

*Pascale Aebischer:*

Hello, I'm Pascale Aebischer and welcome to this new podcast from the Pandemic and Beyond team.

Today's podcast is concerned with Community food growing during the pandemic and how it has helped to build the future differently.

My guests today are Les Levidow and Andrea Berardi, two researchers at the Open University, who are leading a project about local food growing initiatives.

In preparation for this podcast, I've had a look at some of the videos that they've produced and I've really been struck by the ways in which the people who've participated in the work, see food growing as part of their social lives.

And I really hope we can hear more from these participants in the podcast but first, Les, could I ask you to tell us more about your project?

*Les Levidow:* Yes, the US project has a long title local food growing initiatives respond to the COVID-19 crisis enhancing wellbeing building Community for better futures.

The project team includes two organizations which support Community gardens, 'sustain' in London and the 'Reading international solidarity Center which runs the 'food for families' program in reading.

Also in the team, the Cobra collective develops a training process for participants to make short films about their experiences in Community food growing we call this digital or visual storytelling.

Shortly after the project began, we decided to structure the training as a course with a snappier title: grassroots visual storytelling about Community food growing.

Many stories show how their food initiative changed during the pandemic.

*Aebischer, Pascale:* So you're saying that the food initiative changed during the pandemic so, can you tell me something more about those changes and what ways did they change?

*Les Levidow:* Yeah, so, we'll go back a decade or more to first explain that Community food growing has attracted more people, inspired cultivation skills, help to build a sense of place and strengthen relationships.

People have shared their knowledge about cultivating and preparing healthy food thus contributing to a wider food culture.

There has been greater evidence that people gain many benefits, including emotional wellbeing, so confidence, cooperative relationships, and mutual learning.

In early 2020, however, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted those initiatives, while also revealing and intensifying the stark social inequalities in our society.

There was even greater interest than before in Community food growing whose outdoor activities were permitted by the lockdown regulations, people were motivated to continue the activities by overcoming difficult challenges and reaching a more diverse range of people.

*Aebischer, Pascale:* So, in your project, you have actual people telling us stories about these changes, but what I'm wondering is how did they go about that, how do they go about telling you those stories and how did you record them?

*Les Levidow:* Oh, it would be initial stories from the project that describe how the pandemic stimulated efforts to overcome such isolation, why sustaining or even expanding food initiatives this maintaining individual benefits such as health and wellbeing - despite the COVID restrictions.

Participants described how they often with their children got to know each other better and extended friendship networks.

The stories show how Community for growing activities bridged social differences of ethnicity national origin and age.

The stories also revealed more profound benefits, while fulfilling their own needs participants felt that they were doing socially useful activities, such as supplying fresh produce the food banks and learning skills for locally produced food. Cultivation skills have been extended to homes, schools and other food growing spaces.

Earlier feelings of being powerless were overcome by a sense of shared purpose, serving a greater good, the opportunity to make a difference and to create a group agency.

One story described how a Community garden became a place to be escape and recover.

The story showed how food activities have been growing Community bonds, strengthening cooperative engagements intergenerational learning skills sharing intercultural exchanges and thus social cohesion.

*Aebischer, Pascale:* I mean that was one of the things that really struck me when I was listening to some of these voices, how diverse they were and to how many different situations they were speaking so I'm wondering, could we just hear a few of these voices from those films now?

*Andrea Berardi:* Absolutely so these are some short clips representing the diverse voices of our participants and, just like the videos that the participants themselves produce, the clips capture of flavour of the challenges that participants face during the pandemics, the initiatives that they took as part of

Community food growing it activities and the impact that it on them and the wider community so let's hear their voices.

*Stories play. 05.53*

Story 1: The Covid-19 pandemic turned everyone's lives upside down. Practically overnight we went from having well-defined routines of work and play – to being stuck at home an being deprived of social interaction, the things you take for granted.

Story 2: Covid has devastating on children in terms of coming back to school.

Story 3: I was homeschooling my three kids full time and then we were like desperate to go out and do something.

Story 4: In lockdown, I was actually worrying what/how we were going to all survive, so I started sending packet of seeds to people's houses and the people[s] reaction was unbelievable everybody started to grow things at home on the front garden, on the back garden, on the neighbour's garden.

Story 5: So it's all kind of looked up with the mutual aid, so it kind of became a really huge first I was like I was just grow to lettuces for the toddler group, and some strawberries, and now it's become a lot bigger and more different people from the Community are coming in, so it changed like in a way that nobody kind of imagined.

