Exploring food systems with closer relationships

7-8th June 2021

Context

The World Health Organisation says that one of the greatest risks to planetary and human health is a globalised and poorly regulated agri-food system. Whilst people in the UK pay some of the lowest prices for their food in Europe, the cost of that cheap food has been paid for elsewhere in society, now and for generations to come.

Global farming and food businesses argue that they have improved global health and prosperity by making more food available, more cheaply, in more places than ever before. They argue that integrated vertical supply chains bring consistency and control into a highly dispersed sector; that processing and packaging makes food more safe and secure especially in poor and isolated communities; that trusted brands help people choose food they can rely on and that many people can afford to buy the widest variety of foods ever available. They argue there is no alternative to these methods if we want to ensure that nine billion people can be fed, safely and affordably.

But the evidence is now clear that this strategy has come at too high a price. The food system has become geared towards selling cheap, ultra-processed convenience food at the lowest prices, with serious implications for people's health and wellbeing. The costs of diet-related illnesses are not just borne by patients and their families; they are borne throughout society, from the cost to the NHS, (Type 2 diabetes alone costs £12bn) and working days lost (£15bn) through to the cost of removing the drugs that treat them from the water supply (currently incalculable). In the UK, one of the wealthiest countries, nearly 6 million adults are experiencing food insecurity and 1.7 million children live in households that are food insecure. Food insecurity in this case is not caused by a lack of food in the system, but by the inability of people to access and afford that food, especially healthy food.

Healthier and life-enhancing diets mean more and better fresh fruit, vegetables, nuts and wholegrain food, less and better meat and dairy, with livestock products coming from high welfare, climate and nature-safe production, and zero waste. It also means re-establishing food as central to convivial human relationships, in the process rebuilding our connections with food producers, nature and each other. This will be good for our health and wellbeing, and for action on climate change and biodiversity loss.

There are many pathways to reaching a future food system that supports health and vitality, protects and restores biodiversity, and sequesters carbon from the atmosphere. A recent report from the Global Food Security programme developed four scenarios based on two critical uncertainties that are expected to drive changes to the UK food system in coming years: (1) Will the UK food system be more localised or globalised in 2050? (2) What would the UK food system look like if it were to focus on climate mitigation (i.e. Paris Agreement) or wider metrics of sustainability (i.e. the SDGs). The figure below outlines the basic premise of

the four scenarios – we'll be exploring these further in one of the sessions on Monday. You can find the full report in the suggested reading section.

In the context of the urgent need for food system transformation and to meet global ambitions, where does the notion of 'local' sit? What does it mean for communities, places, business, and policy?

Figure 2: Four future food system scenarios arising from two critical uncertainties. The scenarios explore the impacts of differing connectivity (more localisation or more globalisation) and differing food system foci (meeting the Paris agreement targets for climate mitigation or meeting the Sustainable Development Goals for wider sustainability).
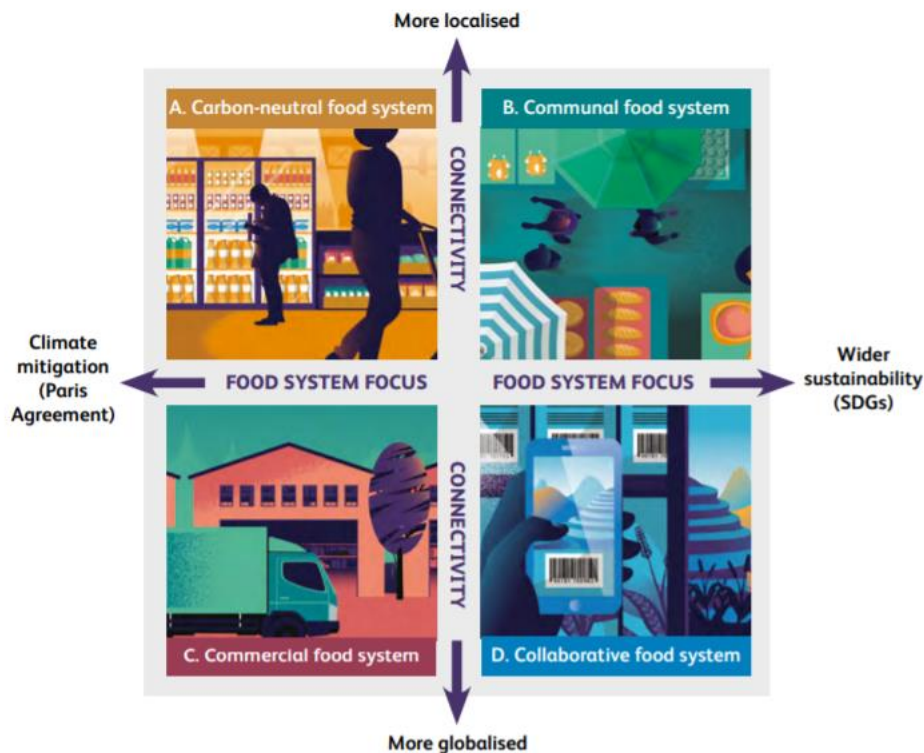
Global problems, local solutions

