# **WAT’s Sustainable? Episode 01 Transcript**

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WAT is up, Waterloo? Welcome to the WAT's Sustainable Podcast, the official podcast of the Sustainability Office here at the University of Waterloo. My name is Jenna and I am the host of this episode. Today in episode one we are going to be talking about WAT is a sustainable food system.

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We are so excited and honestly a little bit nervous to be launching our first full episode of the WAT’s Sustainable Podcast. We hope that it inspires you, it educates you and that you learn a little bit more about how you can incorporate sustainability into your personal life. And if you have any feedback for us about how we can improve the episode, we'd love to hear from you.

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We will start the episode by defining what a food system in a sustainable food system is. Then we will start talking about the problems with food systems and what is making them unsustainable, why this matters on a global as well as individual level and action steps that you can take to promote sustainable food systems in your personal life, plus some resources to help you.

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We also provide many great tips, tricks, and resources for promoting sustainable food systems on our social media, on Twitter and Instagram @uwsustainable, so make sure to give us a follow on those platforms. And if you have any questions, ideas or feedback about this episode or any in the future, feel free to email us at [sustainability@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:sustainability@uwaterloo.ca).

at the beginning of each episode.

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At the beginning of each episode, we want to start with a story, a “Global Hurray” that is encouraging sustainability around the world. We thought sharing a global hurray would be a great way to connect to broader sustainability initiatives around the world.

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For our first Global Hurray, we are going to highlight a story that is very relevant to sustainable food systems. As highlighted in an article on Seed World \*which we will share in the show notes), the global seed sector, who provides seeds for many of our crops around the world, have committed to the Sustainable Development Goals by signing a Declaration to actively support the achievement of these Goals in their sector. The Seed Sector Declaration was signed by seed companies of all different sizes across the world, and has been launched in advance of the United Nations Food System Summit, which is scheduled for September 2021.

Within this Declaration, there are principles set out for the seed sector for achieving global action to support sustainable agriculture. This is especially important for the seed sector to be considering right now, because with the global population expected to reach 10 billion people by 2050, there will be increasing pressures to meet global food demands in the face of climate change and other pressures. Incorporating sustainability and trying to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals through the seed sector, which is foundational to agriculture across the world, is a crucial first step in achieving food system sustainability.

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Let's talk about WAT is a sustainable food system. In order to understand what a sustainable food system is, you first need to understand the definition of a food system. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, a food system encompasses the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products that originate from agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and parts of the broader economic, societal and natural environments in which they are embedded.

So that long sentence that explains a food system is basically saying: everything to do with food, from the food itself to the land it's grown on to the people who harvest and sell the food, and even the consumers like us. All these things are encompassed in a food system.

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So then, WAT is a *sustainable* food system? Well again, according to the FAO, a sustainable food system is a food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that economic, social and environmental basis to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised. There are three components to ensuring this. This includes:

1. the food system is economically viable throughout, so encouraging economic sustainability;
2. the food system has broad based benefits for society, so ensuring social sustainability;
3. and the food system has positive or neutral impact on the natural environment – so ensuring environmental sustainability.

When you're considering the sustainability of food, it's important to realize that sustainability is complex and there are trade-offs. There is no one indicator that successfully or accurately captures whether a food system is sustainable. In comparison, a concept like climate change can be simplified to a certain degree to atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gas emissions. However, when it comes to food systems, there are so many components working together that have to be in balance in order for sustainability to be achieved. And because there are so many systems involved within the food system itself there will inevitably be trade-offs as we strive for a sustainable food system.

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We need to connect all of these points to consider something as sustainable, so we need to incorporate sustainability into the production of food, the transportation and manufacturing of food products, and the consumption and disposal of food products and food wastes.

Now that we understand what our food system is and what a sustainable food system includes, let's talk about the problem: what makes a food system unsustainable? Similar to the definition of a sustainable food system, there is no one aspect or indicator that shows that a food system is unsustainable. There are so many drivers of unsustainability that also may be the symptom of the unsustainable problem itself. In other words, there's no clear-cut issue that we can address to make a food system more sustainable.

