

Current concepts and debates in Food Security

Tim Lang¹

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Thanks

Delighted

etc

We keep invoking the (loaded) Chinese saying that we “live in interesting times”...

... and they are!

¹ Professor Emeritus of Food Policy, Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London.

Introduction

My task is to open up our debate and pitch the big problems about the core concept of food security.

It's a term bandied about, used sloppily and which the UK applies complacently.

Read, if you haven't, the Defra *Food Security Report* published just before Christmas 2021 (?for max publicity?).¹

The first of what's due to be triennial, grudgingly agreed after pressure in the Lords to assess UK post Brexit Food Security.

It's a mix of complacent and interesting perspectives.

This repeats the figure that the UK is 54% self-sufficient.

But assures us this is well and good.

Because we get the imported food from diverse countries.

Actually the vast majority is from the EU.

Which we have left, and imposed bureaucratic barriers to.

In truth, it depends what measure one uses:

- Value
- By market sector
- By nutrients

But my job here is to open up debate on what we mean.

I'll first tease out changes in what we mean by food security since WW2;

Then ask what does it mean now for people like you and for policy-makers.

Without going too far back in agri-food policy history we can identify five phases

5 phases of food security thinking in the modern era

Most people think of food security in the 1974 FAO *World Food Conf* approach

FS was defined in terms of supply - *assuring the availability and price stability of basic foodstuffs*

Supply was the issue – the legacy of histories of famine, failures, wars etc.

Philosophically, modern FS traces its meaning to industrialization + Malthus.

Phase 1. The post Malthusian conception (late C 18th – early C 19th)

The problem

The Rev Dr Thomas Malthus outlined what he saw as a fundamental clash of squeezed supply and demographic / population exponential growth.²

Shortage was inevitable.

Demographic change unstoppable (unless marriage was delayed).

In the 19th century, the argument crystallised as a consequence of

- Urbanization
- Industrialization
- Population growth

The Response included (for UK and N Europeans)

Imperialism

Emigration

Technology

Heavily reframed by Social movements such as

- Chartism (pursuit of democracy / the vote)
- industrial unease (pursuit of living wage)
- demand for affordable food (health and decent diets)

Battles over Corn laws 1815-46 reduced this to price and imports³

Triumph of Food Imperialism in UK politics: let others feed the UK

(underpinned by post Napoleonic military and navy power)

Science – John Bennet Lawes at Rothamsted / Justus von Liebig at Giessen

Their key answer to Malthus was fertilisers

But this was not the kind of intervention social science envisaged.

Social reformers and social science such as Booth,⁴ Mayhew⁵ - sceptics about the scale of poverty and hunger initially – raised.

They fuelled arguments for a benign state, part patrician, part philanthropy, part self-interest.

Mid C 19th food scientists here became central:

- Accum, Hassall, Wakely,⁶

The long battle to contain /prevent food adulteration required local and state intervention.

Legal interventions eg:

1848 Public Health Act

1870 Education Act

1855/65 Food Adulteration Acts

Local authority Acts

- quality controls & inspections
- power (electricity)
- food markets
- etc

Today LAs are eviscerated.

Lack powers to harness civic creativity

Phase 2 for the UK and Europe was War lessons (Boer, WWI, WWII)

The problems amplify

Arguably, the Boer War first dented the post-Napoleonic UK approach

- Dutch extraction farmers hold up Victoria's annexation of South Africa
- Poor quality of British recruits
- Eugenicist thinking blames breeding
- Early nutrition blames quality of diets

WW 1 and then WW2 undermine the imperial model for UK

Also across Europe

The response

1943 Hot Springs Conference

FAO created in 1945 (Boyd Orr generation)

UK MoF created (1916 / 1940) – Beveridge

Era of social democratic / welfare reforms:

Eg UK School meals (1906-1944)

Eg early insurance

Council housing

Scientists claim it can resolve problems

- From primary input to public health
- Productionism

In WWII, US flexed its food power muscles as Russia is doing today

- Lend lease

UK Convoys

Rationing

Phase 3: Food security politics embed then fragment (1940s -70s)

Post WW2 reconstruction

- FAO
- UN system

Institutions seen as having failed globally and especially Europe

response

PRODUCTIONISM

Science

Efficiency

Common Market

FAO created

UK Agric Act 1947

But tempered by recurrence of famines – Sudan, Biafra, Bangladesh etc

Hence → World Food Conf 1974 focus on supply

Phase 4: The Food Security Challenge widens (1970s-90s)

The problems widen → Questioning of the entire model

- Environment
 - Agri-inputs: pesticides, nitrates,
- Health:
 - CHD, fats
 - Food poisoning
 - Adulteration
- Social justice
 - North-South
 - Ex colonial liberation
- Economic concentration
 - TNC power
 - (the first academic studies: lettuce, milk, strawberries, grain)
- Culture
 - Advertising and marketing

Response (goes upstream)

1996 World Food Summit recognises FS as multi-dimensional challenge

By 1983, FAO was troubled by access and availability not just supply.

