

# Food Citizenship: Everyone Can Be a Food Citizen!

**Phil Holtam**

Food Citizenship is all about using our appetites and organising power to create positive change in the world. It provides another illustration of how political literacy can connect to our everyday lives and the routines of school. In this article Phil Holtam discusses the work that Feedback does to help young and old get involved with Food Citizenship and how this can be translated to actions in the school community.



What we eat matters. We all depend on eating 3 times a day (at least!). How these meals reach us has an impact on the people working in the food chain, the animals that become part of our meals and our environment, including our global climate. Food Citizenship provides a lens to explore the role that individuals and communities can play in addressing social, environmental and political challenges within the food system.

Food Citizenship is in essence a way of thinking about and acting around food, both as individuals and collectively, but it's also an emerging social movement of NGOs, campaigners, farmers, chefs and influencers, working together to improve the food system as awareness grows about the impact of our diets and the severity of the ecological crisis.

At the centre of Food Citizenship is the recognition that reducing the role of people within the food system to 'consumers' reinforces a narrow and disempowering version of ourselves. 'Consumers' are assumed to make individual decisions about what they buy and eat based on convenience and price alone, without the agency to create change to the options around them. On the other hand, Food Citizens make ethical and informed decisions, often whilst acting collectively. Instead of passive recipients of decisions made by other actors, like large businesses and governments, they see themselves as having a voice for good in how their food is made and the impact it has on themselves and their environment.

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## **The problems with our food system**

Our current dominant food system exploits and depletes the natural world. Food has the largest (in terms of land area) ecological footprint of any sector and it creates over 25% of global greenhouse gas emissions. Other major environmental impacts of our global food system include rainforest clearance for new farm land, soil degradation due to poor farming practices and huge consumption of both energy and water. These problems are severe, but they are not inevitable. Many negative environmental consequences of the food sector have arisen due to an industrial blueprint designed to the benefit of international agribusiness corporations and supermarkets.

But there are clear tangible ways in which things could be better. One example is food waste. With around one third of all food produced going to waste, the food system's impact could be significantly reduced with better waste prevention designed in. Another major source of planetary pressures from our food system relate to industrial livestock farming - such as the slurry pollution from factory farms, the demand for soy to feed livestock that drives deforestation and the emissions that come from cattle and sheep digesting their food. Reducing the production and consumption of meat is a major part in cutting the ecological footprint of food.

A further problem is that our food system both reveals and perpetuates social inequality. There are fewer more stark examples of this than the dramatic rise in food bank usage across the UK. In



the year up to the end of March 2020, over 1.9m food parcels were donated to people in need of emergency food relief in Britain in comparison to 40,000 in the year leading up to March 2010. It's worth noting that crisis food provision is the tip of the iceberg and below the surface there are many millions of people in our society who are in long-term food insecurity at risk of falling into need of crisis support. For households with the lowest incomes, food is the second highest cost after their household costs and bills. Furthermore nutritious food is not evenly accessible to all and particular communities, including those that are Black or from minority ethnic groups, face disadvantage in accessing healthy, affordable food. Addressing food insecurity therefore requires us to look beyond food at wider underlying causes of poverty relating to issues such as fair employment, affordable housing, fuel costs and social security.

Millions of people in the UK work in food - from farming through to retail, catering and delivery - with the sector providing an enormous number of jobs, yet many of these are low paid and uncontracted roles. Forthcoming research from Feedback and Organise that surveyed food workers found that over half did not feel valued by their employer. Food Citizens expect high standards of the companies that supply their food: they question and potentially avoid companies that don't pay their staff the Living Wage; or have human right abuses in their supply chain; as well as advocating for better regulations to improve the rights of food workers.