However, in general, there are three pillars of sustainability that you can look at to better assess the drivers and symptoms of unsustainability within the food system;

1. Under the social pillar we have growing populations, which means more mouths to feed, which means we need more food. We also have shifting dietary preferences in many parts of the world, specifically towards more meat consumption, a more “westernized” diet in some cases. We're also seeing inequities between overabundance and waste on one hand, and food insecurity on the other. For instance, more than 820 million people around the world do not have enough food to eat yet 33% of our food is wasted globally. In Canada, 60% of the food produced nationally is wasted, 32% of which is avoidable, edible waste.
2. Under the economic pillar, we have food insecurity due to the lack of affordability of food. Also we have malnourishment because healthy, nutritious foods are too expensive, and then we also have worker exploitation and issues around fair wages (if food producers and manufacturers are not being paid enough for the work that they are doing) and we are seeing rapid inflation in parts of the world. Even in parts of Canada where foods have to be imported, the costs are astronomically higher than they are in other areas and therefore people in those communities cannot afford them.
3. Lastly under the environmental pillar, we have issues of biodiversity loss from monocropping, land use change and deforestation. We have run off of pesticides, fertilisers and other chemicals coming from livestock fields and crops, which goes into our waterways and can cause issues like eutrophication (which essentially deprives water bodies of oxygen and kills everything within them). Then we also have issues of carbon emissions (particularly from animal livestock and methane emissions), heavy amounts of water consumption in some localised areas (for instance, almond crops are extremely demanding on water), we have overharvesting which leads to soil depletion and can cause erosion. Soil health is crucial for maintaining our crops and biodiversity long into the future. To understand the intensity of this issue. Right now, it takes 500 years for 2.5 centimetres of topsoil to develop, whereas erosion from ploughing related to agriculture is happening at 10 to 100 times faster than the rate of soil formation. Wrapping this all together, you can see that food systems have a significant impact on our environmental, economic and social wellbeing.

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There’s no simple problem and no simple solution to making our food systems more sustainable. We need to be pursuing sustainability in our food systems, and there's many key reasons for this.

1. One is simply the fact that sustainable food systems connect with many of the Sustainable Development Goals set out by the United Nations that Canada amongst hundreds of other countries around the world are trying to pursue. Specifically, sustainable food systems relate to Sustainable Development Goals number 1, 2, 3, 8, 12,13, even 14 and 15. And you could argue that they connect to many others, but these are the ones that stand out the most.
2. Incorporating sustainability into our food systems and ensuring resilience to climate change. It makes us better equipped to handle droughts, floods, it ensures our food is accessible even in extreme weather events and as the climate changes.
3. It also provides livelihood to millions around the world.
4. Food provides connection.
5. Food is central to culture around the world.

It's clear that we need to be promoting sustainable food systems to ensure our physical health, our mental health and to ensure our communities and the planet can survive for the long term.

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Now that we understand why it's so important to have a sustainable food system, let's talk about some action items. How *you* in your personal life can promote sustainability in food systems. Now as I mentioned, action is complex and there is no right or wrong actions because sustainable and unsustainable food systems are not just black and white. All of that global complexity, from how foods are produced to how they are transported and wasted, that all manifests at the grocery store when you're picking out items. So when I provide some advice on how you can promote sustainability in food systems in the next part of this episode, keep in mind that it is a generalisation because there are so many aspects to incorporate to foster true sustainability. But there are somethings that we all can do to ensure that we are promoting sustainability as best we can.