Story 6: It was like really a lifesaver to just be able to go somewhere out and be part of a community, be part of a bigger project.

*Andrea Berardi:* There you go, those were the stories from the participants just a lovely diverse range of voices.

*Aebischer, Pascale:* that's amazing and what's really striking here is how the participants actually *worried* about how they would survive and how that worried about the sort of continued existence turned into mutual aid and social interaction. But the other thing that's really striking is how well structured these stories or are so, can you tell me something about how you got people to tell their stories so convincingly, how did they plan and make their films?

*Andrea Berardi:* Absolutely, and before you even take your first photograph or your first video, it's so important to get an appropriate narrative so we did a lot of capacity building within the participants to struck, you know, get this narrative right that it's engaging. A classic approach to a good engaging narrative is to start with a challenge, and then you come in with your idea to fix the challenge of peppered into practice and then the resolution; so trying to encourage participants to create the storyboard we did it through [a] very simple approach, where you put some ideas on posted, brainstorm your challenges, then

your solutions and then how you order these things in a linear way because essentially a story is a linear narrative.

So, once you have that structure, and you have your ideas of the timings of each piece that's when you go out and capture the material because, crucially, when you go into the editing process, the last thing you want to do is spend ages chopping and changing with the video clips so once you have a good storyboard, you're all set for capturing a story.

*Aebischer, Pascale:* Yeah, that's great but is there a particular benefit that participants got from doing this storytelling process, of learning these new skills?

*Andrea Berardi:* Absolutely that's a very good question so participants said that the course gave them a new superpower, so you know they've learned a lot of photographic and video skills, so those were the transferable skills that they could use in any walk of life, but also, it gave them more self confidence in the storytelling process. All participants loved the Community food growing initiatives that they were part of, and they wanted to promote these initiatives to others. And how best to do that through stories? So they were more confident in presenting their experience of their of Community food growing but also they were aware that beyond covert we were facing other major challenges, like the upcoming climate catastrophe and an endless other challenges that we might not be aware of, so there is this understanding of this urgency, or engaging community and building cohesion and building relationships, so they also felt that the actual storytelling process contributed to that so it enhanced the benefits already present in Community food growing.

They said that it was invaluable for meeting other people in preparing the film so already they're interacting through the Community food growing process, but the filming gave them an extra excuse to engage and build relationships and also they were excited by the potential of using tools like social media in further promoting the Community food during initiatives so it's almost like a virtuous cycle.

You know, you do your Community food growing, you capture the digital story, and that in turn creates more Community spirit and more involvement in Community food growing.

*Aebischer, Pascale:* I just love this idea of storytelling as a superpower and I'm wondering what has been, in your view, the importance of storytelling for Community food growing?

*Les Levidow:* As well, even before our project began people were telling stories of a kind - not in this formal digital way - and through our course, then they realize more that crucial role that was already being played by storytelling.

As one participant said during the pandemic, I told the story about a derelict former allotment and so attracted people to clear the space to create a new garden.

And other participants said about the cooperative relationships quote we are powerful, but only if we can tell the stories of our power.

Another participant felt that standard horticultural training takes out the fun, so I want to tell the story that makes food growing more accessible to people.

*Aebischer, Pascale:* I can totally relate to that because I've been really rubbish at growing my own food, and I could have benefited hugely during lockdown from that sort of approach to food growing. But I'm just wondering, how did the participants extend the social and societal benefits beyond the food initiative?

*Les Levidow:* Yes, the group activities strengthen people's enthusiasm social bonds cooperative relationships and cultivation skills for localizing food production. You already heard the excerpt about how one coordinator started sending seed packets to people's houses, so they could spread the seeds and the cultivation activities and that's what happened.

Other participants said we set up a raised bed for Community food growing and then a nearby school began growing food as well it's all linked up with mutual aid.

Another said this increasing recognition of the value of locally produced food and short supply chains meaning chains that avoid the intermediaries between the producing consumer, therefore, the garden and everything associated with it will only continue to grow and become more important as we find our way.

*Aebischer, Pascale:* that's brilliant so, can you just say something more about what the implications are for dealing with the pandemic and other societal problems?

*Les Levidow:* Yes, the participants have gained capacities which can help to build a future different than a return to normal, that is the return to dependence on the dominant AGRI food system run by large companies and supermarket chains.

