



Re-framing the great food debate:

The case for sustainable food

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Contents

Executive summary	2
Introduction	3
The great food debate	3
Objectives and main arguments	3
Report roadmap	4
Local food	5
The local food movement	5
Limitations of the focus on local food	8
Sustainable food	10
An agenda for action	12
Conclusion: towards sustainable food policy	14
Endnotes	16

Executive summary

This report argues that ideas around local food have played a key role in the ‘great food debate’ that has taken place in the UK over the last two decades. As such, the local food movement has been extremely useful in raising awareness and helping to shape public discussion about the future of food.

At the same time, it is now apparent that the notion of ‘sustainable food’ has important advantages over local food for framing the next phase of the debate. We define sustainable food as food associated with high levels of well-being, social justice, stewardship and system resilience. A focus on sustainable food is particularly attractive because it provides a basis for a holistic approach to the challenge of re-making the food system. Issues around well-being, social justice, stewardship and system resilience arise throughout the food system – in production, processing, manufacture, transportation, retail, preparation and waste disposal – and for producers, workers and consumers, whether they are located in the UK or abroad.

The final section of this report argues that the notion of sustainable food can serve as the basis of an agenda for action with the objective of re-orienting the food system so that its explicit objective is to enhance well-being, and as such is both fairer and greener. The proposition underlying this agenda for action is that the transition towards more sustainable food must go hand-in-hand with fundamental changes in where and how we live and work, our family and neighbourhood interactions and consumption patterns. In the coming years, these changes will be driven by three main factors: the imperative to cut greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions; peak oil; and the increasing realisation that well-being, social justice and security are ill-served by an economic system that caters to a privileged few while placing huge burdens on the poor and on the world’s ecosystems.

At one level, therefore, in order to move towards more sustainable food we must:

- Renew the commitment to address poverty and disadvantage in all their forms.
- Rethink our relationship with work, including issues of low pay and injustice, long commuting distances, gender and ethnic discrimination, resistance to ‘family-friendly’ work patterns and the ‘long hours culture’.
- Reshape the places where we live so that we are less dependent on cars to access shops and other services and amenities.
- Reduce the environmental impacts of consumption.

In addition, government at all levels needs to develop and implement a coherent and integrated food policy that is directly and explicitly articulated with relevant economic, social, environmental, climate change and security policies. At the heart of this policy must be an acceptance that food is different from other sectors and consumer items and that this difference confers special responsibilities on government. Specifically, a new food policy must mount a full-scale attack on ‘cheap food disease’ which is now endemic to the food system and which manifests itself through labour exploitation, environmental degradation and diet-related ill-health.

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed profound changes in global, national and local food systems. At the same time, there has been sustained public debate about many aspects of the food system – from animal welfare to food advertising targeting children.

The great food debate

These debates around individual aspects of the food system are critically important; taken together they can be seen as a 'great food debate' about the purpose, nature and direction of the food system (Box 1). At the heart of the debate are questions like:

- What is food security, how important is it and how can it best be achieved?
- Is there a fundamental conflict between the goals of productivity and efficiency on the one hand, and sustainability on the other?
- How should the food system be regulated; where should power over food be vested?
- What kind of food system can best deliver nutritional, social justice, economic, rural development and environmental goals?

It is true that few of these questions are new, and some of the positions and arguments are rooted in historic struggles relating, for example, to food safety, poverty and access to agricultural land. Nevertheless, the rapid pace of globalisation through the 1980s and 1990s led to unprecedented, world-wide consolidation of the agri-food sector. Add to this the now universally acknowledged imperative to reduce GHG emissions, credible predictions of significantly higher fossil fuel prices and reduced availability, and the dramatic food price spike of 2008 and it is easy to understand why these questions and arguments have re-emerged with a new urgency.

One important dimension of the great food debate in the UK and elsewhere has been around 'local food'. At one level, the local food story is disarmingly simple: surely it makes sense to eat what is produced near to where you live. At another level, however, the story is extraordinarily complex: depending on the definitions, context and the analysis one chooses to refer to, local food may or may not be associated with particular environmental, economic or social benefits, or combinations thereof.

