

Towards a plan for a food policy response to Brexit: what 57 academics and civil society representatives think should be done about food policy and Brexit

Report from a meeting hosted by the Food Research Collaboration, Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London, July 20, 2016

The FRC hosted a roundtable meeting at City, University of London on 20th July 2016 to hear the views of almost 60 people from academia and civil society organisations (CSOs) on food policy and Brexit. The aim was to garner ideas for moving forward in this policy vacuum, particularly with regard to the role of academics and civil society. 57 attended in total, including representatives from 17 CSOs (environment, public health, international development, consumers, local food, poverty and social policy) and academics representing 20 institutions and a range of disciplines, across England and Wales. Here we have brought together what was said at the meeting about a way forward on food policy and Brexit.

We first summarise the key messages:

- There are a plethora of implications of a British exit of the European Union for food policy and the UK food system. There are many risks, including a deregulatory agenda, a loss of funds to the UK countryside as a result of changes to the CAP, higher food prices, a reduction in agri-food collaborative research with EU partners and issues with trading regulations. But there are also opportunities such as the chance to develop a more holistic food system; the possibility for engaging in alternative free trade agreements, and the chance for more local food policies.
- A holistic coordinated approach is needed to deal with food and Brexit. Although different groups and individuals will have varying interests and perspectives, those concerned about food and Brexit should work to find mutual ground, a common voice with agreed messages and priorities, and a shared vision.
- Various activities need to happen to ensure that the UK's Brexit agreement addresses the risks and takes advantages of the opportunities on offer. These activities include crafting an alternative plan for food and agriculture, mapping out current EU policies and how they affect UK food and farming, and, monitoring what and how policy is being developed and who is deciding what.
- Risks involved for those working on new food policy proposals in the CSO and academic world include the likelihood of work being blindly repeated rather than research from different units complementing each other; and organisations following up on individual interests rather than uniting to promote a holistic approach to food policy.
- To avoid such risks we need a record of interests logging who is doing what on Brexit, an awareness between academics and CSOs of what each other is doing, (similarly between academic institutions and between CSOs) and a 'supra' coordinating body to bring together the actions of a range of new alliances that represent interests in different parts of the food system.
- The FRC plans to respond to this by developing a webpage on Brexit output from in-house as well as external CSOs and academics; by arranging a series of Brexit Food Thinker seminars; by hosting a Brexit blog on the FRC website; and by commissioning a series of Brexit briefing papers to map out the food policy landscape.



1. What are the main concerns about food and Brexit?

Based on their expertise in particular food issues, participants counted a wide range of risks across the food system emerging from the departure of the UK from the European Union, including:

- A deregulatory agenda and resultant regulatory chaos: the loss of positive EU regulations and the use of the precautionary principle in areas including:
 - food safety regulation
 - environmental regulation
 - animal welfare regulation
 - labour regulation
 - public health regulation
- Environmental risks as a result of changes to food production and supply chains (partly due to changes in the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)) and deregulation across the food sector.
- Lack of clarity about what will replace the CAP, for example, what is to happen to direct payments under the current Pillar 1, and the impact any change could have on the farming and rural community and associated industries.
- Reduction in the UK's ability to manage food safety risks as a result of its compromised ability to share information internationally.
- Possible demise of the UK horticultural sector mainly as a result of changes to rules on free movement of people after Brexit, given the sector is so heavily dependent on seasonal migrant labour.
- Worsening agricultural livelihoods in rural parts of the UK as a result of changes to CAP funding as well as worsening agricultural livelihoods in poorer supplying countries if market protection is lost in trade negotiations with lower cost suppliers.
- A worsening sterling exchange rate could lead to higher UK food prices given much of what we eat is imported. This impacts particularly on the lower income sectors of the population who spend proportionally higher percentages of their income on food. Food poverty could increase, including a worsening of children's diets.
- Changes in trade law which compromise the UK's trading relationship with the EU and leave the UK more subject to WTO rules.
- The impact on European agri-food policy collaborative research, pan-EU research and collaboration and access to EU funding in the UK. Associated with this is the potential loss of links with the community of practice that has built up over the Framework Programmes that focus on sustainable food and farming.
- A diminishing influence of the UK in regional and global fora and international development debates.
- A fear of retraction of the promised sugar levy even before it is enacted because it is seen as a threat to economic viability.

