



Food Research
Collaboration



US
UNIVERSITY
OF SUSSEX

CARDIFF
UNIVERSITY
PRIFYSGOL
CAERDYDD

FRC Policy Summary

Nine principles and tests for long-term UK food security and resilience

Tim Lang
Erik Millstone
Terry Marsden

Series Editor Rosalind Sharpe
Creative Media by Gavin Wren

Food Research Collaboration Policy Summary
July 2021

The Authors

Tim Lang is Emeritus Professor of Food Policy, Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London t.lang@city.ac.uk

Erik Millstone is Emeritus Professor of Science Policy, SPRU, University of Sussex e.p.millstone@sussex.ac.uk

Terry Marsden is Emeritus Professor of Environmental Policy and Planning, Cardiff University marsdentk@Cardiff.ac.uk

Introduction

This Policy Summary provides an overview of a longer FRC Discussion Paper, *Testing times for UK food policy: nine principles and tests for long-term UK food security and resilience*. The Discussion Paper summarises the state of post-EU UK food security and policy. It applies a multi-criteria approach, seeing food not as a matter that can be reduced to one overarching goal – cheapness, say, or supermarket availability – but as an issue on which public policy has to weigh up and include several equally worthy and evidence-based concerns. The report offers an approach to ensuring UK food security in the years ahead.

With UK food policy in an uneven state of development – Wales and Scotland have been developing positions for decades, while Northern Ireland’s position is fraught

due to the Trade & Cooperation Agreement (Brexit) – an opportunity to address the complexity of UK food security now presents itself, with the long-awaited publication of the National Food Strategy Part 2. This is essentially an English Government strategy, but it deserves close public attention.

To that end, the paper offers **nine Principles which should guide future food policy in the national interest**. These propose that it is possible to capture a consensus on the need for change and what it entails. **Each Principle leads to a Test** that the UK public and policy-makers could apply to any proposals emanating from Government in coming months.

The overarching question UK consumers, civil society organisations, industries and governments should be asking is: what would it take to ensure food systems become robust, secure and resilient? The answer almost certainly should be: **make them more diverse – economically, environmentally, regionally and biologically – and don’t continue to reduce home food production**. Instead, policy should support the diversification of land use, climate change mitigation and adaptation, preparation for sea-level rise (and other impacts on land use) and skilling consumers and the workforce to drive the transition to sustainable diets sourced from sustainable food systems.

The paper argues that this transition could be difficult, and will require clear leadership and public engagement, but that **the combination of environmental, social, health, economic and governance criteria set out below would build resilience not just in the UK’s food system and ecosystem but also in the population at large**. The term ‘resilience’ is used in the sense that is now common in food systems analysis: the capacity of a

food system to deal with shocks and stress, whether from internal or external sources.

The paper argues that the focus of public policy and public engagement should be **to ensure food security**. We contend that a country’s food system is only secure if it provides a supply that is **sufficient, sustainable, safe** (microbiologically and toxicologically), **healthy** (nutritionally), and **equitably affordable** by all. We also insist that our food security should not undermine food security in any country with which the UK trades.

The context

The paper identifies aspects of the food system that combine to create the context for radical change. There is now a scientific consensus that a coherent UK food security policy is overdue; that improvements require significant not minor changes; and that the desirable changes will provide multiple benefits. There is less consensus – though more today than five years ago – about how to deliver the necessary changes. Perspectives diverge. Consequently, the Government’s food policy-making needs to engage with a wide range of stakeholders, and be open and accountable. A new, comprehensive framework focussed on enhancing the UK’s food security is needed. The Discussion Paper sets out in detail a number of persistent or structural challenges that must be addressed:

- The uncomfortable truth is that the UK food system suffers too many ‘lock-ins’ to unsustainable modes of production and consumption.
- Food prices are too often distorted or disconnected from products’ full costs.

- Intra-UK food policy dynamics show the need for more equitable devolved powers to nations, regions, and cities.
- There are conflicting signals on food trade deals and international relations.
- UK 'food defence' is weak. The UK could not feed its people adequately, let alone well, if there was a severe supply or trade crisis.
- Politicians and policy-makers avoid confronting runaway food consumerism.
- Policy interventions seem reluctant and weak, and consumers face an information deficit.
- There is a long-term crisis over food jobs, skills and agri-food education.
- The role of scientific advisors in current food policy-making needs reform.
- Processes of short and long-term change could put the UK on track to a secure food system.

