Youth Food Justice Transcript

[00:00:00] >>Josena: Hi everyone, my name is Josena and I am a fourth-year student studying Critical Equity Studies and Human Geography at the University of Toronto. Last week, I had the opportunity to record a podcast called Youth for Food Climate Justice. Between fall of 2023 and spring of 2024, Cheyenne Sundance, Aden Fisher, and Michael Classens held six knowledge co-creation workshops with youth in the Greater Toronto area, working at the intersection of food justice and climate justice. The Youth for Food Climate Justice Project was meant to bring youth together to imagine what a more just and sustainable local food system looks like, and to develop policy and program recommendations to get us there. This work was part of a broader initiative, Youth Climate Action in Toronto, a project supported by the University of Toronto and the City of Toronto aimed at developing a strategy to support broader youth engagement in climate action as a part of the TransformTO Net Zero Strategy. As you'll hear, participants underscored the need for deep structural transformation in how we think about food, but also how we think about and reorganize the priorities of our cities. I hope you enjoy.

[00:01:40] >>Michael Classens: Great, so I guess we're gonna introduce ourselves first. So maybe Aden, I'll pass it to you. You can start.

[00:01:49] >>Aden Fisher: Thank you. My name is Aden. I use he/him pronouns, and I'm a recently graduated Masters of Environment and Sustainability from the University of Toronto. My thesis project, which was supervised by Michael Classens and involved workshops that were kind of cocoordinated by myself and Cheyenne. And then we're currently doing some research and teaching at the university still. And yeah, I'm excited to get more into this youth climate action project that we're talking about.

[00:02:21] >>Michael Classens: OK, great. How about you, Cheyenne?

[00:02:23] >>Cheyenne Sundance: Hi, my name is Cheyenne Sundance. I'm not currently in academia, but this is my very first time doing community research work. And I found it so exciting because I thought it was going to be quite boring. It wasn't. So what I do full-time is I'm an organic farmer. I live rural in Mount Forest, Ontario. I also co-founded an amazing non-profit called Sundance Commons, and it's in the spirit of a community land trust as there's four incubator farms, free equipment, free training. And of course, land access is also free. So I've been running that with my best friend and it's slowly but surely gaining a lot of speed. So I got to learn a lot about food and land and how communities relate to themselves to both.

[00:03:08] >>Michael Classens: Awesome. And we'll put links in the show notes to Cheyenne's work, because it's really, really incredible stuff. So my name is Michael Classens, and I'm an assistant professor in the School of the Environment here at University of Toronto. And yeah, I had the pleasure of working with Cheyenne and Aden on this project, along with many other youth that will, and we'll sort of get into that a bit later on. But I thought we could start by talking a bit more about what kind of motivated the project on a kind of fundamental level and really getting at kind of getting at what's wrong with the food system. Why should we care about the food system in the way that I think that we all do? So I don't know who wants to go first. Aden, do you want to jump in on that?

[00:03:51] >>Aden Fisher: Yeah, so I can speak a little bit about this. So obviously for this project we wanted to bring together a group of youth from across the Toronto region who are involved in

food systems work or climate activism work in different capacities. This included student activists who are part of climate justice and food justice clubs, farmers from around the city, food service workers and cooks, as well as community support organization staff. And the reason as to why we wanted to kind of bring youth activists together to think about a better food system in Toronto is because the current modern food system can kind of be understood as deeply ecologically unsustainable, but also socially inequitable. So how I like to think about it is that looking at the food system across all of its stages, so the production, processing and packaging, the distribution, consumption and disposal, we see that the food system is actually one of the largest contributors to the climate crisis, representing about a third of all greenhouse gas emissions globally. And that doesn't even factor in many other ecological issues like the depletion of fresh water, erosion of high quality soil, biodiversity loss. But this is also, in addition to being a very important global issue, very relevant here in Toronto as well as a very dense city, Canada's most populous city. We import a lot of food from all around the world, and actually the city's consumption-based greenhouse gas emissions inventory showed that our food system is the city of Toronto's largest contributor to community-wide emissions as well. And when thinking about how the food system's ecologically harmful, it's also important to think about the strong social inequity that kind of maintains both the labour within the food system and influences who can sort of enjoy the luxuries of the food system. And again, locally we see this here in Toronto where access is not equally distributed when it comes to affordable food, healthy food, culturally appropriate food. We see that our food system is largely intertwined with many global agri-food industries that kind of aim to maximize profits at all costs and in many situations we see this coming at the expense of the well-being of the people who maintain the very food system, as well as inequitable impacts and who can enjoy it. So that's kind of how I see the issues that we wanted to frame within the food system when coming into this work. I don't know if you guys wanted to add anything.

[00:06:36] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, yeah, sure. So just thinking about what's wrong with the current food system. So I'd like the work that you're doing Cheyenne, I think, you know, it seems is motivated by some kind of concern about the food system, because you're literally out there building a different food system, which is real inspiration. So what sort of got you to a point where you thought, you know, I need to just build something new myself?

[00:07:03] >>Cheyenne Sundance: So when I started farming, a lot of people do it through mentorships or job placements, I didn't have the option of either. So with Sundance Harvest, it was very intense, very fast because I started in 2019 September, the pandemic happened, and then all of a sudden there was a lot of eyes on Sundance Harvest. So I had to produce a lot of food. I started with 800 square feet in half of a greenhouse in Downsview and then just about I would think all year and a half after that, I ballooned to 1.3 acres and two heated greenhouses of 2000 square feet each, with also three full-time employees being paid a very high wage close to the living wage in Toronto. So with all of that, I kind of kept going and going and following the thread of what I would see an ethical food system be. Eventually, I saw the emails I was getting, getting stopped at different conferences and seeing how many young people were saying, look, I'd love to join Sundance Harvest, but I'd say I only have so much jobs, but it wasn't necessarily about them wanting to work for me because I'm not the best, you know, I'm not the best farmer. I'm not someone who has 20 years of experience. I'm just, I think, a youth still. But it was rather having a space to grow food and community that was in a dignified way. Currently, Ontario doesn't have any land access incubator, farms. There's of course farming organizations, but they are not putting any energy toward creating an incubator farm or community land trust. It's largely policy and paying large salaries to people who write those policies. So there's nothing really being done for young people who want to farm. And I was just getting very overwhelmed with the amount of

emails again that I was getting saying, can I have some land access at your farm? So I decided with my best friend to start Sundance Commons. And really the idea is to democratize land access in a way that's extremely fair. So on our board, it's made up of primarily farmers. We have new bylaws coming out that also state that the farm members have to have a lot of decision-making power. And currently we have four farms with new ones on the way next year. I can't announce anything. But we're diving into things now like housing, right? On the farm, we're in a very affordable rate and maybe community-managed spaces like maybe an orchard or maybe an apiary and things like that. And we're one year old. So I think my progress was starting is rapid and very fast, but it's because I'm getting the same answers and questions that lead me to where I am today, which is what's happening with the food system and how can I be a part of it?

