



# Best Before:

## How the UK should respond to food policy challenges

by Jane Midgley

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## About ippr north

ippr north, the Newcastle-based office of the Institute for Public Policy Research, produces far-reaching policy ideas, stimulating solutions that work nationally as well as locally. These are shaped from our research, which spans the northern economic agenda, public services, devolution, food policy and rural issues, as well as a strong democratic engagement strand which involves a wide range of audiences in political debates.

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## Executive summary

With rising food prices, concerns about environmental impacts of agricultural production and worrying levels of obesity, food has never been more topical. Ensuring a safe, affordable, sustainable and healthy supply of food is one of the most fundamental challenges facing policymakers in the UK and, indeed, around the world.

At first glance, getting food on the table seems to be a relatively straightforward issue of demand and supply. Yet, there are a growing number of increasingly thorny and sometimes urgent food-related challenges facing UK policymakers, which include:

- Protecting consumers from rising world food prices
- Increasing the environmental sustainability of food production
- Ensuring security of food supplies
- Protecting consumer health and food safety
- Improving economic and environmental conditions of foreign food suppliers
- Promoting healthy eating in the UK
- Supporting the economic viability of the UK agri-food sector.

Unfortunately, neither the current piecemeal approach nor a single, static ‘food policy’ will be able to respond effectively to these or other challenges around food production and consumption. What is needed is a fresh, coordinated approach to food policymaking that puts food-related concerns at the heart of policymaking across government. Such an approach should be able to resolve tensions between competing policy priorities (for example, cheap food versus environmental protection), coordinate between different layers of government, respond to the global and long-term nature of many of the current challenges, and be the basis of an effective communication strategy around food policy.

### Four key areas for action

**1. Food security** is an important issue at global, regional, national and household scales. Yet, current UK policies seem not to take national food security seriously enough. Agricultural policy is no longer orientated just to food production; rather, its focus tends to be on environmental management and food safety. An obvious starting point would be for agricultural policy to clearly support food production.

Ensuring domestic food security will, in turn, also require a greater security in the supply of key resources. For example, a stable supply of workers will also be needed into the agri-food sector, something that may be at risk with changing levels of migration. Moreover, the wider value of food production will need to be taken into greater account when making decisions on land use, especially where good quality land risks not being given over to agriculture.

If we are serious about food security, then we need to ensure that spatial plans and new developments result in greater food production, and respond to food consumption and waste matters. As such, ‘food planning’ should become part of planning policy.

**2. Food poverty** is a serious threat to the livelihoods of many Britons. Reducing household food insecurity has to be a priority in the face of rising food and energy prices. The UK government, through the Department of Work and Pensions, has committed to reinstate the link between earnings and the state pension by 2015. To assist vulnerable households and reduce the short- and long-term effects of food poverty a clear date should be agreed, before 2015. It would also make sense for local authorities, supported by government, to develop the universal provision of free breakfasts to all school-aged children, before proceeding to the roll-out of universal free school meals to all school children. This would help reduce the negative health impacts of food poverty and poor diet for all children and young people and the stigma of receiving free school meals.

**3. Food citizenship** lies at the heart of the interaction between an individual's food choices, private sector production decisions and public sector standards and actions. Promoting sustainable and healthy food production and consumption will require better interventions to promote healthier decisions among individuals, more leadership from the private sector, and more effective interventions from the public sector.

**4. Food communication** needs to be improved to bolster the above interventions. The UK will only be able to respond effectively to changing challenges in food if there is an informed public debate about competing policy priorities. A good example will be the debate about the use of new technology, especially biotechnology, in the food supply at home and overseas. While the development of new technologies may improve the efficiency and sustainability of food supplies, it will be equally important to communicate why and how they will be used.

## 1. Introduction

Food has never been higher on the policy agenda. With heightening global food prices, concerns about the environmental sustainability of food production and worries about unhealthy food consumption patterns, policymakers have numerous and complex challenges when it comes to designing effective policies to ensure affordable, sustainable and healthy food supplies. Yet, the latter outcome has never been more important.

This paper looks at the challenges around food policymaking, what is wrong with current approaches, and what could be done better.

### **Why food matters**

Food is essential for life. Food matters to everyone but for many in the UK it is taken for granted. When it does hit the news, food can be a zeitgeist matter of countless contradictions: a paucity of cooking skills in the nation contrasts with the idolisation and politicisation of celebrity chefs; size-zero waifs in magazines read by the morbidly obese; concerns about the futures of UK farmers and securing fair trade for the world's poorest producers.

Food matters to the UK economy:

- During 2007 consumers spent £119 billion on food (Defra *et al* 2008).
- The UK public sector spends £2 billion annually on food (PAC 2007).
- The agri-food sector generated 6.9 per cent of the UK's Gross Value Added (GVA) in 2006.
- Food manufacturing is the largest manufacturing sector in the UK.
- Nearly one seventh (13.8 per cent) of UK employment in 2006 was food related – most of this in food catering and retail (Defra *et al* 2008).

Food is also a global economic matter. The estimated total value of food in the global market is £1.4 trillion per annum (WAG 2007). The impacts of global production decisions affect what everyone eats. The continuing rapid price increases for staple foods such as rice and wheat around the world since 2007 have led to civil unrest and food riots in countries including Pakistan, Indonesia, Egypt, Cameroon, Senegal, Thailand and even Italy. And as India, China and other emerging economies gain economic power, with their growing affluence and middle classes they aspire to move away from 'peasant food' staples such as rice to demand more protein-rich foods such as pork and chicken, and more westernised diets. This has far-reaching consequences for the global food system as well as for the food cultures of these countries.

Our food choices matter: they are statements of our social and economic standing and aspirations. Supermarket 'finest' and 'the best' ranges, marketed as superior through packaging and pricing, and 'economy' and 'basics' ranges, become the new form of class demarcation at the check-out. The food we eat reflects social change: the creation and rise of the ready meal was a response to greater numbers of women in the workforce reducing the amount of time they spent at the kitchen sink and stove; the rise of dining out as the numbers of cash-rich but time-poor employees grew, alongside the 'Macdonaldisation' of both food behaviour and society.

Food reflects our identity and cultural heritage; traditional dishes and festivals commemorated by food blend together and form a constantly evolving part of our multi-cultural society. Preparing and eating food – sitting round the table for a meal with family and friends – is a socialising activity. Above all, eating food is an enjoyable experience.

Yet our appetite for food is problematic. The western diet – high in salt, sugar and saturated fats – is now synonymous with diet-related ill health: high blood pressure, strokes, diabetes and some cancers. The average UK diet is symptomatic of the global epidemic of obesity gradually spreading across the developed world as diet behaviours continue to change for the worse, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO 2007a). This brings ill health to individuals, exerts costs on families, health and

social care systems, and, ultimately, early death. If everyone in the UK ate according to recommended dietary guidelines then up to one tenth of current annual mortality rates could be reduced (Foresight 2007).

### **From farm to fork**

It is not just what we eat and in what amount that matters but also how our food is produced, processed, distributed, retailed and cooked – how food moves from farm to fork and the associated energy and resources used in doing so. Livestock production for both meat and dairy is the most environmentally harmful and resource wasteful form of food production (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO] 2006). For example, the biggest carbon-producing component of a milk chocolate bar is the milk used in its manufacture. Increased demand and expectations about food available out of season and from exotic locations results in food being transported over greater distances from the time of its production to the consumer ('food miles') and associated greater greenhouse gas emissions. Yet a high proportion of these miles are racked up by driving to do the weekly shop.

How do we – if at all – square these costs with the economic benefits brought to producers at home and overseas? How do we achieve the right balance between people, planet and profit?

### **Food on the policy plate**

How to respond to these numerous and competing challenges around food is one of the most pressing issues of our day. Some of the competing policy priorities in food include:

- Ensuring affordable food prices
- Minimising environmental impacts
- Lowering greenhouse gas emissions
- Promoting locally-sourced food
- Enforcing health and safety in the agri-food industry
- Promoting food safety for consumers
- Ensuring security in food supplies
- Balancing competing demands between food and biofuels
- Promoting global social justice
- Promoting healthy eating
- Changing food behaviour, e.g. reducing food waste
- Increasing take-up of free school meals
- Protecting animal health and welfare
- Ensuring adequate supply of food workers
- Supporting the livelihoods of food producers
- Developing research and skills in the agri-food sector.

