

Inquiry into Food and Social Justice: Q&A

The Food Ethics Council has commissioned an Inquiry into Food and Social Justice. This report explains the rationale of the Inquiry, how it will work and what its objectives are, based on a meeting of Council members on 25th February 2009.

Contents

What has social justice got to do with sustainable food?.....	1
What would a fair food system look like?.....	2
How are we doing?.....	3
Are we trying hard enough?.....	3
Why have an Inquiry?.....	5
What will it look for?.....	5
How will the Inquiry work?	8
Annex I. Case studies.....	9
Annex II. Lessons from experience	12

What has social justice got to do with sustainable food?

Government, retailers, manufacturers and farmers have made commitments to sustainable food. Social justice is a key pillar of sustainable development, whether in food, farming or beyond. The classic definition of sustainable development – development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”¹ – is above all about achieving a fair deal for the world’s people, now and into the future. Looking after the environment is necessary to building a just society, but it is not sufficient.

This focus on social justice continues to underpin formal commitments to sustainable development. For example, Figure 1 shows the UK’s current sustainable development framework.² Not only is “ensuring a strong, healthy and just society” one of the two main objectives, but also one of the aims of “living within environmental limits” is to ensure that natural resources “are unimpaired and remain so for future generations”. The framework sees the economy as a means to these ends, rather than a goal in itself, “providing prosperity and opportunity for all” and allocating fairly the costs of using resources.

¹ Our Common Future, Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987. Published as Annex to General Assembly document A/42/427, Development and International Co-operation: Environment August 2, 1987. Note: the report came under criticism because it tended to equate development with economic growth.

² <http://www.defra.gov.uk/sustainable/government/what/principles.htm>.

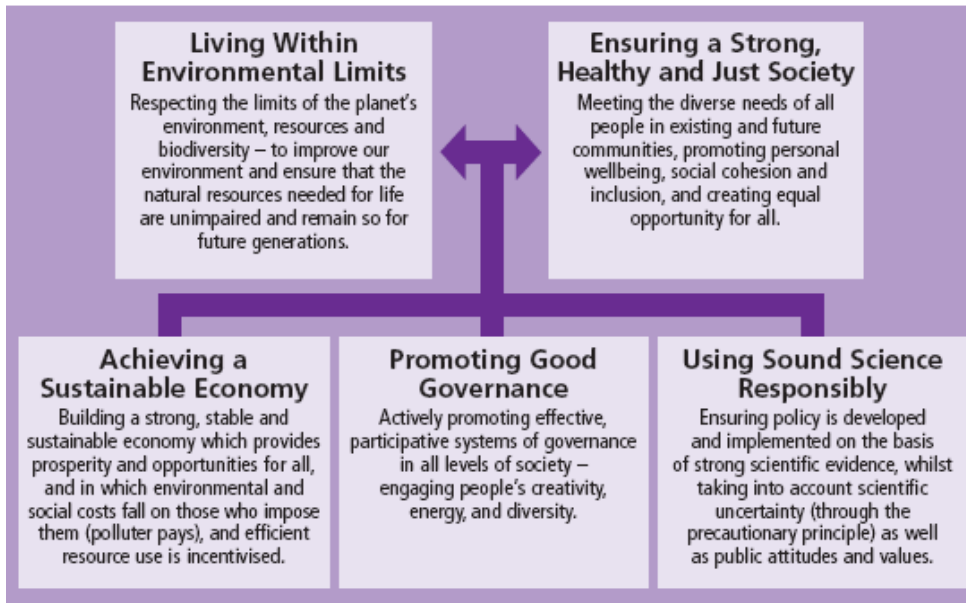


Figure 1: the UK framework for sustainable development

So social justice has everything to do with sustainable food. If we take our sustainable development commitments seriously in the food sector, fairness should be top of the agenda whether we are talking about trade issues, technology, the environment or health. Indeed, we cannot talk credibly about sustainable food without putting fairness at centre stage.

What would a fair food system look like?

Would a fair society be an equal society? It would doubtless be more equal than a world in which nearly a billion people are hungry, but fairness and equality are not the same thing. Inequalities in the incidence of diet-related disease might be unjust, for example, but they are not necessarily so: if I get diabetes and you do not, I might just be unlucky. Even though we are equally entitled to treatment regardless of the origin of my ailment, my condition does not represent an injustice. If, on the other hand, I get diabetes due to dietary patterns linked to my social or economic status (my wealth, ethnic origin, etc.), that does represent an injustice. And lastly, some differences might not matter: it is hardly unfair if you like boiled potatoes and I like them mashed.

So, to understand what a fair food system would look like, we need to work out which inequalities matter – clearly some are more important than others – and also whether they are unfair, as opposed to just unfortunate. Fairness is about what caused something to happen, not just about the end result.

