

## A youth tribune: Using your local food system to make sense of the world we live in

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The definition of resilience is the capacity of an ecosystem to return to a state of equilibrium following a perturbation.<sup>1</sup> Young people today are facing the biggest perturbation of our time: the COVID-19 pandemic. Simultaneously, we are going through one of the biggest ecological crises that man-kind has ever known. We can therefore not go back to the system we had before. We need to be resilient while reinventing our society. This pandemic has created a trauma in the lives of all young people but it has also questioned our relationship to the planet, to its ecosystems and to other human beings. Does this pandemic not arise from our massive destruction of the natural world, and our consumption of wildlife animals that we should perhaps seldom interact with in the first place? From simple actions, the whole planet has now been in some form of lockdown for more than a year now. It has been difficult to see our friends, our family, to travel, to go outdoors, but above all, it seems impossible to project ourselves into the future.

Big questions arise in these moments, such as: how did we get to this situation? What will become of us as a society? What is my place in all this? These questions can drive us young people into existential anxiety. During the covid pandemic young people's mental health notably worsened. For instance, 15–21-year-olds were 30% to 80% more likely to report symptoms of depression or anxiety than adults.<sup>2</sup> When I feel like I'm in a dark period, and perhaps a dark place in my mind, I imagine that there's a small light in this dark room and although it seems far, the one thing that can give sense to my life, is to walk towards that light. What is that light? For me it's

agriculture, culture, and more generally, the agroecological transition. I will tell you why.

### First of all, what is the agroecological transition?

It designates the changing of our current model of food production towards a system which is respectful of humans and the natural environment they work in. The idea is to have a multi-disciplinary approach to solve the issues of a given territory, and to enable it to reach its full ecological, economic and social potential. Its scope of reflection ranges from the individual, the community but also a landscape or a territory.

I will attempt to give a road map of how to engage in food systems, in order to give some sense to our lives, individually and collectively.

### Get to know your local food systems

In order to find solutions for the complex world that we live in today, I believe that it is essential to get to know our local food systems. Wherever you are. To do so it is important to go back to the source of the food, therefore, to go to the farmers and fishermen that feed us.

One of the easiest things to do is to go to our local markets, and to buy our food directly from farmers. This enables us to reconnect to what grows close to us, and to follow the seasonality. It also allows us to meet the people who work with the land and the sea. They have a lot to teach us about our connection to nature and food. Michael

<sup>1</sup><https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/resilience>

<sup>2</sup> OECD. Report: supporting young people's mental health through the COVID-19 crisis. May 2021, PDF.

Pollan<sup>3</sup> coined the phrase “vote with your fork”<sup>4</sup> which essentially means that we eat 3 times a day, and choosing where our food comes from is choosing what world we want to live in. Buying directly from a farmer or a fisherman means your money goes to them, and not to companies that have little attachment to social and ecological sustainability. Eating locally means eating seasonal, which means that your body receives the right nutrients at the right time of the year.

The Mediterranean food diet has been named one of the healthiest and most sustainable diets on the planet, yet it is slowly disappearing. Fruits, vegetables, olive oil and fish have been replaced by foods high in salt, sugar and fat. The World Health Organisation famously pointed out in 2018 that « the Mediterranean diet is gone and we need to recover it »<sup>5</sup>. The reason for this disappearance is highly related to globalisation and the loss of a culinary and agricultural identity in the Mediterranean basin. This, in turn, reduces the traditional know-hows related to a specific land. Eating locally, directly from producers, is a great step to reconnecting with it. <sup>6</sup> It is crucial for us to reconnect with the notion of « terroir »<sup>7</sup> which highlights the relationship between nature and local human societies, between agriculture and culture. « Terroir » is what gives every population and its natural environment uniqueness.

### Get to know your body and mind

The second step to knowing your food system is by putting your body and mind into it. Although it is very interesting to read articles and to talk to people, there is nothing more empowering and profound than working in the field of what you are trying to preserve, protect or promote.

There is a shortage of farm workers all over the Mediterranean and the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened this situation by making it harder for foreign workers to enter many countries<sup>8</sup>. On top of that, we are seeing a general decline in farms being taken over. Young people are clearly not investing in agriculture. For understandable reasons such as long hours, tiring work and small wages. However, what will happen if young people do not engage in their food system? Farms will get bigger, and more machinery will have to be used, bringing us towards a more intensive food production.