Not surprisingly, governments and individual consumers are becoming more involved in the global food system. The many actors that play an important role in the governance of food at various levels are summarised in Table 1.1, next page.

Governments around the world have taken a range of actions from banning exports so that enough food is available for domestic needs (for example, beef in Brazil, and rice in Egypt) to intervening in producer decisions so that more cereal crops can be grown (for example, the relaxation of arable land set-aside by the European Commission) to stipulating hygiene standards for all food-related businesses (for example, Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point [HACCP] regulation to manage risk and ensure traceability throughout the food system from farm to retailer's shelf). Consumers have

<b>Policy level</b>	<b>Institutions and responsibilities</b>
International	<p>United Nations institutions: World Health Organisation (WHO) for public health; Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) which works to end hunger and respond to food insecurity at national and regional level.</p> <p>Codex Alimentarius Commission: sets and regulates food safety standards and is used as a baseline for world trade.</p> <p>World Trade Organisation (WTO): deals with international trade rules and negotiations on food trade (plant and animal health) as well as subsidies.</p>
European Commission	<p>Directives and regulations are developed on a range of issues for member states to ratify and implement, under range of Directorates-General (DG) and agencies: DG Agriculture and Rural Development (agricultural policy, including environmental aspects of pesticide use, land management and biodiversity, water management and soil health, for example).</p> <p>DG Environment.</p> <p>DG Health and Consumer Protection (public health, food safety, animal health and welfare, known as DG Sanco).</p> <p>DG Trade.</p> <p>European Food Safety Agency (including rulings on novel food safety and pesticide use).</p> <p>Food and Veterinary Organisation.</p> <p>European Commission involved in negotiation concerning regulation and agreements with UN, Codex and WTO.</p>
UK government and non-departmental public bodies	<p>Central responsibility for: welfare (benefits and pensions); competition/trade; international development.</p> <p>A common UK position is presented to European and other international institutions for health, food safety (food and feed stuffs and inspection services), animal health and agriculture. Also works on other policy areas such as health and safety of those in the agri-food industry.</p>
Devolved administrations	<p>Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish Government, and Welsh Assembly Government have devolved responsibilities for Health, Agriculture and Environment, and Transport. In England these responsibilities lie with the relevant central government department, with further strategy and delivery through regional development agencies and government offices as well as primary care trusts and so on.</p> <p>Further devolved responsibilities are found regarding research and investment in food technology and skills and agricultural wages.</p>
Local government	<p>Acting as the local food authority, inspects and delivers food related services. These include: environmental health (inspection of food premises and on-farm inspections); provision of free school meals, and local planning decisions.</p>

never been more concerned about what food goes into their shopping basket (whether it is welfare friendly, fairly traded, organic, locally produced...) and they are increasingly demanding more information about the health and nutritional composition of food products.

There has also been growing interest in the international policy arena around food (see Table 1.1.). From institutions governing food safety to specialist United Nations institutions promoting health and reducing hunger, and food-related strategies within the UN Millennium Development Goals, the international community has never been more active on food.

However, international politics and trade make food policy a tricky issue. The General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) for the first 40 years of world trade rounds did not include agricultural support or food trade. Food trade is one of the major sticking points for the currently stalled Doha development round of talks, with competing demands from the US striving to be the breadbasket of the world, the EU arguing for continued producer supports (to deliver environmental and wider social



and economic sustainability), and – the key focus on this round – developing countries seeking to get a foothold in global markets to trade out of poverty.

In the UK, past governments have been more readily involved with the food system in times of domestic ‘crisis’: ensuring national food security and nutritional health during wartime, post-war rationing, through to the end of recommended retail food pricing in the 1960s. More recently, government actions have been in response to changing domestic pressures: the need to restore consumer confidence in British food during the 1990s following a number of food safety scares including salmonella in eggs and the BSE beef crisis, Foot and Mouth disease in 2001 and other recent disease outbreaks.

However, times are changing both within and outside the UK and the Government’s corresponding responses. On the one hand we see the Government’s greater outward engagement with global issues through, for example, its reactions to the current ‘world food crisis’ through food aid commitments. On the other hand, the situation within the UK has become more complex due to devolution. Since 1997 policy responsibilities for agriculture and health have been devolved functions, whereas other matters such as welfare policy remains a reserved (UK government) function.

In many respects the devolved nations have led the way in food-related policy – through attempts to improve the dietary health of their citizens including early efforts to involve the catering industry and producers, the introduction of school meal nutritional standards, and clear strategic approaches to their agri-food industry. (The differential development of food policy in devolved nations will be discussed in a separate policy paper; see Midgley and Schmuecker forthcoming.)

### **Structure of the paper**

Section 2 explores the difficulties of current policy functioning and the issues these generate for food policy. Section 3 then considers some key issues for food-related policy in the UK that need to be addressed, regardless of the existence of a food policy. Section 4 concludes by laying out a series of recommendations for the UK government to improve food-related policy – its functioning, coherence and outcomes.

## 2. A food policy for today's challenges

The concept of a 'food policy' is well-established in the developed and the developing world. For example, in the 1970s Norway chose to implement a food policy to support food producers and improve the dietary health of their citizens, in addition to enhancing world food security. Elsewhere, quasi-food policies have evolved out of measures that were not explicitly about food. For example, the US during the 1930s Great Depression created its 'Farm Bill' to support small producers. This policy has continued since: a proposed bill in 2007 incorporated everything from the agricultural industry and farm subsidies, to conservation, food aid, trade, food welfare and nutrition, and rural development and is now working its way through a complex process of negotiation between the House and Senate.

The European Commission's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), now over 50 years old, was originally aimed to increase agricultural production, ensure a fair standard of living for those in agriculture, stabilise markets, ensure supplies and that food reached consumers reasonably priced. These aims are still central to the CAP with recent attention placed on broader rural development. The CAP and most food-related policy areas of the EC fall under its 'community' pillar, with common decisions made by majority agreement.

It could be said that while these food policies have achieved some of their aims, much of today's policymaking pressure points deal with the legacy of these overarching policies in a world and a food system that are very different from what they once were.

In many other countries, governments have stopped short of enacting a discrete food policy. Germany, for example, has a Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection, as well as an Office for Consumer Protection and a Food Safety and Research Centre for Nutrition and Food but has decided that work should progress on a programme by programme basis.

In the UK, food policy has evolved most rapidly in the devolved administrations. Since the 2007 Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament elections the Welsh and Scottish governments have developed draft national food policies and strategic aims (Welsh Assembly Government 2007, Scottish Government 2008a) and next steps in taking these forward (Scottish Government 2008b). As such, food is rising in importance as a matter of devolved politics and policymaking.

The initiatives taken by devolved administrations (see Appendix 1 for a summary of the draft strategies), policy developments elsewhere and the high-profile emerging challenges around food have combined to raise the question of whether the UK should have a national food policy. The UK government has also been forced to consider a common policy position for the UK – bringing together policy in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – especially for EU negotiations on food-related budgeting and policy decisions.

Yet, the research conducted as part of this project (see also Midgley 2007), suggests that there are several stumbling blocks for a common UK food policy:

- *The risk of an artificial conflation and prioritisation of issues.* Bringing together existing policy positions under one roof does not remove conflicting policy priorities or outcomes and merely replicates what currently exists. This adds little or no value to policy. The strategic prioritisation of issues and aims is necessary for any policy, particularly a cross-cutting food policy with its implications for budgets and outcomes. Current strategies present general, well-founded statements of intent but avoid prioritisation and lack the detail necessary for policy delivery; this may of course come later. But above all there is no reason why any one issue should be a higher policy priority than another – why should domestic industry be prioritised over dietary health, or the environment over food safety, or vice versa?
- *The difficulty of multi-level governance.* The complexity of national governance reflects the role of EC and international organisations, UK and devolved administrations, and local government. For example, most policies relating to food (sustainable consumption and production, environmental action, food safety, packaging standards, labelling requirements, and so on)

emanate from the EC or international regulation and are implemented, but not necessarily driven, by national governments. Even the day-to-day policy coordination surrounding food often lies with local government and the initiatives it develops in response to the lack of central coherence. Moreover, the reach of devolved government is relatively narrowly focused on health and agriculture. These do not necessarily mesh with the realities of non-devolved policy areas such as overseas development objectives or the role of the welfare system.

