

# FOOD SYSTEMS DIALOGUES (FSDs)

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CO-ORGANISED BY

THE U.K. DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS  
THE FOOD FOUNDATION

## *DRAFT SUMMARY REPORT\**

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\*The format of FSDs Summary Reports is under development. This report may be subject to change

## Executive Summary

On 20 June 2019 a Food Systems Dialogues (FSDs) event took place in London, United Kingdom, co-organised by the U.K. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the Food Foundation.

This FSDs event was held in the context of the framing of the National Food Strategy for the U.K. Approximately 80 participants attended, reflecting a range of actors working in Food Systems, including low-income consumers, farmers, public health professionals, local and national government officials, major food manufacturers and retailers, civil society organisations, scientific institutions and the media.

Tables were asked to present one or more proposals to address a specific area of food systems, with a focus on the United Kingdom. Ideally, the proposals were to be achievable within 3 years. The prompt themes for dialogue at this event addressed the following areas: resilient supply chains, creating enjoyment and sense of belonging associated with food, reduction of food waste, decent livelihoods for food producers, accessibility to healthy food, ensuring sustainable production, increasing skills in food systems professions, and alignment between government, industry and society in regards to healthy and sustainable food systems.

The following is a summary of the tables' proposals for food systems transformation as well as the discussions that led them to their conclusions.

As is the norm at FSDs events, all Proposals outlined in this Summary Report are not attributed to any particular individual or organisation. Each proposal did not necessarily receive universal support from all participants at the event; rather, the aim of this report is to capture recommendations made at the event, in order to allow continuity and consensus - a 'red thread' - to emerge across all FSDs events.

# Proposals

## **Proposal 1: Use data and transparency to enable consumers to make better choices and farmers to produce in a more sustainable manner**

The power of transparency and data should be more greatly harnessed, to improve sustainability outcomes in the U.K. food system. This represents a clear opportunity to support consumers to make decisions favouring sustainable foods in retail environments and can also assist the transition to more sustainable practices at each step of the food system.

From a customer's perspective, having access, in retail stores and in their homes, to relevant data about the way food is produced and processed is a first step in promoting a shift to a market that demands more sustainable products. Consumers cannot make choices benefiting the environment if they are not first informed about the choices that are available to them.

Elsewhere, there is an opportunity to use data to increase sustainable practices in the farming system. Data-driven farming should be facilitated and supported, so that producers have sufficient information to easily understand and track the relative environmental impact of their practices.

## **Proposal 2: Use pricing mechanisms in production and consumption to increase the share of sustainably produced foods**

Pricing mechanisms on both the production and consumption sides should be used to solve the dual problem faced in the U.K. whereby many consumers are unable to afford healthy (and sustainable) food, and many farmers are struggling to make ends meet. At the moment the U.K. food system is set up such that wealthy people have better access to healthy diets than poorer people, and that many farmers have severe difficulty to produce good food and receive a decent price for it. At the same time, the U.K. has an ultra-competitive retail market, which externalizes most of the environmental impacts of food.

Options to address this include a combination of government subsidies at the point of production (farmgate prices), and at the point of consumption (retail prices); both of these angles should be pursued in a holistic strategy to address the challenges faced by farmers as well as consumers. The new agriculture outline is a step in this direction, as it rewards farmers for practices that serve the common good.

Government price intervention is important because, although a number of charitable initiatives have emerged in the U.K. to support more affordable access to food for consumers (such as social supermarkets, Alexander Rose initiatives, etc), they are not a long-term sustainable solution to the problem.

These policies need to be developed amidst the challenges associated with the uncertainty of Brexit; the entire system is being re-modelled, and it is unclear what the U.K.'s future trading relationships will be. Without deliberate action, it seems unlikely that the U.K.'s remodelled trade agreements will be driven by an objective of building sustainability into the food system; it is important that the opportunity to draft trade policies that are beneficial to the environment is not missed during this time of change.

### **Proposal 3: Create a land use strategy for the U.K. which draws on a suite of techniques**

The U.K. should adopt a land use strategy that embraces multiple mechanisms working in concert. This will help address the balancing act of increasing production of foods such as fruit, vegetables and pulses, as well as the rewilding of pastures, forest protection, and introducing technology such as vertical farming. We should endeavour to address land use issues holistically, reducing the perception that certain solutions are being pursued at the expense of others, and that certain industries are being favoured while others are left behind.

