9 why we are what we eat

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Food is essential to what we are. For centuries it has shaped societies and cultures. The word diet stems from the Greek, *digitals*, which means ‘way of life’. However, huge changes are underway in our ways of life through the corporate takeover of the food chain whereby food is placed increasingly in the hands of multinationals and locked in a cycle of fossil fuel politics. In the last 60 years how we eat, produce, consume and cook food has altered dramatically. From pumping it with additives and preservatives, growing it with pesticides and fertilisers, to the consumption of processed and genetically modified foods, a chain of events has been set in place by industrial agriculture that has huge implications for farmers, the countryside and biodiversity in general.

A crucial part of building sustainable futures, self-managed lives and struggles for autonomy lies in addressing how we produce what we eat. The premise of this chapter is that the issue of food and food production is inherently political. To take a step away from the grip of capitalism and in order to free ourselves from being passive consumers who are alienated from nature, we must learn how to nourish ourselves and our movements. This chapter explores a range of possibilities and projects that lend themselves both as inspirational examples and real and viable options in changing how and what we eat.

understanding where we are at

Imagine the history of humankind stretched out along a 10 metre rope. The blip of time since the Industrial Revolution would be represented by the last few centimetres on the rope with industrial agriculture and genetic modification of crops barely measuring a few millimetres at the end. The first farms began to appear as plant
and animal species were domesticated about 13,000 years ago but it wasn’t until the industrial revolutions began to unfold in eighteenth-century Europe that mass movement from the country to the city took hold and the way food was produced changed significantly. In the UK the end of the Corn Laws in 1846 saw the end of market protectionism and ever since imports have increased. By the start of World War II, 70 per cent of the UK’s food was imported. This trend is replicated around the world as free market policies have radically changed traditional agricultural models. The following sections look at three of these issues in more detail: corporate control, the environment and health.

Corporate control
There are many negative, hidden effects to the amazing variety of cheap value global products that the world food trade brings consumers in the rich North. Food is big business: the global trade is estimated to be worth $4 trillion dollars a year and the market is concentrated in the hands of a few powerful companies. This imbalance has been created over the last 30 years through food and agriculture policies and global trade agreements which promote trade liberalisation and the globalisation of the food economy. The quality and nutritional value of food, the livelihoods of small-scale farmers, producers, agricultural workers and community economies are all secondary concerns to the profit margin in the industrial agricultural model. The European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has overseen the creation of a heavily subsidised agriculture system, consisting of ever larger farms which drive down production costs through economies of scale and technical efficiency. Meanwhile, World Trade Organisation (WTO) policies have aggrieved the economic crisis in rural areas throughout the world. The liberalisation of agricultural markets, the forced opening of borders and tariff cuts have put farmers in a global system of unlimited competition in which the main beneficiaries are transnational agribusiness companies and their shareholders. The interests of small producers and farmers are ignored causing devastating effects on the livelihoods of billions.

My warning goes out to all citizens that human beings are in an endangered situation. That uncontrolled multinational corporations and a small number of big WTO members are leading an undesirable globalisation that is inhumane, environmentally degrading, farmer-killing, and undemocratic. It should be stopped immediately. Otherwise the false logic of neoliberalism will wipe out the diversity of global agriculture and be disastrous to all human beings. (Lee Kyung Hae, South Korean farmer who killed himself at the WTO protests in Cancun in protest against unfair trade subsidies)
The tragic effect on farmers across the world is one part of the untold damage of modern day agriculture. Supermarkets have increasingly eroded local choice as smaller, independent shops struggle to compete. Wal-Mart in the US (whose UK subsidiary is Asda) is the biggest retailer in the world. Thousands of stores, including newsagents, post offices, grocers, bakers and butchers, have closed creating virtual ghost towns as the number of large out of town stores increases. These all powerful companies dictate the terms and conditions of production to millions of small farmers and suppliers who are forced to compete for a limited number of agreements to supply. For example, many orchards in the UK have been abandoned simply because the varieties of apples produced do not transport or keep well and are therefore not financially viable for supermarkets to stock. Over the last 30 years, 60 per cent of orchards in the UK have been destroyed. By 1996 the UK imported 434,000 tonnes of apples, nearly half from outside Europe.