This means that a fair food system should have the following characteristics:

- **Needs and rights:** a fair food system provides equally for everyone's needs and rights. Food and agriculture should thus contribute to wellbeing and quality of life for all. This contribution ranges from material outcomes such as food security, health and adequate incomes to broader cultural aspects of identity, security, social cohesion and affection. These conditions for human dignity are enshrined in several human rights regulations and therefore represent binding responsibilities and obligations for governments, civil society and businesses.

- **Relationships:** it guarantees people's freedom from discrimination. Significant inequalities in outcome between social groups – for example in health or income – may reflect systematic inequalities of opportunity or the domination of one group of people by another. But discrimination and domination are unfair even if they do not show up in statistics.
- **Choice and freedom:** It ensures people are free to lead lives they value, provided they don't tread on others' freedom to do the same. A level playing field is not always as fair as it seems – people are different, and some will need positive help to be in the game. A fair society helps people shape their own lives, for example by supporting them to take part in decisions that affect them.

How are we doing?

The Inquiry is happening in the UK and its findings will primarily be directed at government policies, businesses and civil society organisations that operate in the UK. However, the scope of the Inquiry is necessarily global: it will recognise that UK's supply chains and policy influence are international.

Modern food systems have managed to eradicate famine from most regions in the world. Over the last 40 years, increases in grain production have helped reduce the number of hungry people even as the earth's population has doubled to nearly six billion. Safety standards in developed countries have minimised the risk of food-borne diseases. Almost three out of four people in developing countries live in rural areas, and make a living, directly or indirectly, on agriculture. Food is a profitable business in the UK: we spend £172 billion a year on food and drink. Food represents the UK's largest remaining manufacturing industry, and the sector as a whole employs 3.7 million people.

There is, however, much work to do to ensure our food and farming systems are fair. They are resource hungry, wasteful, polluting and carbon intensive, creating risks and eroding opportunities for future generations. Environmental degradation goes hand in hand with increased human insecurity. While one billion people worldwide do not have enough to eat, another billion are overweight. Job opportunities in food and agriculture are plummeting and many of those available are badly paid, insecure and at higher risk of workplace injury. Small farms and businesses are closing down or being relegated to low-profit marginal markets.

The UK food system's global reach enables us to 'off-shore' much of the social and environmental cost of production to countries with lower standards of worker, animal and environmental protection. The costs and rewards of contemporary food systems are unequally distributed. Casual workers, migrants, vulnerable women and excluded racial and ethnic groups are all too often at the sharp end. Annex 1 compares three case studies that explore such issues in greater detail.

Are we trying hard enough?

In some specific areas of policy, business and public interest in food, social justice is high on the agenda. Considerable effort has been invested in trying to understand and tackle inequalities in diet-related disease, for example. Unfair differences in consumption are the focus of work on food poverty, 'food deserts' and global hunger. In production, the Gangmasters Licensing Authority has been set up to eradicate the abuse of workers in the UK, and strong sales of fair trade products in

the downturn indicate the depth of public commitment to achieving fair terms of trade for producers internationally. Support for small shops and 'buying local' is motivated by solidarity and support for the underdog, not just environmental concerns.

For all these significant pockets of work to promote a fairer food system, however, social justice barely figures in the UK's flagship initiatives to promote a sustainable food system. A key example is Food Matters – a major Cabinet Office report that sets out the framework for a UK food strategy. The report was welcomed by the Food Ethics Council and is in many ways pioneering, bringing together a broad sweep of health and environmental issues and offering the nearest thing Britain has had to a coherent food policy for decades. It highlights income-related inequalities in diet and health, and tensions between environmental and social objectives around issues such as fish consumption and climate change. It even commits in principle to fair prices for consumers and producers.

Yet even Food Matters does not address social justice – the links between these issues – because it does not examine the causes of inequalities or the factors that give rise to tensions between different social and environmental interests. For example, it does not consider the UK's position in international trade negotiations, although trade rules shape the capacity of UK businesses to meet their environmental and social commitments, and have a major bearing on the social footprint of our food system internationally. It talks about fair prices, but doesn't qualify how to determine what a fair price is and what it is not, and says little about the power relationships between stakeholders in our food chains. Similarly, health inequalities arising from low-incomes are tackled by targeting support at low-income groups. However, more fundamental issues of minimum wages and adequate incomes are not considered, even though farming, food manufacturing, food retail and food service together account for a significant proportion of all jobs in the UK.

