

Food, sustainability and alternative food networks

**Changing narratives:
debates about sustainability and security**

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Aims of this session

- Examine narratives around sustainability in relation to food, including
 - Food (in)security
 - Environmental performance and climate change
 - Self-sufficiency and globalisation (esp since COVID-19)
- Discuss the idea that sustainability is a complex aspiration, rather than a settled state or particular truth.

Sustainability and how it relates to food

- Sustainability is when human and natural systems are able to survive and flourish in the long-term. (Behrens et al. 2020). (Interactions and interdependence between humans-nature.)



Sustainable diets



Source: Reproduced from Lairon (2010)

- The challenge of creating a mode of food provisioning that is ecologically sustainable, while addressing nutritional issues (Lang and Mason, 2017).
- 'Any discussion of sustainability and which way we should go, has to take into account, and explore, the values that stakeholders bring to the debate.' (Garnett 2014 <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/132647716.pdf>)
- Move from meat (EAT Lancet 2019)
- 1/3rd of food bought is thrown away (UC Davis) <https://www.ucdavis.edu/food/news/why-is-one-third-of-food-wasted-worldwide#:~:text=Nearly%20one%2Dthird%20of%20all,economic%2C%20environmental%20and%20social%20costs.>

Plenty, healthy, quality?

Some generalised key developments post 1945:

- Marshall Plan, 'Green revolution', Soviet collectivisation, self-sufficiency, surplus for trade and aid
- Oil dependency highlighted in oil crisis of early 1970s (*see Jones, A. (2001) Eating Oil. Sustain, London; and AEA (2005) The Validity of Food Miles as an indicator of Sustainability.*)
- CAP production subsidies until 2003 \Rightarrow surpluses, global dumping, falling food prices for consumers. Supermarket dominance and foreign direct investment (FDI) (*see Neil Wrigley*).
- CAP reform from 2003 \Rightarrow decoupling of subsidy from production and link to environmental stewardship, farming as a multifunctional activity

Plenty, healthy, quality? (2)

FAO monthly food price index in nominal terms

January 2005 to 2022

— Food Price Index



Data accessed: 4 February 2022
Chart: IFPRI - Source: FAO - Created with Datawrapper

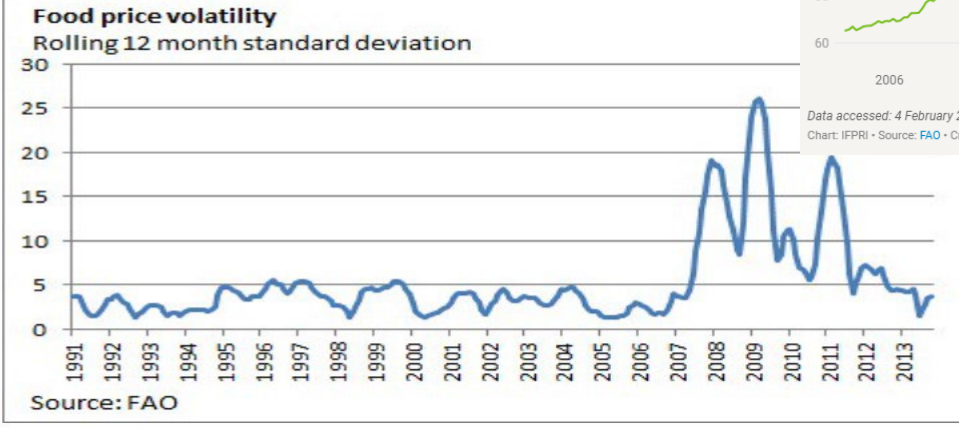
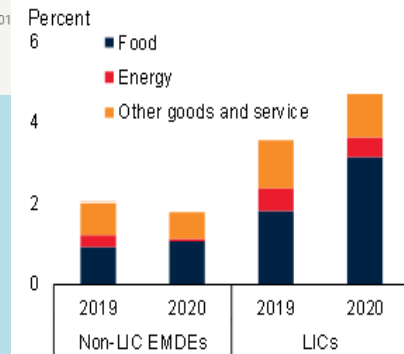


Chart 1: Contribution of food and energy prices to inflation



Sources: International Monetary Fund; World Bank.