Corporate control of food produce doesn’t just stop at the supermarket or production line. Just three corporations control one quarter of the world’s seed market (Monsanto, Syngenta and DuPont) and biodiversity is not high on their agenda. National seed lists in many countries make it illegal to buy and sell unusual varieties and it is prohibitively expensive to keep seeds on the list. Agribusinesses require farmers buying seed to sign contracts that prevent them saving and replanting seeds at a later date. As this is difficult to enforce, seeds are now being genetically modified to be sterile after a year in order to protect company’s patents, a process known as terminator technology. While this guarantees profits, an estimated 1.4 billion farmers worldwide depend on seeds saved or exchanged with neighbours. The Chilean Rural and Indigenous Network call this copyrighting or patenting of living things ‘a crime against humanity’.

**Environmental impacts**

The food system has become a major contributor to climate change. The emissions that a typical UK family of four are responsible for each year equals 4.2 tonnes of CO₂ from their house, 4.4 tonnes from their car, and 8 tonnes from the production, processing, packaging and distribution of the food they eat (Sustain/Elm Farm Research Centre Report 2001). As the world heads towards the peaking of oil supply, the extent that our food systems depend on fossil fuel energy will be brought in to sharp focus. Between 1950 and 1990 the world population doubled and in large part it was the much greater use of chemical (oil derived) fertilisers that allowed this. Many millions of farmers in the global south were devastated by increases in oil prices in the 1970s after the ‘green revolution’ had dramatically changed the way that they
grew food through a more industrial model based upon petrochemical fertilisers and pesticides. In 1940, the average farm in the USA produced 2.3 calories of food energy for every calorie of fossil energy it used. By 1974 (the last year in which anyone looked closely at this issue), that ratio was 1:1. Now it is much higher. For example 66 units of energy are consumed when flying 1 unit of carrot energy from South Africa (Manning 2004a).

Meat production systems are very energy and water intensive. Producing a kilo of beef, for example, uses three times the food energy it yields. The methane from global dairy herds has become a major source of human induced greenhouse gas emissions. Methane is a by-product of digestion for cows, sheep, goats and other livestock but it is also a potent greenhouse gas – over ten times more powerful than CO₂ over a hundred year period in terms of its ‘greenhouse’ effect. Global annual methane emissions from domesticated animals are thought to be about 100 million tonnes or about 15 per cent of the annual methane emissions from human activity, the others being production of fossil fuels, wet rice cultivation, biomass burning, landfills and domestic sewage. Scientists believe that current methane emissions will account for over 15 per cent of man-induced climate change over a 100 year time frame (IUCC 1993). It takes almost 800 kg of cereals (used as feed for animals) to produce the meat an average North American eats in a year. This is nearly five times more grain that a reasonably well fed African eats in a year. Arguably a switch to a vegetarian or vegan diet can do more to cut an individual’s carbon footprint than many other measures.

The distances that food travels is a major issue. It can be cheaper to buy at a distant location and bring the food in (despite the cost of freight and shipping) rather than buy from local suppliers. One consequence of this is that a large proportion of road freight moves food around very long supply lines. Between 1989 and 1999 there was a 90 per cent increase in road freight movements of agricultural and food products between the UK and Europe (see DETR 2000). Rather than importing what they cannot produce themselves, many countries appear to be simply ‘swapping food’. In 1997, the UK imported 126 million litres of milk and exported 270 million litres (FAO Food Balance Sheet Database 2001, see www.fao.org). One study has estimated that UK imports of food products and animal feed involved transportation by sea, air and road amounting to over 83 billion tonne-kilometres, using 1 billion litres of fuel and resulting in 4.1 million tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions (Shrybman 2000). Once inside the UK, food continues to clock up food miles, indeed food, drink and feed transportation accounts for up to 40 per cent of all UK road freight (Jones 1999).