Objectives and main arguments

In this report we examine two alternative devices – local food and sustainable food – for framing the ongoing debate around the future of food. The main arguments we develop are:

- That a focus on local food was extremely useful in raising awareness and launching the discussion about the future of food.
- That the notion of sustainable food has important advantages over local food for framing the next phase of the debate.

Box 1. Some key battle lines in the great food debate

Below we highlight some of the key questions that have fuelled public debate about food.

What is food security, how important is it and how can it best be achieved?

- Is national food self-sufficiency the key to greater food security?
- How will the food system adapt to the global peak and decline of oil?
- What role can organic production systems play in delivering food security, from the household to the global scale?

What relative priority should be given to productivity and efficiency versus sustainability?

- Does the present system of EU farm support help or hinder the sustainability of the agricultural sector and the food system more generally?
- Should public procurement of food (for schools, hospitals, prisons, etc.) be actively used to push the food system towards greater sustainability?
- In the context of the single European market, is the UK's imposition of higher animal welfare standards for home producers simply shooting UK agriculture in the foot?

How should the food system be regulated; where should power over food be vested?

- How active should the Government be in regulating for lower content of salt, fat and sugar in manufactured food products?
- How tightly should food advertising on television that targets children be regulated?
- What are the benefits (if any) associated with using genetically modified organisms (GMOs), and do they outweigh the costs and risks (if any) associated with them?

What kind of food system can best deliver nutritional, social justice, economic, rural development and environmental goals?

- Do supermarkets drive out independent food shops and thus suck resources from neighbourhoods; or are they associated with a net increase in employment and improved access to fresh food?
- Do Fair Trade and other alternative trading organisations (ATOs) provide a genuine alternative for both small-scale producers and Northern consumers?
- Do farmers markets and other 'alternative' marketing channels provide viable outlets for commercial farmers?

- That the notion of sustainable food could serve as the basis of an agenda for action with the objective of re-orienting the food system so that its explicit objective is to enhance well-being, and as such is both fairer and greener.

Report roadmap

In the next section we briefly sketch the historical development of the local food movement in the UK and assess the strengths and weaknesses of a focus on local when thinking about food. Following this, we explore the notion of sustainable food as an alternative framing device. The final section proposes an agenda for the progressive realisation of more sustainable food.

Local food

The UK food system has been more or less dependent on distant production areas and world markets for many decades. Apart from products of tropical origin, such as sugar and tea, the latter part of the nineteenth century, for example, witnessed the importation of increasing quantities of staple foods including wheat from the American plains and frozen meat from Australia, New Zealand, Argentina and the USA.¹

The local food movement

The availability and low price of these goods led to very significant improvements in the diets and health of British workers. While the level of import dependency (or conversely, national food self-sufficiency) fluctuated over the years – being affected by events such as the Second World War and Britain's entry into the Common Market – it is wrong to see the globalisation of the UK food system as a recent phenomenon. However, what has changed in more recent decades is that today no part of the food system is immune, with products like 'fresh' milk and 'fresh' fruit and vegetables now being a normal part of global trade. The domination of the food system by a relatively small number of global corporations; the growing importance of manufactured food and global sourcing of industrial 'food components'; and the growing concentration within the UK food retail sector are also important developments.

It is against this background that renewed interest in local food emerged during the 1980s and 1990s.

People initially came to the local food movement from one of three directions. Some were concerned about the environmental impacts of conventional agriculture, as evidenced by reliance on pesticide use, biodiversity loss, water pollution, hedgerow destruction and the like. For these individuals, alternative, smaller-scale production systems incorporating 'traditional' practices and/or organic principles were central to their vision of local food. Similarly, for some, the notion of 'food miles' and associated images of high energy use, emissions and congestion associated with food transportation, became a powerful argument for local food.² More recently, in response to the prospect of peak oil, some people have promoted local food as an important part of an 'energy descent path'.

Others reacted to the series of food scares that rocked the UK livestock sector, including salmonella in eggs (1988), BSE or 'Mad Cow' disease (1996) and Foot and Mouth disease (2001). For these individuals, the requirement was for smaller-scale, less intensive production systems, that were less dependent on the movement of stock over long distances. Here, traceability or 'knowing where your food came from' was central to rebuilding trust, and local food was seen as a key part of the remedy.