[00:09:43] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, I think this is why we're so lucky to have you be part of this project, Cheyenne, because I think one of the themes that kind of emerged from this work is how, um, youth in particular are, um, not finding the answers they want and things that already exist. So they're going about building these things that they want to see, you know, the fancy kind of academic word for this, I guess, is prefiguration, uh, which again was kind of a theme of this, uh, of this work. But I think, you know, these issues of land access, you know, are always key, access to capital, housing, you know, it's, you know. I think Aden, you did a good job as well of talking about the kind of interconnected nature of the food systems issues that we're kind of facing. So it's not just about food access, but it's this kind of intersectional approach about thinking through things like, yeah, you know, age and class, gender, you know, et cetera. So clearly there are a lot of issues to be addressing in the food system. And that's partly what motivated this work. I thought maybe next we could just talk a bit about what we did and I'll sort of preface that by saying that the project that we did is part of a broader project called Youth Climate Action in Toronto that was an initiative of the City of Toronto and the University of Toronto that really wanted to kind of engage youth leaders in thinking about how we can address the climate crisis and how youth can be more engaged, by the city in particular in climate action. And so this project is co-led by Dr. Laura Tozer and Dr. Grace Nosek at University of Toronto as well. And we were lucky enough to sort of do a kind of sub-project of this broader project that focused specifically on this intersection of climate justice and food justice because we know as we've just discussed these things are so sort of intertwined. So maybe we could just describe. Maybe Aden, I'll start with you again, a bit about what we did in this project.

[00:11:44] >>Aden Fisher: Yeah, so like you mentioned, our goal within the kind of youth climate action project was to kind of better understand engagement between youth in the city who are working at the forefront of food and climate issues, specifically in relation to social justice and social inequity, and try to understand that relationship to the city government specifically in the context of food and climate. So when we brought together this group of about 17 participants for six different workshops, we figured that youth were a very important group to engage for kind of two main reasons. The first is that youth have been traditionally excluded from decision-making issues, particularly around things like food systems and climate change, and we know that youth engagement and participation is particularly important to these issues considering that these are often very long-term ecological challenges that will be impacting youth beyond the current years and then also the fact that youth have also been seen to be very often at the forefront of these social movements around transforming our food system and addressing the climate crisis meaningfully. And like I mentioned the kind of intertwining of food and climate with movements that center social justice. I also think we've seen youth movements specifically addressing that at the forefront in comparison to older generations as well. So when we ran these six workshops with the youth participants, we kind of wanted to take an approach that started very broad and

then narrowed in as we got further into the sessions. So we started off with just kind of basic introductions where yeah, people got the chance to introduce themselves, their roles within the food system or their work as it relates to food and climate activism. We then kind of went into just what people thought as broad visions for a better food system in the Toronto region. What would it look like? Where would we source that food from? What would those farmer -consumer relationships be like? And we wanted to intentionally keep that broad to not limit ways of thinking that are restricted to maybe like the jurisdictional capabilities of the city. And we know that there are those types of sort of constitutional barriers when looking at what the province can do versus what the city can do versus what the federal government can do. But we wanted to keep it broad intentionally so that we could really work towards what we saw as a holistic vision for a better food system in Toronto. Following this, we then went into kind of talking about general attitudes, perceptions, and relationships towards the state. This was the third workshop session where we kind of delved more into to what degree do the youth activists genuinely feel trust towards the government, genuinely feel that the government has their best interest in mind and that they will meaningfully address food system and climate issues. And then that was actually very helpful to have that discussion and kind of align everyone's values and views towards the state to then those next two sessions where we narrowed those broader visions of a better food system in Toronto into kind of specific recommendations, policies, programs that we thought would actually help us progress towards that. And that's kind of what those last few sessions were where we went over these visions and obviously would go over them recurringly in the different sessions to make sure that we were getting a good grasp of what the youth participants were saying. And yeah, we can get into that as well, but do you guys have anything to add about the sessions?

[00:15:43] >>Cheyenne Sundance: So I think you did a really good job of explaining what we did, very thorough. Secondly about my point is I think I want to talk a bit about on the macro level what we did beyond the great on the ground work and the tangible results that we've gotten from this. What this process reminded me of was a way cooler town hall. I don't know if you've ever been to town halls but I'm now in a rural area and I have to go because I know they will make decisions and I'm like, I don't want you to rip out all the lilacs on my street just because you wanna build a wider road. So town halls historically have been reflecting of homeowners and these people with generational wealth. And what I really liked about these sessions is it wasn't just a one and done because I'm learning with town halls, that's just it. It's a day and it's a time you talk for two minutes and then you gotta go. But instead it was numerous sessions and throughout the sessions, it was a longer period where people got to sit together. They weren't just made into a line and just talk and then leave, but they actually got to sit in the same room, hear other people's voices or thoughts and then reflect on that. And then the next session, they can build on that more and more. And I found that was a very authentic and really beautiful way to express yourself in community. You got to have this group of people who you've met and then you saw through all these different weeks, all these different months. And at the end, you got to share this experience together. And I found it very interesting to see maybe some people were more shy at the beginning and then they really opened up at the end. And then our ideas that were once seeds really blossom into the fruits of the labour that is these sessions.

[00:17:23] >>Aden Fisher: Yeah I think that was a point I wanted to mention as well that there was definitely a bit of that nervousness in the first maybe two sessions where people didn't know each other as well. But then as we got into it you could see that those who were a bit more quiet or maybe would just kind of write down their answers on sticky notes were actively participating more and were chatting with people that they weren't familiar with prior to those previous sessions so I think it was really great that we had the the six recurring sessions.