Nine Principles and Tests to help put policies on the right track

Principle 1: UK food system change should be led by a clear, sound and coherent set of goals focused on food security.

TEST 1: Does the Government have a coherent, evidence-informed set of goals for the food system? Will these be regularly reviewed and updated? Are food security and resilience integral to these goals? Is there a target for sustainably derived home production?

Principle 2: The route to food resilience is through ecological integration, linking healthy diets, biosphere, farming, people and economy.

TEST 2: Is there a commitment to an ecologically integrated food system? Is policy aimed at reducing the avalanche of ultra-processed foods, improving access to nutritious diets, halting environmentally harmful food production practices, and encouraging shorter, low-carbon, more diverse, sustainable and circular supply chains? Are the goals clear and in line with international as well as national agreements?

Principle 3: The food system is dominated by giant companies when a more resilient one would be more diverse.

TEST 3: Is the Government continuing to encourage concentration in food markets, and the further decline in farm and food SMEs? Or is it taking steps to reduce concentration and barriers to entry, and to create new markets and increase diversity?

Principle 4: Food democracy has to be embedded in publicly accountable food governance.

TEST 4: Is the Government comprehensively opening up food democracy in decision-making? Is it purposely creating a more strategic and decentralised institutional structure in which to foster food security?

Principle 5: Food standards must be part of a cycle of continuous improvement.

TEST 5: Is the Government strengthening food standards, providing the public with sustainable diet information and walking up, not away from, the Nuffield Ladder of Intervention?

Principle 6: Eradicating food poverty requires substantially diminishing inequalities, with rigorous monitoring.

TEST 6: Is there a commitment to narrowing food inequalities (not just providing inadequate hand-outs for food poverty)? Are real food costs adequately accounted for in wage and welfare costs?

Principle 7: Food Defence should prioritise citizens.

TEST 7: Is there a food defence strategy which could adequately protect the people? Is this top-down and out of sight or bottom-up and community engaged?

Principle 8: Food science and technology should serve the public.

TEST 8: Is UK food R&D and involvement of STEM infrastructure directed towards enhancing the UK's food security?

Principle 9: Food work should be skilled, safe and properly remunerated.

TEST 9: What mechanisms are being created to enhance food skills and wage rates? Are food labour and decent work integral to the future being charted?

Conclusions

To get the principles, policies and programmes outlined in the Discussion Paper implemented, and to put the UK on a trajectory to food security, will require a clear focus and sustained public engagement. It requires positive answers to the Nine Tests. The Discussion Paper argues that food security and food resilience are too fundamental to be left to chance, or to incumbent businesses, or to policy drift, or to centralisation in Whitehall.

The authors' contention is that it is vital that all those who share the consensus view outlined in the

Discussion Paper exert influence on the Government to adopt an approach that enhances the UK's food security, rather than pandering to incumbent interests and/or assuming that 'the market' will solve all problems. Public policy must now re-shape and expand domestic food production and infrastructure, and re-evaluate their ecological and social productivity, costs and benefits, in order to set the food system on the path to ecological and socio-economic sustainability.

The challenges require all progressive food stakeholders throughout the food system from farm to waste, including the public and businesses, to come together as an active, broad alliance to steer the UK in a better direction, and speedily. They must hold the Government to account by applying these Tests. Response to the food system's insecurity and unsustainability must be centrally about delivering the national and inter-generational interest, for our collective good. Unless the food legislation anticipated for late 2022 is focussed on food security, it will have ducked its historic chance.

The Nine Tests set out here provide benchmarks against which the future of UK food and agricultural policies should be judged. This is now an urgent priority for the UK polity.

For detail and references, see the full report here.

About Us

The Food Research Collaboration is an initiative of the Centre for Food Policy. It facilitates joint working between academics, civil society organisations and others to improve the sustainability of the UK food system, and to make academic knowledge available wherever it may be useful.

We are grateful to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for funding our work.

With thanks to our funders



Telephone enquiries
+44 (0) 20 7040 4302



Find out more, visit
www.foodresearch.org.uk



Follow us on
twitter.com/foodresearchuk

www.foodresearch.org.uk
www.city.ac.uk/foodpolicy

Please cite this Summary as:

Tim Lang, Erik Millstone, Terry Marsden (2021) *Nine principles and tests for long-term UK food security and resilience*. Food Research Collaboration Policy Summary.