Finally, some individuals and organisations came to and promoted local food as a response to continuing consolidation within the agri-food sector and more generally to the rising tide of globalisation. Local food was portrayed as an arena of struggle or resistance, providing a basis for a different kind of economic system, where face-to-face relations between producers and consumers could be restored. This view was highly compatible with the increasing rhetoric around decentralisation and 'local empowerment'.

Box 2. Defining local food

Below we provide three examples to help illustrate the variety of ways that local food has been defined.

'Local food is not just about "food miles". When the Soil Association talks about local food, we don't just mean food that has travelled a shorter distance to the shop. We mean food that is produced and distributed in ways that contribute positively to local communities. We are interested in the whole localised food system, not just in the food products.'

The Soil Association (<http://tinyurl.com/c5s6ah>)

'Local food, being food both produced and sold within the same relatively limited area, without necessarily having any distinctive quality.'

Defra (<http://tinyurl.com/c7zyau>)

'To reach FARMA standards, your market must define an area as local from within which the majority of your producers will travel to sell at your market. The area that you define as local is important for public perception of "local food".'

There are two types of local definition that FARMA recognises:

Local as a radius

- Local is defined as a radius from the market. A definition of 30 miles is ideal, up to 50 miles is acceptable for larger cities and coastal or remote towns and villages.

Local as a county boundary

- The definition of local may also be a county boundary or other geographic boundary such as a national park that is similar in size to the radius option.

Difficult to source produce: Producers from further afield may attend the market if there is no suitable local producer of a given product. Markets that accept producers from beyond their definition of local should include a clause that states "preference will be given to the most local producer when a space becomes available at the market, without compromising quality".

Maximum distance: If producers from beyond the area you define as local are permitted to attend your market(s) it is recommended that a maximum distance of 100 miles of the market is stated.'

FARMA (National Farmers' Retail & Markets Association) (<http://tinyurl.com/d5ofun>)

Given these divergent entry points, it should not be surprising that even within the movement there are different definitions of local food. To add to the potential confusion, in one study a majority of the consumers who were questioned considered food produced anywhere within the UK to be 'local' (Box 2).³

The local food movement took root through growing interest in farmers' markets, box schemes, local food directories and festivals. The growth of farmers' markets is a good indicator of the trajectory of the movement: the first farmers' market in the UK was established in Bath in 1997, and today markets regularly take place at some 750 locations around the country.⁴ While the size, frequency, range of goods and governance of these markets varies considerably – as does the degree of insistence that the products sold are 'local' – they have become an established and important part of the foodscape in many areas.

Another important chapter in the development of the local food movement concerns the establishment of local 'Food Links' groups. A number of these groups originated in the late 1990s through the Soil Association's *Food Futures* programme, and by 1999 a national programme to help these groups share good practice and increase their impact was established.⁵ Different Food Links groups worked at the scale of a town, city, county or region, and engaged in a variety of activities including:

- Helping to increase returns for (usually small-scale) producers by founding and/or managing farmers' markets; developing co-ops or other collaborative ventures; and supporting local food enterprise development.
- Supporting community co-ops to buy affordable and wholesome foods.
- Increasing the local economic benefit of the food system.
- Raising awareness of and public involvement in the food sector.
- Brokering local food supply chains, especially in the public sector and for small shops.
- Campaigning for policy supportive of local food.⁶

Following the 2001 outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease, the Government commissioned a major report on the future of agriculture.⁷ Sir Donald Curry's report distinguished between 'regional' and 'local' food: the former being associated with particular production areas (i.e., Cheshire cheese or Melton Mowbray pies) but without regard to the place of consumption, while the latter was linked to 'alternative' marketing channels such as farmers' markets. Many observers within the local food movement concluded that Curry had missed an important opportunity to help articulate a more coherent vision for local food within policy circles.

The Curry report did lead to increased support for regional food marketing groups such as *Taste of the West* and *Tastes of Anglia*. Again, by emphasising 'regional' over 'local' food, these initiatives seemed to offer little to those who were promoting local food as part of a more fundamental re-organisation of the food system.