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To promote sustainability in your life related to food systems, there are few questions that I want you to ask yourself when grocery shopping:

1. When were foods made? Consider the seasonality of produce items. Were they grown in season? If they were grown in season, it's very likely that they may have been grown locally, which can help lower greenhouse gas emissions, makes food items more affordable, and you can stock up on items during those times and can or freeze them so you have access to healthy, nutritious and locally grown foods during colder seasons when those items might not be grown.
2. Where were your foods grown? By purchasing local foods you can help reduce your food miles. A 2005 study by the Region of Waterloo found that the average plate of food in Waterloo Region travels approximately 4,500 kilometres. Reducing the distance that your foods have to travel before getting to your plate can help reduce your personal greenhouse gas emissions and therefore help you promote sustainability. Try purchasing as many local foods as you can.
   1. The term local does vary quite significantly. Some sources would say anything within the Province of Ontario is considered local, but other sources say up to 400 kilometres just because the size of a province or state or wherever you're living can vary significantly. Again, it's also important to recognise the complexities of this, because in some places (especially in Northern regions for instance) it might not make sense to source foods locally when things can't really grow there.
   2. The University of Waterloo is really trying to push for sustainable local food systems on campus: our goal by 2025 is to have 40% of all Food Services food and beverage purchases be produced either on site, locally sourced, or be third-party certified. As of 2019 we were 30.9% to this goal. One of the things that can help you purchase local food items that we are also doing at the institution is to buy items that have the certified Foodland Ontario logo. That confirms that they have been grown or produced in Ontario.
3. What are you eating? For instance, when it comes to meat, are you eating meat everyday multiple times a day because that's how you were raised, you were taught that your plate needs to have meat as a central dish? If so, consider exploring other protein options and the costs and benefits of each. It is important to acknowledge that meat has a large cultural significance around the world in many different communities. That said, there are sustainable ways to incorporate meat into your diet, or healthy, delicious and sustainable plant-based protein options that you can consider as well.
   1. In 2020, the United Nations declared the year to be the International Year of Plant Health, and so this represents a real global turning point towards recognising the benefits of plant-based eating for promoting sustainability. Asking yourself these questions about why you eat certain things and if it's necessary and what you can do to then start changing your habits to be more sustainable is a simple action that really can make a difference.
4. How were foods made? Consider the ingredients or the chemicals that went into the product. Try to buy Organic products, which certifies that a food item has considered the ecological and human health impacts and is focusing on natural, systems-based agriculture. In other words, not using man made fertilisers or pesticides, promoting crop rotation to reduce monocropping and erosion of soils, using plant composting, etc. There's a very rigorous process for certifying and regulating Organic products, so if something is organic it means it is practising these sustainable initiatives that I've mentioned. Also note, for something to be considered organic in Canada there must be at least 95% organic ingredients in it. If it has less than 95% Organic ingredients it can have the word organic on his labelling however the product itself is not considered “Organic.” To promote social benefits, look for products that are designated Fair-Trade. This ensures there is a pricing for the producers, decent working conditions, community investment and the protection of the environment. The University of Waterloo is a designated Fair-Trade Campus as of 2018, which includes all of its residence cafeterias, Food Services-run coffee shops, student coffee shops, the WUSA Caffeine Dispensary and international news, as well as Grad House and Catering Services. However, franchises like Starbucks and Tim Hortons are not part of this certification. Lastly, consider the packaging. Opt for unwrapped or sustainably wrap products with the packaging can be repurposed, composted or recycled. Or consider cooking from home more than taking out to reduce the amount of packaging that you are consuming.

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To wrap everything up, as we have learned food systems and food system sustainability is very complex. However, there are things that you can do in your everyday life to promote food system sustainability. Keep in mind there are trade-offs within the food system, and so it's recommended to try pursuing multiple initiatives to promote sustainability and not just one.

Our final tips for you are:

* eat more plants and minimise your meat consumption;
* opt for whole foods and minimally processed foods;
* reduce your food waste;
* choose sustainable seafood if you are eating seafood;
* choose local, seasonal foods;
* look for credible eco-labels such as Organic and Fair-Trade;
* and minimise your overall packaging by making more of your own food items, opting for no packaging, buying in bulk, and so on.

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We will provide some more resources for you to learn more about sustainable food systems and how you can take action in your personal life in the show notes.

That is all for this episode of WAT’s Sustainable. I hope you all have a great day and we will see you in the next episode!