is a huge consolidation of power over our food system in a really small handful of companies. So you have just a few companies that control most of the meat you see in the supermarket. We now have about five-- well, it used to be six, they just consolidated, so about five chemical companies that control most of the petrochemicals used in agriculture. And any economist will tell you when you

have that kind of consolidation you don't have a fair, open marketplace anymore, consumers or farmers say if they're buying those inputs like seeds and chemicals, you know, aren't getting a fair price, and there's a whole bunch of implications to that consolidation.

One of those implications is how much the story of what we know about food is shaped by those industries that have a real stake in getting us not to ask questions and getting us to not see these kinds of intersections. And one of the things that colleagues of mine and I have been documenting is how much money these food companies have been spending increasingly on shaping the messages about food, not just in the obvious ways that you might think. Like, of course they advertise, but in much more surreptitious and stealth ways, so doing things like funding what are called "front groups," which are organizations that sound like they might work in the public interest but actually behind the scenes are really an arm of an industry marketing campaign.

So to give one example, the Global Energy Balance Network or the GEBN was an institution that was founded ostensibly to promote the message that health is all about energy in and energy out. So it's not really about what you're eating, it's if you're eating a lot of calories then you should exercise a lot, right? It's that energy balance.

Well, researchers exposed that the Global Energy Balance Network was fully funded by Coca-Cola and new FOIA requests that were just analyzed and written up in a peer-reviewed article that just came out last week talked about how these internal documents from Coca-Cola expressly describe the Global Energy Balance Network as a tool in the war about public health. And this was their weapon to communicate their message, which is really the pushback against the global public health concern about sugary drinks and soda being a root cause of diabetes and heart disease and all kinds of other illnesses.

So because it got exposed the Global Energy Balance Network folded and doesn't exist. But to me it's just a great example of the lengths to which these companies will go to try to shape our understanding of food and food's impact on our bodies and the environment.

DAWN KING: And advertising to kids.

ANNA LAPPE: One of the things that gets me so upset is, you know, we've known for decades that the neurology of-- you know, the brains of young children are actually unequipped to distinguish between when they're being advertised to and when they are being educated about an issue.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- [CHILDREN SINGING]
McDonald's is our kind of
place, it's such a happy
place, hap- hap- hap- happy
place, a clean and snappy
place. McDonald's is our
kind of place, it's such a
happy place, McDonald's is
our kind of place, your kind
of place!

[END PLAYBACK]

ANNA LAPPE: And what we've seen is brands like McDonald's really explicitly marketing to young people whether it's through things like Happy Meals or through building things like playgrounds at their restaurants. And so when families are traveling it's where you take your kids to blow off some steam but of course then they associate that with McDonald's.

One of my favorite examples of marketing to kids in ways that I find really unethical is an initiative McDonald's runs called McTeachers Nights. So these are these events where schools partner with a local McDonald's franchise for an evening and they turn out teachers, often the principal will go behind the counter and flip burgers and ring up orders and then encourage families in that school to go to McDonald's. And the concept is raising money for your school and McDonald's as part of your community.

But many advocates who've been pushing back on this say, wait a second, teachers and principals shouldn't be used to market McDonald's. So there has been a

pushback. And actually the Teachers' Union in Los Angeles organized with concerned community members and they have said, absolutely no McTeachers Nights in our town, and other school districts around the country are starting to say that. But McTeachers Nights, again, just one more example of how these food companies are trying to position themselves as kind of community partners when really we know they're a source of such ill health in our communities.

INTERVIEWER:

Well Dawn, help us understand how policy can be brought to bear on this problem, if it can. You're more interested in state and local food policy. Is that a more nimble way to go about this than the federal level?

DAWN KING:

I remember I used to be bored to death in my state and local politics class until I really understood how much power was at the state and local level and I think as you know, as Anna had just said like, that the federal government, it is so overrun by really large corporations. That's much harder to do at a city level and cities and states actually have a lot of power when it comes to food, whether it be local food economies or nutrition in the classroom. State and local governments also try to hold up food businesses, right, that's becoming a very large thing or local food economies.

INTERVIEWER:

One example of how local food policy can have a real impact on a local food economy is the fight for a sugary drink tax in Berkeley, California in 2014.

ANNA LAPPE:

I live in Berkeley, California now and we were the first US city to pass a sugary drinks tax. 35 cities had tried before we passed ours in one and those 35 cities had failed because the soda industry went after every single community that tried to pass this tax with everything they had. And we were able to succeed where cities had failed because we did such incredible community-based coalition building and really did a lot of popular education about why we should be taxing sugary drinks, that sugary drinks are the single largest source of sugar in our diets, that consuming sugar in liquid form is particularly impactful to your health, of course all the implications of diabetes, heart disease, weight gain.

And so even though the soda industry spent millions of dollars in our small city of like, 117,000 people, they lost. They lost really badly, I think it was like, we won by like, 76%. And what we've seen is now revenue from that tax, about a million and a half

dollars every year, is going to some of the best public health programming in the city. We created hydration stations across the high school, we have one high school in the city, and we've been monitoring that first class of freshmen that came in after the tax.