[00:17:53] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, I mean, me too. I, you know, I really value, you know, I guess we should also mention we had food at these things as well. They lasted sort of two to three hours and we had food and it just felt like, um, just a conversation, right. Among, among allies, really. We should also mention too, that, um, you know, of this group that, that sort of like willingly participated in these discussions, you know, we had farmers like Cheyenne, we had, uh, there were like activists and advocates, and advocates for food justice. There were some chefs. There was, you know, so people sort of representing kind of across, across the food system. So it was a really like rich and diverse, I think perspectives that were shared. And yeah, I mean, it was the favorite part, you know, so we held these sort of last year and it was like each one of those sessions. I just really look forward to it. It was kind of the favorite part of my, of my week to get to sort of continually have these ongoing discussions with this group of people who were all committed in one way or another to realizing kind of a more just and sustainable food system. Um, but I mean, I guess that gets into like what we heard, you know, um, again, we had these many, many hours of discussions with this group and, and kind of, as Aden Fisher said, move from this broad vision of what a just and sustainable food system looks like all the way through down to like very discreet kind of policy and program intervention. So, uh, Aden, maybe you can kick us off just in terms of like what we heard from this group.

[00:19:17] >>Aden Fisher: Um, yeah, sure. So as we kind of went through the sessions and we're kind of collectively discussing what that better food system would look like, as I mentioned, we got kind of more into specific ideas for what could actually be actionable in the city of Toronto, and then through that kind of grouped it into eight broader ideas that we wanted to present as part of the Youth Climate Action in Toronto Project. So just to go over a couple of these ideas here. One of the main ones was just the need for more third spaces in Toronto. This would be sort of non-privatized, non-commercial spaces where people can actually gather and cook together and just spend time together, without needing to actually spend money or be a consumer in some way in order to be allowed to be there. And this was not only just more cooking and gathering spaces and community centres, but asking to add more communal spaces and new developments, particularly new high-rises around the city. And also the need to actually reduce policing in a lot of these community spaces and just decriminalizing the use of space in general. So the third spaces was a topic that we saw come up a lot and just the need to have these kinds of spaces where people can gather and not feel like you need to be spending money to be allowed.

[00:20:43] >>Michael Classens: I mean, maybe we can just stop on this one because intuitively this might not feel like it's necessarily connected to food or climate justice, talking about third spaces. Cheyenne, I don't know if you kind of have any reflections on this idea of third spaces because I know, you know, you talked very eloquently in the sessions about this. I don't want to put you on the spot, but yeah, I mean, why are third spaces important to thinking about food, you know, food justice?

[00:21:13] >>Cheyenne Sundance: So, third spaces are very interesting because in comparison to a vegetable farm, who's going to go to a vegetable farm? People who have the skills to become workers or people who maybe collectively are growing together. But a third space in a way that has access to food or access to food and land will allow more people who may even be interested to go in. I think there's also sometimes a fear, at least for me, to enter a new space and activity because I don't really know anyone. I don't really know what to do. For agriculture in particular, and of course, I'll get into food, that's a big hindrance to a lot of people getting started. And when I think about when I made my first kimchi or sauerkraut, I will say I was very nervous. I watched a

lot of YouTube videos. But what if I could go to a space that I didn't have to be nervous, that there's maybe cookbooks I could read, and there's people using the space as well, and I could make conversation. And in terms of loneliness and youth and feeling like you're chronically online, because sometimes we are, being able to go to a space like this, you'll have a common denominator with someone, which is literally, why are you here? Are you cooking? Oh, that's really cool. Are you in the community garden? That's also interesting. And I think that is one of the ways to bridge the gaps. And I could see that through our sessions, just not saying it's a third space, but new friendships have formed. And it's because there was a common relationship and connection. And way before, decades and decades ago, we had those places, right? There was much, much more third spaces, but with the commercialization of our cities, we're seeing them dwindling and dwindling. We're also seeing less spaces that are made available for young people to go after school even, right? And then that's when we get silos and we get young people saying, well, I don't know if I can grow food. I don't really see myself doing it. But what if they could go to a space that they could see many different people of all walks of life cooking or making or sewing even, or even just tending the land as well. So I think third spaces are very important for also youth mental health, but for the future of our cities.

[00:23:13] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, see, I said you spoke very eloquently, but thanks for sharing that again. And I think what you paint is just such a lovely image of what the city could be, right? I mean, how we could arrange space in the city in ways that it isn't just about kind of consumption and commodification. And I think that that really resonates, particularly in the context of food, because food as a right is something technically that exists in this country. Although, um, you know, in practice doesn't. We know that food is available to those who are able to afford it in the same way that space, access to space in the city, is available to those who are able to afford it. And I think this maybe bridges nicely Aden into the second theme, maybe, if you want to.

[00:24:07] >>Aden Fisher: Yeah, so after we talked a lot about third spaces, we then kind of got into discussions about wanting to reduce corporate control within our food system. And this was something that came up in so many different discussions, whether it was about limiting corporate grocer and fast food advertising across the city, increasing quotas both within public institutions but also within private grocers for how much local food they procure and from where and under what growing conditions, as well as just establishing long-term supports for local food producers in the city not one-time grants or a one-time rebate but actually sustained funding so that people growing food in the city feel economically secure in that role.

[00:24:57] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, I mean, Cheyenne, I don't know if you if you have any thoughts on this, because you're sort of living this fight right now in some ways, right? I mean, you are not a large corporate entity. You know, but you're you're you're supplying many people actually in the province with with food.