- *The limits of a national policy in relation to the global food system.* A food policy can only impact on domestic production and processing, whether for home consumption or for export; it cannot easily impact on imported food. For example, the EU's common economic borders or multi-national companies transferring products and parts of the production process between countries make it difficult for national government to intervene. Moreover, the global food system is immense, while the powers of a single government – whether devolved or UK – are not. The leading multi-national agri-food companies through their own power set the market rules and behaviours of growers, buyers and consumers, often ahead of public policy action.
- *The need for specificity.* A food policy would need to specifically consider the different foodstuffs and the associated actions and behaviours to be encouraged or discouraged. For example, the desired outcomes, possible policy actions and actors involved will be very different according to whether they relate to an apple, a chocolate bar, or a lamb chop. Variation will occur depending on: whether policymakers want to encourage people to eat more or less of the food for health reasons; environmental considerations, such as the use of pesticides, and generation of greenhouse gases throughout the supply chain; animal welfare considerations; labour practices, and so on. This is where the devil really is in the detail and it is unclear whether policy can be so specific for primary produce, let alone processed foodstuffs.
- *The limits of regulation.* The above raises an important question as to the level of regulatory involvement and extent of governance in food-related policy that is practicable and desirable. It is clear from a review of current approaches to food that there is a need for better coordination and coherence to achieving long-term goals. Few policymakers 20 years ago, surrounded by grain mountains, milk lakes, and salmonella scares, would have identified obesity, biotechnologies, greenhouse gases and concerns over domestic and global food security as policy issues of the future, or developed a framework within which they could be set and responded to together. What is needed is a holistic and dynamic approach to food, that involves incorporating food-related objectives into a range of policies. And any successful initiatives in this area will need to include a range of stakeholders beyond the state.

In addition to these limitations, it is also worth pointing out some of the successes of the current policy set-up in the UK. For the past eight years, UK policy relating to food production and consumption has not come under the control of one sole government department or agency. The separation of responsibility for consumer health and safety (to the Food Standards Agency [FSA]) and producer matters (to what is now Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [DEFRA]) followed the findings of the inquiry into the government handling of BSE. Concerns over how the public would react to BSE hindered policy actions when the effects on domestic producers were considered alongside public health actions (Philips 2000). The outcome of the inquiry, which led to the creation of the FSA in 2000, shows the value in keeping competing interests apart.

The fact that each department or agency is doing what it should within its own discrete remit, enabling others to focus on their own remits, may be a perverse yet beneficial outcome in terms of the current lack of policy coherence surrounding food. This of course does not mean that policy could not be better coordinated, and given the scope for food to cut across a number of wide-ranging policy areas, improved coordination would be a good thing.

More coordination may be able to overcome the problems and associated costs beyond a single policy area. For example, the CAP has supported food production but has not considered the health implications of doing so. The WHO points out that EC policies have resulted in the supply of sugar, vegetable oil and animal products in excess of the region's needs, but few countries supply enough

fruit and vegetables for their populations (WHO 2007b). In Sweden it has been argued that CAP supports to European producers – particularly sugar and dairy, along with wine and tobacco – have negatively affected Sweden’s health (Elinder *et al* 2003). Moreover, CAP policy relating to fruit and vegetable production has been problematic: CAP has prevented the sale of surplus fresh produce to consumers, which could have improved health outcomes and access to affordable food (*ibid*). Therefore, a different, perhaps better, European and British diet may have prevailed if CAP had incorporated health outcomes within its scope.

So now as diet-related health pressures mount, the time may have come for CAP to pay greater attention to the health outcomes its policies contribute to. 2008 is the right time for this debate as CAP’s own health check is being conducted this year; although the focus of reforms put forward for agreement by December 2008 have omitted broader policy coordination. The connection between food production and consumption is particularly apposite given the inclusion of fruit and vegetable growers within its regime.

But greater coordination does not mean a discrete food policy is needed and efforts should be focused on coordination to improve outcomes and reduce regulation and intervention rather than on increasing the use of these often blunt tools. The rest of this paper focuses on the food matters presented by particular policy gaps and difficult questions that need to be addressed to increase policy congruence surrounding food.

### 3. Food for thought: issues to be addressed

Noting the complexity of food governance discussed earlier in this paper, this section identifies a number of key issues that need to be considered by policymakers, regardless of whether a food policy is developed or not. These are:

- The role of agriculture and agricultural policy
- Food security, particularly the role of land use and food planning, and food security in the household for low-income families
- The role of the food citizen – individual, corporate and state
- Sustainable food production and consumption, particularly sustainable labour supplies and use of new technologies.

#### **The role of agriculture and agricultural policy**

As strange as it may sound, agricultural policy is the main reason why a food policy is problematic. The Common Agricultural Policy has affected UK agricultural policy for many years. First, the CAP's role in securing food supplies and raising agricultural incomes by increasing supports to farmers, alongside greater efficiencies in the industry, led to over-production. This 'productivist' era of intensive farming was also associated with widespread environmental damage. In response CAP was gradually reformed. This led to the subsequent decoupling of support payments to farmers for production, promoting stronger ties – cross-compliance – between payments and the production and provision of public goods such as environmental management and landscape quality rather than a direct link to food production. In effect the UK and Europe really has not had a food-focused agricultural policy for at least a decade.

Today the CAP budget and subsequent payments subsidise the environment; food is a secondary product. The payments made to farmers in recompense for public good provision through their environmental behaviours and requirements placed on them are fair. The problem – for producers, policymakers and the public – lies when this payment is clouded by a falsely assumed connection to food.

Agriculture is an industry of varied sectors, sub-sectors and individual businesses. There are those businesses enmeshed within tight supply chain structures that are market orientated (for example, working closely with supermarkets and processors or using futures contracts). However, there is still a significant proportion of businesses that, despite government supported attempts, continue to act in separation to the market and food chain (Boys 2007). Given that for generations through CAP and government action producers were in effect isolated from the market and encouraged to act in isolation of each other, it is unsurprising that this continues. However, time and tolerance may be decreasing as greater market orientation has been on the agenda for years. In effect these are essentially private business decisions that the state should not be involved in, and perhaps does not want to be.

Current payments to producers (through the Single Payment) are attempting to enable farmers to step from being locked into past production decisions to make the most of new market opportunities. This means that they may have to change in order to prevent lock-out from agri-food markets and to offer a long-term future to the industry (this has been recognised by Northern Irish approaches [FSG 2004]). Although how providing payments based on past income and associated production decisions can stimulate change and market orientation is another issue.

It is also a learning process as different sectors have different market dynamics. For example, the dairy industry has a relatively tight supply chain where the knock-on effects of recent increased feed costs were quickly realised and could be passed on through the chain. In contrast, the red meat industry has less market connection and so now the impacts of higher feed costs are being seen and are part of a media campaign to try to persuade the consumer to help them bear the costs, while the market rebalances itself.

Another stimulus of policy, aside from environmental considerations, is food safety. The new food safety requirements of HACCP – Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point regulation to manage risk and ensure traceability throughout the food system – bring for the first time every food farmer and grower into the food hygiene regulation and inspection regime as a registered food business. This may offer the agri-food industry greater opportunities to strengthen links within the supply chain and bring farmers and growers closer to the market. Moreover, through HACCP and CAP reform, farmers are now brought closer to growers in the horticulture industry. This shows how separate food production and related policy has been in the UK for decades.

### **Food security**

Food security is another issue that clouds attitudes towards agriculture and food policy. Food security has long been an issue of the past, in times of political uncertainty and war, but it is now reappearing in debates. However, today's risks, fears and threats are different from those of 50 years ago. The primary threats are now the effect of environmental and population pressures, including concerns around the impacts of adverse weather conditions on planting and harvest, and diseases and pests that flourish in response to these, population movements due to conflict and natural disasters, and difficulty of people with low incomes accessing food in the face of high food prices and poorly functioning food markets. Due to a combination of these factors many countries across the world are not 'food-secure' – the Food and Agricultural Organization recognised 37 food-insecure countries in April 2008 (FAO 2008). Often these states also have fragile political and economic structures. As such, food insecurity and associated governance instabilities are of great consequence in a global arena.