There are very simple ways to work in the food system, which do not necessarily involve buying a farm and working there for the rest of your life. You can start by volunteering on farms close to you. Most farmers would be more than happy to have young people working on their farm. WWOOFING (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) for example is a worldwide movement that links volunteers with organic farmers. In exchange for your work you receive a free room and food during your stay.<sup>9</sup> For example I spent 5 months in Chili helping a restaurant owner start a farm to locally and

<sup>3</sup> Michael Pollan has been writing about the socio-cultural impacts of food for more than 30 years and is a Knight Professor of Science and Environmental Journalism at UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. He wrote *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006) and *The Botany of Desire* (2001)

<sup>4</sup> POLLAN, M. 'Each day, you have three votes to change the food system'. April 2010 – *The Ecologist*.

<sup>5</sup> BOSELEY, S. The Mediterranean diet is gone! region's children are fattest in Europe. May 2018 – *The Guardian*.

<sup>6</sup> O-CIHEAM. White Paper, Mediterranean food consumption patterns and health. 2015, PDF.

<sup>7</sup> Vost, P. & Capitaine, Mathieu & Gautier-Pelissier, François & Michelin, Yves & Jeanneaux, Philippe & Fort, Fatiha & Javelle, Aurelie & Pascale, Moity & Lérique, Françoise & Brunschwig, Gilles & Fournier, Stéphane & Lapeyronie, Paul & Josien, Étienne & Électronique, Référence. (2014). *Le terroir, un concept pour l'action dans le développement des territoires*. Vertigo. 14. 10.4000/vertigo.14807.

<sup>8</sup> Christiaensen L, Rutledge Z, Taylor JE. Viewpoint: The future of work in agri-food. *Food Policy*. 2021 Feb;99:101963. doi: 10.1016/j.foodpol.2020.101963. Epub 2020 Oct 9. PMID: 33071436; PMCID: PMC7546261.

<sup>9</sup> For more information: <https://wwof.net/>

sustainably source his produce. We built raised beds, greenhouses, started compost piles and even went through the beginning of a growing season together. I learnt farming and building skills that I will forever keep and use in other projects.

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**Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF)** is a worldwide movement to link visitors with organic farmers, promote a cultural and educational exchange, and build a global community conscious of ecological farming and sustainability practices.

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### Make it part of your career

If you enjoy working on a farm, you can easily choose to become a seasonal farm worker for a few weeks to a few months. This is a great way to learn about the hardships and joys of working on the field, while making money. For example, I worked as a goat herder and cheese maker in the south of France, and I learnt some incredible skills, valuable life lessons, and fell in love with goats! Whether you like animals, plants or both, you can choose to work in wineries, in fruit orchards, in market gardens, cheese making, animal husbandry... If enough young people start working on farms, even if it is just for intensive work periods like harvests or births, it would be a huge help for farmers and perhaps some young people will discover a passion for certain food productions, therefore enabling them to find a fulfilling career!

These are just simple examples, but there are plenty of ways that you can start to invest yourself in your local food system. For several months I worked as a cheese vendor in markets in the South West of France. Working as a vendor on a farmer's market is extremely interesting: it allows you to meet a huge range of food producers (cheese makers, market gardeners, brewers,

coffee roasters) and to have friendly exchanges with them will make you learn about new facets of the food system that you weren't aware of. Furthermore, you will be meeting many food consumers daily - through your clients - that you will learn even more about their expectations and desires. It is important to remember that food systems are a chain, where you go from the farmer's soil to the consumer's plate. Being able to interact with different levels of this chain is extremely rewarding and teaches you about how it works on a social and ecological level.

### Make the food system attractive

Today young people have access to an amount of information that no other generation has ever had. We therefore know that there are endless possibilities to create the life that we desire. In this context, it may seem hard to go towards farming and fishing, as we know that these jobs are difficult and require a big amount of investment in time and energy.

On the other hand, many of us want to feel grounded, close to nature, and connected to something as simple and straightforward as the land. Although we might be interested in farming, we are also interested in many other things. Many of us have multiple passions and taking all of them into consideration can be a very interesting way to re-invent our food system.