As the story show closer relationships, strengthen the future basis for more cooperative reciprocal socially resilient practices. Participants described how their involvement, strengthen people's enthusiasm and cultivation skills for localizing food production. The stories also show how the multiple benefits emerged from staff capacities to facilitate those relationships.

As one said, "my aim is to develop group capacity so that they acquire the skills to teach gardening skills and embed the veins among the wider community".

*Aebischer, Pascale:* This is probably the right point to hear from Project Team Member, Fiona McCallister, who coordinates London's largest food grown network 'Capital Growth' and who is based at the food and farming charities, 'Sustain'.

Fiona McCallister: There are other benefits to and the pandemic really highlighted how people coming together to grow food can help respond to issues of food insecurity and poverty in our local communities.

People have become more aware of our fragile food system and the long supply chains, and we've seen the benefit where people have more direct contact with the land and people who grow food. In London those growing at scale on the edge of the city showed incredible resilience and were able to meet a surge amount of the vegetable box schemes. At capital growth we've seen and helps community gardens and urban growth is really connect in with the local communities and respond to the local need ultimately reclaiming bits of I damaged food system and creating more resilience. and food justice in our cities, many community gardens scaled up their production helps communities and access healthy food. And we saw this through our community harvest initiative which helped over 50 gardens grow five and a half tons of projects and 2020 reaching over 6500 families in need. Urban growing also can play a critical role in tackling the climate and nature emergency, for example through increasing biodiversity, creating important wildlife corridors and habitat for pollinating insects. Our latest project at capital growth is investigating how community gardens impact the environment locally cut copulation cool the local climate prevent flooding and create food at a fraction of the CO2 footprint and build resilience. We will be running a program of activities to increase the status and protection of Community food gardens across London develop a new designation for Community gardens alongside practical activities to engage and build the capacity and support.

*Les Levidow:* The digital stories from our project highlighted those processes and their benefits. In this way through the stories Community food initiatives can better identify exemplary practices build on their strengths spread the societal benefits and attract greater commitments.

*Aebischer, Pascale:* I'm really, really impressed with the sheer scale of what you're achieving there and what Fiona was talking about, I mean 6500 families getting produce and the clear link up with the climate emergency that's just fabulous but how'd you how'd you get your people in to facilitate this sort of process, what does it take to make that sort of change happen.

*Les Levidow:* Yes, with the staff. Including the coordinators and to the growers at these food initiatives play a crucial role in facilitating the process. They bring skills, often called people skills to facilitate cooperative creative relationships among the volunteers come from diverse backgrounds here quotes from three volunteers about that capacity. The organizers in Tucson growers are very welcoming they encourage the belief that all volunteers can make a worthwhile and valuable contribution. Regardless of previous expertise or experience. 'For me the most important benefit was the chance to interact with other people, socially, while being involved in a worthwhile activity, followed by the chance to learn new practical skills'. Second volunteer said, 'I think the tutor did a great job keeping us busy with new and exciting ideas and third one said 'the coordinator, has been a great motivator and teacher you're learning so much'. Let's hear from coordinator at the reading international solidarity centre which runs the food for families Program.

*Dave Richards:* Testing relaxed and as the government regulations meant that we could open our gardens because allotments were seen as being a form of healthy our outdoor activity. We began to explore the possibilities of getting one of our new projects or partnership with a local mosque which was

trying to create a community garden in its grounds. So the idea to have all kind of resonance with Islam to encourage the local congregation to become interested in in growing their own food, but then also using the garden as a whole community hub so very much within the kind of food for families remit of encouraging people to see gardens as a space where they could come together to share to make new friends to enjoy all the well-known benefits of being outside. It was unexpected that it would become for me personally a real element in my code survival strategy that once a week going to the site, trying to make my design for a community garden a reality, working with new volunteers, making new relationships, friendships. As well as an opportunity to sort of share ideas to kind of plant seeds around sustainability was really, really rewarding and then, as the months passed as we can see the transformation that the group of us had managed to realize how we turn this sort of scrubby area outgrown with alkanet and all kinds of other things as a vegetable grower, you don't want, as well as scrubby trees.

All of that was cleared and it was replaced by these magnificent oak raised beds and people started planting, kids got enthused when their seedlings came up and then more recently as it's ready to harvest the pleasure of seeing the fruits of your labour really coming to fruition has been just so enormously rewarding and so being part of this sort of video project, this digital storytelling project, has just enabled me to reflect on the past 18 months - to just have my ideas about the importance, the relevance of creating Community spaces where growing food is the key element of what we do.