Air freighted fruit and vegetables are a particularly fuel intensive and unsustainable trend which has impacts that go far beyond the environment. Millions of workers in
the global South are at the mercy of supermarket production schedules. Orders are dependent on previous day's sales, and so already precariously employed workers lives are dictated by volatile production schedules. There are widespread allegations of worker rights abuses (see for example the Ethical Trading Initiative report, 2003). In Kenya, women work day and night in refrigerated packing sheds producing high value goods such as bundles of asparagus shoots, miniature corn, dwarf carrots and premature leeks, tied together with a single chive. The chives and plastic trays are flown out from England to Kenya where the produce is prepared at low labour costs. They are then air-freighted back to England again, a round trip of 8500 miles (Growers' Market, Felicity Lawrence, *Guardian*, 17 May 2003).

Waste is another key environmental issue related to food. In addition to very wasteful use of oil for excessive packaging rotting food in landfill sites produces methane, a potent greenhouse gas and leachate which can contaminate groundwater supplies. Whilst around 40 per cent of waste produced in the average UK home is compostable, only 3 per cent is composted. This adds to the estimated 30 per cent of perfectly edible food a year that ends up in landfill.

**Health**

Malnutrition, starvation and famine remain huge issues in the twenty-first century. Conflicts and climate change are devastating small-scale food production in the global South. According to Oxfam, the number of food emergencies in Africa has nearly tripled since the mid 1980s. Meanwhile, huge tracts of land in the so-called developing world are used to produce animal feed or other crops for export. Hunger, of course, is not caused by lack of food, but by grossly unequal access to the plentiful food that exists. In the USA, there are an estimated 10 million low-income Americans who do not have enough to eat. People on low incomes are more likely to suffer and die from diet related diseases such as cancer and coronary heart diseases (Food Poverty Project 2002). To get all the calories needed in a day while spending the least money, the best bet is to go for a high fat, sugary diet and avoid fresh salads and fruit, a situation which has widespread impacts on health.

A range of other health issues, from allergies to behavioural problems in adolescents and Alzheimer's disease, have been linked to food. Non-organic vegetable produce not only has less nutritious value but it is laden with chemicals and hormones. A number of substances found in everyday foods are carcinogenic. For example, aspartame, a sweetener found in many foods, has also been linked to leukaemia and lymphoma cancer yet there is very little research carried out into these everyday foods before they are placed on the market. Every so often a food scandal or crisis erupts such as...
BSE, foot-and-mouth disease or salmonella, which hints at the potential time bomb waiting to explode related to the long-term health effects of the cocktail of chemicals and drugs we consume.

**Box 9.1 Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group (H/HEAG)**

In response to a damning report investigating health in Bristol, UK a group of local people set up a project to support residents in taking control of their local environment, food and health. They raised funds to install new school kitchens, and doctors can now refer people for classes on nutrition and cooking. The project also has two gardens - one open to anyone interested in learning about or growing food and another market garden with paid employees that supplies the food co-op shop.

**resistance is fertile**

Developing food sovereignty and taking back control of what we eat have become vital and important routes for action. Across the world, movements in urban and rural areas are fighting for the rights to their land and for food sovereignty. Although there would inevitably be less consumer choice than the artificially high levels we have today, a different food production system which prioritises short supply routes could massively cut greenhouse gas emissions, and is essential in the battle against climate change. Beyond this, if we stop buying these environmentally, socially and personally damaging foods and instead set up co-operatives, ‘grow our own’, build community gardens and support local farmers, then the economic, agribusiness system is starved of nourishment and weakened. Many of the ideas in this chapter are not new, indeed we don’t have to look that far back in to the past to see pointers for the future. Up until the middle of the last century the practices of seed saving and swapping and organic agriculture were all commonplace.

The following sections look at four ways that people are taking back control over the food that they eat and they way it is produced: community food projects, sustainable agriculture, food co-operatives and movements for change.
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Fighting for food sovereignty

The concept of food sovereignty was a term coined by Via Campesina at the 1996 World Food Summit in Rome and is defined as the right of peoples, communities and countries to define their own agricultural, pastoral, labour, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances.

Growing communities: community food projects

Reclaiming land as a community resource has been part of an ongoing struggle around the world. There are many wonderful examples of community gardens, emphasising education, the production of healthy organic foods and also providing a valuable base for community interaction. Community gardens not only fulfill social needs but can also relate to the political formation of movements for social change. In the 1970s the fiscal crisis that gripped the USA impacted heavily on inner city areas. In New York, dismayed by government inaction and the increasing number of vacant lots, crumbling buildings and rubbish strewn streets, a group of people known as the ‘green guerrillas’ began to set up community gardens. By the early 1990s the network of 850 community gardens on abandoned plots of land in New York city.
York had become an important social resource, providing a place to meet and talk, repair broken bikes, play music, and grow food and herbal medicines.

