

Fatma Sabet, Research fellow in school food system transformation, social activist and Shillingford Organics Farm School creator

by Mimi Mostefai

Year 5, Medicine, University of Exeter



Fatma Sabet is a postdoctoral knowledge exchange research fellow at the University of Exeter, collaborating with Sustainable Food Cornwall and the Cornwall Council Public Health team to develop a sustainable school food landscape for Cornwall. I first met Fatma when she delivered a lecture during the Planetary Health module as part of my Public Health Master's degree.

Planetary health underscores how human health is contingent on the health of our planet and the ecosystem services it provides. Thus, there is a need for us to cherish and conscientiously safeguard our planet. Food systems constitute just one facet of planetary health with the potential to be harnessed and ameliorated. Globally, our food system is a key driver of greenhouse gas emissions contributing to global warming, biodiversity loss through land conversion and loss of regulatory services that the environment, particularly forests. Yet, large quantities of our global population remain malnourished, accentuating how unsustainable our current food systems are.

Fatma's passion for food education for health and sustainability along with her drive to address policy challenges and solutions was evident in her lecture where she discussed her research journey and experiences at the 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference or Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC, known as COP27, held in Egypt. To me, Fatma appeared to be the ideal candidate to foreground the importance of planetary health. Indeed, it behoves all allied health professionals to be more cognisant of it.

Tell us about yourself and your academic background.

I embarked on an MSc in educational research at Exeter University in 2018 with a keen interest in research methods and academic inquiry. Throughout my MSc journey, I conducted various research studies for each module assignment, allowing me to gain hands-on experience and fuel my passion for rigorous academic research. Graduating with distinction, I was honoured to receive an ESRC scholarship to pursue a PhD focused on theorising sustainable school food in England.

What was it that first inspired you towards the subject area of planetary health and the specific area of "Food Education for Health and Sustainability"?

In 2016, I started the Shillingford Organics Farm School, a social educational enterprise located on an organic farm near Exeter.¹ The purpose of this initiative was to educate the public about the food system, where food comes from and the importance of healthy and sustainable eating. Witnessing the transformative changes in children and adults eating behaviours alike was truly eye-opening. It became evident to me that educating the public about sustainable food systems through experiential and authentic food education was not only possible but essential. While the Farm School was successful, I wanted to reach a broader audience, particularly families who faced barriers such as lack of transportation or limited educational opportunities. This motivated me to focus my PhD research on sustainable food provision and food education in schools.²



Please could you give us an overview of your current research work.

During my PhD, I conducted the first sustainable school meal and food education evaluation study in three schools in England. Through realist evaluation, I developed a theoretical and practical framework for sustainable school food, elucidating what works, for whom and how.³ Subsequently, I started a postdoctoral research fellow position, collaborating closely with Cornwall Council and Sustainable Food Cornwall to develop a strategy for sustainable school food in Cornwall. Additionally, I am involved in a climate science communication project at the University of Exeter, utilising

artistic mediums to amplify the voices of indigenous communities in sharing their climate stories.⁴ This interdisciplinary work bridges facts and emotions, generating a profound impact.

Having attended COP27 in Cairo, Egypt, what were the key lessons/challenges you drew from this that you would like to share with us?

Attending COP27 was a profoundly enlightening experience, highlighting the stark divide between politicians and activists all over the world. I had the privilege of meeting senior academics in the field as well as passionate activists from around the world advocating for climate justice, indigenous rights and food and water security. One key observation was the inclination of politicians and governments to rely on technology as a solution and a means to perpetuate the status quo rather than embracing necessary changes.

What would you consider to be the most pressing planetary health issue of the 21st century?

In my view, the most pressing planetary health issue of the 21st century revolves around the food system. As a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions and soil degradation, our current food system fails to meet the nutritional needs of the population while exacerbating climate change. Urgent action is required to transition to a more sustainable and equitable food system.

Do you have any suggestions for how readers of this journal might individually take a step towards helping to achieve planetary health/attempting to overcome the aforementioned issue?

Addressing the most pressing planetary health issues depends on individuals' roles within society. As a parent, for example, my responsibility lies in educating my children about healthy and sustainable food choices, minimising food waste, and supporting local food sources. As an academic, my aim is to provide compelling evidence for innovative and sustainable approaches to food production and consumption. Overall, it is essential for everyone to engage in education and activism. Education is a powerful force for positive change, and each person can make a difference within their sphere of influence. Maintaining a philosophy of active hope, fostering a positive outlook and driving change are vital for a sustainable future.

Do you have any advice for students who wish to take up a career in your area?

In the field of sustainable food systems and sustainable school food, interdisciplinary approaches are crucial. I would advise students interested in this field to embrace the complexity and interdisciplinarity it entails. Navigating such a multifaceted topic requires in-depth knowledge across different disciplines, avoiding working within disciplinary silos. While it may not be feasible to master every discipline, maintaining a certain level of expertise in one's field while also gaining knowledge from other disciplines enables a comprehensive understanding of this complex subject. Building networks with colleagues from diverse backgrounds and shared interests fosters collaboration and facilitates the production of transformative knowledge.

Are there any additional points or issues that you would like to address, or that you believe would be of interest to our journal audience?

One important aspect to address is the interconnectedness of planetary health and human well-being. It is crucial to recognise that our actions and choices regarding food, environment, and sustainability have far-reaching implications for both people and planetary health. By promoting sustainable food systems, embracing local and agroecological food sources, reducing food waste, and

advocating for policies that prioritise health and sustainability, individuals can contribute to achieving planetary health goals. Additionally, stakeholder involvement and fostering collaborations between different sectors, including academia, government and civil society, is essential for creating holistic approaches that address the complex challenges we face. Through knowledge exchange, we can drive meaningful change and promote a more sustainable and healthier future for all.

Images provided by the interviewee.

References

1. <https://shillingfordorganicsfarmschool.co.uk>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFrI9A7Jvi&t=2s>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yib7LQzuRtE>
4. <https://greenfutures.exeter.ac.uk/we-still-have-a-chance/>