By 2005, most of the major supermarkets groups had initiated marketing campaigns around local food. One study of these initiatives indicated that while some of the smaller, regional chains had successfully made 'local products an integral part of their business model', all the larger supermarkets 'attempted to capture the local "feel" but mostly through shallow niche marketing'.⁸ A detailed examination of the Co-operative Group's experience in one region highlighted 'the tensions of localising a national procurement structure', and this despite the imperatives of both national policy and a strong commitment to corporate social responsibility.

The 2008 Cabinet Office report *Food Matters: Towards a Strategy for the 21st Century* also takes an equivocal view of local food.⁹ On the one hand it suggests: 'The local food movement can play a part in reconnecting consumers with food producers, providing new market opportunities for farmers and small-scale food manufacturers, strengthening social capital within communities, and providing a focus for local economic development.' On the other hand, it concludes that the environmental case for 'local' is less clear and points to a body of evidence 'showing that, in terms of the environmental impact of households' food consumption, *the composition of our diet is more important than how and where food items are produced*' [emphasis in original]. If diet composition were to change towards – for example, lower meat and dairy consumption – the environmental case for 'local' would be more compelling.

Nevertheless, today the proposition that local food and a more localised food system can be the basis for a different kind of food system is being pursued by a diverse collection of private individuals, community groups, firms and national charities. From within the third sector, major ongoing initiatives include *Making Local Food Work* and the *Local Food Fund*, both funded by the Big Lottery, which bring together local groups and national organisations such as the Soil Association, Sustain – The Alliance for Better Food and Farming, the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) and the Plunkett Foundation.

Over the last decade, as the local food movement has developed, numerous claims have been made about the potential benefits of local food. These include

Box 3. Some recent research findings addressing claims about local food

In a recent study Edwards-Jones *et al.* examined the evidence supporting a number of the claims commonly made about local food, including reduced GHG emissions and other environmental hazards, higher quality and nutritional value, and positive impacts on health. Their analysis indicated that in part because of the many different definitions of 'local', data to support many of these claims – including those for GHG emissions – were simply not available. They further highlighted the fact that the nature of some of the claims makes the generation of such data both highly complex and costly.

This study points to the need for context specific analysis of the claims made for local food.¹⁰

One of the claims commonly made about local food is that because it is associated with fewer food miles, it is less environmentally damaging. Weber and Matthews from Carnegie Mellon University in Pennsylvania examined the importance of food miles by comparing life-cycle GHG emissions associated with food production against those associated with long distance distribution. They found that even though food is transported long distances, the GHG emissions associated with food are dominated by the production phase: transportation as a whole represents only 11 per cent of life-cycle GHG emissions, and final delivery from producer to retail contributes only 4 per cent. In other words, food miles represent a relatively small part of environmental impact as represented by GHG emissions.

On the other hand, because foods differ significantly in the GHG intensity, Weber and Matthews conclude that dietary change can be more effective in reducing household food-related climate footprint than 'buying local'. In their words:

*'Shifting less than one day per week's worth of calories from red meat and dairy products to chicken, fish, eggs, or a vegetable-based diet achieves more GHG reduction than buying all locally sourced food.'*¹¹

Also addressing the food miles debate, in a recent UK study, Coley *et al.*, estimated the carbon emissions associated with two systems for purchasing organic vegetables. In the first, a consumer travels to a farm shop by private car, and in the second they have the same produce delivered to their home by a large-scale vegetable box scheme located at some distance from the consumer's home. In both cases the same amount of energy is used in the production of the organic vegetables. However, while the farm shop uses no additional energy in handling the produce (i.e., there is no cold storage), the box scheme uses energy for cold storage, packing, transport to a regional hub and final transport to the customer's doorstep.

The results showed that if the consumer drives a round-trip distance of more than 7.4 km (4.6 miles) in order to purchase vegetables from the farm shop, the resulting carbon emissions are likely to be greater than if they purchased through the box scheme (even though there were over 360 'food kilometres' per box). According to the authors: 'Our work shows that the concept of food miles, as typically used, is of little value per se and that it is the carbon emission *per unit of produce* over the transport chain that really matters.'¹² Looked at from another angle, these findings indicate the overriding importance of the carbon emitted as a result of even a relatively short car journey to and from the farm shop, and as such highlight the dangers of simplistic assumptions about the environmental benefits of local food.

local food being: fresher and tastier; more nutritious; more socially just; more environmentally friendly; and more traceable. In addition, it has been suggested that buying local food puts more back into the local economy and builds social capital. As is often the case, however, when we move from general claims such as these to a more detailed examination of specific cases and situations, the picture is much less clear (Box 3).