More or less falling consumer prices until 2000s, but derivatives and CIFs cause price volatility following the 2007-8 financial crisis.

Environmental degradation (Carson 1966), food safety scares, growth of organic movement from 1990s (see Julie Guthman 2002 and Gill Seyfang 2006...)

‘Quality turn’ and shift from public to individualised concerns in 2000s – health, lifestyle, ‘alternative hedonism’ (Soper 2004)

Lack of diversity in trade – 97% of all food in UK sold in 10 supermarkets.

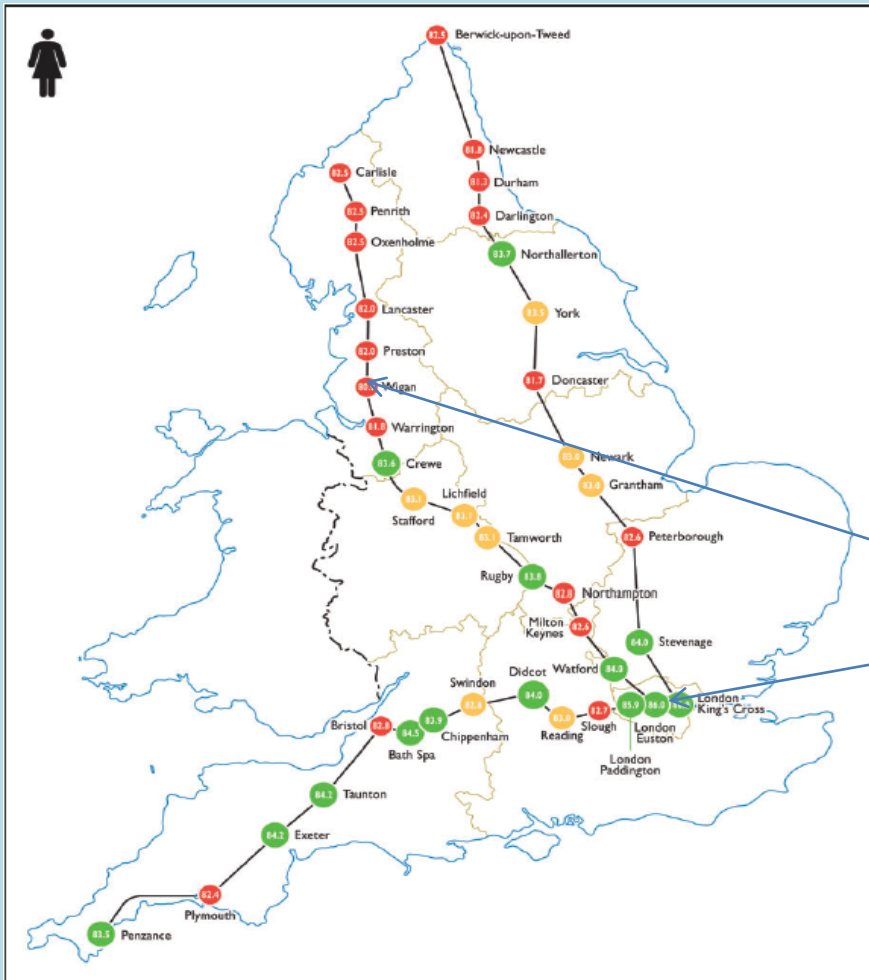
Obesity/famine paradox, food poverty - the rise of social food co-ops in the absence of policy (e.g. see Elizabeth Dowler and Martin Caraher and allies). COVID exacerbating this.