[00:25:12] >>Cheyenne Sundance: So my farm itself, we're obviously a corporation, we're a business, but when I started the farm, I looked at other larger scale farms for almost advice, not asking them, but I would look through, you know, their websites and see what they do. I would watch some videos when they did talks. And I would look at very, very, very large scale, you know, like hectares and hectares, because there was stuff I could learn from it in terms of efficiency. But then obviously I saw things I wanted to not learn from that. And the biggest thing for me was paying a living wage. And next year, we officially are paying all of our employees a living wage, which is like 25 and five cents in Toronto for our one Toronto farm and like 21 in Mountain Forest. So I wanted to do this because I felt like it was extremely important to value my workers' work,

but also it just creates so much health within the farm, not just with the land, but they stay. People tend to stay and when they're staying at a place of work they have greater economic power and with that power they can buy food and a lot of great people have spoken about this, but you know food insecurity as we know is not caused by a lack of food is by a lack of income and when wages have been stagnant for so long and not raising with inflation people often blame workers. They're like oh you should just save more you should budget stop getting Disney Plus when none of this actually changes anything for workers, what changes if it raises, go up with inflation. So in terms of corporation and corporate corporate control, I think that's a big piece. We look at the boycott of Loblaws, people banding together and doing something for that. And you know, Galen Weston, I don't think he really cares a lot about people, but he cares about his bottom line. And I think that's one of the ways that the workers and the people can boycott these large corporations and get some control back because they do have to listen at a certain point. Aside from that, I think taking away corporate control from the food system looks like creating other spaces. For so long, we've seen young people leave the charge in food justice lately, in the last decade, I would say, but also see that they have answers. They're seeing what there is a void of, and they're trying to create that. And at least that's what, for me in my life, I was like really tired of being fed these like bland little options, and I wanted to actually make something fruitful and fun and exciting. And that's why I did what I did with my friends. So I think the future of food and corporate control and agriculture looks like, of course, looking at the efficiencies, but seeing what's actually harming the planet, the people, and of course, our communities.

[00:27:47] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, that's great. You know, and you touched on a lot of things that I think that speak to the kind of interconnections of sort of struggles for food justice and sustainable food systems, climate justice and other kinds of social struggles, right. So you talked about income, for example, I think Aden, you raised earlier that, you know, a lot of the folks that we had these conversations with talked about things like defunding the police, in order to free up budget to fund other things, right. So this kind of like intersectionality, I guess, of the food climate justice movement was a pretty resonant theme, and I don't know if you want to just talk a bit more about that.

[00:28:26] >>Aden Fisher: Yeah. I think the interconnections between food and other social struggles was, again, a huge thing that was discussed so much in these workshops about how food security is not just about, yeah, being able to access food or it's also economic security and it's also climate justice and it's increasing the minimum wage and creating the communities and the food system we actually want to see and addressing the many social inequities that are a consequence of the modern food system. And I think that what Cheyenne was saying in regards to the corporate control of the food system, I think that this was another huge point that came up a lot in the sense that in terms of how the food system is governed in Toronto, we see very little jurisdictional control from the city government itself. And as a result of that, they don't tend to make too many major food policies. And we actually mostly see the majority of food policy coming from the provincial level. But even then we haven't really had many updates to like the Local Food Act, which came out in 2013 or the Circular Economy Act in 2017. Since we've had this new government in Ontario, we actually have seen very little progress on that, but what sort of, a lot of these initiatives around the food justice and climate justice movement are coming out in is this idea to kind of strengthen and support local agency around food and climate issues that exists outside of government spaces or the private sector, at least the corporate agri-food industry. And I think that this actually became another really central topic was that if you can strengthen that local agency within the food system you can create food systems that build these strong relationships that pay people well and are good for the planet, then we actually have more

leverage in these discussions with the government and we have more power to actually get them to sway their policies and their practices towards what the people actually want. And I think that was a huge finding from the workshop was that the youth activism around food and climate justice is not simply protesting to beg the government to implement better policies and better programs, but it's actually, when we were talking about prefiguration earlier, prefiguring the changes that we want to see and the kind of farmer-consumer relationships, the kind of food waste and food procurement practices that we would want to see in a better food system in Toronto.

[00:31:11] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, I can plug your Master's thesis here, but you talk about, there's a kind of like pragmatism. And I think Cheyenne, you actually, you're like a great example of this where you work with the state and you're very adept at grant writing and finding programs of support, et cetera. But also, maintaining some distance, right? And sort of still kind of doing your own thing, right? Through these various initiatives that you have on the go. And we've heard that I think a lot as well, right? That people are kind of somewhat skeptical of being completely incorporated into the fabric of the state. And so they want to maintain a little bit of a distance because they don't just want whatever their actions to become watered down or sort of somehow regulated by a large sort of state bureaucracy. Cheyenne, I don't know if you have any reflections on that. Yeah, okay, I see you shaking your head. Sure, go ahead.

[00:32:09] >>Cheyenne Sundance: Yeah I think something that's made me feel a bit sad in the little bit is seeing that a lot of youth are seeing being perfect as the enemy of good and they're not trying things and there's a lot of idealism and purity politics of saying oh you got a very large grant from the Ontario government for this non-profit that provides free land access equipment and training? Oh you're a sellout when I'm like who would have gotten that money? There's so much money floating around from banks that suck, from corporations that suck, and from the government that mostly sucks. So the money's floating around, someone's going to get it. And I think for me, I think it's because I grew up very working class. I don't just say, okay, bye money. I say the money is going to be in our community because we can do really cool stuff with it. And you know, the non-profit I work with that I wrote so many grants for this year we got a grant from Maple Leaf, from the Ontario Trillium Fund, from all these different organizations that people might be like, whoa, I don't like them. I don't either. But at the end of the day, I can like parts of them. And that's good enough because I can't sacrifice, you know, other people's futures for my own purity and for being pure and good and being put on a pedestal and people saying she did it all right. No one in history has done everything all right. I know saints are great, but they've had downfall days, you know? So I think for me I would rather see someone try and make something kind of cool and learn from it and then just keep getting better rather than saying, I can't accept a grant from RBC. I'm not going to be a sellout. Well, who is losing this battle? It's the land, it's the people, and it's your community that could have got that half a million dollars and really had an amazing maybe small housing development on a communal farm. So there's so many things that I think about, but that's something that I've been thinking about lately. And I think that's why the Commons is blowing up so fast, because there's been a lot of people I've talked to not wanting to do what we're doing because they're afraid of taking money from corporations and how they're being perceived. I think I've always not really cared how people perceive me. And that has led to the success of my work. So I would like people to take more risks, but also do it with, you know, if you get money from these corporations, do something radical with it. I've never let a corporation tell me, even on a gigantic grant, what to do. I write what I'm going to do. And they say yes or no, they can say, this is a bit weird, we're not going to let her do this or they can say we read it that's

cool just be honest with yourself and try not to water yourself down and eventually they're going to say yes because you're doing a really cool thing that they want to get behind.

[00:34:43] **>>Aden Fisher:** That's actually a really interesting point. Have you found in your experience ever that these large either banks or businesses will try to like influence your work in some way or try to hold this over you that they've given you this kind of funding?