Limitations of the focus on local food

There can be no question about the fact that over the last decade the local food movement has played a major role in re-orienting debate about food in the UK, particularly by drawing attention to some of the negative externalities associated with the conventional food system. In the face of declining trust on the part of the public and the increasing dominance of supermarket companies, local food has provided a focus for awareness raising, collective action, enterprise and behaviour change.

These changes can be seen at nearly all points in the food system: farmers' markets are thriving; celebrity chefs sing the praises of local and seasonal food; restaurants of all types highlight local sourcing; some public sector food procurement actively seeks local food; and even the supermarkets now feature local produce. Some organisations have used the interest in local food to promote a broader approach to social and economic reform. As we have seen, the Soil Association makes an explicit link between local food and its positive contribution to the community.

These are real gains and their importance should not be underestimated. The notion of local food has provided an extremely valuable route into both the public consciousness and policy debates about the food system.

Nevertheless, a single-minded focus on local food has important limitations in relation to ongoing efforts to reform the food system. Born and Purcell at the University of Washington use the term 'local trap' to refer to the assumption that 'the local is inherently good'.¹³ In relation to food:

*'The local trap refers to the tendency of food activists and researchers to assume something inherent about the local scale. The local is assumed to be desirable; it is preferred a priori to larger scales. What is desired varies and can include ecological sustainability, social justice, democracy, better nutrition, and food security, freshness, and quality. For example, the local trap assumes that a local-scale food system will be inherently more socially just than a national-scale or global-scale food system.'*¹⁴

Drawing on recent theoretical developments in the field of geography, Born and Purcell argue that the local trap arises because there is nothing inherently good or bad about any particular scale. Common sense suggests that a local employer could be as exploitative as a global corporation; or that a local farm could be associated with as much environmental damage as one far away.

It follows from this that a food strategy based on 'local' scale cannot simply be equated with any particular set of outcomes such as sustainability, justice, quality and so on. Rather, scale should be seen as a means to achieve specific, desired outcomes, but always with the understanding that the eventual outcomes will 'depend not on the scale itself but on the agenda of those who are empowered by it'.

According to these authors, the critical point for policy-makers and activists is to identify the goals and then choose the scale(s) of action most likely to achieve them.

Directly related to this is the ongoing debate around the role of food exports to the global north within pro-poor development strategies for the global south. The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) and others have used the term 'shopping for development' to describe the power of Northern consumers to directly and positively impact on the livelihoods of poor people in the developing world. The case of fresh fruit and vegetables imported from developing countries is often highlighted and there is now a significant body of research exploring, for example, the employment and labour relations, gender, and poverty effects of export horticulture.^{15,16,17} One author approached this in a very provocative way by asking whether we had a 'moral obligation' to eat strawberries at Christmas.¹⁸ He argued that the commonly cited environmental justification for favouring local food (i.e., reduced food miles) is far too simplistic and that any resulting 'boycott of fresh produce from the poorest and most vulnerable countries will have a significant negative impact on their efforts to eradicate their poverty'.

But perhaps the real problem is that a continuing emphasis on local food lets us all off the hook because it does not challenge us to clearly articulate an alternative vision of the food system. In the next section we explore how the notion of 'sustainable food' can help to re-frame our thinking about food and set the stage for a more holistic approach to both food policy and food activism.

