

# **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 (incl 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



Food price volatility  
Rolling 12 month standard deviation

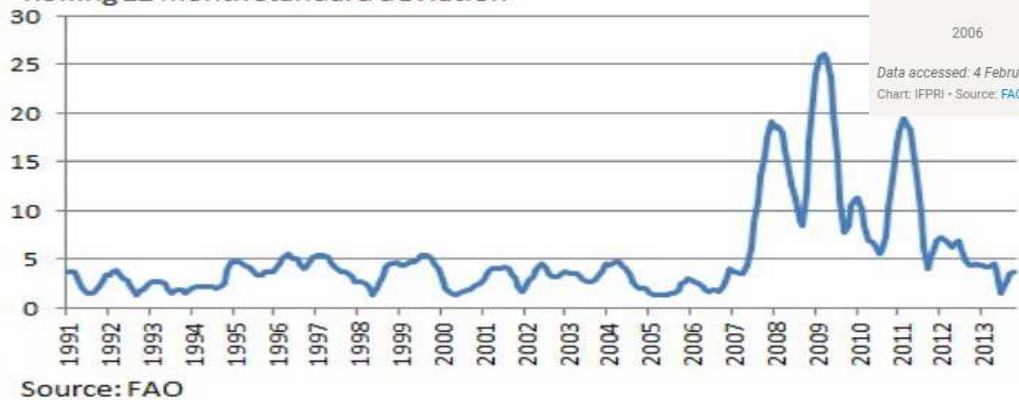
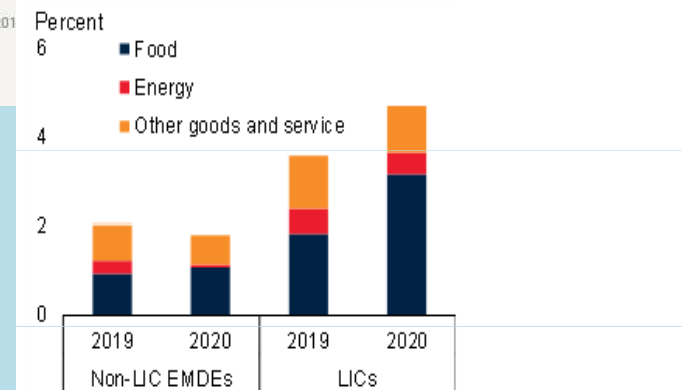


Chart 1: Contribution of food and energy prices to inflation



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.

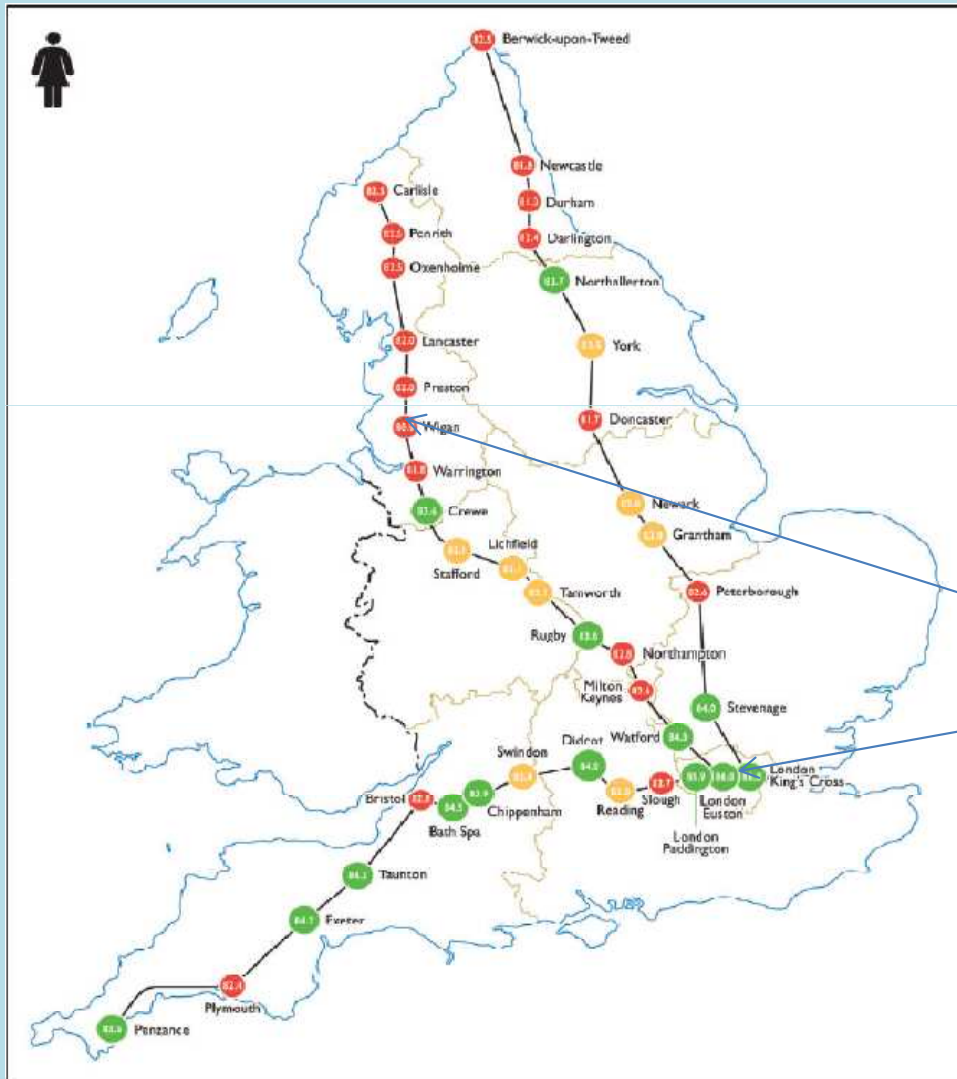
Obesity/famine paradox, food poverty - the rise of social food co-ops in the absence of policy (e.g. see Elizabeth Dowler and Martin Caraher and allies). COVID exacerbating this.