[00:34:59] >>Cheyenne Sundance: Yeah, I can say with my own business this has happened, mainly with like larger, very, very large corporations. They want to do, you know, photo ops and stuff like that. I sometimes say, oh, I'm busy or I have a cold. So that happens, but I've always made it very clear when I write these grants, when I write up the about Sundance, I list kind of what we do and our ethos and our values. And if they say yes, then they know everything. I've never hid anything. That's why my Instagram is still a bit controversial. So I'm pinned posts about talking about wages and Galen Weston, how he sucks and all these things, and they look through my Instagram cause I add it on my applications. So they know what they're doing, but are they at the end of the day, if they weren't pushing back against me, I probably wouldn't stop because there's just so much funders out there and there's so little projects like Sundance Commons and even my own business that they're looking to fund this. I'm getting, you know, the non-profits getting emails from funders letting us know to apply for a fund. And we don't even know these funders. So I think a lot of young people should see this as an opportunity. Community wealth and that wealth can spread not just through financial means but land and food and experience. And also like paying elders for their time and honorarias and all these things that they can do.

[00:36:18] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, that's, you know, the thread here, of course, is this really creative way of using resources that are available, even if they aren't, as you said, sort of pure and perfect. But using those resources from the state or the corporate sector, maybe, to experiment and implement solutions. And I think that there was a lot of discussion about this as well in the group about that, you know, where the sort of rubber meets the road, so to speak, how do we actually build something different? And there were lots of great ideas that were shared there about sort of building these kinds of networks and initiatives for food system cooperation and resilience and sustainability. Aden, I don't know if you want to sort of just talk a bit more about some of the things that we heard in that context.

[00:37:19] >>Aden Fisher: Yeah. So I think what we're kind of talking a lot about is the relationship between people's principles around a better food and climate system, but then also people's sort of tactical responses and then how they go about it. And I think what Cheyenne is kind of referencing is that sometimes activists can be very principle-oriented and then will refuse to engage with companies or sources of funding that they see as kind of going against their values and therefore they cannot engage with it at all. But what we actually found in these workshops, a large theme, was that even though there is still very much a strong principle of institutional distrust and feeling that the state and its corporate agri-food affiliates are to a large extent kind of uncaring about the horrible effects of the modern food system. But that this sort of distrust does not just result in kind of giving up in any sorts of collaborations at all or resulting to kind of farright libertarianism or anarchism. But rather there's actually a very kind of instrumental response to the political landscape where these activists recognize that they're, at least in terms of their principles, are very misaligned with a lot of the governing bodies and a lot of the companies that control our food system, but they recognize the urgency in addressing the climate crisis and also helping people's day-to-day like lived realities, which I think is a lot of what Cheyenne was getting at is that yes, you can talk about how you don't want to take money from these certain

institutions, but the reality is if you can maintain the majority of control on your projects, and you are doing things that are helping people live better lives materially in terms of their incomes and if they can afford to put food on their table, then there is a need for that kind of political instrumentalism, despite that distrust. And I think talking about those networks for food cooperation and resilience was a huge part of this, that we want kind of more data that outlines jobs in Toronto's food landscapes, starting up companies in terms of growing and redistributing and disposing of food, more training opportunities and having community food representatives in each City ward that can actually communicate and create these food system cycles that are local within the city.

[00:40:00] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, so, you know, this is and we should say I mean we're recording this like a day after the election in the US. So I think trying to look for hope and optimism is is maybe something worthwhile doing at the moment I think what you've just described Aden, is that is you know people, yeah, I mean using these tools they have access to to try to you know build something. You know, it's maybe not perfect maybe it's not a long-term solution, but it's doing something now, and this idea of just kind of trying to sort of inch things forward, inch things closer to, you know, something a little more sustainable, a little more just, etcetera. One of the things I wanted to see if we could touch on is, cause of course we're talking about food in the city, right? I mean, all these youth were, lived in the city, are in the city. Our focus was on the urban area. And so some of what we wound up talking about inevitably was reimagining what the city looks like. So the, you know, everything from sort of like boulevards to golf courses, to urban parks, hydro corridors. Um, and imagining what it might mean to sort of grow food there. Um, so I don't know, Cheyenne, do you want to sort of jump in on that? Cause I know that access to land is obviously like one of your areas of, of expertise.

[00:41:29] >>Cheyenne Sundance: Yeah, so during these amazing sessions, we spoke a lot about kind of more permanent structural solutions to the issue of land access. Of course, people can farm in their friend's backyard, but that's not available for everyone to farm in that one backyard. So something that I found was very interesting is when it was brought up of having a large community farm. I love Black Creek Community Farm. I think it's so cool that it's very large. They have chickens, they have this market garden, and it's like a fully-fledged farm. You'd see that in a rural space in terms of how big the acreage is. Why don't we see more of that? We're seeing with Flemmo Farm, which is a new farm that happened in a hydro corridor in the east end of the city, that is so much space that we could use these hydro corridors. So I think what I would love to see in the future and what I've heard from the sessions is more of a set location. A set location that isn't going to be developed by a condo guy like in a couple of years, but a location that's gonna be held either by a non-profit or an organization that has a long-standing history of doing food justice or food-based work. We see that, you know, with Malvern Urban Farm, with the food chair at their Burnham Thorpe Collegiate Farm in Etobicoke. There's many examples of this, but there's not enough. Because we're gonna see there's a big desire to farm in the city still. I know that seems like a, you know, very silly to say farming in the city, but this is one of the ways for young people to actually realize they like agriculture. Through our programming at Sundance Commons, we realized we can't just only have rural sites because what if someone doesn't drive, what if someone's just like a bit uncomfortable going out of their way and maybe living in an area that people don't really look like them? And those are all valid reasons. So we have a location at Woodbine Racetrack where those horsies are running a lot and they're racing, it's very cute. And that location is our educational farm. So it's transit accessible, and we have some space for people to grow and learn how to farm, but also sell their vegetables. And that location has been such a hit because again, it's so close to the city. So I would love to see more examples of permanent

structures that are farms that have options for land access. And I'm not really talking about community gardens here. Obviously they're great. There's a lot of community gardens example and very little incubator farm examples in Toronto.

[00:43:56] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, Aden, I don't know if you want to add anything, anything to that.

