Global Solution Networks for
Climate-Resilient Agriculture and Global Food Security

Transcript of Interview with Christine Gould

Guest:

Christine Gould, the founder of Thought for Food. She is a Senior Public Policy Manager at Syngenta, leading policy-shaping and reputation-enhancing initiatives related to global issues such as biotechnology, biodiversity and intellectual property. She has a passion for sparking disruptive innovation to tackle global challenges and for using powerful social media tools to inspire new forms of collaboration and game-changing action.

Thought for Food is a network focused on mobilizing a new generation of university students around the world to develop bold solutions to the global challenge of feeding 9 billion people by 2050. TFF runs an annual competition to catalyze university students from all fields to learn more about the complex challenges surrounding food security, and to inspire these students to channel their passions and creativity toward developing new ideas that make a difference.

Interviewer:

Alastair Marke, a project leader at Global Solution Networks and a fellow of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA), dedicated to driving social progress and spreading world-changing ideas. Previously a researcher at the Overseas Development Institute and The ResPublica Trust in the UK, he has extensive policy research experience with various publications on climate change, sustainability and new economies issues.

The Interview:

Marke: How did you come up with the idea to found "Thought for Food"?

Gould: I am going to be really honest with you. This is because of reading *Wikinomics* and *Grown Up Digital.* The gist of those books has heavily influenced the direction of my career. The idea is to engage "millennials" – with their unique skills, perspectives and tools – in global discussions around food security.

Right now, they are looking at their heroes in Silicon Valley and trying to become entrepreneurs. But how can they re-adjust and take the same kind of smart skills and apply them to solving the biggest challenge of their generation? I believe that big challenge is how to feed 9 billion people. It is a challenge that is unique to their generation. There have never been that many people on earth and the resources have never been so strained. So, frankly, it is about getting the best and brightest minds that have the most powerful tools to work on this topic.

I also fundamentally believe in the power of mass collaboration. By opening things up, you can get to new breakthrough ideas. I wanted to get people, especially this millennial demographic, to focus on the challenges. Even if they are not involved directly in food security, if they are not studying environmental science or agriculture, I wanted to get architects in on this discussion – artists, people who study literature, whatever it may be, and who have a different perspective. By getting all these diverse minds working together, you can come up with true breakthroughs. That is where the idea for Thought for Food came from. Then it was a matter of making the case to get people to believe that engaging with this issue is a good idea.

If you look at the fact that the millennials represent the largest, most well-educated, culturally diverse, politically progressive, socially engaged generation that the world has ever seen, that means you have to engage with them in new types of ways. I think asking a question is the right way to engage. They don't want propaganda; they don't want the answers; they want to come up with the solutions themselves. More than 50% of the world's population is under 30; they cannot be ignored, and this is a generation hacking their way around traditional rules and hierarchies. They are well educated. They want to be entrepreneurs. They are tenacious in getting what they want, and so tapping into that is necessary.

Marke: Do you think that a lot of global issues, particularly global hunger or food security, have not been fully resolved by state-based institutions? And do you think that is why people who want a real solution are now increasingly engaged in the process through online platforms?

Gould: Absolutely. A recently published white paper showed a country-by-country breakdown of answers to the question: "What do 'millennials' believe will be the greatest agent of change in the world?" In the US, 13% said politics as compared to 44% who said people empowered by social media; and 20% said companies. 44% believe that individuals powered by social media will be the greatest agents of change in the world! That is what technology is doing. It is a tool to influence the current state institutions and uproot the status quo. What you are seeing is those types of UN bodies doing well, but they move slowly while revolutions are being created online. These people grew up digital, and being part of this millennial generation, like to see things done using technology. That's what they believe in. They want to become entrepreneurs because that is the place where you can say goodbye to bureaucracy and move quickly and see an impact in your own lifetime.

Marke: How are you leveraging technology to achieve your goals for TFF?

Gould: Well, pretty much everything we do is online. Literally, everything, including research, analysis, advocacy, collaboration and engagement, is part of the TFF programme. These are all online, so the students as part of our programme undertake curriculum that spans a few months in order to develop and prototype their ideas. All of these are going to be really cool because I am working with experts on design thinking to make a very user-centric experience around the

curriculum. But it is all brought to life online, so they are equipped with tools and resources, books to read, mentors to talk to, exercises to undertake, tools to document and share what they have learned.

In terms of advocacy, one of the biggest components we have in the Thought for Food programme is developing ideas. In this day and age, there are a million brilliant ideas. The point that becomes a game changer is when the world believes in those ideas. So we are equipping the students, many of whom don't come from communications-type backgrounds, with the tools and understanding of how to use social media in powerful ways to rally supporters to a cause.