The numbers of people hit by the current food crisis has increased due to the World Food Programme being unable to afford the cost of grain to provide food aid relief, and having had to cut back other actions such as providing school meals in some African countries. More worryingly the World Food Programme and the World Bank have warned that the current crisis risks setting back progress made over the past 10 years and could return many to poverty. This means that global food insecurity will remain an issue of immense global importance for some time to come.

The UK's food – both its production and supply – has never been as globalised. It is now in the hands of fewer, even though levels of overall food self-sufficiency for the UK have been far lower in the past. Food security, according to the Government, is achieved through trade (Defra 2006). This is open to challenge but recent crises have shown that supermarkets have the ongoing capacity to put food on shelves due to the breadth of their supply chains.

Moreover, food security is not the same as self-sufficiency. The UK in 2007 was approximately self-sufficient in 61 per cent of its food (this figure is higher or lower for different foods) but through imports it is a food-secure nation (Defra *et al* 2008). Perhaps worth more consideration are the associated issues of land use (how we may ensure domestic food production continues) and what food security means in practice for UK citizens: access to safe, healthy and affordable food.

### **Land use**

The recent global price hikes for cereals and coarse grains, such as maize, used for food and biofuel, have affected the balance of these products grown throughout the world – the 'food versus fuel' argument. This affects the amount of food grown and its geographical location. For example, global wheat stocks are now at their lowest level for the past five years and world cereal stocks at their lowest for 25 years. This market change can affect the balance of different food types grown. If cereals are receiving higher returns, then these returns are capitalised into higher land prices and rents. UK arable land prices increased by 27.9 per cent in the second half of 2007, which was in part stimulated by farmers buying more land after deciding to expand cereal production due to the high returns (RICS 2008). Consequently, increased rents for land used to grow less profitable crops such as cauliflowers and potatoes also encourage those producers who grow them to shift to growing crops with higher returns. Yet producers who have the capacity to change or expand production have always supplied the more profitable crops, often in part affected by government supports, such as current biofuel initiatives and in the past CAP subsidy.

Land used for food production also has to be taken into account in planning policy. This does not mean a central land use plan is needed. However, the intrinsic value of agricultural land for growing food needs to be recognised in its own right and not just for the leisure and landscape value it offers which other policies seem to prioritise (for example, CAP and also the Barker Review of Land Use Planning [Barker 2006]). As land is a finite resource this means that decisions for competing interests have to be weighed more carefully within the UK, to take into account land for housing, food production, transport infrastructure, to the extent that the best agricultural land is used for food production.

Land use and food issues have recently become associated with the ‘obesogenic’ environment – that is, conditions of the built environment that lead people to become overweight and obese. For example, the layouts of our towns and cities reduce the capacity for physical activity – due to the distance between homes and work, schools and shops including food outlets such as supermarkets – and/or due to fears for personal safety where there are poorly lit areas, which discourage people from walking. While attempts to reduce the impact of the obesogenic environment are recommended (Foresight 2007, Department of Health 2008), further action can be taken. Our towns and cities, particularly new developments, should incorporate food production, as well as consumption, within their design. These could include the provision of allotments and community plots, and more scope for the growing of fresh and perishable produce such as fruit and vegetables nearer to large centres of population. This has been seen in the United States, where civic agriculture is more common, and in UN ‘Healthy Cities’ such as Toronto; however, it is rarely seen in the UK.

The proposed ecotown initiatives in England offer a unique opportunity to develop and incorporate ‘food planning’ into planning policy. If greenfield sites are chosen then in addition to allotments and community gardens a more coherent view to incorporate food production within the scheme should be considered to compensate for the loss of agricultural land. On brownfield sites, reclamation and restoration opportunities for food production may be more limited but should not be dismissed. In turn, these schemes offer the opportunity to deal with food waste as part of the settlements’ intrinsic service planning. There is no reason why food planning should be limited to new developments and not incorporated and reflected through regional and local planning initiatives. Local and regional food production could be factored in and become part of balanced regional economic and spatial strategies.

#### **Food security in the household – access to healthy, safe and affordable food**

Household food security remains ‘a problem for vulnerable groups of people in higher income countries’ in Europe (WHO 2007b: 5). The link between food, poverty and health outcomes in the UK is recognised (WAG 2007, Scottish Office 1999, Scottish Executive 2004, Acheson 1998) but is not comfortable for policymakers to make. Therefore, more could be done on this issue.

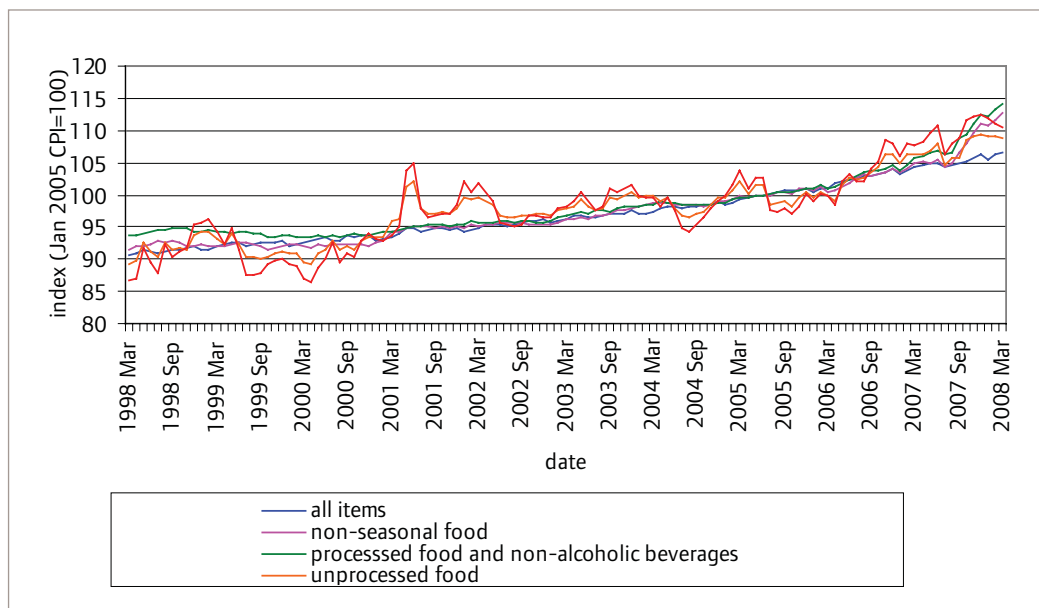
Recently there has been considerable media attention over rising food prices. In the year to March 2008 food prices in the UK increased by 5.9 per cent – bread and cereals by 7.3 per cent, milk, cheese and eggs by 16.0 per cent, meat prices by 2.2 per cent, and vegetables by 3.4 per cent (National Statistics 2008). Figure 3.1, next page, shows the change in food price inflation between March 1998 and March 2008 inclusive. The food price rise in the year to March 2008 was relatively large given the overall rate of inflation was at the level of 2.5 per cent. However, food prices were starting from relatively low levels and food was and remains relatively cheap. For example, in 2006 UK households spent on average 15.1 per cent of their income on food, a proportion that has fallen slightly over the previous decade from 16.6 per cent in 1996. This is due to the fact that incomes rose faster than food price inflation.

However, given that world wheat prices during 2007 increased by 83 per cent (FAO 2008) it is clear that the full costs have not been passed on to consumers, and the cost pressures have been absorbed by competition within the food supply chain and between food retailers in the UK (and US). For example for the four weeks to 8 April in the UK 150 items across the major food retailers (Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury’s, Morrisons and Waitrose) had increased by just 3.0 per cent compared with the previous year (*The Grocer* 2008). But a snapshot of average food prices collected to form part of the UK retail



**Figure 3.1.**  
**Consumer Price Index and food's contribution to inflation, March 1998–March 2008**

Source: National Statistics 2008 statbase, CPI tables



price index show a range of price hikes between March 2007 and March 2008: a kilogramme of dessert apples increased from 129 pence to 142 pence, a pint of milk increased from 37 pence to 40 pence, a dozen of size-2 eggs increased from 200 pence to 276 pence, a kilogramme of cheddar-type cheese increased from 566 pence to 662 pence, and a large loaf of sliced wholemeal bread increased from 97 pence to 117 pence (National Statistics 2008).