The gardens became catalysts for community development. Once people succeeded with the garden, they went on to other things like fixing the schools, housing, creating jobs, whatever was needed. (Ferguson, 1999)

However by the late 1990s, the mayor, Rudi Giluani, began to pursue an aggressive policy of gentrification in inner city areas. A series of high profile demonstrations and campaigns took place to resist evictions, but today only 50 community gardens remain in New York. However, the idea of guerrilla gardening has spread across the world. Your imagination is the only limitation in looking for places to grow food – railway embankments, back gardens, golf courses, roofs, car parks, overgrown areas, and cracks in the pavement can all become areas to grow edible crops.

Community gardens show that urban food production is possible, but making food accessible to people on a wide scale is a major challenge. Price and convenience are often the major determinants of what people buy and many areas are fresh food

Figure 9.1  Resistance is fertile. Brazil: Indigenous people reclaiming their traditional lands and cutting down eucalyptus trees owned by Aracruz Cellulose

Source: Carbon Tradewatch.
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Box 9.3 Can Mas Deu, Barcelona

Can Mas Deu is a squatted social centre, home to around 25 people on the outskirts of Barcelona. Since 2001 the old hospital building’s finca (estate) which had stood empty for over 50 years, has been reclaimed, the ancient irrigation system has been restored and now the terraces are bursting with vegetables, herbs and flowers. As well as providing food for the house there are over 100 people who are involved in the Horts Comunitaris or Community Gardens. Notices around the neighbourhood invited anyone to take on a plot, provided they were interested in cultivating food organically and prepared to embark on a journey of collective work, learning and skill sharing. There has been a waiting list for plots ever since. It has been an inspiring experience, not only for the opportunity to learn about growing food but also the interchange of knowledge and skills between generations and nationalities.

Figure 9.2 The Cre8 Summit Community Garden, Glasgow, located on the site of the proposed M74 motorway extension

Source: Cre8 Summit.

deserts with no greengrocers. Growing at home in window boxes, containers or small gardens is a vital response. A very small area can supply fresh leaves, beans and potatoes. For many people gardens are a symbol of self-reliance rather than dependence on a system to which they have no control. ‘Ecological footprint’ refers to the amount of land and water area a human would hypothetically need to provide the resources required to support itself and to absorb its wastes. Footprinting is used around the globe to measure the environmental sustainability of an individual, organisation or entire nations (see, for example, www.ecofoot.org). If we are truly
to reduce our ecological footprints, then we will have to redesign both our urban and rural spaces to maximise food production. Below the concrete there is a garden!

**Sustainable and organic agriculture**

Taking back control of our lives involves moving rapidly away from industrial agricultural models and towards sustainable farming practices. Sustainable agriculture is farming that maintains the natural environment and sustains resources whilst respecting all involved, from farm workers and consumers to the animals raised for food. Despite the onslaught of intensive agricultural models some traditional farming practices have survived. The last decade has seen a resurgence in interest from both consumers and farmers and an increase in research and experimentation in sustainable farming practices. Sustainable agriculture is characterised by its emphasis on crop diversity and rotation, favouring small and medium-sized farms and prioritising staple crops rather than cash crops for export. It uses natural systems and cycles to grow crops, improve yields and reduce the needs for pesticides and chemical inputs. Organic agriculture also cuts the amount of oil energy in crops as long as they are produced locally.