[00:43:58] >>Aden Fisher: Yeah, I mean, green space kind of vegetation change was recurring in a lot of these workshops. A lot of the things Cheyenne was talking about, converting these just kind of grasslands that are the hydro corridors into spaces that the nearby communities could actually manage themselves. And a lot of what we were talking about in regards to, I mean, green space vegetation change, but also a lot of these other things was actually just having a lot of deregulation in some ways and restraint in others on the state's part, whether that be making it easier for communities who live near a park to actually want to convert a certain section of that park into a growing space or allowing more communities to do curbside planting out front of their properties in a way that the city won't just come and destroy it because they didn't do it with the proper city permissions and the permits for that. But also providing more education on safe forging in the city and decriminalizing those who are foraging safely across the city. So we see in a lot of different ways that there really just needs to be less bureaucracy that obstructs people from trying to make the changes that. they know that themselves and their local communities want to see in Toronto.

[00:45:26] >>Michael Classens: Um, yeah, I mean, there's so much, I think a distance to go in terms of, you know, I mean, clearly I see like Toronto, we will never be able to grow all of the food that we eat like in the city necessarily, but certainly we could grow a lot more and I think ultimately, um, it would be useful to have some kind of like paradigmatic shift in how we think about what the city is. Um, you know, sometimes it feels like we have a long way to go, you know, we're right now in the midst of, uh, Premier Ford talking about ripping up bike lanes, for example, all along Bloor, bike lanes I ride on every day to get to work, as do thousands of other people. So, sometimes it feels a little bleak and like there's not a ton of hope when we're kind of going backwards in some respects. But again, speaking personally, I mean, this is why I felt like it was such a rewarding project because I felt like there was just a lot of good energy and a lot of enthusiasm in those discussions. Um, and a lot of, I think, great ideas as well for how those who govern, so whether it's the city government, provincial government, uh, can sort of better work with youth in particular and kind of have that inform the kinds of policies, uh, that ultimately are, are sort of realized. So, um, Aden I don't know if you know, maybe, yeah, you want to talk a bit about some of the ideas that were generated at these sessions in terms of kind of city community engagement.

[00:46:58] >>Aden Fisher: Yeah, so particularly after that third session where we kind of as a group discussed, all right, what attitudes and perceptions do we have towards our respective representative governments? Do we trust them to really address a lot of these inequities that exist within the food system and in regards to the climate crisis. And we got a lot of great insight around how a lot of youth organizing around food and climate issues in the city want us kind of fundamentally different way in which the city government and larger governments are engaging with them. This includes, you know, increasing transparency and accountability in regards to like how decisions are made, removing a lot of that like kind of hidden decision-making processes, and kind of going away from this idea that one kind of ward representative for an area that has uh... tens of thousands of people is not sufficient for making community development decisions. So we

see that a lot of the youth activists wanted a lot more transparency from the city about how their contributions to climate change are fueling what we know to now be this kind of global climate crisis as well as how their decisions around zoning and food landscapes and food accessibility is actually impacting the health and realities of many people living in Toronto, and that the city should be taking more accountability for that. As well as, I think we had mentioned a bit briefly before, but actually having dedicated community members who serve as either staff or partners of the city who can kind of mediate between existing community groups who support a lot of residents in certain communities who do a lot of this food advocacy, but also connecting that with decision makers who can influence policy and implement these programs. And this kind of actually came out of a point that many of the youth activists felt that city officials themselves are not actually very trustworthy, and they do feel that they, especially the participants who had experience working with governments, felt that they were often very superficially engaged in decision-making, just for government officials to say, oh, we did our engagement, we did these workshops where we met with people, and then this is what we're going to do, and then it does not end up aligning with what the people wanted or actually having any real meaningful change to their outcomes.

[00:49:26] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, Cheyenne, I don't know if you have any kind of thoughts on this idea of like, kind of government, like citizen engagement and, you know, any other kind of reflections on what we heard or your own experiences.

[00:49:39] >>Cheyenne Sundance: So when I'm hearing Aden speak and explaining these topics, it makes a lot of sense. Something called working groups, you see it happen of very large nonprofits. Our organization, which isn't very large, is actually creating these little working groups, which is very fun. But working groups are essentially kind of subsections of the main idea, right? So if you have a food justice non-profit, a working group could be food access in schools, or another one could be community gardens in lower income neighborhoods. So these working groups basically focus on core issues that they wanna mobilize, you know, rubber to the road. So what's really cool about them is you can have them as a bridge to get to the larger decisionmaking positions in the board. So the board doesn't have to have seven-hour meetings talking about all these key little issues, but these working groups can make their own decisions because they appoint usually a chair or maybe a president of the working group. That's something that I've really liked, and I would love to see that implemented. Maybe not exactly, because that would be chaotic in the city. There would be like a thousand working groups. But the idea that the people who are making the decision have a stake in the decision, right? And a lot of these working groups I've seen, people who are like, we just want a community garden, join it. Because they're like, I really would love to do this and I can put some labour toward it. But like I had mentioned, we're seeing more the liaison be someone from the city, but do they know that a community doesn't need this golf course but rather have an urban farm? No, because maybe they don't actually live in this lower income neighborhood that is lacking a green grocer. So I would love to see that kind of liaison be someone representative from the community or from either a non-profit, because often non-profit staff have this structural skill and you know, non-profits there's a cool industrial complex about them but something that's really great is there is structure and there's organization. And there also is the investment in the local community, especially if it's an existing nonprofit for like 20 years; they know people around because they're serving their service users.

[00:51:42] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, I mean, I like that idea that these kind of existing neighborhood infrastructures is one way to potentially think about redemocratizing access to food, the food system, but also just sort of imbuing everyday life with more opportunities to

engage. I think so often we think about our sort of democracy as something that we participate in once every four years or every few years. But that's such an obviously a thin engagement. But the truth is, is there aren't a lot of opportunities often to sort of get involved or they're not obvious maybe. Another thing that I remember coming up is this idea that there would be positions to kind of help sort through, you know, how do you, where do you access food, for example, how do you get involved? So more support from the city in terms of enabling people to sort of engage in their city and get involved in the work of kind of transforming people's lives. So I think that theme of kind of democratization was quite a significant one, which again, seems like maybe not immediately connected to food issues, but I think inevitably is. I mean, this is how we get into discussions of, for example, food sovereignty, right? And realizing some kind of control over the kind of food system that we have, and of course right now at the moment, for those of us living in Toronto and many other places in the world we're quite far away from that, but it remains I think a pretty compelling vision. So that was a lot of what we heard. I don't know if we've missed anything or if there's any kind of final thoughts on the kinds of things that we heard at these sessions.