# 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

## 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 good to catch 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 my table. Here's more 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 healthy, 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 area's community centre. There she can choose to itemise her basket that might include bread, meat, cereal, frozen ready meals, coffee, fruit, vegetables and other essential household products, such as mineral water and toilet paper. The retail value of her purchases will be around £25. The club usually runs up. One year she had a birthday cake. "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 would go a whole day without eating, according to latest Oxfam research. But in a new report, the think tank says that while it shares the aim of helping people on low incomes, the approach is 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 the most in the way of autonomy and helping living standards, poverty and food insecurity are chronic or recurring, rather than a temporary blip.

Neil 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. Many food banks limit clients to a set number of visits.

"There's a dignity in paying, rather than being given to," says Cooper. "The food offers a better in terms of quality, variety and freshness, and the transaction in what members are able to sit on a regular basis is huge. You have



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

choice, within constraints. It's not a normal shop, but it is close to a normal shop," Cooper is working 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 housing, energy and debt advice if they need it. There are a few simple housekeeping rules, but there is no strict no-testing or suitability - and no entry on the part of the pantry that members have to "fix their problems" and move on.

One of the most striking aspects of the pantry is that unlike other food club models like Community Trust, the pantry does not insist that members regard it as a temporary solution. There is no suggestion that members' continued access to subsidised food is mainly because of their practice. It seems there is a real turnover and people move on, at their own pace. Cooper

elaborates the idea that food insecurity is mitigated by employment. What if members are re-referred, or ill, he says. "The point is that conditions 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 personal failure either."

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 reforms in 2012. They had worked with local food banks and still landlords could not help everyone, with some cases turning down applications.

"We found people weren't using the food bank even though they got a referral, because of the stigma," says Fiona Carr, homeless advice manager at the three offices at Stockport Homes. "We wanted something that provided dignity and choice."

So the pantry was born. The food supply comes from Greater Manchester PureProve (GMPP), 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. GMPP agreed to provide the pantries with a regular weekly supply of practically free food. Birmingham Pantry tops this up with free fruit and vegetables financed from the club's subscription income.

GMPP has supplied around 50 tonnes of food over the past three years. An estimated 2,000 households have benefited from membership, saving them each typically £500-£700 a year on food bills. Collectively, members have saved an estimated £200,000 a year.

One of the most of the local volunteers who run the pantries, a handful of whom have moved on to paid work, and the club quote positive social returns on investment numbers to demonstrate that the project is cost-effective. But the seven most enthusiastic about the less measurable big wins. A financial feasibility study for struggling families getting healthy food into their shopping baskets and tackling social isolation. "Ultimately," she says, "food is a way of engaging people."