Sustainable food

The term sustainable food is certainly not new, and a number of organisations have provided useful definitions. For example, Sustain describes sustainable food as follows:

'Our working definition is that sustainable food should be produced, processed and traded in ways that:

- Contribute to thriving local economies and sustainable livelihoods – both in the UK and, in the case of imported products, in producer countries;
- Protect the diversity of both plants and animals (and the welfare of farmed and wild species), and avoid damaging natural resources and contributing to climate change;
- Provide social benefits, such as good quality food, safe and healthy products, and educational opportunities.' ¹⁹

For our purposes, and echoing **nef's** (the new economics foundation's) core concerns, we consider sustainable food to be food associated with high levels of well-being, social justice, stewardship and system resilience (Box 4). We find this way of defining sustainable food to be particularly attractive because it provides a basis for a holistic approach to the challenge of re-making the food system. Issues around well-being, social justice, stewardship and system resilience arise throughout the food system – in production, processing, manufacture, transportation, retail, preparation and waste disposal – and for producers, workers and consumers, whether they are located in the UK or abroad.

A note of caution is in order. The food system is and must be understood as a component of the larger economy. It follows that sustainable food can only be achieved if and when the economy overall is re-oriented towards well-being, social justice, stewardship and system resilience. In other words, while a specific focus on food is certainly justified, and the food system provides an important test bed for the transition to sustainability, we have to recognise that it will be impossible to arrive at a sustainable food system as long as the sustainability of the global economy remains in question.

We already briefly explored the idea of the local trap. A focus on sustainable food is one way to avoid this trap, as the framing of sustainable food makes no *a priori* assumptions about the relationships between the various components of sustainability and scale. In other words, framing the problem in terms of sustainable food does not require an assumption that local is always or necessarily associated with higher levels of well-being, social justice, stewardship or system resilience. Again, clarity in relation to ends (sustainable food) and means (the identification of appropriate actions and use of appropriate scales: local, regional and global) is absolutely essential.

This approach also helps to resolve the tension between a privileging of local food on the one hand, and the recognition of our responsibilities in relation to the developing world on the other. Professor Kevin Morgan has described this tension in terms of two narratives: 'local and green' versus 'global and fair'.²⁰ He develops the notion of 'a new geopolitics of care' to help articulate 'why we should take an active interest in the plight of others in an ever more inter-dependent world'. In this light, he concludes that 'local and green' and 'global and fair' need to be seen as complementary narratives, 'each of which is important to the constitution of a *sustainable food system*'.²¹

Box 4. The dimensions of sustainable food

We consider sustainable food to be food associated with high levels of well-being, social justice, stewardship and system resilience. In this context we use and understand these terms as follows:

Well-being: 'Our working model is built on two headline measures which capture personal well-being and social well-being, reflecting crucial aspects of how people experience their lives. Personal well-being is broken down into five main components with a number of subcomponents: emotional well-being (positive feelings and absence of negative feelings); satisfying life; vitality; resilience and self-esteem (self-esteem, optimism and resilience); and positive functioning (which covers autonomy, competence, engagement, and meaning and purpose). Social well-being is made up of two main components: supportive relationships, and trust and belonging.'²²

Social justice: Refers to the belief that all individuals and groups should be afforded fair treatment and an impartial share of the benefits of society. As such, social justice must be rooted in the equitable distribution of power and resources – economic, political, social and environmental – within and between social groups. Social injustice and power (economic, political and social) are thus inextricably bound together.

Stewardship: 'The long-term maintenance of valued environmental resources in an evolving human context'.²³

System resilience: The ability of a system to retain form and function in the face of shocks. For example, a resilient food system would have the ability to continue to provide sufficient quantities of an appropriate range of food in the face of a significant and sustained increase in energy prices.

An agenda for action

In this section, we highlight some of the most critical steps required for the progressive realisation of more sustainable food; that is, food associated with high levels of well-being, social justice, stewardship and system resilience.

One of the reasons why food is such a compelling area of study and action is because it is a microcosm that encompasses pretty much all contemporary economic, environmental, social and political challenges. We have already alluded to the fact that as the food system is part and parcel of the larger economic and social systems, sustainable food will only be achieved if and when these are re-oriented.

The proposition underlying this agenda for action is that the transition towards more sustainable food must go hand-in-hand with fundamental changes in where and how we live, our residential and commuting patterns, working hours, family and neighbourhood interactions and consumption patterns. We assume that in the coming years these changes will be driven by two main factors. First, the imperative to cut GHG emissions which, when combined with the effects of peak oil, will result in fossil-fuel-based energy becoming significantly more expensive. Second, the increasing realisation that well-being, social justice and security are ill-served by an economic system that caters to a privileged few while placing huge burdens on the poor and on the world's ecosystems.