In the run up to COP26, governments around the world are focussing attention on ways to mitigate and reverse their climate and nature impacts. There is a growing movement for locally led adaptation, the idea where decisions over how, when and where to adapt are led by communities and local actors, building out from local knowledge, expertise and experience.

The Global Commission on Adaptation's 2019 report calls for strengthening the role of vulnerable groups and local actors in planning processes that affect their own lives and found that local actors can produce more effective adaptation, as they have local knowledge that can better inform solutions.

How do these principles of locally led adaptation work in practice? And what do these approaches mean in the context of food system transformation?

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown in sharp relief that local actors are often the first to respond to crises. The wide-ranging effects of the pandemic on the food system are well-rehearsed; from empty shelves to an increasing in buying local.

A nationwide Food, Farming and Countryside Commission poll from the first lockdown found significant changes to our relationship with food, family and the environment: 42% said the outbreak had changed how they value food as an essential, more than 19 million people (38%) said they were cooking more from scratch and 17 million were throwing away less food (33%), and 3 million people tried a veg box scheme or ordered food from a local farm for the very first time.

Our follow up survey of sector professionals found a huge appetite for more resource and investment in communities, more diverse sources of food production, more investment in short supply chains, and more collaboration and collective leadership to tackle the big food system issues.

As the UK moves to 'build back better', COVID-19 has shown the importance of flexible and adaptive food systems, but these need to be supported and nurtured, and tailored to the communities they serve.

What does this mean for 'local food'?

The question of a more localised vs. a more globalised food system is not a new one.

For decades, farmers, civil society groups and citizens have championed localised food systems as a route to achieving better environmental, social and economic outcomes. There has been lots of work and research done on ways to better support local food systems, and yet it can still be hard to land the case to create the conditions for these systems to flourish.

But what do we really mean by 'local'? Intuitively we all think we know what we mean when talking about 'local' food systems, yet it remains hard to define – and to agree in practice. It embodies values of closeness, connection, participation and fairness. It relates to the horizontal relationships central to place making, where – in our everyday lives – we instinctively understand and value the links between good jobs, affordable housing, vibrant high streets, easy transport, good public services, health and wellbeing, access to nature, a sense of community cohesion, decision-making and power, culture, skills and learning, livelihoods, a sense of belonging, joy, and much more. And yet these interdependent and foundational relationships are very often under-valued and under-supported in policy making.

This consultation aims to bring together diverse and complementary voices across the food system to explore and debate the mechanisms and rationale for developing food systems that deliver multiple benefits. We want to ask, what is the rationale for supporting food systems with closer relationships to the places they are located? What powers do communities need, to be able to act on their local food contexts? What policy objectives create the right conditions for these systems to flourish on a level playing field? What policies are needed to ensure that the right things happen in the right places at the right time?

Suggested reading:

- Global Food Security Programme (2021) The role of the UK food system in meeting global agreements: potential scenarios: https://www.foodsecurity.ac.uk/activities/future-food-system-scenarios/
- NEF (2021) Growing Communities: farmer-focussed routes to market: https://www.nefconsulting.com/growing-communities-evaluation/
- Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (2019) Our Future in the Land: https://ffcc.co.uk/library/our-future-in-the-land
- Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (2020) YouGov COVID-19 public polling: https://ffcc.co.uk/library/yougov-covid-19-polling
- Food, Farming and Countryside Commission (2020) Learning from Lockdown survey: https://ffcc.co.uk/library/learning-from-lockdown