

WeQual Global Big Think: Ending World Hunger

Here is your five-minute brief on our first Big Think Live Event - a live interview by WeQual Founder, Katie Litchfield, with Dr Gunhild Stordalen who aims to end world hunger while saving the planet.



Where did it all start?

As a doctor I care about human health, and as I grew up in the Norwegian countryside I learnt early on to love nature and worry about the damage that people are inflicting on it. I decided at the age of seven to make a difference.

In 2011, I served on the executive board of my ex-husband's hotel company. I knew nothing about business but I was pushing the company really hard on sustainability issues. As a scientist, I began reading about all the challenges in the hospitality industry. I found a report from Cornell University that said up to 70 per cent of the waste in a full-service hotel was due to food and beverages.

Suddenly I realised that food was at the heart of our biggest climate challenges. And obviously, if it is part of the problem then it has to be part of the solution.

What was the 'enough is enough' moment that drew you to take on the global food system?

When I realised that we don't have a global plan or scientific targets. This was before the Paris Climate Agreement. Once we got those goals it became clear that without fixing food we don't have a chance of reaching those targets.

Since there was no science looking across all the components of the food system, somebody needed to do something about it and I found myself in the middle of it. I called up Dr Johan Rockström, of the Stockholm Resilience Centre, and I told him about the gap I had stepped into and that was the start. We hosted our first global forum with Bill Clinton on stage, and people from 28 countries, in 2014.

For more on the UN Climate Change Paris Accord [click here](#)

For a full biography of Dr Johan Rockström [click here](#)

For more on the Stockholm Resilience Centre - [click here](#)

What were/are your biggest challenges?

The world's biggest economy, food, has a lot of entrenched thinking, and invested interests or silos, and we have not seen the bigger picture or how things are interlinked. Trying to shake that up is not easy.

At the same time, food can be the most powerful medicine for people and the planet, and can allow people to make such incredible progress towards sustainability goals. Once they have this explained they quickly realise that there are so many win-win situations.

Another challenge was to step out of the perception of being arm candy by being married to a Norwegian billionaire. Once some of the smartest people in the world had joined our advisory board, these were no longer problems.

You've been in the limelight for a large portion of your life. Are there any tips you would give on how to remain in the public eye?

I think it is always about standing up for what you believe in. And using social media, using your voice as often as you can. And stop being shy and stop thinking that you are not good enough. It's time for women to believe more in themselves and not be so obsessed with being perfect all the time. My husband always used to say to me that 80% is good enough 80% of the time. Just get out there and speak from your heart.

What advice can you give women about driving change within their remit or their companies?

Use science as your compass for the changes you need to do. We also know that science is the path for success for businesses. It's not about adapt or die anymore, it is about transform or die. From there it is about counting backwards and asking yourself where you need to be as part of a global society by 2030.

Realistically, can we end world hunger? And, if so, how do we go about it and how long do you think it will take?

It boils down to political will. But we have to move beyond the current firefighting and sticking plaster approaches. Climate change is now the principal driver of food and hunger in

the world today. So, without tackling climate change there is no way we can end hunger. Ending hunger is about building resilient, nature positive, and equitable food systems that deliver healthy and safe food for all. That is where a lot of mindset shifts are happening at the moment.

How can you keep your message at the top of the world's agenda?

I think the current catastrophes - a global pandemic followed by the invasion of Ukraine - strengthen the case for why we need to fix food.

They have revealed so many vulnerabilities for the food system and how interdependent countries are. And how it is possible to weaponise food.

We really need globally-coordinated responses. We need countries responding to this with integrated strategies, with more focus on local production for local consumption. We cannot afford to be dependent on a few global food baskets - like Ukraine and Russia.

There are always going to be naysayers - what's your response to them?

Impossible is not part of my vocab. If enough people believe, it is possible. I have learned and seen this through experience. At the UN Food Systems Summit a handful of countries and companies were blocking the process and watering down the outcomes. This to me was a very strong message that unless we get people on board, and fuel this growing movement demanding change, very little is going to happen.

This crisis is the time in history where we can change the rules of the game. It is one area where everyone is a stakeholder - we all have to eat. We can make this happen within the eight-year time frame that science says we have at our disposal.

For more on the UN Food Systems Summit, NY 2021 [click here](#)

How do you get your message across?

Stick to your guns no matter who you are talking to.

We have to think and recognise the big picture: think globally while also acting locally. For example, if we are talking to smallholder farmers in Africa we are not telling them that they need to mitigate climate change by changing their diets, we talk about how improving agricultural methods can improve diets.

If we are talking to business, the challenge is presenting new business opportunities to them - how they can leverage this for profit in the long term.

If senior leaders of big companies want to back you, what should they do?

The private sector produces 98 per cent of the food in the world. Big business needs to be part of the solution. When we see big changes it is usually because of women in charge. I would suggest that they go back to their leadership and present the four shifts in behaviour needed to deliver change.

1. To shift to nature positive, generative food production
2. To shift to a more healthy plant-rich diet
3. To shift to fair and equitable livelihoods
4. To shift to circular food waste economies.

Every company should look at this and what role they play and how they can play a bigger part.

Many of the women who we speak to want to change the world but don't know where to start. Where do they start?

I would say, "Do your homework." Look into what is happening, who is doing what. Secondly, think about partnerships. Companies are not good enough at forming partnerships. We need to work together. It depends on what your mission is. How do you transform your company to become a net positive company?*

To read more about Net Positive by Paul Polman and Andrew Winston [click here](#)

How do you remain grounded, stay healthy and balanced?

I think it is absolutely vital to take care of your health. Health isn't everything but everything is nothing without health. I can't make an impact for the better unless I am up and running.

School should teach how important sleep is and how stress-relieving tools are so important. I meditate every morning. And I found after starting that it keeps me grounded and helps me be able to deliver.

What does the near future look like for you?

In 2030, I hope we are out of business and shut down. Then I will buy a farm and be surrounded by happy animals and grow my own vegetables. If I am able to do that then it is because we have managed to be successful in transforming global food systems.

For more information on Dr Stordalen and the EAT Foundation [click here](#).