This is not an exhaustive list. Other concerns raised, or posed differently, by non-attendees since the meeting include:

- A lack of blue sky thinking as to what alternatives to the CAP objectives and food policy legislation currently in place might be preferable.
- The impact of Brexit on UK public health standards, the legislation for many of these being currently set at EU level.
- The questionable outcome for the relatively successful EU environmental legislation as applied in the UK post-Brexit.
- The impact on food sector workers, currently protected under EU legislation, of leaving the EU.
- The difficulties of comparing animal welfare legislation across continents and production systems when deciding on how the UK's demand for meat should be satisfied post-Brexit.
- Competing demands on CAP expenditure from non-food sectors that reduces the availability of funds in the farming and food sectors to 'do differently'.

In addition, meeting participants said they were concerned about how the *process* of dealing with food policy would be dealt with during the Brexit negotiations. Six main concerns emerged about processes:

- i. Most importantly, that the process of dealing with the food issues in Brexit would be captured by those with strong interests in keeping or enhancing the status quo, and that there would not be the opportunity for a greater diversity of views to be aired.
- ii. That there would be a lack of clarity in the process to determine new food and farming policies and significant policy change would be agreed behind closed doors.
- iii. That there have been such large reductions in staffing levels in governmental organisations that there is now an inadequate institutional architecture to deal with food in a co-ordinated way.
- iv. In the Brexit negotiations, sustainable food and public health will not feature highly on the food policy agenda relative to the economic issues around food. Brexit could also lead to a "policy/regulatory chill" with policy development or implementation put on hold whilst we await the Brexit negotiation outcomes.
- v. The lack of UK trade negotiators as currently negotiations are largely undertaken by the EU and whether, therefore, the potential gains from trade deals will be maximised. Linked to this, whether UK trade negotiators will have sufficient expertise in environmental issues and public health to be able to negotiate appropriately with the food industry and foreign powers that might otherwise negotiate without challenge.
- vi. The possibility that the US will dump sub-standard food on the UK market if the TTIP goes ahead.

2. What are the main opportunities emerging for food policy from Brexit?

Despite the concerns regarding Brexit, participants identified opportunities. Most importantly, that Brexit creates a space to "do food differently," to create new policies and systems to address the failings of the current food system. Participants said it was a chance to bring together food, health, livelihoods and the environment in a more holistic and structured way and an opportunity to review and reform the UK food system to better support healthy, sustainable diet objectives.

Beyond that, specific opportunities identified comprised:

- ❖ That to address economic challenges, the UK agricultural sector could differentiate itself by producing high quality products with high environmental, health and labour standards
- ❖ That changes to the CAP could lead to a more diverse farming structures, positive changes in land use, and adaptation in associated supply chains
- ❖ That removal of the EU as food label regulator could actually allow for stronger regulation on food (nutrition) labelling
- ❖ That withdrawal from the EU customs union could enable the UK's participation in other, improved, free trade agreements (FTAs)
- ❖ That the process of modifying farming systems, improving food standards and negotiating new trading agreements makes it apparent to government that they need to rethink the governance of food in the UK
- ❖ That the devolution of decision-making away from the EU creates an opportunity for city-level and city-region food policy, which is relatively progressive.

3. What needs to happen to move the food policy and Brexit agenda forward?

The participants in the 20th July meeting universally agreed that a holistic coordinated approach is needed to deal with food and Brexit. Although different groups and individuals will have different interests and perspectives, those concerned about food and Brexit should work to find mutual ground, a common voice with agreed messages and priorities, and shared vision.

Participants suggested that eight different processes are needed to address the risks and take advantage of the opportunities offered by Brexit for UK food policy:

- i. **Policy visioning and planning.** Taking the opportunity of this policy window to craft a forward looking vision (variously termed 'The Plan', a 'Plan B' or a 'Plan C') for what British food policy would look like in order to deliver the public good. Guided by a vision, taking into account a plurality of proposals, asking and answering big questions (e.g. where should food in Britain come from?), with concrete suggestions for coherent governance and a national food policy, and solutions to managing the risks and opportunities of Brexit for food. This would also involve looking at current governance of UK food and seeing how it could change for the better. It would have to address the reality that there are genuine conflicts. It was suggested that this process should involve looking at the economic arguments to make a case to the Treasury that using this opportunity to change food policy makes economic sense.
- ii. **Policy mapping.** Having an overview of existing food policies affected by Brexit as a "baseline" is necessary to devise any further course of action, and to mobilize the right people/organisations for the most pressing topics. It is also a prerequisite to monitoring government actions/negotiations. Analysis could identify all current EU policies relevant to food and assess what impact they have had on UK food policy and the food system in the UK and internationally. This could be used to assess what would happen if they are removed or modified, and then to identify priority policies to focus on for advocacy and/or input from researchers.
- iii. **Policy monitoring and advocacy.** Though little is known about the process to be followed to Brexit, the actions being taken by government and industry should be monitored and tracked and followed up with advocacy to defend EU regulations which the policy mapping indicates are proving positive for the UK food system.