Even though food price inflation has been relatively low, the effects have been very real. The reduction in consumer buying power hits the poorest in society first and hardest as they spend proportionately more of their income on food than higher income groups. UK studies show that low-income consumers go without food because they cannot afford it (Holmes 2007). As food is a flexible item in the household budget this produces a double whammy for some of the most vulnerable in society; for example one in five families with a disabled child in the UK cuts back on food when times are tough (Work and Pensions Committee 2008).

#### **Towards food welfare?**

Over the past decade food has been historically cheap yet we have experienced considerable adverse outcomes in the health and diets of UK citizens, often exacerbated in the poorest households (Holmes 2007). The risk remains that if food price inflation continues people will either cut back on food or eat greater quantities of cheaper food which tends to be high in calories and low in nutritional value. If this argument were taken forward then one proposal may be that government should support vulnerable households to afford basic nutritious food.

Support of this nature is already provided for new mothers and young children in low-income households to help meet nutritional needs for these groups through the Healthy Start programme run through the Department of Health. Healthy Start is a continuation of the Welfare Food Scheme which began in 1940. The scheme offered universal provision of milk to pregnant and nursing mothers and young children to encourage good health at times of food shortages and rising food prices. Since then the scheme had become focused on low-income families and in 2002 the scheme was reformed. At the time the scheme was assisting nearly one-quarter of the UK's under-fours. Today ring-fenced vouchers worth £2.80 per week are given to low-income mothers and all mothers under 18 (one voucher), children under one year (two vouchers per child) and children under four (one voucher per child). The vouchers can be spent on milk, fruit and vegetables at a range of retailers including doorstep milk delivery, corner shops and supermarkets. Healthy Start requires registration with a midwife or health visitor and so links food behaviour with health advice.

Another group that is vulnerable to food poverty is older people. Older people are more likely than younger adults to suffer from malnutrition (according to hospital admissions checks), with the



consequence that they are more prone to ill health and take longer to recover from illness. This is detrimental to their quality of life, and has adverse effects on their carers, families and health services. The Government is looking at the nutrition of people in institutional settings such as care homes but wider opportunities for support should be considered. For example, provision of local meals on wheels services could be expanded or made free for those on low incomes.

Indeed it could be argued that as government has become involved in pensioner fuel poverty there is no reason that it cannot involve itself in their food poverty – in the 21st century it should not be a case of ‘food versus fuel’ within a household. Moreover, as the UK’s population profile is forecast to have a higher proportion of older age groups in the future, and with the link between diet and dementia remaining unclear but not ruled out (APFHF 2008), it may be that food will be the focus of future action to ensure quality of life.

One approach would be to restore the link between pensions and earnings that has been missing since the 1980s, particularly given the impact of current food costs on low-income households. Restoring the link between pensions and earnings is due to occur in 2012 at the earliest (and may not happen until 2015), and would raise pensions in line with the higher rate of inflation or earnings. This will obviously increase the purchasing power of pensioner households. More benefit would be reaped if the date were brought forward. Government should attempt to address this inequality and potentially reduce further long-term health and care costs.

#### **A focus on children and food**

Broader food and health concerns have centred on children – whether through obesity targets or banning the advertising of ‘junk food’ (a total ban on advertisements for food and drink products that have a nutrient profile high in fat, salt and/or sugar around TV programmes for under-15s or programmes which have a high volume of children in their audience came into force in January 2008). Another feature of the debate surrounding children’s food and health is the role of school meals. Requirements for the nutritional quality of school meals have been introduced throughout the UK following initiatives in Scotland and Wales.

A call for provision of free school meals to all children irrespective of background is often made, with the aim of ensuring the nutritional quality of school children’s diets. This is currently being piloted in Scotland over six months to all primary 1-3 pupils, with the intention that this could be rolled out to younger primary school aged children. Free school meal roll-out for all school pupils would be costly: the Scottish trial is costing £5 million. But given that a quarter of four-year-olds in England today are obese, the future costs of obesity from children unable to tell what a nutritious meal looks and tastes like could be far higher. One estimate puts the cost of obesity and overweight people in the UK population by 2050 – when today’s children should be in the prime of their working lives – at £50 billion at current prices (Foresight 2007).

The roll-out of free school meals, and even the greater take-up of school meals, is currently a difficult task as school kitchens are not able to meet demand, despite investment in facilities and staff training. A more practical first step may be the universal provision of free breakfasts to primary and secondary school pupils, which does not require such sophisticated kitchen facilities. This practice already happens in Wales for primary school children. The Welsh Assembly Government made £10 million available during 2007-08 for this initiative, including one-off set-up costs, staff and food costs. Research suggests that children who are able to eat a nutritious breakfast do not arrive late, and are less disruptive as their attention levels are better (Lynch and Murphy 2007, APFHF 2008). In addition by getting children to school earlier, parents and carers can reduce their childcare costs and schools can fulfil extended school activities and other healthy school initiatives.

The meal could be provided by breakfast clubs, so as not to place extra strain on school staff, but has the scope to improve employment opportunities for current school catering and supervisory staff. The breakfast format could change with age; for example, coffee shop style options could be offered to older pupils. It could also get children, parents and the wider public used to the universal provision of nutritional breakfasts for school-aged children and reduce the stigma of receiving free school meals.

So that familiarity increases with universal provision of breakfasts, alongside the development of catering facilities and skill, the provision of free school meals could be rolled out universally – as was intended at their inception in 1944 (Morgan 2006).

Together with the scheme that gives free pieces of fruit to younger primary children, the breakfasts – and lunches if provided – offer a good introduction to healthy food behaviour, and guarantee that children are fed healthily for at least the two-thirds of the year that they are in school. They also work to counter the negative effects of poor diets on the health of children who come from poor backgrounds and also from more affluent ones (wealth does not necessarily equate to good nutritional knowledge and diet). Extended roll-out would also counter the perverse incentives that currently exist so that a family is better off with no one in work to claim free school meals for their child(ren) rather than a parent find work and lose this entitlement when claiming working families tax credit (Work and Pensions Committee 2008). A further step would be to continue access to breakfast clubs and free school meals during school holidays, to ease financial stress placed on low-income households that have relied on free school meal provision during term time.

### **The role of the ‘food citizen’**

‘Food citizenship’ developed as a social movement in the United States, with consumers’ food behaviour decisions made based on their civic responsibility to influence (and counter) local and national policies and practices; in response, local farmers’ markets and civic agriculture developed. In the UK food citizenship occurred relatively late and has been harnessed by policy initiatives such as the encouragement of local food procurement to improve the economic position of local farmers and growers and ‘Eat the View’, a Countryside Agency programme that ran from 2000 to 2006 to increase awareness of the links between sustainable local products and the countryside.

If food, through the purchasing decisions of consumers, is an expression of identity, then this is a very complex and difficult expression to make. First, there are assumptions that are made – whether for the public or private good – that local small producers are better for the environment than larger producers (the latter may in fact have better environmental management systems in place), or that supporting production that maintains the local landscape is money better spent than supporting producers elsewhere in the country, let alone overseas.

Expressions of food citizenship are further complicated by the increasing amounts of information presented to consumers through a myriad of labelling schemes – fair trade, organic certification, the red tractor for British produce, animal welfare assured, carbon labelling, and dietary information such as traffic lights. This is all in addition to lists of ingredients, allergy warnings, and use-by or best-before dates. It is unsurprising that some consumers find this confusing and given the estimated one or two seconds that most people spend making a food purchasing decision it is unlikely that these bite-size pieces of information are considered fully, if at all.

### **‘Editing’ choices**

Many food consumers believe that issues such as environmental sustainability and labour force conditions have been taken into account by supermarkets before the products reach the shelves and shopping baskets: their choices have already been ‘edited’ for them (Defra 2008). This presents a conundrum for policymakers. If nanny-stateism is to be avoided, consumers need to be able to make their own informed and educated choices. But many consumers are not interested in doing this or cannot weigh up the varying information given to them. Therefore policymakers may be left with little choice other than to act before the consumer. To an extent this has already happened and the consumer is aware of it; for example, some of the leading UK supermarkets sell only fairly traded bananas, while others have a commitment to British producers (although this is not a public policy action).