We created the hydration stations, every single freshman got a reusable water bottle, and now researchers are tracking how is the culture of soda consumption changing as a result of this tax revenue? Researchers have looked at the data on, is this reducing sugary drinks consumption, and yes it is. It impacting small businesses and hurting jobs? No, it's not, and there's been interest all across the country in these taxes from cities large and small, and a number of them have passed them.

What we're seeing now is the soda industry realizing what an existential threat it is to their bottom line and they are ramping up their pushback against advocates. And the thing that has a lot of us really concerned is the industry is pushing policy at the state level in states across the country that would preempt any city in that state from being able to say, you know what? We want a sugary drinks tax here. So there is definitely an unclear path ahead about what will happen for other cities that want to pass this tax and see it as a powerful way to raise revenue for good programs and to raise public education about this issue. But to me it's a great example of a good policy that can really work.

INTERVIEWER:

So when unhealthy food products such as sugary drinks are being squeezed out of the US as a result of local food policy, how are these large food corporations responding?

ANNA LAPPE:

Yeah, and I think that there is incredible parallels to me between the history and the current practices of the tobacco industry and some of these big food companies. When you look at the rate of illness and death from diet-related illnesses globally, it's a significant factor in global health.

And what we're seeing is a lot of these huge food companies-- you mentioned Nestle, Kraft, and Coca-Cola, you know-- you see them starting to change some of their PR and messaging certainly to that US audience and certainly to the millennials. I mean, you're absolute right. These millennials, across all demographics, across the entire country, are of incredible force in saying they want more real food and they want-- they don't want chemicals in their food and they don't want these high-sugar

products.

What we are seeing, which is very concerning to me, is these companies are looking outside of the US for new markets and pushing into markets that are the last place that can handle the burden of diet-related illnesses, countries whose health care systems are already burdened by not having enough funding and by other diseases. And so you're seeing a Nestlé marketing heavily in a country like Brazil and having deals with local distributors of their packaged products to go into some of the farthest reaches of regions in the Amazon with their packaged products.

So my concern is that as we make some progress in pockets of the planet these companies are pushing their most deleterious products in other parts of the world. And that's why I feel like this movement really needs to make these global connections and be working internationally, working at that World Health Organization level to really be setting regulations and policies that can help protect populations.

And there's been really fabulous reporting out of the New York Times that have been looking at Nestlé in Brazil, KFC in Ghana, looking at what's happening in these different countries and bringing in some of that global data where they've said, you know, look, yes, packaged food consumption is going down in the US. In the last 10 years it went up 26% around the world. Yes, sugary drinks consumption in this country is falling off a cliff and it's going up in other parts of the world.

DAWN KING:

And in some parts of the world it's actually cheaper to buy a bottle of Coca-Cola than it is to buy a bottle of water, and sadly, in a great marketing campaign, it's sometimes safer to drink a bottle of Coca-Cola. You won't die of dysentery. I mean, and that is-- you're absolutely right, first, Coca-Cola has done brilliantly at getting into every single corner of the world, some places that many, many others haven't touched yet and you will see Coca-Cola signs everywhere.

[AUDIO PLAYBACK]

- [SINGING] I'd like to teach
the world to sing, sing with
me, in perfect harmony,
perfect harmony. I'd like to

buy the world a Coke and
keep it company. That's the
real-- I'd like to teach the
world to sing in perfect
harmony. I'd like to buy the
world a Coke and keep it
company.

[END PLAYBACK]

INTERVIEWER:

In the face of these large food corporations who have so much power in America's food industry, what keeps them motivated to continue working for food justice and fair food policies?

DAWN KING:

I do want to give a shout-out to millennials because I think this is the generation, they do not trust the Nestlés of the world, they really don't. And it used to be not that long ago, just a decade ago, where the middle aisles of the grocery store where everybody shopped. And if you talk to any grocery store owner now they call it the dead zone. They're walking around to where the fresh dairy is and you-- so you walk the periphery where all the fresh food is and you avoid the middle. People are ignoring, you know, the cereal aisles and things altogether.

Sugary beverage consumption is on decline, I believe, for the first time in many, many, many decades. Now I think these same companies are saying, well, we'll just call it Vitamin Water and add a lot of sugar to that. That is a ray of optimism for a movement, that there's a whole generation and even that, you know, the generation before them were questioning. And in the '70s and '80s there was a lot of people that just didn't question. If somebody, you know, on a commercial if they told you this was better because it's low fat, you're going to eat it because it's better for you because it's low fat, even though they pump it full of more sugars, which is even worse for you.

So this generation gets it, I believe. And that-- I think that is a ray of optimism for our food system. Now, should we depend on the large food companies to do that? I'm not convinced. Although they are-- they're shifting course. I mean, it was what, five years ago when McDonald's said they were going to stop using chickens raised with

antibiotics? So I mean-- and that's a big push. It's not because-- I don't think they cared but their consumers care and their customers care and they're being forced-- they are being forced to react to that.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you both. This has been so interesting and it has made me hopeful. Thanks.

DAWN KING: Thank you for inviting me.

ANNA LAPPE: Thank you.

[CALM MUSIC PLAYING]

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