There is a contrary growing interest in the idea. Stockport Homes has four pantries, and GMPP supplies about 15 pantries in Greater Manchester. Cooper expects that number to double over the next three years. There are more inquiries. Pantries are relatively cheap to set up, 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 Rausang of GMPP admits more supplies are needed. "There's an art to managing a pantry in terms of supply," she says. There is competition, too: charities and private retailers are also seeking cheap produce, with the aim of "helping struggling families."

Community Share, which went on to the stock in 2015 when it opened the UK's first social supermarket in South Yorkshire, is to open a new shop next month, in Greater Manchester, with the aid of a lottery grant of 100,000. "After three years we believe we have found a model which can deliver high impact at scale," says Gary Stott, head of Community Share. But although the shop's 2019 impact report published this week suggests that its mix of cheap food and free cooking gas helps reduce energy bills, expansion has so far been difficult. Two years ago, it took about a year to open 20 stores; currently will be just its fourth.

Martin Casher, 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 difficult bit for all such ventures is ensuring a consistent and reliable food supply.

Cooper accepts that charity food is never ideal, in whatever form. But these members in 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."

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



“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 what it really is. It's hunger and it's fear.”

SHARON GOODYER, COMMUNITY WORKER, THANET

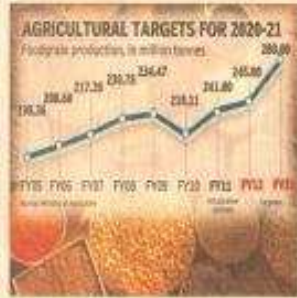
(Power et al. 2020)

# Second green revolution must for food security: PM

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

By Reuters  
New Delhi, July 16

While noting that the food production has been increasing consistently over the last few decades, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Sunday stressed the need for a broad-based and sustainable second green revolution to meet rising demand of food and ensure long-term nutritional security. While calling upon agricultural scientists to help augment the food grain production to 24 per cent, Singh said the necessity of the task ahead is indicated by the fact that during the 50-year period from 1947-48 to 2004-05, the country's foodgrain production had grown at an average annual rate of only 1%.



“Although foodgrain production has also registered the requisite momentum,” Singh said while addressing the 88th Foundation Day of Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). “We still look back proudly to our green revolution, which helped us overcome food shortage and health and nutritional deficiencies, but today we find that the green revolution has fallen short.”

Agreeing that the second green revolution that is more broad-based, more inclusive and more sustainable, “We need to produce more without depleting our natural resources by 2030, since a substantial portion of our agricultural growth would come through the application of new technologies and new knowledge in production processes. But spending more on research is not

# 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 golden-brown staple resumes globally.

The government has lifted wheat exports since early 2007 to boost domestic supply and contain inflation. “There is no ban. Wheat exports resumed,” agriculture minister Sharad Pawar told reporters on the sidelines of an ICAR foundation day.

The government has not announced the quantity of wheat allowed for exports as global prices are very low. “I don’t think we will be able to sell in the market at such low prices,” Pawar said. “I don’t think we will be able to sell in the market at such low prices.”



Sharad Pawar, agriculture minister

“I don’t think we will be able to sell in the market at such low prices.”

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REAL INTERVIEW ON PAGES 32-33

# WELBY: STATE MUST BACK FOOD BANKS

Archbishop steps into austerity row with radical report

US tycoons pay £500 million to dine with Wills and...

# 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

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# OBESE WILL BANKRUPT NHS

EXCLUSIVE  
 By Lucy Johnson  
 OBESITY is growing apace and is on the verge of bankrupting the NHS, a shock new report says. The study, which shows the health care costs of obese people are 100% higher than those of people who are not obese, is expected to force the NHS to raise its budget. The report is the first to show that obesity is a major cause of NHS costs, and that it is not just a health problem but a financial one. The study, which is the first of its kind, shows that obese people are 100% more likely to be hospitalized, and that the cost of treating them is 100% higher than for those who are not obese. The study also shows that obese people are 100% more likely to be hospitalized, and that the cost of treating them is 100% higher than for those who are not obese.

**Queen is asked: 'May we dig up Henry VIII?'**  
 EXCLUSIVE  
 By Jonathan Cook  
 HENRY VIII could be exhumed if the Queen gives the go-ahead, it has been revealed. The Queen has been asked if she would allow the exhumation of the body of Henry VIII, which was buried in St Dunstons Church, London, in 1547. The Queen's response is expected to be a decisive one, as the exhumation would be a major event for the NHS and the government.

