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UK Food Policy

Can we get it on the right track?



Almost half a century of neglect has left UK food policy in the doldrums, write **Tim Lang** and **David Barling**. But there are reasons to be optimistic.

As recently as thirty years ago only a few academics and people concerned about food in the developing world used the term 'food policy' let alone understood what it entailed. Neither politicians nor the public appreciated that the UK had a food policy, let alone recognised that it was awry. There were a few dissenters. Back in the mid 1960s, a minority of brave culinary champions had expressed alarm at the poor quality of our mass diet.¹ In the early 1970s, a new breed of NGO (Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace) highlighted environmental issues such as pesticides, packaging and pollution.² Some health researchers were troubled about heart disease in the '70s and additives in the '80s.^{3,4} But the dominant political verdict was that the nation had never been so well fed.

In truth, since rationing had ended in 1955 there had been remarkable transitions in what people ate, the range of choice, where they bought food (the inexorable rise of supermarkets) and declining food prices. The latter were helped, economists argued, by rising incomes and macro-economic initiatives such as the ending of Retail Price Maintenance (RPM) in 1964. The demise of RPM meant manufacturers could no longer tell retailers what to charge for their products. This transferred power from food manufacturers to retailers, turning them into the gatekeepers they are today.⁵

The cosy 1970s and 1980s?

In the 1970s and '80s, the then Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) ran an agriculture policy that focused mainly on what Britain could or could not do within the Common Market (now the European Union). While the period was characterised by a famously close relationship between MAFF and the farming unions; a raft of tensions were building including: who makes the money; what sort of food and farming system is desirable; power and control over food decision-making; the role of the state in food; diet-related ill-health; and – long before dire concerns about climate change – food's environmental impact.

Anyone reviewing the last half century of UK food policy history couldn't help noticing that these tensions, established a generation ago, are plainly still manifest today. And despite work to highlight them over the past 40 years by both traditional conservation bodies (including the National Trust, CPRE and the RSPB) and the new breed of publicity-savvy NGOs, policy makers are still refusing to address them. How much evidence of food's impact on the environment or health or social inequalities is needed for a new direction to be charted?

The UK food system

Food is both a biological entity, subject to whims of weather, taste, season, culture and fashion, and a microcosm of the economy, subject to wider socio-political forces. It's a fissured

sector, with 1.4 billion farmers (many wage-less) globally feeding seven billion people via a distribution system which distorts needs and mal-distributes. How else can 1.3 billion be overweight or obese while 0.9 billion are malnourished? The UK is part of that wider picture. Four hundred and eighty thousand farmers, 400,000 people employed in food manufacturing, 200,000 in wholesaling, 1.2 million in retailing, and 1.6m in catering feed 63 million consumers. Consumers spend around £180 billion on food each year from 90,000 shops and 430,000 catering outlets.⁶ Seventeen million hectares of the UK's landmass is farmed, about 70% of the total, but only 36% is croppable.⁷ We grow a declining proportion of our food. We imported about £37.5 billion's worth in 2012 and exported £18.2 billion. The food trade gap is steadily growing – something the Coalition has set out to reverse but has – so far – failed to deliver.

Home production peaked in the early 1980s and has declined slowly ever since, with hiccups along the way. About half of our grain is fed to animals, which, as meat and dairy, could contribute to a healthy diet but mostly doesn't. Calculations of the UK's food footprint are sobering.⁸ Like the rest of Europe, we are consuming as though there are two or three planets. Globally, the rich world consumes more than those on lower incomes, the USA seemingly beating a path to planetary overload, with the UK sadly following. In all, current UK food policy betrays a gap between the evidence showing what policy makers should address and what's being done by the food chain and the public.

The case for optimism

And yet, writing this, we are hopeful. More people are more aware of the enormous challenges facing food policy ahead than at any time in human history. The vibrancy of debate is wonderful. The spread of information and insights around the globe, in rich countries and poor alike, is quite astonishing. Blogs, books, tweets, media coverage, public consciousness and discussion proliferate. The horsemeat scandal – being investigated by the Elliott review (reporting in 2014) – led not to denial but to public hand-wringing by mighty retailers. Sadly no prosecutions seem to have followed, but then no-one (yet) has accused the powers-that-be of a systematic cover-up. Public scrutiny is alive in the age of the internet.