To address the 'impossible equation' of moving towards healthier diets for consumers, while improving farming and land use practices, we need to use all available mechanisms. That may include farming standards, subsidies, research and development support, taxes, regulation, planning, investment, and procurement standards. Everything should be designed to work in concert.

### **Proposal 4: Implement public procurement policies to encourage sustainable practices and local production**

A government initiative to use purchasing and procurement policy could strengthen the shift towards sustainable production. The initiative could be structured such that schools and public organisations are required to source 20, 30, or 40% of goods from suppliers based within a certain number of miles from their location. This would reboot local economies, addressing the difficulties faced by farmers in regard to earning a living wage.

Public procurement policy can also be designed to encourage the consumption of more plant products, to reduce waste, and to assist the public in not over-consuming food.

### **Proposal 5: Design a U.K. trade policy that drives the transition to healthy sustainably-produced foods**

The U.K. should set up trade policies that drive the transition to healthy food from sustainable production both domestically, and from trading partners. This could involve creating baseline standards (environmental and social) for all food imports, establishing obligations for companies to perform due diligence and report on their performance in relation to these standards, as well instituting bi-lateral agreements with producer countries which support these countries in the transition towards the products the U.K. seeks to prioritize. Finally, trade agreements could also contain measures to tackle specific problems such as the overproduction of soya for use in animal feed.

Due diligence required of companies should encompass analysis of the risks of not meeting certain standards, and commitments to taking action to minimize these risks.

In the future, it would be ideal for the U.K. government to demonstrate an explicit commitment to using trade as a tool to support environmental standards.

### **Proposal 6: Improve appeal, affordability and access of healthy foods to encourage greater consumption**

The government should take a three-pronged approach to improving the consumption of healthy foods, for people of all wealth levels across the U.K.

Firstly, to improve the appeal of healthy food, there should be efforts to connect people with what they eat. This should involve programs for young children, particularly in schools. A mass movement should be facilitated whereby every school has a garden, and students have opportunities to visit the countryside with their class. Schools could conduct special trips, and also create spaces in locations where food is grown which are accessible at any time for students and their families. Once young people feel more connected with healthy produce, they will feel more attracted to it, and seek to build healthier food into their diets.

Health outcomes related to nutritious diets are not only related to physical health, but also mental health and other aspects of health. Therefore, food-related policies in the U.K. should embrace the notion of a shift from a National Health Service to a National Wellbeing Service. State institutions should recognize the principle that food has multiple benefits across health.

Secondly, the government needs to take action to improve the affordability of fruits, vegetables and healthy foods, compared to ultra-processed 'junk' food. The ambition should be to completely switch the affordability of these groups, reversing the current price trajectories which

indicate that fruit and vegetables are becoming more expensive while processed foods are becoming relatively cheaper.

In order to increase affordability of healthy foods, there should be a focus on increasing the efficiency of production, in two ways: there should be a significant reduction in food waste, and there should be a focus on reducing labour costs. At the same time, the low prices of ultra-processed foods could be curbed through a progressive taxation system. It must be noted, however, that taxation can affect populations who are very vulnerable, for whom any increase in price for these foods would make it difficult to put food on the table. Provided that taxation can be designed without causing harm, it is an option that should be explored to discourage consumption of unhealthy foods.

As the third component of this effort, access to healthy food needs to be increased, so that it is easy and convenient to make healthy choices. At the moment, certain areas of the U.K. are deprived from easy access to healthy foods. There should be community-led efforts to create shops and resources that would increase availability of healthy choices. This should come in the form of community projects and encompass skill-building for those carrying out the projects, so that local people feel ownership of initiatives, as opposed to simply dropping a supermarket in the area.

### **Proposal 7: Conduct a holistic review of policies to support actors in the food ‘web’, and increase education in food systems professions**

The government should carry out a review to align current policies across the whole food web. This would be a first stage of action and could be achieved as a short-term goal (perhaps in one year). As a next step, the government could work to identify the gaps in existing policy and write new policies to fill these.