This brings in to play the role of the supermarkets, which could potentially be a positive one. Supermarkets have the power and trust of their shoppers to act on these matters, including on the consumers’ behalf. Policymakers, by working with the leading supermarkets at which 80 per cent of the UK population shop, could achieve much more than they could by attempting to get 80 per cent

of the population to act independently. It is also important to work with all parts of the food industry, including catering and hospitality services, whether those be in workforce canteens or local sandwich shops, as increasing amounts of food are being consumed outside the home.

### **Public and private sector standards**

Editing of choices, as described above, does already happen and highlights the relationship between private and public actions that any food-related policy would need to take into account. The leading food retailers set the private global production standards under which most fresh produce is grown, through organisations such as EurepGAP, and these are therefore likely to have greater reach than any specific state scheme or regulation. For example, Australian producers use these standards as a way of accessing the European, North American and, increasingly, the Asian markets for their produce.

In addition these private standards may provide incentives to further raise the technical and governance competencies for producers in developing countries to ensure future markets and earnings, but conversely can also impact on the poorest producers and limit trade opportunities. Private standards often lead public standards; for example, the British Red Tractor scheme has now become incorporated into the Government's regulation and inspection regime, as the scheme's independent inspections can show how mandatory, state-set standards are being met. Indeed, private standards and their inspection regimes are appealing when public budgets are tight.

The private sector can act quickly and reflect consumer concerns (or concerns it has stimulated) more effectively than the public sector. But private sector actions may also act in the private interest to increase product differentiation and market power. Ultimately there will still be a need for public standards so they do not slip in quality or exert negative effects. But there are further questions around public standard-setting, such as:

- Who should set standards: international institutions (such as WTO or Codex) or government?
- Should public standards act as the minimum or the maximum?
- How easy is it to take into account different environmental and other contexts – as one size may not fit all?

### **Public and private sector practices**

The above debate moves food citizenship into a more global forum. At present there is much hypocrisy involved. For example, the food miles debate and associated actions such as labelling products as being air-freighted and discussions surrounding the exclusion of air freight for organic certification have focused attention on the negative aspects of air-freighting fresh produce to the UK, with little regard for the social and economic development of developing countries' populations. Making changes to retailers', and in turn consumers', buying practices would be irresponsible to say the least as agriculture and food-related trade offers the most likely source of growth in Africa. Likewise, contradictions are found in food strategies elsewhere such as the draft Welsh food strategy (WAG 2007) that wish to reduce food miles but have no problem with expanding the scale of food exports, particularly of quality food products; somehow this carbon footprint does not seem to count. The private and public sectors find it very difficult to balance the social and economic development needs of producers in the developed and developing world.

It may be that the current global economic climate combined with the CAP health check and Doha round of talks brings opportunities to the table for developing nations. The UK government is pushing for the end to export subsidies and the trade distortion they bring. It is also insisting on an end to intervention-buying for the sake of it, particularly when commodity markets are functioning well. In addition, the new Economic Partnership Agreements between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific countries – in line with WTO trade liberalisation – will in theory offer greater trade opportunities.

However, a considerable amount of food trade is undertaken by transnational companies on an inter-country basis, and so circumvents trade agreements (Wilson and Cacho 2007). For example, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) can be used to complement or substitute trade (through exports to the host

country). During 1990–2000 the UK was one of the four countries, along with the US, France and the Netherlands, with the highest outward FDI stock of any developed OECD country, worth US\$30,600 million (ibid). Further attention may focus on FDI as companies in the developed world find it harder to make profits and may look to explore growth in developing countries. FDI can also support firms in the host country to meet international food trade standards.

### **The role of Corporate Social Responsibility**

Greater reporting of corporate activities, including FDI, as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) measures, offers a way in which food citizenship can include the corporate sector to a greater degree. Many leading companies publish CSR statements to communicate their ethical position to investors rather than consumers and focus on environmental and workforce standards. In the UK CSR has focused on carbon use and its reporting by leading companies. Now stock market listed companies have to report on environmental, social, employee and community matters as they relate to the company's business. However, while some companies may go further in their reporting, these statements can be used to skew debates and interpretations of their actions. The UK government is attempting to move towards integrating socially responsible behaviour with business practice, supported by EU actions.

Reporting only affects publicly traded companies; some of the world's leading food companies are still in private ownership. Thus there would be value in requiring all companies, whether private or limited, to report to a broader set of official standards for trade within the UK or EU. The EU is a trade area of significant size that would promote compliance with higher standards. For example, the system might be enhanced by building on current CSR to include carbon use, waste, water use, energy use, employment conditions, civic responsibility (such as health and education about food products), and even commitment to securing national food security in countries where this is still problematic. This approach to corporate food citizenship and responsibility through more detailed reporting to higher standards may be needed to add transparency to the food sector if consumer choices are to be 'edited' further.

### **Sustainable food production and consumption**

Sustainable consumption and production principles run throughout the food system, reflecting UN and EC initiatives and regulation. However, while sustainability is a big issue it is also one reason why food should not be seen as separate but instead incorporated into wider policy. For example, the Food Industry Sustainability Strategy (Defra 2006b) has effectively fizzled out, despite establishing working groups on a range of environmental issues. Instead progress is being made idiosyncratically by the food industry with agreements and commitments on water use and waste going to landfill being reached.

Environmental issues generate the most headlines and in turn comparatively high policy attention and so policy actions on these are relatively well formed. In part this is because these capture bigger issues than food; for example, water management and soil plans, even proposed actions on plastic bag use. However, this does not mean that actions could not be improved. For example, food waste and associated packaging waste is a big problem in today's disposable society. Every year:

- UK households throw away 6.7 million tonnes of food
- UK households throw away 5.1 million tonnes of packaging
- Supermarkets throw away 1.6 million tonnes of food (SDC 2008).

There is also a cost from the wasted resources used to make and transport the food and the energy that will not be recovered from sending this waste to landfill, and from the greenhouse gases emitted in turn.

There is a need for behaviour change in households and retail, as well as in other food sector businesses such as catering, to address what is considered tolerable in terms of waste and packaging. While there is the intention that the Courtauld Commitment to reduce food and packaging signed by supermarkets will be extended to non-food retailers, further action can be taken (Defra 2007). For

example, by shopping more frequently for smaller amounts that will be consumed rather than thrown away, instead of doing one large weekly shop, the necessary size of which is hard to estimate accurately thus leading to waste, over-consumption – buying too much – would be less of a problem. Retailers could also stop their ‘buy one get one free’ and similar offers on perishable foodstuffs to reduce the risk of food being bought for the sake of grabbing a bargain. This would at the same time reduce some of the inequalities in the food supply chain that are argued to result from such offers.

However, the biggest opportunity may have been missed already: the recent downgrading by government of ‘pay as you throw’ – where residents are charged according to the amount of waste they put out for collection (and landfill) and so would encourage greater recycling (as this is uncharged) – to a pilot limited to five local authorities rather than a national scheme has wasted a chance to provide incentives for households to reduce food waste (Defra 2007). Likewise, the opportunity has been missed for encouraging local authorities to deal effectively with food waste in ways other than sending it to landfill, and improving recycling provision of packaging materials and collection of food waste. This could pose problems for the 2020 waste reduction targets of recycling and composting 50 per cent of all household waste.