The food policy genie is now truly out of the bottle. Too many people know too much about the state of modern food adulteration, food-related ill-health, gross waste of food by the rich world, and the unprecedented concentration of power over food systems by multinational corporate entities for there not to be some semblance of what we've called Food Democracy. With the increasing auditing of supply chains by industrial and retail buyers of food produce and its raw materials, and by Government departments, enormous amounts of data are

being collected right along the supply chain, and not just on our purchasing choices at the check-out tills. Here, there is a need for more transparency and accessibility of information to help public authorities shift these food supply chains towards better health and environmental outcomes. What's truly amazing is the lack of global conflagration driving policy-makers to reassess their previous strategies on how to ensure food security. This is important, since the big changes to the food system in the second half of the 20th century largely followed the destruction during and reconstruction after World War II.

The new complexity

As we have suggested above, the roots of current 21st century debate about the failures of Western food policies and the need for new strategies lie in the 1970s. Even as the post-World War II reconstruction appeared to be yielding, and the brilliance of technical revolutions were working through supply chains (plant breeding, industrial processes, new products and modes of cooking, logistics, branding), signs of their limitations were apparent. Not just obesity but an entire epidemiological and nutrition transition was spreading. As we have argued elsewhere,⁹ a new complexity emerged for policy makers. 'Diseases of affluence', environmental damage, consumer expectation of cheap food, and unprecedented concentration of power all combined to incapacitate politicians, undermining their ability to get a grip. Instead, they lionised retail bosses as exemplars of modern British capitalism.

After the systemic shocks of World War II complacency about food policy was first shaken not by macro-problems like non-communicable diseases or climate change but by food poisoning and safety issues. This surprised many watchers. Although worries about additives and pesticide residues emerged in the 1980s, it was hard data about foodborne diseases and food poisoning (salmonella in eggs, e-coli, BSE), which dented the policy 'lock in' and shook the food status quo, leading to modern food traceability, the rise of 'tick-box' management via HACCP, and new institutions (EFSA in the EU, the FSA in the UK, Defra replacing MAFF, shake-ups of Codex Alimentarius at the UN).

The 2007-08 commodity crisis momentarily unlocked this lock-in. Fresh from ousting Tony Blair, Gordon Brown ordered a

Cabinet Office Strategy Unit review of food, the first since the 1950s, to take stock of the whole food system.^{10,11} The resulting Food Matters report charted a new direction which narrowed the evidence-policy gap, stating that Britain should aim for a low carbon and healthy food supply. Negotiations went on across Whitehall, with Devolved Administrations, and most importantly with industry. A Council of Food Policy Advisors was created at Defra as well as a Cabinet Sub-Committee on food. A consensus emerged that a new framework would help, with big companies also recognising dire challenges ahead. Looking across the Atlantic they feared litigation. An optimism that some structural change might occur emerged. Globally there was a renewed interest in the importance of primary growing.¹² In the UK, meanwhile, farming's contribution to the national economy had been shrinking; in 2011 it was worth £8.7 bn, a mere 9% of the total agri-food economy which itself was only 7% of the total national economy.⁷

Where to next?

Modern UK food policy discourse has come a long way. The much-heralded 2011 review was, rightly, mostly about the world.¹³ Furious debates remain: light green vs deep green; consumer choice vs choice editing; whether to focus on single issues like carbon or aim for a more complex set of goals; hand-outs to the poor or decent living wages. Dare we suggest that there might be a core consensus on what is needed ahead for future food systems? We do. The future of food requires action now to:

- Lower environmental impacts drastically; this should address not just climate change but water stress, biodiversity loss, soil depletion, and more;
- Reconnect consumers with the realities of food economics. Put simply, food is too cheap, but it's a concept hard-wired into our culture. And cheap food is necessary for low income consumers for whom food is a flexible item in weekly household budgets. Recent food inflation means the UK is beginning to live with more expensive food, and with expensive housing and transport too, so a rebalancing of priorities is inevitable;
- Begin the slow process of what will have to be a radically changed set of food choices in the future, away from sweet, high calorie diets with high meat and dairy consumption

Photo: Michael Garnett



to perhaps simpler, certainly more plant-based diets with meats more exceptional. We see potential here in applying the distinction emerging from public health nutrition between simple, processed and ultra-processed foods;^{14,15}

- Rebuild skills and engagement by the public, to take responsibility for and be involved in coming changes;
- Reframe markets by setting out clear new short and long-term goals; this requires bringing together individual company and sector actions under one framework.