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**Box 9.4 Sustainability Cuban style: Los Jardineros Urbanos (Urban Gardens)**

In the residential barrio of Marian in Havana – hidden amongst the concrete is a patch of land lush with vibrant green. The urban garden, one of the first in Havana, started 15 years ago and was given by the government to support the local community. The 2-3 acre site includes a polytunnel, community shop and small research unit. The vegetable beds are arranged in raised strips and full of flourishing vegetables, fruits, flowers, house plants and herbs. At regular intervals along the rows, metal plates are covered in liquid solutions to attract certain insects and deter other pests that might damage the crops. The gardens produce lettuce, cabbages, herbs and peppers all the year round as well as more seasonal vegetables which are given to the local schools and sold in the community shop. Fifty per cent of the profits go to the state and the workers in the garden and shop take the rest. Volunteers come from all over the world to work in this garden as well as Cubans who come for advice on setting up their own community gardens.
Cuba is an enlightening example of a country that has fully embraced sustainability in food production. In the early 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed Cuba's financial support dried up and the country was faced with widespread shortages. With few options to import food given the stringency of the US embargo, Cuba converted almost entirely to an organic, non-oil dependent, production system within ten years. The methods have borne some amazing results, not only in terms of food production but also in the development of a more personalised food culture, woven deeply into patterns of food consumption, nutrition and community. Farmers and urban citizens dedicated themselves to meeting food demands and urban plots and parcels of land that had formerly operated as cane plantations for the sugar industry were turned over for domestic food production. In 2002, Cuba produced 3.2 million tons of food on more than 29,000 urban farms and gardens (Barclay 2003).

Alternative agricultural systems can create more equal relationships between the environment, community and producers. An example which has blossomed over the last decade are Community Supported Agriculture Schemes (CSAs). It is a tall order for everybody to be active in their food production and so CSAs act as a bridge between community and sustainable agriculture. For example, Stroud Community Agriculture in the UK employ the equivalent of one full-time farmer and the 50 members collect vegetables each week and take a share of the meat. Importantly, the consumers share the risk, their regular contributions pay the wages of farm workers, and the yields are shared out equally.

**Food co-operatives**
Going beyond vegetable produce, to drive down costs of ethically sourced staples, such as rice and pulses, and to step away from dependence on supermarkets many people turn to food consumer co-operatives. These are worker or customer owned businesses that provide high quality and value food to their members. Robert Owen, Welsh industrialist and socialist and one of the founders of the co-operative movement, believed in putting his workers in a high quality environment with access to education for themselves and their children. He had the idea of forming 'villages of co-operation' where workers would pull themselves out of poverty by growing their own food, making their own clothes and ultimately becoming self-governing. Food co-operatives are one way of self-organising that have become widespread, along with housing, workers, renewable energy, social care, banking and agricultural co-operatives.

There are a number of benefits to setting up a food co-operative: they can reduce food costs, improve nutrition and allow members to negotiate directly with grower or producer. Large whole food, wholesale co-operatives supply smaller local food
co-operatives and members decide on the pricing of the goods. The ‘Fruity Nutters’ co-operative in the UK add 5p to organic products, but 5 per cent to non-organic goods, thus subsidising organic foods and making them more accessible to people on lower incomes. Any profit from the co-operative covers expenses, and any surplus goes to good causes. Co-operatives can achieve lower prices than supermarkets, not only by buying direct, but also by dividing up bulk orders themselves, thus avoiding the financial and environmental costs of excessive amounts of packaging. Food co-operatives have enormous potential for expansion. In Japan, one in five people are part of a consumer co-operative. In the UK in the year 2004–05 UK health food wholesalers and shops reported a rise of 35 per cent in sales indicative of an increased awareness of health and environmental concerns (Union of Co-operative Enterprises 2006).

Nourishing movements for change
The formation of cooking collectives and community kitchens is another way that food consumption can be more sustainable and sociable. Cooking collectively at social centres, protest camps, mobilisations and gatherings is often done by grassroots, non-profit orientated groups. Unlike commercial caterers they are based on the spirit of mutual aid where people help with chopping vegetables and washing up. There are numerous kitchen collectives across the world that run on these principles. The Dutch collective Rampenplan, for example, have been running for over 20 years and can provide locally sourced organic food for up to 5000 people. Other collectives include the Anarchist Teapot, who as well as cooking for events help to run a permanent cafe.