Two policies in particular should be considered in this second stage:

- 1) A policy for valuation, compensation and information that drives and rewards positive change and behaviour, including assessing the true cost of food. This should build on work already undertaken to place a value on the true cost of food. As a result of this policy, the cost of food in supermarkets should better reflect its health and sustainability profile, allowing consumers to make informed choices.
- 2) A policy to identify and support educational pathways in food systems professions, from early years through to Continuing Professional Development (CPD). This would include removing barriers to the apprenticeship system for less academically gifted people. It would also include making the apprenticeship scheme more easily accessible, and better linked to community and voluntary schemes; currently, many people who are trained in apprenticeship programs do not have good access employment after their training. As a

result of this policy, uptake in education would increase significantly, across all ages and levels, and as skills increase, growth would also be seen in research and development, production, processing and distribution.

### **Proposal 8: Address food waste through comprehensive education in schools**

The root cause of food waste at the consumer level is a lack of education about food. Therefore, food education should be incorporated into the core curriculum at primary and secondary level. Learning about food could be incorporated into the delivery of other subjects such as maths or science.

Every school leaver should be equipped with knowledge of food, nutrition, budgeting and shopping. Downstream, this will likely lead to a reduction in the food waste in homes because individuals and households will be more food-literate and they will likely have greater instinctive knowledge and a disposition to use available food. Using fresh produce remaining in the house would ideally come to replace the reflex of buying a convenient fast food meal, as it would be perceived as equally cheap and easy.

A number of charities are engaged in efforts to address food waste, but this is not sufficient; central government needs to drive the solution. Charities do not have the power to develop an integrated and widespread program such as curriculum development in schools.

To complement the core approach of reducing food waste through education, introducing food waste-related charges would serve as a very effective disincentive to creating waste in homes. In the past, the introduction of black wheelie bins and fines for excess rubbish, to replace rubbish bags left on the side of the street for collection, has proven highly effective in encouraging families to limit waste. This strategy is not universally implemented in the U.K. (currently the implementation differs by postcode).

### **Proposal 9: Create a national conversation around the U.K. National Food Strategy which truly engages citizens**

The National Food Strategy is the perfect opportunity to have a national conversation about food issues, and about how they affect all citizens. Every person should be actively encouraged to be involved in the formulation of the Strategy, through inclusive tools and techniques.

The consultation process for developing the Strategy should be different from the norm and genuinely energize all to be involved. The conversation should encourage the U.K. population to ask questions such as 'What does it mean to be a good food nation?', 'How do we become a

Good Food Nation?', 'What would it mean to have better food?', and 'How would we build towards a future with better food?'

The consultation process should learn from other ideas platforms and movements around the world, such as crowdfunding schemes, and perhaps draw on a particularly memorable case study involving the movement towards healthy food launched by Oklahoma Mayor Mick Cornett ("This City is Going on a Diet").

Conversations should occur at people's kitchen tables, among many other locations; the government could circulate 'conversation menus' to prompt these. Ideas should come from all locations across the country, not just from professionals working in food systems and attending conferences to devise the Strategy. The framing of the consultation process should be inclusive and should encourage the creation of new enterprises to contribute to the conversation, with great energy, and a feeling of belonging and shared purpose.

Food systems actors of all kinds could contribute to the roll-out of the consultation process in different ways. For example, food manufacturers and retailers could help provide food for events and in-home discussions, to encourage people to discuss the Strategy over a shared meal; other organisations could work to ensure that people who might ordinarily be excluded from these conversations are brought in; again others could take on the role of host or facilitator of conversations, or organize for speakers to attend events.

#### **Proposal 10: Introduce fiscal measures like the sugar tax to support healthier eating habits**

Consumers need support to eat healthily; will-power alone has not been enough to stem the obesity struggle of the country in past decades. Fiscal measures should be used to support consumers' healthy eating habits, as well as to promote sustainable production of food.

While information about the contents of food is important - and additional platforms for transparency in regard to the ingredients contained in manufactured products should be created - the food environment itself must change. It is not enough to simply rely on consumers to make the right choices as a result of being informed about the best food health decisions to make.

The sugar tax on soft drinks was a remarkable example of success in improving the food environment for consumers. It encouraged a large number of manufacturers to decrease the sugar content of their drinks. There was no longer a choice for the consumer; the contents of their food had changed.

Furthermore, the fiscal output of initiatives such as this (e.g. tax revenue) can be reinvested to further support healthy food provision.