In collaboration and engagement, we're working both on and off line. We have collaboration happening all the times on Skype and, of course, on the project platforms that we have custom built. Then through the document-sharing program, they go through the curriculum. But we also do offline collaboration. For instance, we have once-a-year global summit where we bring the TFFers from around the world to meet in person. That is where you see things really take off due to the conversations they are having. We now have teams of students from around the world collaborating in ways we never even anticipated. This is one of the most amazing aspects of this whole programme and engagement for me.

Marke: Tell us about the progression of TFF?

Gould: In 2011, I piloted TFF in Europe. We sent an invitation out broadly to 30 universities. On day one, 11 signed up. So, they were a pilot class for this programme. At that stage, we were not focused so much on the prototype being business or social business-type ideas. It was more like awareness-raising and kind of creating viral videos on social media. Year 2 in 2012, based on the success of this pilot in Europe, we went global. Year 3 in 2013 was really a turning point where we had 118 entries. We had over 1,000 participants from 66 universities and 24 countries. So in 3 years, we have scaled from 11 universities to 66 with, basically, a staff of me and a couple of other volunteers. Now, I have some more dedicated resource and I think we will see it scale even more.

Marke: What are the challenges of having such an international team of students?

Gould: That is a huge challenge for me, because as you can probably imagine the way universities work, how students operate, even just timing things varies so much depending on where you are in the world. Anyway, that is one of the nice things about going online. The students can do things in their own time. Time zones matter less because they can get the information they need.

Marke: What barriers have you come across in running the programme?

Gould: One is just trying to operate with the diversity and the complexity of the university programmes around the world. Case in point, China, we had several universities from China participate in the 2013 challenge. It was fantastic to have them on board, but a lot of requirements for the challenge around leveraging social media were not easy for them to undertake, for obvious reasons. Africa is another case in point. They don't have constant Internet connections in many countries. So it was managing those types of situations that were obstacles.

The other thing is that there is so much coming out of students' proposals. Until I have a full resource on board to help manage the students and report all of the successes, right now it is

snowballing. One of the things I am doing this year is taking a step back and generating robust reporting, supporting the students as their projects take off. TFF is just a platform for the ideas to develop and be nurtured at the beginning, but we don't own any of the ideas. It is really up to the students to move forward. We provide this platform, the network and the contacts they need should they want them, but it is a lot of work. So, one of my big obstacles is just resources, human resources and financial.

Marke: How do you facilitate the transfer of these innovative ideas to the countries that need help desperately?

Gould: It's really up to the students to do that. That's what really gives me goose bumps! I am really excited by this, as you know, we have participants from a lot of countries that are facing food security issues. Whatever that means for their country, the students are taking that forward, it is not about winning. The great thing about Thought for Food is that it is not about winning or losing the competition. Of course, that brings the challenge and incentivises ideas to come out and action to be taken. What we find is that the students who take part in Thought for Food see winning the prizes as just a subset. They are all moving forward with implementation of their ideas, and bringing real change into their communities. That is really exciting to see!

What we do, as I said, is provide a platform, funding where possible, but we are not here to fund every single idea. We are here to provide that platform and network for the students to tap into. For instance, a couple of the projects needed some communications help. So I put them in touch with someone who is volunteering to help them develop and fine tune their messages. There are just relationships with the students once they attend the summit, create for themselves, help each other and then they say, "Hey I know this person who can help you with the programme." That idea, whatever it may be, is just if they need help writing a strategy, we have mentors who are experts, and are pitching to VC or angel investors. So, we are just that pool of resources for them.

Marke: What are some of the notable achievements of your programme? Can you give me some examples where students have had excellent ideas which have been successful in the developing world?

Gould: I can tell you the winner of the 2013 challenge is a team called "Henlight." They have developed a solar panel. It powers very cheap light that can be used to increase egg production, which is particularly relevant for small-holder farmers in developing countries. It is an increasingly common practice in chicken and egg production. They actually won the 2013 challenge based on the success of their project. They are now looking at getting some funding from USAID – and have applied for an innovation prize of $100,000. So, based on the success, it is snowballing into something bigger, and they are looking at Brazil and India and parts of Africa, like Nigeria where this project can have a big impact.

There are other examples in India. Projects are really taking off. They are also organising a lot of student-led sessions of various events taking place. For instance, there is an event taking place next month, called Cognizance, one of Asia's largest tech festivals that brings together all of the programmers, coders and gamers. Students are taking a lot of their projects into this festival and raising awareness within the Indian community about topics like food waste, which is a big issue there. Recently I have a TFFer, whose project proposal is really about eating insects as an alternative

source of protein. And the project founder has been getting all kinds of press coverage. He is being invited now to participate in a very popular television show in the United States. He has gotten coverage in the UK newspapers like the Sun and the Daily Mail. These are all taking off because of Thought for Food.