Food in the public health arena

Public health concerns around dietary intake affected by structural and social changes:

- Fewer people work in industrial settings and other jobs which feed workers. Traditional family structures are changing. Post-modern cities and working arrangements. 'On the hoof' eating, convenience shopping. COVID \Rightarrow routine home-working.
- Move from 1980s (in UK) away from institutionalised public catering to consumer choice, lowest price tendering and de-skilling kitchen labour. School cooks \Rightarrow food assembly workers (Morgan and Sonnino 2008).
- By highlighting choice, the state moved some public health responsibilities to the private domain.

Spatial/social health inequality



In their 2016 paper, Bambra and Orton outline differences in regional life expectancy in England, mapped through the train network.

- Wigan 80.9 years
- London 86 years

Q: If we assume some of these differences could be linked to food, what might be the food-related causes of these differences?

Household food insecurity

Food insecurity: 'the inability to acquire or eat an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways' (Dowler & O'Connor 2012)

Oxfam (2013) and the Church of England (2018) link food poverty and the rise of food donation projects to welfare reforms.

COVID has made a bad picture worse: unemployment, stockpiling, supply chain mobility, price rises: 'Lockdown

The stores with an appetite for change

For just £2.50 a week, a food club near Stockport is helping to fill the shelves of people who cannot afford the weekly shop, finds **Patrick Butler**

Over two hours before the Birmingham Local Pantry opens, Christine arrives to take her seat at the head of the queue. She says she doesn't mind waiting in line for food: friends and neighbours will join her there, it's quite a social occasion, and anyway, it's worth getting in early to get the best choice. "The pantry is a lifeline for me. I don't have much money. If I didn't have this I would not have food on some days, there's many a time I would have gone without."

Christine is one of around 600 members of a food club set up by Stockport Homes, a project that provides heavily subsidised groceries to struggling low-income households. She has been a member for more than two years, and pays £2.50 a week to shop once a week at a small store in the Birmingham estate's community centre. There she can choose to items from a menu that might include baked beans, meat, cakes, frozen ready-meals, coffee, fruit, vegetables and other fresh seasonal products, such as tomatoes and aubergines. The retail value of her choices will be around £15. The odd bag of flour or one or two tins of tinned food can be added, she says. "I can get things I wouldn't normally be able to afford," she says.

More than 8 million people in Britain live in households that struggle to put enough food on the table, and over half regularly go a whole day without eating, according to the latest UN estimates. In the UK, the food bank network is the largest of its kind in the world. In Birmingham's new food bank, while it shows the aim of helping people on low incomes, the approach is very different. It is not a supplier of emergency food parcels like a food bank, instead it strives to offer longer-term support, based on the idea that firms in the age of austerity and falling living standards, poverty and food insecurity are chronic or recurring, rather than a temporary blip.

Hazel Cooper, the director of Church Action on Poverty (CAP), calls the pantry model a "step up" from food banks. Unlike most food banks, it is a co-operative: members can join without having to be referred by others, and not just because they are deemed to be sufficiently in crisis: they pay in to the club, and they can remain members for as long as they like unless food banks limit clients to set handful of visits.

"There's a dignity in paying, rather than being given to," says Cooper. "The food offer is better in terms of quality, variety and freshness: and it gives members a sense of ownership and control over what members are able to eat on a regular basis is huge. You have



Birmingham Pantry near Stockport, where people can buy 10 items for £2.50 a week. Photograph: Jon Super for the Guardian

choice, within constraints. It's not a normal shop, but it is close to a normal shop," Cooper is writing with Stockport Homes on plans to develop the pantry model across Greater Manchester. Prospective members must live locally, but are simply asked if they ever struggle to pay bills, whether they have cut back on shopping in the last three months and whether they ever run out of money towards the end of the week. Members are signposted to energy, energy and debt advice if they need it. There are a few simple house-keeping rules, but there is no strict menu testing or conditionality – and no priority on the part of the pantry that members have to "fix their problems" and move on.

Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the pantry is that unlike other food clubs, it provides like Community Shop. There is no "temporarily that members' continued access to subsidised food is mainly based on income. In practice it seems there is a regular turnover and people move on, at the slow pace. Cooper

illustrates the idea that food insecurity is mitigated by employment. What if members are retired, or ill, he says. "The point is that sometimes people's circumstances do not change. If they end up going to the pantry for the next 10 years, that's fine. We don't regard that as a second-class option."

