**Should we intervene for better climate and better food solutions?**

On 1st March the Square Meal Group hosted an event to discuss how a more sustainable food system could help tackle climate change. Expertly chaired by Professor Tim Benton it was a lively and stimulating afternoon covering the need to reduce our meat consumption; whose role it is to take the lead in driving change and how big policy tools like the CAP could work so much harder for people and the environment. A panel of MPs from three Select committees grilled the speakers on their proposals.

By way of introduction Professor Tim Lang (City University) reminded us of key high-level global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on sustainable consumption and production, and the Paris climate agreement, which cannot be met if the global food system continues along the path it is on.

Given this background, the [Square Meal report](http://foodresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/squaremealfinalpdf-1.pdf) is if anything even more relevant now than it was when published two years ago. It is an example of the holistic and multi-faceted approach that is needed, looking at ecology, public health and the social and economic impacts of food production.

**Meat consumption and climate change**

The first speaker Laura Wellesley (Chatham House), outlined the findings of its report [*Changing Climate, Changing Diets*](https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/changing-climate-changing-diets). This global study based on a multi-national public opinion survey and focus groups in Brazil, China, the UK and the US looked at how to change attitudes to meat consumption.

Meat consumption is important because current consumption patterns are incompatible with any carbon budget aiming to reduce emissions to safe levels. On its current trajectory, the livestock sector alone would use up half the emissions budget for a two-degree consistent pathway, and nearly all of the emissions budget for a 1.5 degree consistent pathway by the middle of the century. Laura highlighted that supply side measures are not enough – even if all producers adopted best practice, emissions would still be too high. Although demand has to be addressed, it is not being discussed enough at the levels that matter: Paris had too little mention of consumption with diets barely featuring and very few countries include sustainability as a consideration in their dietary guidelines.

Laura advocated using a suite of policy options, from public education through celebrity endorsement to the use of public planning and public procurement to make plant-based foods more visible and more readily available. She underlined the fact that consumers do not yet make decisions about what they eat based on climate change – making it important to emphasise the co-benefits of dietary change (such as improvements to individual health and a reduction in the costs of public health care). She also suggested introducing consumption-based emissions reporting, which would ensure governments are held accountable for the impacts of consumption patterns in their country (e.g. effects of land use change to supply global livestock feed).

Concerns were voiced about the risk of ‘less meat’ messaging leading to people switching to products which may have other significant environmental impacts. The benefits of grass-fed ruminants, in arable rotations are very different to pigs and poultry or intensive ruminants fed on grain. Laura pointed out that the research did not advocate meat from any particular species, and agreed that intensive pig and poultry production brings with it significant environmental, health and social concerns such as heavy dependence on grain- and soy-based feed, overuse of antibiotics also critical to human health, and often poor animal welfare. One area of agreement seemed to be that advocacy should focus on reducing meat or dairy from grain-fed ruminants.

**Price intervention**

Laura’s final suggestion was not to be afraid to intervene on price, which will be necessary to produce the change needed, possibly in the form of a meat tax. This stimulated discussion on the price of food with the MPs raising concerns as to how those already in food poverty would cope and what the impact on farmers would be. Laura’s response was the need for a range of measures in addition (public education, subsidy reform, improving access to healthier/more sustainable foods). With these in place, and if the tax is hypothecated, then focus groups showed the general public were surprisingly accepting of the idea. She also underlined once more that the severity of the problem meant that radical actions were needed. The longer that agriculture is ignored in de-carbonisation efforts, the greater the sector’s proportion of total emissions will become, as other sectors decarbonise. It was absurd she said, that Defra’s forthcoming 25 year Food & Farming Strategy wasn’t linked to climate change goals.

**How to create cultural change?**

Linked to the idea of a meat tax, the need for such radical and/or unpopular policies encouraged a debate about how cultural change is achieved. Lowering or altering diets to become sustainable and healthy will require a serious change in behaviour. MPs and speakers were divided as to who can create such change.

MPs on the panel disagreed as to whether cross-departmental action could produce the dramatic cultural change needed to transform policies such as a meat tax from politically unacceptable to acceptable. Some were wary of public backlash against such top-down intervention. Our second speaker Guy Watson from Riverford Organics, on the other hand, argued that the fact that a policy being politically unacceptable was not reason enough for a government not to enact it - especially if it is the right thing to do. Tim Benton highlighted that unless government tells industry that something is important, they will assume it is not. Once industry does take action, however, it can shape public attitudes more effectively than governments.

Another group who will have a key part to play will be farmers. Guy Watson argued for an increase in knowledge sharing available to them (to counteract the current situation in which agriculture is predominantly shaped by the input supply chain). He stressed the important role of agricultural colleges and the fact that the strongest influence on farmers is other farmers. Good techniques and solutions already exist, these tend to be based on agro-ecological knowledge, rather than high-tech solutions like GM. (However the introduction of new useful technological approaches could be beneficial if they contributed to overall sustainability.) Unfortunately, the economic context makes these solutions hard to implement competitively because those engaged in unsustainable practices often do not have to bear the costs of doing so. This highlighted the important role of regulation in providing a level playing field.

**The role of the Common Agricultural Policy (‘CAP’)**

The final speaker Martin Nesbit of IEEP, gave a personal overview of how CAP reform could help create a better food system. He noted that the CAP no longer directly subsidises grossly harmful production but described the greening measures as ‘significantly watered down from an unambitious start’. Although there is now a headline commitment to the environment, CAP’s implementation has not been good. He argued that there is still significant room for improvement, including a move from £50 billion mainly spent on income support capitalised on land prices of no benefit to consumers or the environment and the removal of coupled payments to livestock production – except for High Nature Value Farming. He proposed instead shifting funding towards agri-environment payments tailored for local conditions, which could include those to tackle climate change. He suggested that rural development measures should be more ’prix fixe’ menu than ’a la carte’, ensuring that all Member States target their spending on key environmental priorities.

He signalled caution however of any measures at either the UK or EU level that come at the expense of production and could result in the export of environmental damage. In response to the MPs questions on whether CAP payments should be capped, he responded that if they represent income support then they should be capped. However, if they are paying for public goods, then there is less justification for capping, providing the scale of delivery reflects the scale of the payments. He warned that the CAP could go backwards if the UK is no longer a part of CAP negotiations.

Thanks to all our speakers and MPs for engaging in these challenging discussions. The Square Meal group will continue to facilitate and provoke discussion to bring about better policies for food, farming, people and nature. We encourage you to read the report and to engage in the debate.

**Defra’s Food and Farming Plan**

A final question asked the speakers what they would say to Defra as they finalise their 25 year plan for food and farming. In response, Martin Nesbitt said that the plan has to be framed in the context of the UK’s climate change commitments. Guy Watson said Defra needed to support good agricultural colleges with research linked to farms and Laura Wellesley made the point that it would be an opportunity missed if the food and farming plan did not include environmental aspects and reference to climate mitigation goals.

**Speakers**

**Laura Wellesley** from Chatham House

**Guy Watson** from Riverford Organic Farms

**Martin Nesbit** from IEEP

**Select Committee Panel of MPs**

**Mary Creagh MP (Environmental Audit Committee)**

**James Heappey MP (Energy and Climate Change Committee)**

**Angela Smith MP (Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee)**