1980 Brandt North-South Report / 1987 Brundtland 'Our Common Future' rept

1986 World Bank *Report on Poverty and Hunger*

EU creeping environmental legislation

1992 MacSharry reforms → pillar 2 (20% CAP funds)

Slow consumer engagement → green consumerism

Some industry engagement

Public health movement flexing its muscles on

- Cost of diet-related ill-health
- (not our problem said agrifood industries: it's **consumer choice**)

NB c.25 yrs to get QUID labelling & We still lack food ecolabelling + SDGs

There are no sustainable dietary guidelines.

Phase 5: Food security as Sustainability (2000-2020)

The problems are clarified

... become more extensive.

... and become more stark

We cannot reduce the agri-food supply chain problem to calories + carbon

- Biodiversity
- Embedded water
- Land use
- Culture
- Class divisions
- gender

It's a multi problem:

- Multi-problem
- Multi-level
- Multi-actor

Not just Carbon → climate change

Agri-food systems require integrated thinking.

Mostly they receive fragmented thinking

- From competing voices
- Social vs enviro vs health vs cost
- Different discourses

Responses

Moments of breakthrough

IPCC taken more seriously

Emergence of ecological public health thinking.

But still a struggle to get integrated policy response

But it's the era of globalisation obsession

At all levels: global, continental, national, local

But in 2007-08 oil & food world price rise crises

- → G8 L'Aquila declaration

UN Decade of Nutrition Action

UK → intense review → Food 2030 integrated food strategy after intense 2 yr review

- Food Matters (Cabinet Office)
- Council of Fd Policy Advisors
- Food security review
- Consultations etc

Dumped by Cameron Coalition

But not the Climate Change Act 2007

- Hence importance of what Committee on Climate Change reports
- (good work by team and John Gummer)

Where we are now: Great Food Transformation?

This term is what 2019 EAT-Lancet Commission proposed to capture the radical but reasonable global strategy the data indicate is need.

Policies must address challenge differently and appropriately everywhere but to common goals: sustainable diets from sustainable food systems.

A particular challenge to the affluent West.

- We are the problem.
- Over- / mal-consumers
- Powerful food industries
- Big consciousness industries

Let's be clear (Chancel data):⁷

- bottom 50% of world population emitted 12% of global emissions in 2019, whereas the top 10% emitted 48% of the total.
- Since 1990, the bottom 50% of the world population has been responsible for only 16% of all emissions growth, whereas the top 1% has been responsible for 23% of the total.

What's our task now?

Let me put it starkly. It's to:

- Rebuild biodiversity
- Change diets dramatically
- Develop radical low impact food production
- Shorten supply chains where possible
- Recalibrate food culture
- Cut much food processing
- Change how we live and what we eat
- Build civil food defence

This needs:

- Courage
- Government to get a grip / facilitate change
- War akin changes

It's not the **Victorian individual self-interest** but a **COLLECTIVE INTEREST**

Meanwhile, the window to change direction *voluntarily* is closing

Events look more set to dictate change

- Which may come from many directions – eg Climate, Water,...

But *socio-economic* disruption is also the new normal

Not in the sense venture capitalists or neo-liberal cult dominating Tory Party.

Look at the picture of events, dear boy, events:

2007-08 oil price → Great Recession

2016 Brexit

2019ff Covid

2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine

2022 Horn of Africa famine

Brexit effects sh'ld be UK food wake-up call but barely featured till recently.

- Delays
- Costs
- bureaucracy

Lock-ins

- Political reluctance / timidity
- Consumer expectations

The meaning of food security has changed

- urgency of addressing it has simply grown and broadened.
- Eg Food disruptions not addressed by Resilience Forums (CCAct 2004).

Need for sober review of local / community-led civil food protection potential.

What can we do?

A process of change is needed – which current Govt won't do:

- New Food Acts
- Repurposing some structures eg inject 'F' back into Defra
- DHSC to do more prevention dietary work

Policy options exist but are not being properly addressed by political processes

We should emulate aspects of EU's Farm to Fork Strategy.

In reality, UK sidelined Dimbleby's *Nat Food Strategy*

Set against which the June 2022 *Govt Food Strategy* is frankly pathetic.

So UK options are:

1. Drift → bau → ignore the data → crisis deepens

OR...

2. Begin the Great Food Transformation based on new principles
 - a. Contract and converge
 - b. ecological public health
 - c. land use for Sustainable Diets from Sustainable Food Systems

This is to:

- Feed the mass population better
- Invest in new infrastructure
- Decentralise → bioregional institutions
- Unleash civic creativity

These are stark options and realities which challenge Agriculture trades

- There's a limit to what you can do
- Power is off the land

But you can choose to continue to intensify and pollute rivers. ...Or not.

Plant orchards ... or not

Rethink land use... or not

Are you for or against the Great food Transformation?

[ENDS / THANKS]

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