Stockport Homes started the project three years ago, after looking at ways to help increasing numbers of its tenants who were struggling in the wake of the then coalition government's first big welfare reform in 2013. They had worked with local food banks food still handouts could not help everyone, with some even turning down assistance.

"We found people weren't using the food bank even though they got a referral, because of the stigma," says Hazel Cooper, homelessness strategy development officer at Stockport Homes. "We wanted something that provided dignity and choice."

So the pantry was born. The food supply centre from Greater Manchester Foodshare (GMFS), a regional arm of the national charity that collects surplus

produce from supermarkets and manufacturers and distributes it to charities for an annual subscription fee. GMFS agreed to provide the pantry with a regular weekly supply of practically free food. Birmingham Charity tops this up with free fruit and vegetables financed from the club's subscription revenue. GMFS has supplied around 70 tonnes of food over the past three years. An estimated 1,200 households have benefited from membership, saving them each anything from £200-750 a year on food bills. Collectively, members have saved an estimated £200,000 a year.

Cooper is proud of the local volunteers who run the pantry, a handful of whom have moved on to paid work, and she can quote positive social return-on-investment numbers to demonstrate that the project is cost-effective. But she is most enthusiastic about the less measurable but wins: a financial breathing space for struggling families, putting healthy food into their shopping baskets and tackling social isolation. "Ultimately," she says, "food is a way of engaging people."

There is certainly growing interest in the idea. Stockport Homes has four pantries, and GMFS supplies about 15 pantries in Greater Manchester. Cooper expects that number to double over the next three years. Every week brings more than 100 people to the pantry, and she says that, at about £10,000, and if a regular supply of surplus food can be sourced, Cooper says there is no reason to believe they couldn't expand.

On the face of it there is a plentiful supply of surplus food out there – about 10m tonnes are wasted by supermarkets and manufacturers every year. But Miranda Knauman of GMFS admits more suppliers are needed. "There's an art to managing a pantry in terms of supplies," she says. There is competition, too, as other pantries and private retailers are also seeking cheap produce, with the aim of "helping struggling families."

Community Shop, which burst on to the scene in 2013 when it opened the UK's first social supermarket in Stockport, is to open a new shop next month, in Genny, with the aid of a lottery grant of £60,000. "After three years we believe we have found a model which can deliver high impact at scale," says Gary Scott, boss of Community Shop. But although the shop's 2019 impact report published this week suggests that its mix of cheap food and life coaching has helped many members, expansion has so far been difficult. Two years ago, it opened openly to plans to open 20 stores. Genny will be just its fourth.

Martin Caraher, professor of health and food poverty at City University, says the food pantry model's roots in the local community and its emphasis on local volunteers are likely to stand it in good stead. But the difficulty for all such ventures is securing a constant and reliable food supply.

Cooper accepts that charity food is never ideal, in whatever form. But then neither is life on low incomes. "The ultimate solution is that people have enough money to buy the same food as everyone else. But people's incomes aren't going up dramatically or even at all. So we need to find solutions that enable people's budgets to go further."



'More than 8m people in Britain struggle to put enough food on the table, but if

“At the beginning of the pandemic, two families were on my doorstep. Almost shaking with fear, they thought when they saw those empty supermarket shelves that they were going to be starved out. This is not food insecurity, let's call it really is. It's hunger and it's fear.

SHARON GOODYER, COMMUNITY WORKER, THANET

(Power et al. 2020)

Second green revolution must for food security: PM

Demand for foodgrain projected to touch 280 mt by 2020-21

By Bureau
New Delhi, July 16

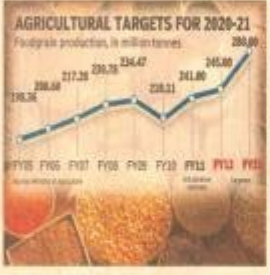
While saying that the food production has been increasing consistently over the last few decades, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Saturday stressed the need for a broad-based and sustainable second green revolution for meeting rising demands of food and security.

