

What is the point of food and farming?

Talk to Wales Real Food and Farming Conference

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

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

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Preamble

Thanks for the invitation which delighted me.

... but I had hoped we'd be on Anglesey! Instead we're on Planet Zoom.

I don't need to tell you that Wales is again seriously interesting on food.

New Plaid-Labour agreement, November 21 2021 ¹

- Food as a sub-theme: school food, poverty, trees, Then (pg 6): "Develop a community food strategy to encourage the production and supply of locally-sourced food in Wales."

Senedd backing for Food (Wales) Bill (Peter Fox MS Conservative opposition) ²

strong Civil Society voice (beyond FUW/NFU)– eg WRFFC! eg FPAC³ eg WWF ⁴
eg FoodSenseWales⁵

something new is underway beyond the romantic 'old' agricultural appeal

That's what I want to address in this talk.

1. What is the point of food and farming?

I don't ask this question lightly!

A Cabinet Office civil servant said to me once "we don't need food production in the UK. We can buy food on world markets."

His thinking is exactly what is again resurfacing in Right Wing politics.

- Hence the reluctance
 - o to include food in the English Agriculture Act
 - o to specify food security as a policy motive in the English NFS Pt 2.

One could have a land policy delivering Biodiversity + Soil management + Water sequestration + CO2e resilience, etc, **WITHOUT IT BEING A FOOD POLICY**

This would be mad given the UK left the EU whence we get 30-40% of food!

Whitehall / London Govt uncertainty about food security is dangerous.

We must question that drift. And Wales should take a lead, and is beginning to.

Wales' food system:⁶ (see p12)

- £21.35 bn turnover in 2019
- 27k enterprises
- Exports of £0.5m
- 229.5k jobs in food system – 17% of Wales' jobs - many in SMEs

So, to answer my Q1 (What is the point of food and farming?):

a) **a decent country sets out to feed ALL its people sustainably (ie healthily + eco-systems + social resilience) by producing as much of what is needed from its own resources as long as this is sustainable.**

- ie NO to growing bananas in nuclear powered greenhouses
- but YES to growing a vast range of Fruit & Veg sustainably

b) **Food is part of the foundational economy, the infrastructure of a good culture. We need to redesign institutions to deliver that.**

c) **This must be enshrined in law... and to link food economy to other goals e.g. climate change, biodiversity loss, decent jobs, improved health, & pleasure!**

The point is to discuss HOW THIS CAN BE DONE and BY WHOM

2. Tricky Times require Food Ambition + Political Realism

- Brexit not giving clarity
- Nigh silence on food at COP26
- UK settlement is in some disarray
- London Govt zig-zagging
- Geo-politics are tricky, nay dangerous (eg think gas and storage)
 - China vs USA, etc
 - East-West Europe tensions: Russia vs EU
 - Intra-EU relations : East/West Europe
 - Re-tilting world

We're an era of runaway Technologies where consumers work for free and power is unaccountable

- Era of Big Data
- + AI
- + Hypersonics
- + Quantum Computing
- + Biotech

Technologies are running ahead of democracy

- Europe/UK caught between China and USA clouds

The answer to better food system isn't in the hi-tech 'CLOUD'...

... but in people+ skills on EARTH

Ambition for Wales does not mean chasing hi-technology economies but as getting agri-food right as the BASICS of a decent society:

- Feeding people well
- providing decent jobs
- valuing labour and nature in circular economies

3. Food Security, Food Sustainability & Food Defence

Food is essential part of infrastructure

- Foundational economy thinking (Manchester School)

We inherit much:

- Roads, small farms, water, hygiene

But future will require more

- Adaptability
- Social cohesion

Food as part of the foundational economy.⁷⁻⁹

This is the social infrastructure which makes a society civilised to live in

Ecological public health is key to sustainability

- How we eat
- Where and how it's produced
- The conditions of food labour force

A food foundational economy would address these issues

- And prepare its consumers for present and coming challenges

We need a new Civil food defence

- And the National Infrastructure Commission to take Food Security seriously

The market model is on a treadmill yet consumption is locked-in.

We need to focus more on people, where they are now, what they want, and how that can become something resilient.

This means rethinking urban-rural relations.

A resilient food system is not just what about what new generations of farmers and growers can produce...

... but about a reconnection of land and people via healthy diets

.. and one way in is via gardening – far the biggest link if looked at human time

4. Food Democracy in a multi-level world: decision-making on the line

Long-term drift 'up' of food negotiations

Brexit disappointments eg Morrisons sold off to US Private Equity

But space is now opening to wrench 'down': London govt is nervous about this. Wales can exploit that, surely.

- Wales has a head start – partial devolution
 - but could press the local button more
 - and debate south/mid/north internal bioregionalization more
 - or simply encourage structures emerge via food (partially happening eg Monmouth 1200 et al)

key challenge is to rewrite the 'rules of engagement' for the Wales food system

- in the post WW2 period, the goals were to produce more food / specialise and 'modernise'
- from 2020s, goals must be to redemocratise and localise appropriately
 - decision-making to
 - encourage eating within planetary boundaries
 - rebuild culinary culture
 - decision-making which links the local to sub-national to national
 - regional food democracy

5. We need to put people at the heart of regeneration

Wales has long been proud of:

- Its landscape and holdings
- its radical political traditions (opposition to England!)