- iv. **Development of policy proposals.** In light of potential changes to take place, there will be a need not only to defend, but also to propose new policies to replace those which will no longer be in place
- v. **Knowledge sharing.** A repository of all relevant research and information produced by academics and CSOs on Brexit food policy could be stored in a shared area that could allow the building of a research bank and that would help to avoid repetition of work on particular themes. A list/network could also be made of organisations and individual academics working on food and Brexit.
- vi. **Learning from, and connecting with, people.** Despite the clear importance of expertise in addressing food in Brexit, there was a sense that there was much to do to put together a fractured, unequal society, and one aspect of this was to better understand where people are at - people who voted to leave - with food and how this could be listened to, engaged with and interpreted to be part of the policy planning. Importantly, too, to identify the food issues of importance that would connect with them as priorities.
- vii. **Engaging with the media.** For all of the above, there should be a media strategy early on, with a clear set of messages.
- viii. **Identifying target audience.** Throughout these processes, there is a need to identify who within government needs to be targeted and engaged with and who are the influencers of government. Part of this will be to identify who will be doing the negotiating with the EU.

3. Who should do what?

Many academics and organisations in the UK are conducting work on food that is relevant to Brexit from a range of different perspectives. What role they can best play in taking forward the above-proposed actions will differ between academics and CSOs, between CSOs with different interests and between academics with different disciplines. Some expertise will become more in demand, legal expertise, for example.

A broad range of groups and individuals working on food policy and Brexit is to be welcomed. Two risks however are that:

- different groups planning to work on food policy and Brexit embark on doing similar things, rather than complement each other;
- the work focuses on specific food policies or parts of the food system, thus missing the opportunity to develop a more holistic and integrated approach to food policy.

This indicates three specific needs in order to take forward the food policy and Brexit agenda in a coordinated manner:

- I. *A record of interests:* Clarity and transparency are needed in the academic and CSO world as to who is working on food policy and Brexit and what they are doing.
- II. *Academic awareness:* Academics are aware of what other academics are doing on food policy and Brexit, and what CSOs are doing.
- III. *A “supra” coordinating body:* NGOs are forming alliances in order to bring together interests in different parts of the food system e.g. agriculture, environment, public health, labour, with a united set of clear and common messages. Functions of these alliances could be to monitor what the government is doing on food and Brexit, to conduct advocacy and craft policy proposals. A “supra” coordinating body is likely to be needed for these alliances since the issue



is bigger than any one alliance alone. This coordinating body could monitor what is happening and take action or mobilise others to intervene.

The FRCs role is to facilitate more effective collaboration between academics and CSOs to produce, share and use the knowledge needed to improve UK food policy. We thus plan to promote two-way knowledge sharing and an enabling environment for coordination, transparency and collaboration between academics and CSOs by:

- *Developing a webpage* to report on articles, events and funding opportunities on food policy and Brexit, to enable a two-way flow of information between CSOs and academics to allow each other access to public documents as well as previously restricted in-house (as well as less publicised informal) research findings.
- *Holding a series of Brexit Food Thinkers* to allow for some of the 'blue sky' thinking that might open up alternative avenues for food policy post-Brexit. Two of these (Professor Tim Lang (City, University of London) and David Baldock (IIEP)) are already arranged.
- *Hosting a Brexit blog* on the FRC website with contributions initially from the July 20th speakers.
- *Commissioning a series of briefing papers* mapping out the policy landscape. That is, to assess what food policies we have that are affected by EU Membership, the impact they have, and what they could be replaced by to improve the food system. The papers will also include an analysis of where policy responsibility within the UK government lies for these policies (including which are devolved) and how this might change post-Brexit.



Food Research Collaboration

The **Food Research Collaboration** is a project, funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, to facilitate joint working by academics and civil society organisations to improve the UK food system.

Food Research Collaboration Brexit output can be found at:

www.foodresearch.org.uk/brexit-and-food

Email: contact@foodresearch.org.uk

Tel: 020 7040 4302