While talking upon agricultural scientists to help augment the food production to 24 per cent, Singh said the security of the food is the top priority as indicated by the fact that during the 10-year period from 1997-98 to 2006-07, the country's foodgrain production had grown at an average annualized rate of 1.5%.

"Although foodgrain production has also registered a respectable increase in the second green revolution that is more broad-based, more inclusive and more sustainable. "We need to produce more without depleting our natural resources any further, and we look towards our agricultural scientists for ushering in this green revolution," Singh said.

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Ban on wheat exports lifted, says Pawar

New Delhi, July 16: The government has decided to lift the over four-year-old ban on wheat exports, even as shipment of the grain to the volatile international market.

The government has lifted wheat exports since early 2007 to boost domestic supply and contain inflation.

"On the one hand, wheat exports remained, what exports remained," agricultural minister Sharad Pawar told reporters in the corridors of the Parliament.

The government has not announced the quantity of wheat allowed for exports as global prices are very low.

Recently, finance minister Pranab Mukherjee led an empowered group of ministers to G20 London, in which Pawar is also a member, had given inter-judicial approval to lift the ban on wheat exports in the wake of over-inflation.

At present, the government's move has helped wheat move of 17.5 million tonnes (mt) in view of a bumper crop.

Exporting wheat in view of its volatility, wheat exports, the government has decided to lift the over four-year-old ban on wheat exports, even as shipment of the grain to the volatile international market.



Sharad Pawar, agriculture minister

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26 November 2012 Last updated at 15:56
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On the breadline: Food banks in Cumbria

A record number of people in the North West turned to food banks in the last six months because they cannot afford to feed themselves, a charity says.

The Trussell Trust said its network of food banks across Cumbria, Lancashire, Merseyside, and Greater Manchester fed more than 13,500 people since April. This compares to just 22 people in same period last year.



Thousands of people are turning to food banks for help

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SHOCK OBESITY FINDINGS

HORSE MEAT IS FOUND IN TESCO BURGERS

Supermarkets clear shelves Inquiry at supply plants

TESCO Everyday Value 8 beef burgers

WHICH BURNER? TESCO staff were last night clearing beef burgers from stores nationwide after horse meat was found in its own brand range.

CO2 vs. social justice

Special report The human cost of food

How 'modern day slavery' on the Costa del Sol puts the salad in your shopping



Felicity Lawrence reports on the exploited migrant workers, just out of sight of Spain's tourist beaches, who make possible a €2bn hothouse industry feeding Europe's supermarkets

with temperatures reaching 40-45C, is unattractive to the local population. So it has sucked in thousands of illegal workers, first from Morocco, then from eastern Europe and sub-Saharan Africa.

Estimates of the number working in the hothouses vary, but Juan Carlos Checa, researcher in social anthropology at the university, put the number of migrant workers in April 2010 at between 80,000 and 90,000.

Spitou Mendy, who was an illegal migrant from Senegal until he gained his papers in an amnesty, now helps run Sindicato de Obreros del Campo (SOC), a small union for migrants. He thinks the numbers have swollen to more than 100,000 due to the recession.