Box 9.5 Food Not Bombs

Food Not Bombs is a loose network that started in the USA which recycle large quantities of food in this way, cook it up and distribute it for free. It is a radical political act in today’s society to distribute this food and as a result, Food Not Bombs groups have met with massive police repression. By the year 2000 there had been 1000 arrests in San Francisco alone, vehicles were impounded, people were beaten, detained and even jailed for participating in Food Not Bombs. However, in 2000 there were 175 Food Not Bombs groups in the world, distributing food with no strings attached but “as a celebration of life against death.”
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four times a week at the Cowley Club in Brighton, UK providing cheap and affordable food. These infrastructures are a valuable resource to weave food and consumption into our lives, and sharing food together is a time for talking and connecting with each other.

**Freeganism**  ‘We’ll eat your scrap, but we won’t buy your crap’ (Freeganism slogan). The term freeganism refers to a novel and widespread approach to delinking food consumption from corporate control. As one activist put it: ‘It seeks to lessen rampant over consumption, environmental destruction, waste, and exploitation in the developed world’. Freegans get free food by pulling it out of the rubbish, a practice known as dumpster diving, skipping or recycling. Once you have got used to the idea of looking in bins freeganism allows you to avoid spending money on products that exploit the world’s resources, contribute to urban sprawl, treat workers unfairly or disregard animal rights. Ample amounts of clean, edible food can be found in the bins of restaurants, supermarkets and other food-related industries and distributed to a wider net of people. The vast majority is still fine to eat, but has been thrown away due to strict hygiene and stock rotation laws.

Facing up to the limitations

**Access to land**

The benefits of local, community based food production models are enormous but there are of course limitations. Small-scale growing projects demand a sustained amount of time, hard work and initiative from a group of committed people. Finding land on which to grow food can also be a major challenge due to a historic concentration of ownership, restrictive planning laws and the fact that agricultural buildings and land are increasingly more valuable when sold off as second homes or development land than as small-scale farms. Because local production works on completely different principles and strategies than the heavily subsidised economies of scale of industrial agriculture, competing with the international financial food market is virtually impossible. However, as the world moves towards peak oil scenarios, coupled with growing consumer demand and a rejection of the corporate control of food, the possibility of small-scale production is greatly enhanced.

**Changing cultures**

As with all topics in this book, the question of changing our individual desires and expectations is a big stumbling block. Making things accessible and affordable are the biggest hurdles towards changing what people eat. In addition, adapting our
bodies and taste buds to a new diet of food fresh from the allotment, grains and pulses from the food co-operative or strange seasonal vegetables can take a while. Cheap but tasty processed foods are more socially acceptable, largely due to fat, sugar, salt and flavourings, and the fact that they are also intensively promoted by the manufacturers as desirable foods to eat. The key is shifting the culture of food away from a ‘McDonalds culture’ part of which is challenging the idea that children have an innate preference for chips. Despite some successes, like celebrity chefs who encourage schools to introduce cheap, healthy food, many schools remain locked into long purchasing contracts with large, distant food contractors, such as Scolarest in the UK, who have monopoly contracts to ship in processed food. Education about the impacts of the food we eat on the environment and our health is crucial to ensure that from an early age the important issues of eating habits and diet are addressed.

**Turning ideas into reality**

Often, our lack of skills can hold us back in implementing our ideas. In response to this, there are an increasing number of growing projects for children, courses in organic gardening, permaculture and sustainable land use. Learning to grow our own food is a never-ending process as we adapt to new conditions and incorporate new ideas. With co-operation, education and skill sharing enormously successful projects can be created which are nourishing and fulfilling.

**Ways forward**

We are planting the seeds of a society where ordinary people are in control of their land, their resources, their food and their decision making. (Flier handed out at the Guerrilla Gardening event, London’s Parliament Square, May 2001)

In this late capitalist society that has brought so much financial wealth, we are witnessing the devastating impacts of the corporate control of foods and industrial agriculture. In the last decade there has been a wave of popular responses: growing your own food, farmers’ markets, fair trade, co-operatives, seed saving projects, allotments and traditional organic farming practices are all experiencing a renaissance. But there is still a long way to go to make these accessible and relevant to everyone. Despite the enormity of the challenges, connecting food production and consumption together can strengthen, green and nourish our communities. Most importantly, we must remember that our current food system needs to be changed as it is vulnerable, unsustainable and inefficient as well as being directly linked to
wars over oil and global exploitation. *This chapter* has aimed to bring some of these issues into focus and explore alternatives to destructive food practices. It is a call to act – because we are what we eat.

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