To help young people invest time and energy into the food system, we need to make it attractive. We can see that many places in France and abroad are already doing this. To illustrate this multi-disciplinary approach, I would like to talk about one place that really captures my imagination. This place is « La Friche de la Belle de Mai » in Marseille, France.

### Create alternative spaces

La Friche used to be an old factory in the middle of Marseille, and its 45 000 m<sup>2</sup> have been converted into a unique space that combines an urban farm,

a theater, concerts, community gardens, sports playgrounds, a restaurant, a library, museum spaces and a kindergarten<sup>10</sup>. In these spaces you can eat, drink, learn how to cultivate your own vegetables, go to the weekly farmer's market or even go to a conference, a concert or an art-show. In my opinion this is an amazing and smart way to engage young people into their local food system. I believe that young people need such diversified spaces to arouse their curiosity and creativity to tackle new issues. Knowing that close to 100% of the population in the coastal regions of the Mediterranean reside in urban localities<sup>11</sup>. These spaces in the city seem extremely important to raise awareness among young people about the importance of having a sustainable and resilient local food system.



In my opinion these spaces can solve quite a few problems that we face when talking about youth and food production. They create employment opportunities for young people that are interested in agriculture but that need a stimulating environment, where creativity, culture and the arts are alive. The farmer's markets allow farmers and fishermen to be in direct contact with consumers, hence reducing intermediates and increasing their margins. Conferences organized about food production can help sensitize urbanites to key problems and solutions.

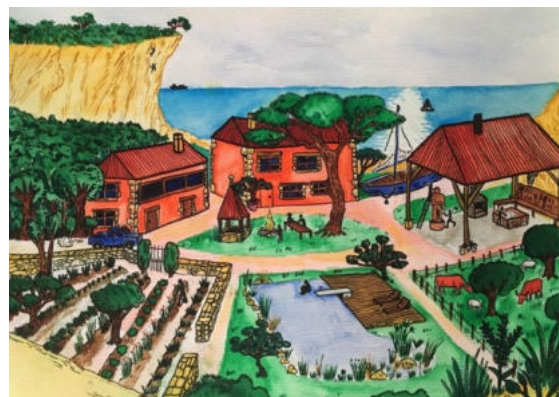
<sup>10</sup> <https://www.lafriche.org/la-friche/le-projet/>

<sup>11</sup><https://www.medqsr.org/population-and-development#:~:text=Close%20to%20100%25%20of%20the,in%20the%20Mediterranean%20coastal%20regions.>

## Use technology

Being a generation of people that are extremely attached to social media, it is imperative that we learn to use these tools to attract young people towards careers in food. In 2019 a study showed that among 4300 respondents from the ages of 16-25 in France, more than 80% had an Instagram account. <sup>12</sup>Nowadays, more and more farmers are using Instagram (and other social media platforms) to communicate and share the ups and downs of their daily lives. "La Friche de la Belle de Mai » is extremely interesting because it creates areas that are aesthetically pleasing, so « shareable » on social media, hence making them popular places to visit and work in. The multidisciplinary nature of these spaces make them attractive, and encourage people to engage in their community and their food system.

## Invest in rural areas



Although these alternative spaces are mostly present in urban settings for now, it seems obvious that we need to create spaces like these in rural areas, in order to attract young people back into the countryside. Rural exodus has been going on since the industrialization of agriculture.

<sup>12</sup> Statista. Percentage of Young French generation using social media platforms in 2020. (online)



Slow Food is a global, grassroots organization, founded in 1989 to prevent the disappearance of local food cultures and traditions, counteract the rise of fast life and combat people's dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from and how our food choices affect the world around us.

Approximately two thirds of the world's population will be living in urban areas by 2050.<sup>13</sup> This also means that by 2030, the Mediterranean Basin will be the global biodiversity hotspot with the highest percentage of urban land.<sup>14</sup> Young people do not want to live in rural areas anymore because they say there is no social life, no culture (museums, concerts etc) and no other young people. But what if we inverted this trend? We need a pioneering youth movement ready to create alternative spaces in the countryside, and therefore make farming attractive.

Considering what we have gone through with the pandemic, too many of us have spent months confined in small apartments, with no access to the outdoors, or even a balcony to feel the breeze and the sun on our skin. Too many of us have asked ourselves the question: why am I living in these conditions? I think that now is the time to invest in rural areas, and in tangible things such as

land, forests and houses, where we can feel like we are part of the place we inhabit.