All that experience has just been sort of reinforced my whole life to forty odd years of Community food growing, that has kind of in a way, really been affirmed by our experience of at the Mosque over the last year and I guess that's very gratifying, and it's been a key point in helping me survive the last 18 months.

*Aebischer, Pascale:* That's a really powerful personal testimony of sort of the transformative benefits of this project are his own life, but also in the life of his entire Community.

I'm just wondering to conclude put for Community gardens to maintain and expand these benefits that have been hard-earned during the pandemic, what further support measures do you think are still necessary, what we need to put in place so that this work doesn't get lost as we move out the pandemic.?

*Les Levidow:* Yes, we just heard from Dave Richards at the Reading International Solidarity Centre, which is one of many umbrella organizations both supporting Community gardens and trying to gain favourable policies for those activities. They advocate several support measures to maintain the necessary conditions so let's hear again from Fiona McCallister at the organization 'Sustain'.

*Fiona McCallister:* And what could Councils and government do to support Community figuring in terms of policies and practice? We've been working over the last 10 years to get London Councils to recognize the many benefits their local urban gardens provide and we've worked to help residents access Council land and support, working closely with many Councils to help them support their local growers to ensure their planning policies protect gardens, and each year re-assess how well the council's are doing against a set of measures.

At London level we've worked closely with the gla to embed food growing into their London wide strategies, including the food strategy, the London plan and environment strategy, and they funded many small and large food growing projects and helps us engage local councils in this agenda.

We recently published a briefing document covering what we think councils can and should be doing to support figuring initiatives and this document sets out four key areas where councils should take action.

The first is taking a cross cutting approach Council should include food growing in public health strategies, food strategies, local plans, and climate and nature strategies. This is especially important for councils as this Community figuring meets many Council objectives and crosses the work of different departments. We'd like to see exploration of figuring on prescription as public health teams work to explore prescribing to see how opportunities for edible planting and figuring out integrated into green spaces strategies. And how enterprise and employment program look at other horticultural opportunities that are growing provides. In Scotland, all Councils now have a duty to produce the food growing strategy, and this is something we're looking closely at to see what benefits, this could bring to other nations.

Secondly, Councils need to build capacity, this is internal and external and we recognize the value and importance in appointing a designated officer to champion food growing, and create clearer pathways for accessing land, as well as links with local networks or key VCS organizations.

This should go some way to help gardens think about longer term funding and to create a viable social enterprises where possible. There are many beacons of good practice across the country where councils are investing internally and office time. One example is Southwark in South London have recently employed two officers to build capacity across their housing estates. And Tower Hamlets in East London, where the public health team supported a local charity for many years to run a local growers network, but we need all Councils to learn from these attacks be given more direction or targets from national government so that this is not another postcode lottery.

Thirdly, we need to increase access to land and assets, we want to see Councils proactively identify land for food growing and make access to land easier. Mapping land and assets is a great place to start, and this could also identify assets such as under or unused glass houses that can be a great base for food growing social enterprises, an example is Growing Communities Dagenham Farm in East London.

And our fourth area is focused on planning policies, we strongly advocate for Community food going to be included in planning policies and frameworks. As it is in the overarching London plan which we can campaigned for, we want Councils to secure and protect land for food growing. We've developed toolkits and guidance to help this be taken forward.



*Les Levidow:* In all those ways, it is necessary to provide continuity for staff who bring multiple skills, especially the people skills. Likewise, continuity for food growing spaces, especially in cities where land access has been squeezed by so-called 'urban regeneration'.

This is often a euphemism for policies that financialise land, remove green spaces and dispossessed lower income people. Our stories highlight the potential for an alternative future which spreads cultivation skills and localises food production.

*Aebischer, Pascale:* That's a really powerful end point to this podcast. Thank you very much to my guests Les Levidow and Andrea Berardi, and all the participants in their project that we've heard from with those very clear ideas about how to plot a better future for food growing in urban and other communities.

And the Pandemic and Beyond team are Des Fitzgerald, Sarah Hartley, Victoria Tischler, Benedict Morrison, Garth Davies and me, Pascal Aebischer.

This podcast is edited for us by Rachel Nicholas. To find out more about the latest Arts and Humanities COVID-19 research follow us on Twitter at PandemicBeyond and to check our website at <https://pandemicandbeyond.exeter.co.uk> to access future episodes of the series and read our blog.

Thank you very much for today, bye.