The Spanish government allows those who can prove they have worked for more

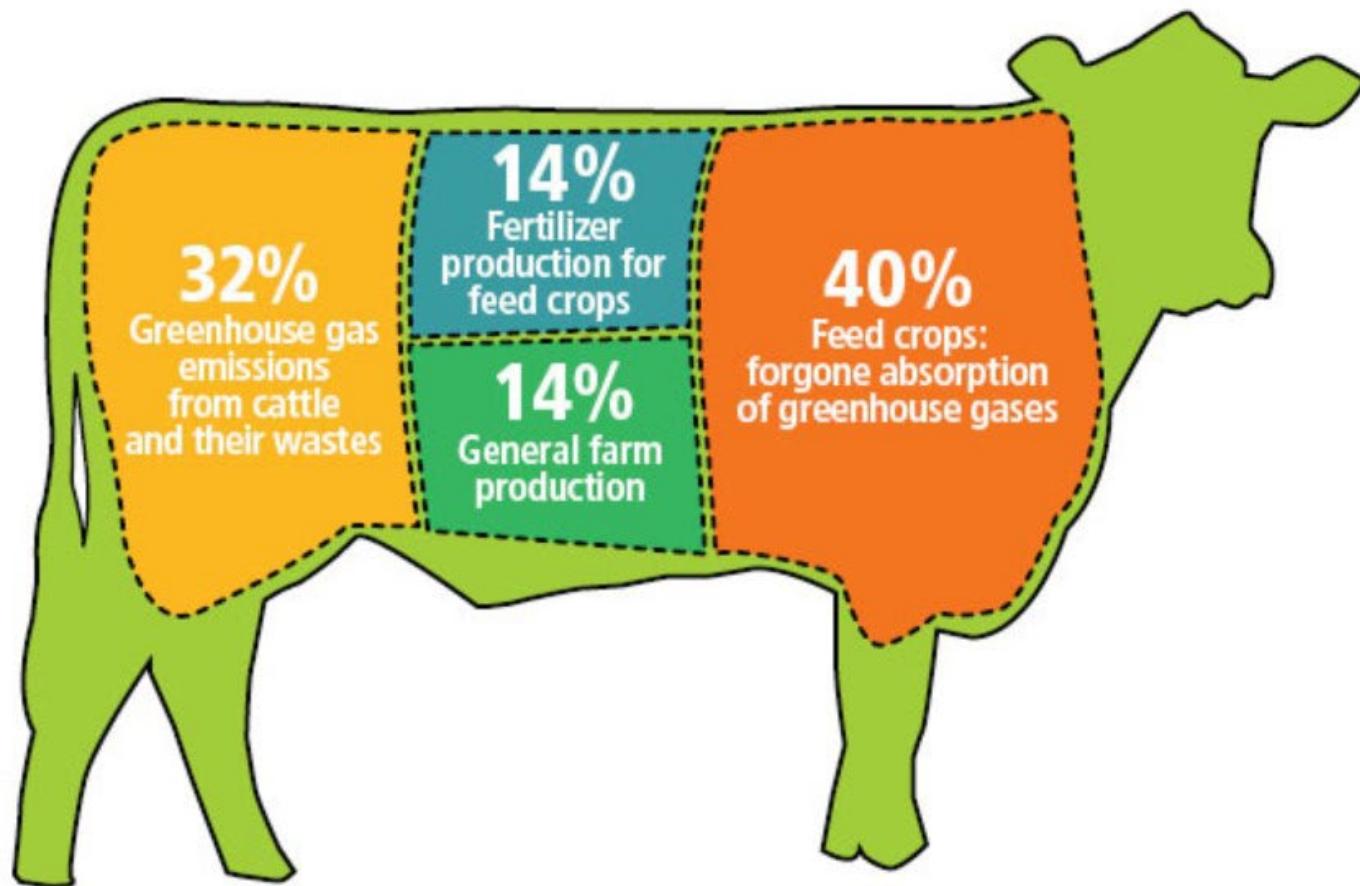
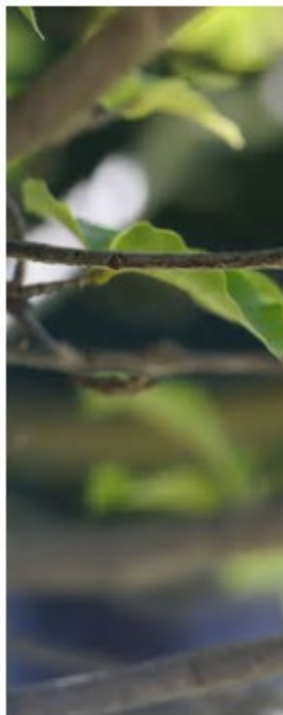