This means that we will need to:

1. Renew the commitment to address poverty and disadvantage in all their forms.
2. Rethink our relationship with work including issues of low pay and injustice, long commuting distances, gender and ethnic discrimination, resistance to 'family-friendly' work patterns and the 'long hours culture'.
3. Reshape the places where we live so that we are less dependent on cars to access shops and other services and amenities.
4. Reduce the environmental impacts of consumption.

Actions in these four areas will affect every aspect of the economy. They will also be critically important in enabling the move towards sustainable food.

1. Renew the commitment to address poverty and disadvantage in all their forms.

While diet-related ill-health (e.g., obesity, heart disease, diabetes and many cancers) can be seen across the socio-economic spectrum, it is particularly prevalent amongst people living with poverty and disadvantage. One might interpret this as a specific failure of the National Health Service (NHS) or the school system, but a far more compelling explanation lies in the economic and social structures that create and re-create poverty, and the failure of policy to address these. Until and unless these structural barriers are eliminated, the dream of food provision that is associated with high levels of well-being and social justice will remain just that – an unfulfilled dream.

2. Rethink our relationship with work including issues of low pay and injustice, long commuting distances, gender and ethnic discrimination, resistance to 'family-friendly' work patterns and the 'long hours culture'.

It goes without saying that the experience of work varies tremendously

across the population. Some people can't find any work, some have far too much; some people struggle to take home the minimum wage, some look forward to a very substantial annual bonus; some people see work solely as a means to pay the rent and feed the family, while others look to work for personal fulfilment. Nevertheless, we can draw a direct link between work and sustainable food in that unless work leaves you with sufficient money, time and energy, the ability to move towards more sustainable food will be very limited. For example, the sense of 'time poverty' often associated with our culture of long working hours increases the demand for pre-prepared and convenience foods and reduces the opportunity for children to learn about food and cooking in the home. Again, there are structural issues at play that must be addressed if sustainable food is to become a reality.

3. Reshape the places where we live so that we are less dependent on cars to access shops and other services and amenities.

A significant increase in the price of fossil fuels has the potential to change the commercial logic of the production and distribution functions in every corner of the economy, and perhaps particularly for food. Energy-intensive food production systems, far-flung manufacturing and distribution networks, a retail sector that relies on a few, lorry-dependent distribution hubs and our willingness and ability to drive to out-of-town outlets all make the current food system vulnerable to increased energy prices. Maintaining the adaptive capacity of the food system by fostering a high level of diversity will therefore be critical for assuring system resilience. This will demand a radical re-think of approaches, for example, to local planning, land tenure and the regulation of competition.

4. Reduce the environmental impacts of consumption.

It is increasingly acknowledged that wasteful patterns of consumption in developed countries are a major factor driving climate change. Present patterns of consumption have other negative effects – for example, they are wasteful of key natural resources and the disposal of many products causes additional, long-term environmental burdens. Put simply, we have to accept that in terms of both sustainability and well-being, less material consumption is more. There will be a critical role for innovative policy to drive company and individual behaviour in this direction. In relation to food, this 'less is more' approach could play out in a number of ways, including reducing levels of dairy and meat consumption, as well as fish consumption, and setting aside the notion that all fresh fruit and vegetables must be made available throughout the year.

Let's make no mistake about this – these are complex issues and there are few simple or non-contentious solutions. In addition, some of these problems will require global agreements and a high level of coordination. Nevertheless, identifying effective ways to incentivise governments, companies and individuals to change their behaviour will be absolutely essential if we are to successfully confront both the broad sustainability challenge and the more specific challenges relating to sustainable food. The current turmoil within the global financial system may provide a unique opportunity to move decisively along these lines.

Conclusion: towards sustainable food policy

Now we can focus more specifically on food. First we need to acknowledge the many important initiatives that are ongoing – for example, in relation to school and hospital food, sustainable procurement, Fair Trade, Transition Towns, community-supported agriculture and so on.