Taking this interconnected web of issues into account, Food Citizenship allows for purposeful and constructive response that empowers individuals to contribute positive change. As the American author Michael Pollan puts it, through

**“Food Citizenship is much more than having the privilege to choose good food. It is about having individual and collective agency within a society where capitalism, social inequities, and a complex food web intersect. It demands of us a responsibility to be truly humanitarian, to be protectors of nature and to stand for real democracy and human rights. Our food citizenship places us as rights bearers at the heart of the right to food, to hold our government accountable to its duty to ensure all people are able to access culturally appropriate, healthy, sustainable and just food.”**

**Dee Woods, Co-founder Granville Community Kitchen and member of the Food Ethics Council**

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our food we get to “vote with our fork.. food gives us the incredible and empowering ability to embody our values, ethics and concerns three times a day”.

#### **What makes a good food citizen?**

As with other citizenship responsibilities, Food Citizenship is about informed decision-making, active participation and taking a collective approach to solutions. So the first step to being a good Food Citizen is about building on existing knowledge through reading books, watching documentaries, talking to peers and learning about where your food comes from and who produces it. Speaking to people that work in food is always helpful to - be it greengrocers, farmers, food campaigners or chefs. Many of us have only a very vague sense of where our food comes from or how it was produced, including the reality of farming in the UK and overseas. The UK produces a mere 18% of the fruit we eat and only 55% of our fresh vegetables.

And after learning about the issues, it's by taking action in the community that Food Citizenship really comes to life. This could be by setting up food projects in collaboration with local people such as opening a community fridge to share surplus food or addressing a particular need such as the emergency food distribution hubs we saw spring up during the Covid pandemic. It could also be about campaigning to see change made in how the food sector is regulated or calling on a particular business to change its ways. The

# Theme

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Community Chefs  
During COVID

antidote to consumerism is collectivism - the decision to work with others to address problems. One example of a youth led campaign BiteBack 2030, which is focusing on the health inequalities that occur from unequal access to nutritious food. These campaigners recently achieved a campaign victory on junk food advertising, which can now only be shown on TV after 9pm

It's clear we need to change our food system to avoid ecological breakdown and social injustice. It's also clear that a shift towards healthier and more sustainable food requires both high public awareness of food issues and widespread participation in food-related activity, by both individuals and groups, as part of a growing movement of active Food Citizenship.

Feedback is an environmental campaigning charity regenerating nature by transforming the food system. We work on the basis that society cannot solve the climate and ecological crisis without changing how we produce and consume food. Two central aspects of this challenge are reducing the amount of food that gets wasted and halving meat production and consumption. We create change through evidence-based campaigns, hard-hitting research investigations and on-the-ground community food projects that empower communities by putting them at the centre of a new, greener and fairer food system. Our website features toolkits for taking action including how to run a Disco Soup event feeding attendees surplus food and how to start a gleaning group rescuing surplus food from farms.  
<https://feedbackglobal.org/>

### Topics that can be discussed in classes through the lens of Food Citizenship:

- Should Deliveroo riders be paid a Living Wage?
- Who is responsible for the greenhouse gas emissions associated with food production - the farmer, supermarkets or the person eating the food?
- How much is a fair price to pay for a cup of coffee and who gets to decide this price?
- What are the most effective ways to encourage people to transition to climate friendly diets?

### Food Project Actions: Food projects are a great area for citizen led action in a way that reduces emissions, enriches quality of life, strengthens social resilience or builds community. Here are some ideas for student projects that exemplify good Food Citizenship:

- Campaign to change the food provided by your canteen to be healthier, fairer and greener.
- Host a community event feeding guests a meal composed of otherwise wasted ingredients.
- Run a series of workshops in 'climate cuisine' for students to learn tasty, low-carbon recipes.
- Start a community allotment or orchard in your neighbourhood.
- With people in your community, choose one of your favourite imported food products and start a purchasing cooperative, sourcing directly from producers at a fair price. This could be Palestinian olive oil, chocolate from Ivory Coast or Columbian coffee.
- Write an action plan for a community food distribution project in the event of a pandemic lockdown.

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