Source: *The Guardian* 8th Feb '11

Environmental impacts

'Catastroph
populatio

Dozens of species
by two-thirds, bec



▲ Sales of pesticides in France have climbed steadily. Photograph: Alain Jocard/AFP/Getty Images

Guardian 22nd March 2018

'Have you eaten the Amazon today?'
www.vegetarianformeatlovers.weebly.com

Circular farming in the Netherlands



Different scales/aspects of food security (overlaps)

Global/international	National	Household
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Trade – barriers/alliances?• Distribution – on what basis?• Environmental factors – eg drought, deforestation, soils• Population rises• Migration patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-sufficiency (Brexit)• Subsidy/tariffs• Land avail'ty/quality• Skills and labour• Retail structure (supermarkets?)• Fuel consumption	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Income• Family structures• Nutrition• Eating (cultural) preferences• Access• Knowledge



COVID-19



Food system issues

Sustainable Food

Well-being

Social justice

Environ. Sust.

Resilience

Production	Impact of pesticides on nearby residents	Poor labour conditions Dependence on gang-masters	Degradation (soil, water, over-fishing) Habitat destruct'n	Highly energy intensive Dependence on migrant labour
Processing & manufacture	More processing = harder to control salt fat sugar consumption			Dependence on global trade
Distribution	Road intensive = noise, pollution, traffic	Power balance against producers	Carbon intensive	Fuel cost
Advertising & marketing	Junk food adverts target children	Power balance against small or indep. shops		Consolidation of retail sector
Disposal			High levels of waste & packing	

Food culture issues

Sustainable Food

Well-being

Social justice

Environ. Sust.

Resilience

Shopping		Poor avail. of healthy food in disadvantaged areas Low income = inadequate for healthy diet	Expectation of year-round avail. of all products	
Cooking	Time poverty = more consumption of prepared foods			Falling levels of food 'literacy'
Eating	Loss of eating together			Fuel cost
Meaning	Disconnection to rural and farming issues			Homogenisation of food & places

Post-normal science?

- The best way forward seems uncertain – who are the winners and losers? Science is behind practice.
- But the need is very urgent and there are multiple legitimate perspectives (Funtowicz & Ravetz 1993)
- One thing we can say, therefore, is that the decision-making process about where we go next needs to be democratised.
- This brings us finally to local and alternative approaches to sustainable food. How do local networks try to forge a sustainable food system based on more democracy and shared values?

Key beliefs in local and sustainable food

- It is better (healthier) to eat a more rather than a less diversified diet
- It is better (healthier) to eat fresh food rather than preserved/prepared food
- It is better (less environ. damaging, & food chain more transparent) to eat food produced closer to rather than further from the point of consumption
- It is better (healthier, and less environmentally damaging) to eat food produced with a minimum of pesticides
- It is better (less environmentally damaging) to eat food produced with a minimum of inorganic fertilisers
- It is better (more socially just) to eat food produced, processed and/or marketed by smaller-local rather than larger-international operations

(Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming, London.)

NGO and market innovations

- Farmers' markets
- Hyperbolic organic sales (mainstreaming) (until 2008)
- Box schemes
- CSA and buying groups (growth during COVID)
- Public food procurement (FFL, SFT, free school meals)
- Food access co-ops

NGOs as civil society agitators → under-paid market innovators?

In summary...

Food is complex – farming, nutrition, education, consumption, industry, diet, culture, shopping, politics, income, town planning, waste, political activism...

"...the concept of a base-line sustainability standard is non-sense, as sustainability is an aspirational open-ended agenda involving trade-offs and a range of potentially conflicting priorities..." Smith, B. (2008) *Developing Sustainable Food Supply Chains*. Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society for Biological Sciences. 363, pp. 849-861.

"What is most pressing is alliances that move local food beyond a single-issue topic. This overcomes defensive localism autarky, articulating instead local food as part of place-centred community resilience..." Jones et al. (2021) Resilience and Transformation: Lessons form, the UK local food sector in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Geographical Journal* <https://doi.org/10.1111/geoj.12428>

Questions?