The silence of Food Matters on social justice is indicative of a wider neglect within UK initiatives to promote sustainable food. In contrast to the formal definitions of sustainable development outlined above, which start with social justice, most current policy and business programmes start with environmental issues. They focus on sustainability as a technical challenge of resource efficiency, lean production and cutting waste – of keeping on doing what we do now for longer – rather than a call to meet the unanswered human needs of today and to leave open the options for future generations. There are exceptions, of course – the Co-operative Group's approach to climate change and trade is one example – but this is the overall picture.

Studies by City University and the European Commission confirm this view. Whereas the economic – understood as profitability – and the environmental pillars of sustainable development are very well elaborated by stakeholders in the food sector and in policy, understandings of social justice are foggy.³ Practitioners do not have a clear vision of what social justice entails, and implement unconnected and ad-hoc schemes on different issues such as nutrition and community programmes.

As recession bites, social issues are rising up the agenda. The concern is that falling incomes and high prices for some foods will severely exacerbate food poverty and hunger. Yet even now the urgency of this problem puts the focus on catering for the poor, rather than on tackling the

³ Food security and sustainability. Seminar for stakeholders April 2008. Centre for food policy. City University.

structural causes of poverty and ensuring a good quality of life for all. That is the difference between charity and social justice.

Why have an Inquiry?

The Food Ethics Council has commissioned an Inquiry into food and social justice. The aim of the Inquiry is to put social justice at the heart of efforts to promote sustainable food and farming. Often social justice is already there in the headline or in formal definitions of sustainable development, but it falls out of view when it comes to the nuts and bolts. We want the Inquiry to address the reasons for this.

The basic problem is that social justice seems too difficult. It is difficult as a concept – tricky enough that philosophers have wrestled for centuries with what means. It can also be politically difficult because, after all, it challenges us to test whether the rules of the game are fair.

We want this Inquiry to address both these obstacles:

- We will try to understand better what social justice means in practice in food and farming, and we have invited others to join us in this learning process. How fair is our food system?
- We want the Inquiry to prompt stakeholders to strengthen their commitments to social justice, both in principle and in practice. How can we make our food system fairer?

Holding a formal Inquiry, as opposed to a research project, will help to achieve these aims. The process provides opportunities to involve a wide range of stakeholders, both as members of the Committee of Inquiry and as witnesses. It is a deliberative process which is important because, like most ethical issues, the questions of values and priorities that arise in considering social justice are better resolved in conversation than on paper. Furthermore the process itself – the evidence sessions and the final report – provides exciting opportunities to highlight issues of social justice to a wide audience.

We will count the Inquiry as a success if, because of it, social justice moves centre stage in discussions of sustainable food and farming.

What will it look for?

The Committee of Inquiry will agree and publish a call for evidence when it meets in May. It follows from how we define social justice in earlier sections and from the rationale for the Inquiry that it is likely to seek evidence under two main headings: ‘How fair is our food system?’ and ‘How can we make it fairer?’

1. How fair is our food system?

a. Needs and Rights:

- Where is it providing equally for people's **needs and rights** and where is it failing to do so?

The inquiry will gather evidence of hunger, malnutrition and food related ill-health, including health hazards due to employment in food and farming. It will look into the adequacy or otherwise of incomes and consumption. Further, it will explore the contribution of food and farming to people's wellbeing and quality of life. On another note, it will include questions on the resilience of food systems, looking into elements that are 'tightening' the food system (making access to food more difficult), such as food commodity speculation, bio-fuels and meat production.

Evidence of this could include, at local, regional, national, global scales: statistics on nutrition, disease incidence, workplace health and employment relating to food; qualitative research on food poverty; and discussions of how to evaluate and prioritise different objectives. Statistics or qualitative analysis on increased vulnerability to shocks such as climatic events or price volatility could be sought. Well-being indicators and their relationship to food and farming could be included. Complementary evidence could include agriculture and food related human rights violations included in human rights monitoring reports or evaluations.

b. Relationships:

- For and against whom does our food system **discriminate**?

The inquiry wishes to explore differences between social groups i.e. whether the benefits or burdens of food and farming systems are distributed unequally in terms of gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, etc. Discussions will also centre on the re-structuring of food systems. The committee will explore how power relations between different groups work, and will draw on existing evidence of discrimination and exploitation. Of relevance are issues such as access to resources, small farmers' access to markets, labour exploitation, the creation of marginal markets. Included will be issues of how standards can be pressures that complicate producers' access to consumers.

Evidence of this could include: statistical analysis of the significance of differences between different groups according to factors such as gender, ethnicity or age; analysis of inequalities in factors that affect opportunity such as levels of resource use or access to markets by small-scale producers; analysis of power, for example using 'value chain analysis'; first hand accounts of discrimination, for example labour exploitation; analysis of the effect of 'ethical' or other quality standards on small suppliers and workers; and discussions of how to distinguish between difference and discrimination.

c. Choice and Freedom:

- Where does our food system enhance peoples' **freedom to shape their own lives**?