A strong civil society renaissance

- Eg CAT founded 1973
- Eg Abergavenny Food Festival founded in 1999
- Eg *Our Food 1200* group

A next stage is surely to focus more on **capacities and skills**

Part of Wales' reluctance to shift its food system has been desire to PROTECT its heritage:

- Small, upland farms
- Places of huge skill
- Knowledge passed down and on through generations

Now we need new skills

- new Colleges of Agri-Food, linking town & country (*Feeding Britain*)¹⁰
- C19th had colleges of agriculture
- C20th had Nat Agric Adv Services → 1971's ADAS → privatised 1996¹²

C21st skills need to have a new escalator from town to country

ie a New skills share building on experimentation such as

- Innovative farmers
- 1200 group in Monmouthshire

New short chain skills: foodservice → farm/horticulture

¹ <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1996/nov/19/adas-privatisation/>

² <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/c/F264070>

6. Bio-regionalism: why Wales should embrace this

Conservative Govt rationalised Brexit as 'Global Britain'

- but is actually sending different signals
 - o Atlantic Britain, neo-imperial Britain, buccaneering Britain

No coherent position has yet emerged:

- 'Our friends in Europe' vs knifing France on nuclear submarines to Australia
- silence on selling off Morrisons to US Hedge Fund (more to follow?)
- desperate for US trade deal but side-lined by Biden over NI Protocol

There is space to carve an ethos of Bio-Regional Britain and Wales.

- It is coherent in a time of climate change
- It's a way to address the urban-rural split everywhere
- It makes England face the England problem... but Wales too to face its sub-national differences
- It enables us to reconnect People to the eco-system – this is your area, yr identity
- Intellectually, it reminds us that Darwin's web of life includes us
 - o Ecology is not just of 'nature' but ALL life.

Practically, bio-regionalism is a way to integrate diverse aspects of political economy. Wales is arguably at least three 'sub-national' regions: N, Mid, S

Every area – N/S/Mid or county or self-identified unit could:

- Develop appropriate horticulture
- Co-create how it meets general goals eg 30 in 30 (30% tree cover by 2030)

I think this is in effect emerging but it needs to be 'out and proud'.

7. Facing or engaging consumers - the elephant in the room?

The market model has food on a treadmill.

Consumption is locked-in to increasingly ultra-processed foods.

Wales' health is divided. The diet is not generally good.

This is long known eg Heartbeat Wales in 1980s

- Today eg only 25% of adults eat 5-a-day Fruit & Veg. ¹¹
- eg 61% of adults are overweight or obese.

Analysts are also pretty clear that consumers are about to be hit hard:

- Food price rises
- Inflation up
- Brexit effects starting
- JIT disruptions normalised

No pathway to sustainability will occur unless consumers en masse change

- Eating differently alongside producing differently (more Fr & Veg)¹²
- Consumers aren't being helped to change yet when shown the data, they ask: why weren't we told?
 - o Climate Assembly ¹³
 - o Which? citizens juries ¹⁴⁻¹⁶
- Yet UK consumers say they are (sort of) ready to change
 - o See the profile within EU (WWF report)¹⁷

Alas Governments duck consumers rather than helping dietary change.

- Interventions are weak – vague recommendations but not followed up
- HERE IS A CHANCE TO SHIFT THE DIAL
 - o I argue for new 'omni-labels' which provide
 - Health incl... nutrition
 - ingredients
 - enviro info incl. CO2e, H2O, biodiversity,
 - social info eg fair trade, Living wage
 - this is all possible via QR codes¹⁸

What labels do is to encourage REFORMULATION eg on salt and sugar

8. Renewed Organisations and Institutions

Wales and UK are not alone in struggling to deliver good food policies.

Now we know enough to begin the radical change which data say is needed

To link environment, culture, economy and society through food systems

To reduce CO2e and reverse biodiversity loss **quickly**

We could / should plan Wales within the Great Food Transformation.¹⁹

1846 Repeal of the Corn Laws broke the post-mediaeval food compact

- The feudal monastic assumption that people would / could be fed if dire

The transition from mediaeval to industrial societies

- removed the moralistic links
- put the onus on individual responsibility
- market mechanisms were to replace moral economy

There was a 100 year fight to reinsert moral welfare into brutal individualism

- 1906 School Meals Act / 1936 *Food Health & Income* / 1942 Beveridge

Thatcherism began the break from that, ongoing today.

Today's Food Banks As Welfare Era is failing. Charity does not work.

We need:

- New local Food Committees
- attached to / serviced by existing institutions: City Councils, Counties,
- linking / engaging Civil Society, food supply chains,

I argue Resilience Forums (Civil Contingencies Act 2004) should help this.

- But they are not yet.

WRFFC is and should be a meeting where institutional structures are discussed

- Then taken to the relevant democratic processes
- Breathe life and pressure into those processes

CONCLUSIONS

I have done no more than sketch matters.

Everyone I know in the food world in Wales is engaging with this picture.

My central argument is one of encouragement.

Food has to be seen as part of national infrastructure / the foundational economy

Its role and goals need to be enshrined in law, subject to democratic scrutiny in appropriate multi-level levels

The new direction is not just about land use but about the end of supply chains – consumers

It's a food system.

It's creaking.

But we know enough about what to do.

We must get on with it.

Fast.

Thanks.

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