**The King's smooch**  
 WHO'S HIS COUGH A VALENTINE'S SMACKER? PAGE 5  
 FULL STORY PAGE 21

**NORTH NORFOLK NEWS**  
 You can't see the news on TV  
 The best news in Norfolk  
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 The best news in Norfolk  
**SHOCK OBESITY FINDINGS**  
 Obesity is a major cause of NHS costs, and that it is not just a health problem but a financial one. The study, which is the first of its kind, shows that obese people are 100% more likely to be hospitalized, and that the cost of treating them is 100% higher than for those who are not obese.

**DAILY Mirror**  
 Wednesday January 16, 2013  
 REAL NEWS... REAL ENTERTAINMENT 50p  
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 Simon Walters  
 Jonathan Pette  
 US tycoons pay £500 million to dine with Wills and...

# HORSE MEAT IS FOUND IN TESCO BURGERS

**Supermarkets clear shelves ▶ Inquiry at supply plants**

By DAMIAN FLETCHER  
 TESCO staff were last night clearing beef burgers from stores nationwide after horse meat was found in its own brand range. Experts discovered horse meat at shops in Ireland had been contaminated but withdrew all stock from the UK as a precaution. One sample tested contained 20% horse meat. Tesco said: "We apologise for any distress." Bones insisted there was no risk and blamed foreign suppliers. Last, Aldi and Lidl beef was also hit. FULL STORY: PAGE 6

# 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



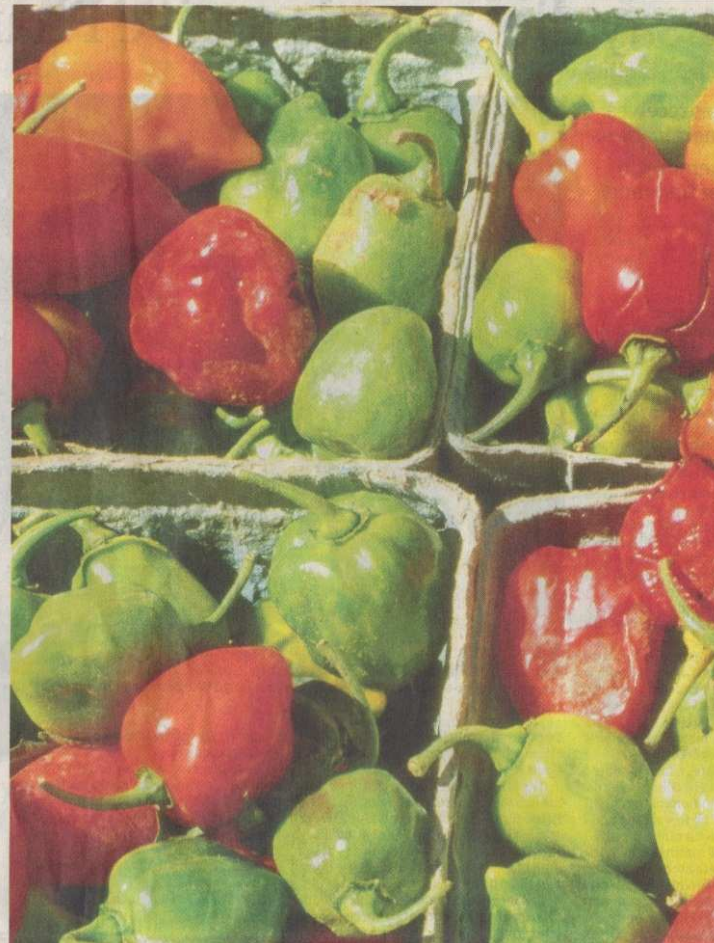
**Felicity Lawrence** reports on the exploited migrant workers, just out of sight of Spain's tourist beaches, who make possible a €2bn hothouse industry feeding Europe's supermarkets