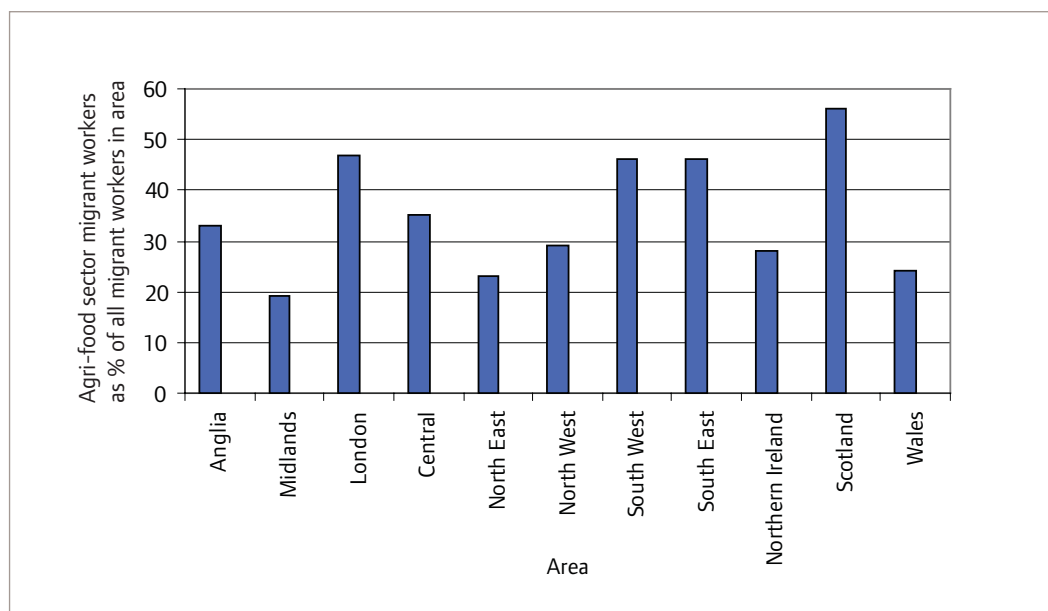
However, there are other issues that impact on the sustainability of food production and consumption that need further attention, in particular labour and technology, to which we turn below.

### Sustainable labour supplies

In conversations about the sustainability of food production and consumption in the UK one important issue often gets overlooked: migrant labour. Economic migrants work throughout the food chain, from picking to packing, processing and in food service sectors. In total, these sectors account for a large proportion of migrant worker employment; ranging from one fifth to just over one half of migrant workers from new EU member states who registered under the Workers Registration Scheme (WRS) between 2004 and 2007 (see Figure 3.2). Moreover, employment patterns have distinct seasonal peaks to coincide with harvests (Figure 3.3).

**Figure 3.2 Agri-food sector geographical distribution of employers of registered workers, May 2004–March 2007**

Source: BIA *et al* (2007) table 10

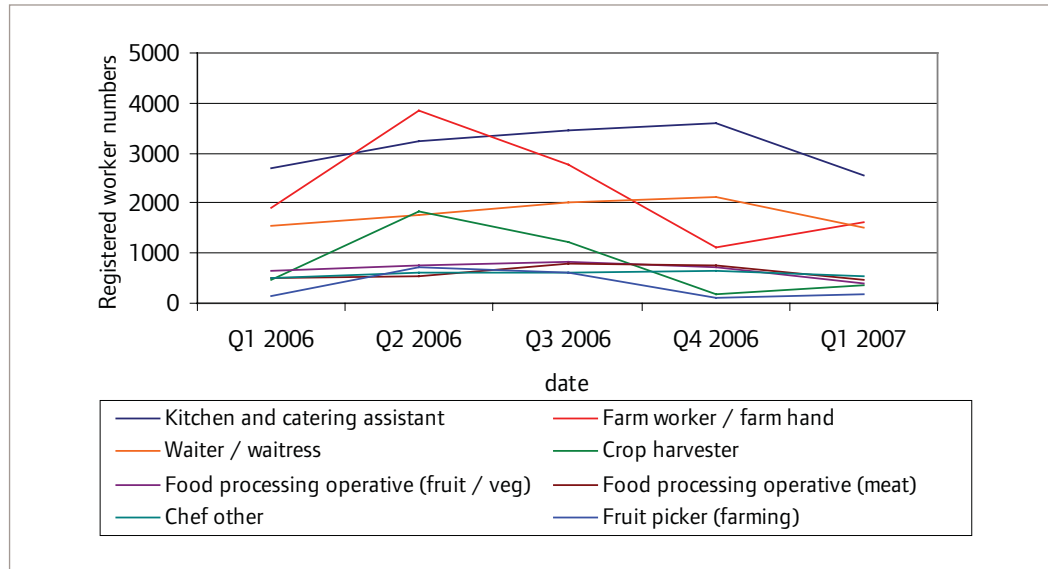


While much is made of the pressures that migrant workers add to local services and communities, the dependence of the industry and regional economies on this group is often overlooked. In 2007 the strawberry harvest was threatened due to a lack of pickers arising from changes in wage rates and the availability of other work. Thus it is clear that the UK agri-food industry is susceptible to labour supply problems (CRC 2007).

Current migration policies, including the Home Office’s new points-based system for migrants from outside the EU, are focused on attracting the brightest and most highly skilled workers to the UK. But

**Figure 3.3. Top food-related occupations of registered workers 2006-07, by quarter**

Source: BIA *et al* (2007), table 7



there has been little discussion of the contribution made by workers in low-skilled positions without whom the domestic agri-food industry would falter. The use of overseas migrant labour has been a long-standing practice for the agri-food industry (for well over 60 years) but its role and our reliance on it need further policy recognition and consideration. While the industry may be experiencing a relatively healthy supply of labour at the moment, there are already signs that the tide of workers from the new EU member states may be turning (Pollard *et al* 2008). Not only are gross arrival numbers likely to fall and gross departure numbers to increase, but there is also evidence to suggest that those nationals from new EU member state who do remain in the UK may move into urban and professional jobs outside the agri-food industry (*ibid*). Thus, further attention needs to be paid to working conditions (over and above that of gangmaster labour and regulation) and the role of migrant workers in bringing their skills and willingness to work in the agri-food sector.

### Technological development

In 2009 it will be possible to grow genetically modified (GM) food throughout the EU. The debate around GM and novel technology will not go away. When debates first appeared surrounding so-called 'Frankenstein' foods in the late 1990s there was public outcry and the EC committed to banning the production and import of GM products (defiantly breaching world trade rules as it did so).

Traditional approaches to plant or animal breeding identify the desired attributes and then attempt to breed these in through more random techniques. This selective breeding has been going on for centuries, whether for reasons of animal health or for more human concerns such as improved taste and colour. In contrast, more recent biotechnology innovations include irradiation, genomics and marker assisted breeding or selection. For example, GM approaches identify the attribute(s) to be bred in or out and alter them through specific targeted techniques. Times change, though, and it may be that there is now a need for a fresh debate on the role of new or novel technologies, biotechnologies and GM food.

This paper does not argue for or against GM or the greater adoption of biotechnologies. But two issues suggest that a need for revisiting the debate is apposite, particularly given the 2009 date.

First, climate change threatens the livelihoods of many in the most marginal agricultural lands throughout the world which could potentially lead to mass movements of population as people are forced to leave their homes and livelihoods. Biotechnologies, through developing salt-tolerant crops for example, could limit this threat. Potential problems in the developed world could be competing land pressures causing a reduction in the land available for agriculture, or soaring energy costs to cause sources for artificial fertilisers and pesticides to decline. GM may offer opportunities for the same or higher yields to be produced with reduced application of fertilisers. Of course, there are issues

over using this technology appropriately, to avoid damage to the environment or compromising social equity (as noted by the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology for Development [IAASTD] 2008).

Second, the world economy and global food system have changed. Ten years ago the EU was the biggest importer of maize and soya, for example, and so could set the market. If the EU was not prepared to purchase GM products in response to its citizens' demands then it was not in the interests of major exporting countries to produce these. However, now China and India are major importers of rice, maize and other products and are more relaxed about GM foods and to an extent lead the market for imports. Thus, greater amounts of GM crops are being produced and GM foods may have to be contemplated. Already the EC is indicating support for this, even recognising that some GM foods have been to the best of current knowledge safely consumed elsewhere, such as North America for twenty years and this should be taken into account. Indeed food or ingredients that so not have a significant history of consumption within the EU before May 1997 have been permitted to enter the European food chain following rigorous testing. Consequently some clarity and communication in preparation for the 2009 date is needed.



## 4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that food has an important and often uncomfortable relationship with public policy actions. Food is critical to people's lives in so many ways, but a coordinated approach to food policy at the national level does not exist.