In their own way, each of these supports the move towards more sustainable food, and every opportunity should be taken to support, strengthen and extend them. But to really fulfil their potential, these and related initiatives must be set within a coherent policy context. Here we call on government (at all levels) to develop and implement a coherent and integrated food policy that is directly and explicitly articulated with relevant economic, social, environmental, climate change and security policies.

At the heart of this policy must be an acceptance that food is different from other sectors and consumer items and that this difference confers special responsibilities on government. Specifically, it is no longer acceptable to put loosely regulated markets at centre stage and then place the burden of responsibility on the shoulders of individuals to ‘choose health’, ‘eat well’ or use their spending power to nudge companies towards more responsible social and environmental behaviour. Rather, a sustainable food policy must make explicit the fact that responsibility for moving towards more sustainable food is shared by government, companies within the food sector, public institutions, and the general public. Within this shared responsibility, government must provide a level of leadership that today is largely lacking. Anything less will mean that sustainable food remains yet another distant aspiration.

Looking across the food system, we see a need for strong leadership in relation, for example, to food composition, advertising, environmental impacts and the social injustice that underpins much of the food system (Box 5). The case is strengthened by the fact that food, and the systems that produce and provide it, play a unique and pivotal role in health and well-being, employment and the economy, and environmental management. We are not suggesting that the state should control all aspects of the food system, but rather that striking a new balance of rights and responsibility among government, business and consumers will be essential if more sustainable food is to become a reality.

At the centre of this new food policy must be a full-scale attack on ‘cheap food disease’ which is now endemic to the food system. Basically, this means all the financial, social and environmental costs that are now externalised (i.e., hidden), thereby artificially lowering the price of food, must be acknowledged and either eliminated or internalised. Cheap food disease manifests itself in many forms – including exploited labour, environmental degradation and diet-related ill-health – and, when made explicit, the costs of these symptoms will cast cheap food in a whole new light. It goes without saying that grappling with cheap food disease should not create additional burdens for those who are already disadvantaged, highlighting again the necessity of setting the movement towards sustainable food within a wider re-organisation of economic, social and political relations that addresses the problems of well-being, social justice and environmental sustainability more broadly.

Box 5. The Food and Social Justice Initiative

In March 2009, the Food Ethics Council commissioned an Inquiry into Food and Social Justice. Alongside this Inquiry **nef** is undertaking a research project called *An institutional analysis of social justice within the UK food system*. In addition, The Food Ethics Council and **nef** have established a joint initiative on food and social justice to raise awareness and to create a shared network of expertise relevant to the two projects.

The **Food and Social Justice Initiative** aims to put fairness at the heart of efforts to promote sustainable food and farming. Through this initiative we want to make it impossible to talk credibly about food policy, public health and/or sustainable food without putting social justice at centre stage. The initiative will run until June 2010.

The food and drink sector in the UK turns over £172 billion a year, accounts for seven per cent of national output, employs 3.7 million people and encompasses the UK's largest manufacturing industry as well as its farms and fisheries. It feeds 61 million of us, probably more adequately and more reliably, and certainly with more variety, than we have ever been fed before.

But, for all its effectiveness, this system is unsustainable. Here in the UK it is environmentally damaging, resource hungry, inequitable and heavily dependent on a 'flexible', low-wage workforce. The UK food system is also inextricably dependent on global supplies of cheap labour, raw materials and finished imports, as well as on the land and water located elsewhere that are used to produce our food. This global reach enables us to export many of the negative impacts to countries with lower standards of worker, animal and environmental protection than apply in Europe. Moreover, while one billion people worldwide do not have enough to eat, another billion are overweight: in other words, even in crude calorific terms, one-third of the planet's population is ill-served by existing food systems.

The environmental challenge this presents is increasingly well understood, and is the focus of industry commitments, efficiency drives, regulatory measures and global agreements. The social consequences are all too apparent: they include rising levels of chronic, diet-related disease and malnutrition; unfair treatment of workers, often with a severe impact on individual and family well-being and sometimes ending in injury or death; and financial hardship for suppliers squeezed by lower prices yet asked for higher standards. The social challenge – to build a food system that feeds people fairly and sustainably – is neglected.

It is this neglect that the Food and Social Justice Initiative seeks to address.

You can learn more at: www.foodandsocialjustice.org

Endnotes

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One of the other centres at **nef**

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