[00:53:36] >>Cheyenne Sundance: Um, maybe a little thought I have is I found this very helpful, even though I was kind of, you know, a facilitator with Aden, I have never been in an experience like this, you know, I dropped out of high school, so I didn't really have a lot of experience in this setting and I was a bit nervous. I felt like, ooh, why am I here? And this is not like, I don't really know anything about policy. I just grow food and do a little something, something, but I felt really emboldened to actually speak and share my mind. And I think a lot of youth who may not go to university or college or have also dropped out, they don't see themselves in these positions that they can influence policy or even share their ideas because maybe sometimes they think you know what do I know because these students over here who study food know so much more than me but I felt like it was a very fair and even environment, especially for someone like myself there wasn't anything I didn't fully understand and even if I didn't I felt like I could actually ask for help. And I think that came because there were so many sessions. And it was not too many, it was not too little, it was enough. I would love to see if there was more spaces, even for the Toronto Food Policy Council or Toronto Youth Food Policy Council, to have more of these events that people can share on a regular basis. Of course, town halls exist in Toronto. I've been to a few virtually, but it's kind of cold. And you speak for a slow, tiny time, and then you go. And you can't get to know, well, why does your neighbour not think they should have a bike lane on your street? May not agree with them. I probably wouldn't. You get to actually humanize people and understand their background, and their decisions. And I thought that was really nice. And I think in terms of decision-making and democracy, it's not a one and done like Michael has said. It should be more of a commonplace thing. And I would love to see that youth can have more power within their voice and also in the spaces that they can be heard in.

[00:55:31] >>Aden Fisher: Yeah, I, I agree that, I mean, we, I think we had talked about it a little bit, but just having those multiple sessions to allow people to familiarize themselves and kind of how that contrasts to a town hall where you do just show up, say your piece and then that goes having that time to really build that trust with each other. But then also being able to, once people got to know each other and actually play into those strengths with the different knowledge people had around the food system that farmers talking about receiving compost from certain restaurants and then the restaurant chefs saying they don't even have adequate compost infrastructure to begin with. And then the community organization staff getting involved saying well they had talked to the city about that. And then it's all these people who have very, who have a lot of knowledge about specific parts of the food system really coming together in an environment

where they're comfortable to share and build on their ideas together that I thought was really great about these workshops. And just for the two other small things that we didn't get into as much with regards to the ideas for a better food system in Toronto, was just having pay equity across the food sector to actually ensure what Cheyenne's talking about, having a livable wage in Toronto, which as we know, the agri-food sector is one of the most precarious for employment and economic security, as well as actually enforcing good quality food as a right in the city as we know. We've had a Toronto Food Charter for, I think, about 20 years now, but we're still seeing rapidly rising food insecurity and food inaccessibility, and that's obviously very much disproportionately affecting low-income individuals, BIPOC communities, single-parent families. So I think that those other two ideas are important to mention as well.

[00:57:21] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, yeah, thanks for that. And I want to go back also to this idea of being in community with people and organizing, because ultimately that's what we were doing. And I think this is a theme that's pretty resonant again today in the sort of like immediate aftermath of the US election and a lot of the people that I follow on social media or read regularly are kind of coming back to this idea of finding hope and energy in community, being with people. Maybe there's still a kind of hangover from the worst of COVID as well. And like the sort of isolation where we're all still, creeping back out of our basements, so to speak. But it seems like there's a real appetite for being in community with people and organizing with people, right? There's a joy kind of in the struggle, I guess. And Cheyenne, I'm sure you find that in your work as well. It's just sort of like, whenever I'm speaking with you, it just kind of like pours out of you, you know, your enthusiasm for the work that you're doing. And I wondered to what extent, yeah, just sort of like being with others who were in a kind of joint struggle is kind of like sustenance in and of itself.

[00:58:39] >>Cheyenne Sundance: I'm, I love what I do. I'm extremely lucky to have gotten to where I am in my life through my stubbornness and very hard work and a lot of luck, so much luck. And with all of that, I still have so much to do, but then I don't wake up and I'm not sad, I'm not doom scrolling. I'm excited because I know the people in my community are people I'm gonna do it with. You know, I've gotten to grow alongside many people over a couple years and also some of those people have followed me into the non-profit and now have jobs in the non-profit. I can think of Nico, who's so amazing and then some other folks we're going to hire next year too. But there is like struggle but I think the key thing is I surround myself with people who have the similar values of as I do as an organizer. They're not again doom and gloom but they're like wow we can make something great and it's not about making something great in the macro, it's about the micro, it's about the everyday little wins. I recently got a trailer that I can use and help move product back and forth, and that's a big win because that means I can buy even more crops for my friends who may have extra surplus. And we all celebrated that. We're like, this is so great that you have a trailer. Um, but I think what's been really helpful is to also focus on the macro. So there's some things that we're doing with the non-profit that I never thought would happen and that are slowly happening and I kind of want to pinch myself, you know, things really to housing, things really to very, very, very long-term land access and all of that great stuff and me buying a farm and being able to have a portion of it go to the non-profit in perpetuity, which is amazing. And there's housing. So all of these struggles, it's been very almost beautiful to see the people who have been there for years along the way and every day saying, this is great, this small thing is happening, get to see this giant thing happening all of a sudden. But I think it really comes down to who are you with and do they share the same values of you, the anti-puritanicalness I want to share with my organizing.

[01:00:48] >>Aden Fisher: Um, I think, uh, what Cheyenne's talking about is almost kind of like antithetical to like the current food system that we see where it's so much about the building of relationships and having these shared values to understand that this is actually a process in which people are working together to, to improve outcomes for both the planet and the people working the land. Whereas I recall specifically two anecdotes from our workshops where one of the cooks had mentioned that the food system is just so uh... individual oriented now that it's just supposed to be that you go to a grocery store you don't know where any of the food is come from, you don't talk to anyone while you're there; you just get what you need. It's all wrapped in like packaging from who knows where, you take it home, cook, whatever you don't cook you throw out, throw out all the packaging and you don't really have, there's no connection to anyone else in the food system. And it was a similar thing when one of the participants who had worked for a non-profit was talking about working with city officials on issues concerning food insecurity, that when we were talking about this lack of trust around working with governments, I remember an anecdote that the person explained it felt almost difficult trying to convey to this city official the severity and the seriousness of food insecurity because they got the impression that the city official just did not understand what it's like to have very little income and what it's like to actually not be able to afford food. They weren't really understanding the seriousness of it and therefore, felt that they weren't being taken seriously in that work. So I think that this part about surrounding yourself with people who have these shared values, shared visions for a better food system and actually building those relationships is probably one of the strongest things we can do to advance a better food system in Toronto.