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

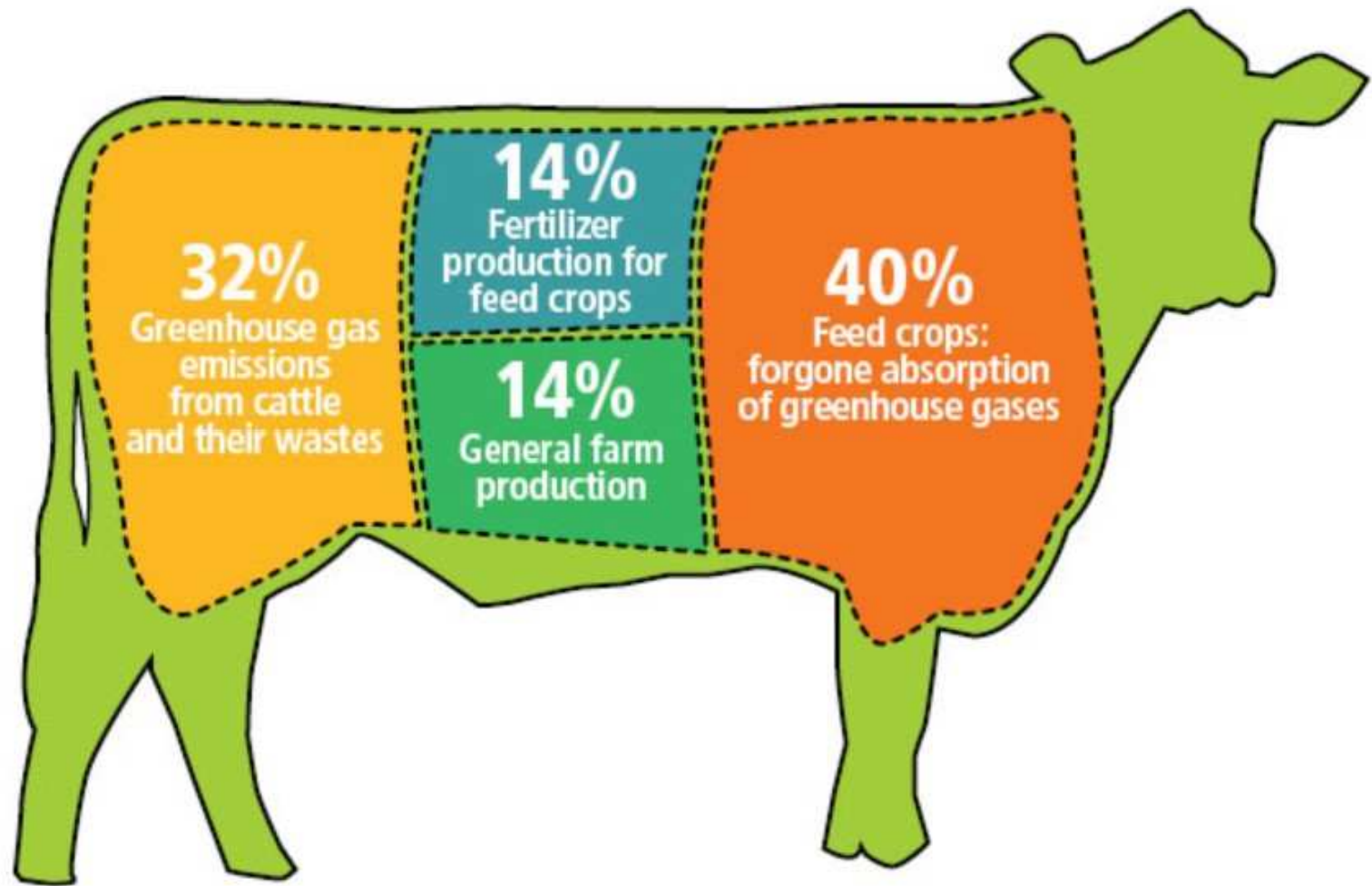


Source: *The Guardian* 8<sup>th</sup> Feb '11

# 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 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2018

'Have you eaten the Amazon today?'  
[www.vegetarianformeatlovers.weebly.com](http://www.vegetarianformeatlovers.weebly.com)

# Circular farming in the Netherlands



# Different scales/aspects of food security (note overlaps)

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



**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

	<b>Well-being</b>	<b>Social justice</b>	<b>Environ. Sust.</b>	<b>Resilience</b>
<b>Production</b>	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
<b>Processing &amp; manufacture</b>	More processing = harder to control salt fat sugar consumption			Dependence on global trade
<b>Distribution</b>	Road intensive = noise, pollution, traffic	Power balance against producers	Carbon intensive	Fuel cost
<b>Advertising &amp; marketing</b>	Junk food adverts target children	Power balance against small or indep. shops		Consolidation of retail sector
<b>Disposal</b>			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?