I also just want to mention one of the achievements of this project, which is inspiring the next generation to get involved. One of things they appreciate is the opportunity for recognition that Thought for Food provides. TFF is the platform where they can showcase what they are doing, for other innovators and potential employers and the world. Whenever they get press coverage, we promote it broadly to our networks. We help them get coverage; we open up a lot of doors for them. That is something that they really appreciate.

Marke: Can you tell me the challenges behind this multi-stakeholder model?

Gould: Yes, differences of opinion and differences of commitment and cultural differences are all there, but we are learning as we go. I think at the end of the day, what makes this really powerful is that we are still nimble, we can change quickly if needed, pivot if needed, to move towards a better approach.

Marke: Compared to a bureaucracy, do you think a digital network needs a lot less time to develop a management system?

Gould: That is what I am finding. We have positioned ourselves as the platform more than a decision-making body. But we had a little bit of concern in 2013 about the winners of the challenge. I think it is a fair and healthy discussion to have about whether we selected the right projects. I should also mention that TFF is not selecting the winning projects, an independent panel of judges does that. But what we want to do is get some governance around our judging process. Are we choosing the right judges? Have these projects been evaluated in a way we all agree with and want to maintain? We don't want to become really bureaucratic with formal voting procedures. It's really about having this loose network and coalition type of environment.

Marke: Have you encountered any problem regarding the commitment of volunteers when you run the TFF?

Gould: No. In fact, I have been blown away because this is something that they are not getting paid to do and they are doing in their free time with the level of commitment and passion that they demonstrate. That is a testament to the energy young people have for tackling global challenges that they feel every day. Everyone has a touch point with food. Everyone has an opinion on how they can make a difference. And now they are incited to action.

A couple of years ago one of the students who took part in the pilot programme said to me, "I have always cared about food security, but it wasn't until Thought for Food came along that I actually had a way to get involved and do something." That is how I feel: many people benefit from this and there is energy beyond my expectations that comes out. They spend so much of their time for free working on this. It just blows my mind all of the time.

We make this project platform really fun for them too. For a lot of national institutions, this is hard. I have interned there. I have seen the experiences there. It's bureaucratic and, sometimes, they offer

really great internship-type programmes, but most of the time, it is very formal. I think one of the things Thought for Food offers is something that is really fun, really empowering and makes a difference. That is what attracts people and keeps them committed. We also have an ambassador programme, which is our volunteer programme. The ambassadors take it upon themselves to be part of this because they find it so rewarding. It brings something to them. We don't even have to ask. Most of the time, they are coming to us with ideas that are brilliant.

Marke: What do you foresee for TFF in 5 years' time? Would it be an organisation or just to remain as a digital network that connects students only?

Gould: In 5 years' time, I definitely see us with much deeper relationships with the investment community. The whole start-up scene will be more formalized with many more partners. I know that sounds crazy, but I would love to see the logos of the various universities on our page, foundations that have money, and also venture capital firms that might want to invest into some of these ideas to take them to the next level. So I would see a much broader group of partners in 5 years' time.

Marke: Do you think this model can be transferred or replicated for other issue areas in terms of global problem solving?

Gould: Absolutely. In fact, it is also something we are looking at with this model. You could make it "TFX." I think there are many global challenges that you could integrate with the spirit and approach that TFF is representing, whether that be health or education, even security or peace. It is a model that is about inspiring and inciting action in the next generation towards solving global challenges. I happen to be passionate about food security, and believe it is at the core of many of the issues the world faces, including all of those issues I've just mentioned. At the core of health and development, and war and peace, is the ability for a country or individual to feed themselves. There are also women's issues.

Whatever it might be, this approach can really work, and that is about designing a user-centric learning curriculum that allows people to develop and prototype ideas that make a difference. It provides a platform and network for them to tap into. It is absolutely something that we have discussed with some of the partners – how we can do this and then bring that spirit, which is so unique to TFF. In TFF, we are passionate problem solvers. When people get together, so often you can't escape that feeling! So many people who attended our summit were like a family. It was so inspirational!

Marke: Do you think this project has achieved any kind of legitimacy in the eyes of other key stakeholders in relevant fields or government institutions?

Gould: I think so. I was just in the US at this conference and was approached afterwards by the some of the attendees there from amazing organizations like World Food Programme, the US Agency for International Development, the Food & Agriculture Organization, as well as the presidents of universities. They all came up to me afterwards and said they wanted to get involved, and wanted to work together. Definitely, we are getting more legitimacy and increasingly so.

Marke: Thought for Food has given us a lot food for thought. Thank you for your time, Christine.

Gould: You are very welcome, Alastair.