[01:02:46] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, agreed. Well put, um, you know, and that kind of gets us to maybe the last time we wanted to, to kind of contemplate in this, this, uh, chat here. And that's kind of like, what's next? So what's next for the, for the project, uh, Cheyenne, what's next for you? Um, yeah, I don't know, Aden, do you, Aden, do you want to go first? Well, we, and we should say as well that, uh, I think I already mentioned this, but yeah, Aden recently, um, defended his Master's thesis, so congratulations, in the School of the Environment at University of Toronto, so congratulations, Aden. so yeah, maybe you could tell us a bit more about kind of maybe what's next for this work or for you...

[01:03:25] >>Aden Fisher: Yeah, so obviously this project is within the Youth Climate Action in Toronto project, which still is ongoing partnership between the University of Toronto and the City of Toronto, so there is still work ongoing with that in presenting the findings of this, as well as the other projects to the city officials in kind of concurrence with the TransformTO Net Zero Plan. As for what's next in terms of seeing like the change we want to see in our food system in Toronto, I do think it is very important, I mean, we talked about relationship-building already, but to really try to support these grassroots food and climate movement actors as much as possible. Often it does feel that the resources are very unequal between themselves and the ones who are largely governing and influencing the food system. And then even from a governmental perspective, I think if we want to really look at changing anything in regards to policy and programs, then we very much need to be pushing for that kind of cross-governmental collaboration. Although we do know it's increasingly complex with the food system and the various departments and ministries it intersects with, but I think to really make substantive political or policy change to Toronto's food system, we definitely need to see a lot more collaboration with the province and the federal government to enact these changes across the entire food system and to also actually hold a lot of these private food industries accountable to their actions, both ecologically and socially.

[01:05:04] **>>Michael Classens:** How about you Cheyenne, what do you think is next? What are you going to be doing and what should we all be doing?

[01:05:13] >>Cheyenne Sundance: Okay, so next there's a lot of things happening next. I think from the group I can hear, and I did hear, a lot of people talking about what they want to do. So I'm really excited to see what happens from that and how they make relationships with each other and build something cool. Aside from that, I'm going to keep doing what I do, which is grow a lot of food on my two acres vegetable farm in the middle of nowhere. And then outside of that, I'm going to be able to spend time with my friends who are people I grow with. The Sundance Commons non-profit is really growing next year. And I'm so excited to soon announce all the exciting changes. Aside from that, we have funding again to keep our programs going, which is always a great thing. But the key thing I look forward to is hopefully community land trust designation happening in Canada because I'm on the board in an American community land trust called the Farmers' Land Trust, and they have designation under the 501C3, but in Canada, we don't have a designation for a community land trust for agriculture in the same way, which is very surprising. There was a member of parliament out in Kamloops who was actually fighting for that last, I think it was last year, and nothing really came from that. So I hope that we can see that designation happen because I believe that we'll see more farmland not become highway and also not become McMansions, but rather be held in a trust for 99 years, 100 years, longer and longer, and kept from real estate development. And with that land being available, the cool thing about the Community Land Trust is the ground lease could be like a dollar a year because the land is not being sold. There's no really motivation. Oftentimes the lease is not that low, but it could be in theory. So that's something that I'm excited about. Hopefully seeing more policy change around community land trusts because I'd really believe that's the solution to fair and affordable land access because there's no landlord trying to get the highest price because he wants to sell it off to someone. But it's usually a non-profit or charity or community organization holding the land and just trying to make enough lease just to pay the property tax. That's usually what ends up happening. And in very rural areas the property tax can be way, way, way down.

[01:07:35] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, yeah, thanks for for that. You know, it speaks to me, there was a report by IPES Food a couple of years or last year, I guess it was we can maybe link that in the show notes as well. You know, and they said that what we really need to do fairly immediately is to relocalize, diversify and decommodify our food systems. Otherwise, you know, the quote was something like we're going to be sleepwalking into you know, climate catastrophe at a faster rate, so. Again, it seems like the task is sort of monumental and sometimes it's, you know, you don't wanna get out of bed. You know, when you keep the covers over your head, but I just feel so grateful to have gotten to spend so much time with the both of you and then everyone else who came to these chats that we hosted and I, you know, I hope that we get to do more of this work together because it's just, it's a joy. You know, it brings me joy to get to do this work. And it makes me... You know, it makes me hopeful. You know, all the work that you're doing, Cheyenne, is just obviously incredible, and your ability to organize and just move mountains while also farming. I just don't know how you do it, to be honest. And then Aden, of course, yeah, working with you, and just all the incredible work that you've done over the last year. Yeah, I've just got to learn so much from both of you, so I really appreciate it. And yeah, I'm not exactly sure how to wrap this up, but Aden, it looks like you wanna say something.

[01:09:10] >>Aden Fisher: Yeah, I was just going to kind of return it, thank you to both of you, it was such a huge honour getting to work with you guys in this project and just be a part of the Youth Climate Action in Toronto project as well. For future plans, I'm hoping to eventually go do

doctoral research still in sustainable and equitable urban food systems, and you can contact me at Aden.Fisher@mail.utoronto.ca.

[01:09:40] >>Michael Classens: We'll put that in the show notes too.

[01:09:41] >>Cheyenne Sundance: And then thank you both for this opportunity. I thought it was really cool and you can follow me or don't follow me and just email me at Sundance Harvest on Instagram or sundanceharvest@gmail.com and then the commons is Sundance Commons on Instagram and the same for the email.

[01:09:58] >>Michael Classens: Yeah, and we'll make sure that all gets put somewhere where people can find it as well. All right, this was fun. Maybe we'll do it again, I don't know.

[01:10:09] >>Cheyenne Sundance: Maybe.

[01:10:09] >>Aden Fisher: Part two.

[01:10:12] >>Michael Classens: Dot dot dot...