### Create your own job

Once you have started to understand the food system that you are in, it is interesting to see how you want to insert yourself professionally into it. If there are certain things that you found particularly attractive, or on the contrary you found disappointing or ineffective, it is the time to invest yourself into it! In sociology, work is defined as an "activity which is productive, produces something of value, such as goods or services, which is done with the expectation of reward or remuneration".<sup>15</sup> Work is our way of transforming the world that we live in, and therefore to transform ourselves. In this society and this period where us young people feel lost, work is the best way to find sense in our life. We have been brought up with the idea that we need to work in something that we are passionate about, but truly, what we need is to work where we feel useful!<sup>16</sup> We are going to spend 80,000 hours<sup>17</sup> in our careers. We therefore need to find a job that we find value in, and I believe that making the food system better is one of the best ways to spend a life's work.



**Agroleague** is a start-up that helps farmers gain and share knowledge to better the ecological and economic sustainability of their farm. To do so, we work with passionate agronomists specialized in agroecology, who go directly on the farm, to help implement regenerative farming practices. Secondly, we have developed an App which allows farmers to ask questions to our group of agronomists, to get

<sup>13</sup>[https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/375/unepmap\\_soehighlights\\_2012\\_eng.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y](https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/375/unepmap_soehighlights_2012_eng.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y)

<sup>14</sup><https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007%2F978-94-007-7088-1>

<sup>15</sup> [tps://sociologydictionary.org/work/](https://sociologydictionary.org/work/)

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKlx1DLagEA>

<sup>17</sup> <https://80000hours.org/key-ideas/#impartial-concern>

strategic peer-reviewed answers all year round. Agroleague is a community of more than 900 farmers in France.

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## Be entrepreneurial

Depending on what surprised you on your journey in the food system, you can either work as a farmer, an animal herder, a chef, but you can also work for NGOs such as Slow Food, or for institutions and start-ups that help farmers better their ecological practices such as Agroleague. You can also work on research, to better understand the role and impact of farming and fishing on the environment.

The possibilities are endless, but perhaps the best way to change the world is by creating your own job. Entrepreneurship is a way to use our current capitalistic system to our advantage. When you see a problem, whether it be social, ecological, economic, or a combination of the three, you have the possibility to create a business that can give answers to the problem while at the same time creating value. The value that is created can in turn create a dynamic of employment. A great example is Agroleague, a start-up that started 2 years ago and was founded by an agronomist and an entrepreneur. They have created a community of farmers and agronomists who share knowledge. This gives critical technical help to farmers that enables them to integrate agroecological practices on their farms while being more profitable. Farmers are very interested in these services, so Agroleague has hired young agronomists to be part of the adventure. This dynamic of entrepreneurship helps farmers ecologically, economically, socially while creating a positive source of employment for young agronomists.

## Conclusion

It is crucial to be creative in the ways we find solutions to the problems we face. We are slowly

getting out of this global pandemic and we should lean into the messages of this trauma, to use them to reinvent a new society. I believe that a great way to do so is by engaging in our food system.

The first step is to spend time working on the field, involving our body and mind in different activities. By exploring different paths, we can hopefully stumble upon a career which brings us fulfillment and meaning.

The second step is to re-invent the food system you have found, by being innovative and bringing in other passions you have in life. Using technology can help us make jobs in the food sector more attractive, and bring more value to the producers. Bringing citizens closer to the farmers can be done by creating alternative spaces, which give a sense of community.

Finally, being entrepreneurial and creating your own job is a great way to be aligned with your passions and to give sense to the world we live in. To do so, I believe that we need to be encouraged through education, but most importantly through networks and communities of people who share the same desire to give a sense to the world we live in.

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**Graham Martin** is an agronomist that graduated from 'l'Ecole d'ingénieurs de Purpan' in 'Agriculture and sustainable development'. He gained various field experience in France and worldwide by working in livestock farms and cheese mongers in the Gers, the Hérault region but also in Chili and Peru where he participated in the development of a community garden and compost in deprived areas. After that he joined Agroleague where he worked as a Business Developer to facilitate and help European farmers in transitioning towards more sustainable food systems mixing economic performance and environmental respect. He now works with Wecandoo, a community of artisans that organizes manual workshops where they can gather individuals around a know-how.