This does not necessarily mean that the UK needs a food policy in the form of a single, static document. Indeed, bringing all the above concerns and objectives together in one long-term strategy is precisely where the problem starts. Having the capacity for reflection and responsiveness when new policy pressures appear – whether environmental, economic, social, technological or political – may be of more public value than a food policy in itself. This would enable both the private and public sectors to make their own way efficiently and innovatively.

This almost limitless scope for food policy highlights the potential overstretch of government. Embodying all the possible concerns and actions relating to food within a single policy seems a Herculean task. It may be more appropriate and effective if food-related issues and behaviours were incorporated more systematically into other policy areas to achieve more coherent and effective outcomes.

Food is, and should be, part of the policy agenda but not the agenda itself. Most policy affecting food production and consumption is driven from other concerns, mainly the environment (waste, soil health, water management, greenhouse gas emissions) and health (diet-related health and food safety/public health). The problem starts when policymakers and others focus very narrowly or look at a single issue, for example supermarkets, ignoring the bigger picture, such as the wider food service industry.

This paper has identified four key areas in which food-related concerns will need to be incorporated in a more systematic way:

### 1. Food security

Food security is an important issue at global, regional, national and household scales. Yet, current UK policies seem not to take food security seriously enough. Agricultural policy is no longer orientated just to food production – nor has it been for some time; rather its focus tends to be on environmental management and latterly greater food safety. An obvious starting point would be to gear agricultural policy more towards food production and current market conditions seem an appropriate time to further encourage producers to become more market orientated. The UK government (primarily the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) in association with the respective departments within the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish Governments should continue this approach.

Ensuring domestic food security will, in turn, also require a greater security in the supply of key resources. For example, the wider value of food production will need to be taken into greater account when making decisions on land use, especially where good quality land risks not being given over to agriculture. Similarly, if we are serious about food security, then we need to ensure that new planning developments, especially the proposed English 'ecotowns', promote greater food production, and respond to food consumption and waste matters.

As such 'food planning' should become part of planning policy. This could be pursued in regional spatial planning by the Department for Communities and Local Government, and equivalent spatial and economic planning by the Department for Finance and Sustainable Growth in Scotland, Environment, Sustainability and Housing in Wales and the Department of Environment in Northern Ireland. A stable supply of workers will also be needed into the agri-food sector, something that may be at risk with changing levels of migration.

### 2. Food poverty

Food poverty is a serious threat to the livelihoods of many Britons. Reducing household food insecurity has to be a priority in the face of rising food and energy prices. The UK government, through the Department of Work and Pensions, has committed to reinstate the link between earnings



and the state pension by 2015. To assist vulnerable households and reduce the short- and long-term effects of food poverty a clear date should be agreed, before 2015. It would also make sense for local authorities, supported by government, to develop the universal provision of free breakfasts to all school-aged children, before proceeding to the roll-out of universal free school meals to all school children. This would help reduce the negative health impacts of food poverty and poor diet for all children and young people and the stigma of receiving free school meals.

### **3. Food citizenship**

Food citizenship lies at the heart of the interaction between an individual's food choices, private sector production decisions and public sector standards and actions. Promoting the production and consumption of sustainable and healthy food will require better interventions: more leadership from the private sector, and more effective actions from the public sector. Currently the two sectors are working to complement each other. But more may be needed if consumer choices are to be 'edited' further, such as more rigorous reporting requirements on corporate social responsibility for all firms. There should be greater efforts by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, working alongside the Department for International Development and Defra, to move forward this agenda within the European Union.

### **4. Food communication**

Finally, the above interventions need to be bolstered by better efforts at communication about food. The UK will only be able to respond effectively to changing challenges in food if there is an informed public debate about competing policy priorities. A good example will be the debate about the use of new technology, especially biotechnology, in bolstering the food supply at home and overseas. While the development of new technologies may improve the efficiency and sustainability of food supplies, it will be equally important to communicate why and how they will be used.

It is only through the incorporation of food-related issues into these policy areas that the UK will be able to face up to the numerous and complex challenges surrounding food. As concerns about a growing world food 'crisis' deepen, many people will be tempted to draft the definitive food policy. This paper argues that there may be more value in better coordinating efforts across a range of policy concerns.

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## Appendix 1. Developments in Welsh and Scottish food strategy

	Wales	Scotland
Title	<i>Quality of Food Strategy, Task and Finish Group Report, 2007</i>	<i>Choosing the Right Ingredients, The Future for Food in Scotland, Discussion Paper, 2008a*</i>
Vision	‘To enable all citizens in Wales to access healthy and sustainable food via a strategy which integrates the goals of public health, sustainable development, social justice, equality, diversity and human rights, agriculture, education, rural and urban regeneration, and citizen engagement, to improve nutritional health by raising the quality of food from farm to fork.’	‘Our vision for food in Scotland is that it should make the nation healthier, wealthier and smarter with production making communities stronger and consumption respecting the local and global environment.’
Goals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Optimise health and reduce the burden of illness from diet-related disease</li> <li>2. Tackle health inequalities</li> <li>3. Create a healthier environment and support individuals in improving their own health</li> <li>4. Promote social cohesion and community development through community involvement</li> <li>5. Increase the viability and sustainability of the farming and food industry</li> <li>6. Increase education, information, support and opportunities for people employed in these sectors</li> </ol> <p>Underpinned by three ethical principles:</p> <p><b>1. Well-being</b> Food should be safe and nutritious, contributing to public health and reducing the burden of diet-related ill-health. Food production and consumption should contribute to social and community cohesion and to the health and well-being of the environment and farm animals.</p> <p><b>2. Justice</b> Food should be accessible and affordable to all. Food should be traded fairly, respecting the needs and rights of all people involved in the process of getting food from farm to fork.</p> <p><b>3. Accountability</b> The whole food chain should be transparent to public scrutiny and answerable to all people who depend on it. Food should be accurately and honestly labelled, in line with national and international food safety regulations, enabling citizens to make choices.</p>	<p><b>A healthier Scotland</b> will result from changing individual behaviour and attitudes about diet and food choices; from improving the nutritional quality, safety and freshness of food on offer in institutions and the catering sector to supporting Scottish food manufacturers and retailers to take the initiative in driving forward consumer demand for more affordable, healthier food options. Communities across Scotland will enjoy better access to affordable, safe, healthy and fresh seasonal food.</p> <p><b>A wealthier and fairer Scotland</b> will result from the sustainable economic growth of the food industry through greater cooperation and collaboration from primary production to final market, ensuring the long-term viability of primary producers, and increasing export markets for Scottish produce.</p> <p><b>A safer and stronger Scotland</b> will result from a thriving food industry where local communities will flourish and become better places to live through improved access to amenities and services.</p> <p><b>A greener Scotland</b> will result from reducing the environmental impact of food and drink production, processing, manufacturing and consumption by encouraging responsible behaviour throughout the supply chain through reduced emissions, unnecessary use of raw materials, waste, packaging, energy and water use.</p> <p><b>A smarter Scotland</b> will result from a highly-skilled and innovative food industry with consumers that are better informed about where their food comes from, how it was grown and the wider health, environmental, social and economic benefits of the choices they make.</p>

\*Note: On 19 June 2008 the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and the Environment announced the next steps for Scotland’s National Food and Drink Policy (Scottish Government 2008b). The remit of policy action has been extended to include drink. A number of new measures were announced. These included:

- A major campaign to improve the quality and visibility of Scottish produce served in Scotland's restaurants and pubs
- A focus on food education through Scotland's first Cooking Bus, teaching healthy, practical cooking skills to pupils, parents and community groups across the country
- An investigation into 'Scottish' labelling of food and drink to help to make it easier for consumers to identify and trust labels
- Support for a world-class health and nutrition centre through the future merger of the Rowett Research Institute and Aberdeen University
- A new Scottish Government catering contract which leads by example with greater emphasis on healthier menus, and the procurement of fresh and seasonal produce
- An inquiry into affordable access to food, in light of the global rise in food prices.

Five key themes for actions to develop future policy have been set as:

1. Supporting the sustainable economic growth of the food and drink industry
2. Supporting consumers and working with the food and drink industry to support healthier and more environmentally sustainable choices through better food education about the impact on health and environment
3. Celebrating and enhancing Scotland's reputation as a Land of Food and Drink
4. Walking the talk – getting Government to lead the way
5. Affordability, access and security in relation to food.