All this requires institutional revitalisation, possibly reforms and certainly genial but firm leadership. Defra and the FSA, for example, are severely weakened by cuts. No-one wants food dictatorships but, unless the state has internal skills and capacities, it cannot be expected to 'chair' a new direction. Talk of the 'nanny state' is irrelevant now. Even hardline neo-liberals know that individual consumers cannot sort out their own food supply chains. The UK has no room – literally – for US-style backwoods self-sufficiency. We are all in this mess together and must work together to get the food system onto a genuinely sustainable footing.

Specific tasks

To help address and deliver these principles and goals, some immediate tasks already seem possible:

- Undertake a review of UK food policy, and outline options (from radical to business-as-usual), incorporating the thinking and work already done under strategies such as Food 2030 and the lessons of Coalition actions such as the green food project and export drives.^{16,17} This could be done in a number of ways: high-level taskforce; arms-length review (like the 2013 Dimpleby-Vincent review of school meals); joint existing advisory bodies (SACN, PHE, Environment Agency) devolved to a special joint working party (such as the Royal Society, Academy of Medical Royal Colleges); or open public engagement. But, wherever the review is conducted it must be inclusive in its policy scope, not fragmented into disconnected activities.
- Create a new set of sustainable dietary guidelines to replace the Eatwell plate. Nutrition and public health need to be aligned with environment. Each needs the other. This requires a new cross-disciplinary, multi-agency working party, and linking with the Environment Agency and other bodies. It should be applied and modified to suit all public provision including school meals, prisons, hospitals, and the forces.
- Appraise national skills needed for the transition to a sustainable food system. We need long-term advice on managing the UK's responsibilities. This should become a seminal review of the UK's education, science, technology and food skills capacities at all levels – from citizens to science. What, for example, is required from soil science, once a world leader, but now marginal? Or from plant breeding beyond the current policy fixation on GM?
- Create a Beveridge-type review of food welfare, including the role of the labour market, the rise of zero-hours contracts, food poverty and food banks. Existing strains in this policy mix are likely to be exacerbated by the Coalition's welfare reforms and long-term thinking based on a living wage to afford a sustainable diet is needed.
- Reform institutional structures. Should the Food Standards Agency be merged into Public Health England (Scotland and Wales are already using their FSAs differently to England)? Should Defra's responsibilities for corporate supermarkets and large manufacturers be transferred to the Department for Business Innovation and Skills as part of BIS' industrial strategy?

- Re-activate the UK's high level involvement in the EU's sustainable consumption and production agenda, in the context of the Lisbon agenda, where the EC's Roadmap makes a start but remains subsumed under industrial policy and disconnected from the debates and decisions on CAP reform. Agriculture, the supply chain and consumers' health need to be reintegrated in EU policy formulation.¹⁸ The UK ought to be central to ideas in that forum. The SCP theme at EU and UN levels needs to be repatriated, and expanded beyond its current focus on food waste and greening public procurement, notwithstanding the importance of movement in these areas.
- Set out a clear land policy. We have argued before that this is ultimately a question about what land and food production are for.¹⁹ The UK could take the lead in advocating more productive land use strategies for food growing and meat reduction strategies internationally. Already the Netherlands is taking a lead on protein substitution.

Not much to do, clearly!

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Incentivising change – a business point of view



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Few would disagree that the pursuit of short term profit has led to massive environmental destruction and a breakdown in society. The recent horsemeat scandal brought to light the consequences of not having a transparent and accountable supply chain and just how disturbingly widespread this ignorance is. And right now the solutions being applied are like applying a plaster to a stab wound, wholly inadequate.

But think what could happen if those social and environmental impacts were monitored as closely as the financial bottom line. What if those impacts truly affected their ability to run their business and were fundamental to every decision taken. Now wouldn't that be a fantastic world in which to live!

But where's the incentive for business to change? Right now, the reality is that unless the environmental and social impact of their operations affects profits, then they are a minor consideration at best. Government legislation which either financially rewards or punishes companies for these impacts, such as through the use of tax breaks, funding or fines, would finally make it worthwhile for a business to invest time and resource into restructuring its reporting. For the first time, this would enable true accountability and transparency, giving their stakeholders and consumers insight into the companies they support and giving them the ability to pressure companies to continuously improve this position. Government is a key influence in the way businesses operate and will be crucial in putting social and environmental impacts at the very heart of each company.

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