Of interest here are issues surrounding peoples' participation in food systems. What are the existing mechanisms to make food and farming systems accountable to all? What other mechanisms would enhance people's voices in decision-making in our food systems? The

inquiry will be interested in private initiatives that enhance participation e.g. social auditing, multi-stakeholder initiatives, etc. and initiatives that enhance citizen participation and deliberation in public policy-making. The inquiry will look into schemes that try to bring to the fore the plights of farmers in the South such as the Fair Trade movement.

Evidence of this could include: studies of how much control consumers or producers feel they have over their lives; examples of initiatives to involve people in policy, business or community decisions that will affect them; and discussions of how actions today can enhance the opportunities facing future generations.

2. **How can we make it fairer?**

- Where do **controversies or dilemmas** highlight institutions or rules that get in the way of promoting social justice?

Evidence of these could include case studies of tensions between: different groups of people; this generation and future generations; and economic, social, environmental or animal welfare objectives. Case studies should include the following elements: (i) description of unjust outcomes; (ii) tensions between social groups or objectives; (iii) root causes of tensions and outcomes; and (iv) levers for change.

- What **factors** cause discrimination?

Evidence of these could include: social and cultural analysis of issues such as gender discrimination and racism as they relate to food and farming; political and economic analysis of factors that affect the distribution of power and opportunity in the food system, for example retail concentration and deregulation of financial markets; discussions of whether such factors are unique to food and farming.

- Where are there **specific opportunities** to promote social justice?

Evidence of these could include: recommendations for government, business or society that would resolve tensions, eliminate discrimination or promote participation in decision-making; examples of opportunities in areas of policy such as finance, competition, trade, labour, innovation and international development; analysis of the capacity of different institutions to influence systematic change; case studies of measures that have promoted social justice in the food and farming sectors, in the UK or other countries; and examples of measures that have promoted social justice in other fields and offer lessons for food and farming.

We expect to receive a large volume of evidence. Simply organising the evidence we receive under headings such as these and summarising the Committee of Inquiry's deliberations would be likely to make a significant contribution to understanding social justice in the food system and identifying ways to promote it. However, the Inquiry can also draw on the experience of previous

studies of social and environmental justice (Annex 2). The Committee may even choose to use an established framework or set of concepts to structure its deliberations and present its findings.

Possible frameworks for deliberation, analysis and making recommendations include concepts of rights, power and risk. A rights framework may be particularly worthy of consideration. The concept of human dignity that underpins social justice is also central to human rights. The use of a rights framework would provide a reference point for discussions about human needs and freedoms, it would help to assign responsibilities, and it would demand institutional mechanisms to ensure the accountability and the possibility for redress in the case of human rights violations. All countries have signed binding legal commitments to human rights, which include a number relevant to social justice in food and farming such as labour rights, and rights to food, water and development.

How will the Inquiry work?

The Inquiry will be led by a Committee of sixteen members. Half are drawn from the Food Ethics Council. Half are leading figures from sectors and communities with a stake in food and farming. The Inquiry's final report will highlight areas of consensus and difference among the members.

The Committee plans to meet five times. At the initial meeting, in May, they will agree their Terms of Reference and publish a call for evidence. Over the summer, the secretariat will gather written evidence and identify witnesses to take part in oral evidence sessions. Three such hearings will take place during the autumn. The Committee will then prepare a final report, which will be published in the spring of 2010, together with the evidence submitted to the Inquiry.

The three hearings will bear the headings proposed in the framework above:

1. Needs and rights
2. Relationships
3. Choice and freedom

Hearings will each have three to four speakers: one introducing a relevant case study while the others will delve in the broader theoretical and policy implications. At each hearing the oral evidence will aim to (i) identify the problems or concerns, (ii) identify causes, which may go beyond the food system to other sectors, (iii) recognise the tensions between sustainable development objectives (economic, social, environmental, animal welfare, etc.) and between social groups, and finally (iv) point to opportunities for change.

Annex I. Case studies

Food and farming systems are plagued with dilemmas and controversies depending on the element of sustainable development that one prioritises (economic, social and economic), the different social groups involved (consumers, producers or others), different generations, and animal welfare concerns.

For example, food prices illustrate the kind of dilemma we want to help resolve with this Inquiry. Ethical sourcing, in which environmental and social standards are met, may mean food is less affordable for poorer households. Instead of squeezing the supply chain to produce cheaper food, should we ask what factors affect people's incomes – factors such as wage legislation and social protection schemes – and seek to improve those? After all, increasing the price pressure on suppliers might itself lower incomes and contribute to poverty and social deprivation among workers in the food sector.

In order to provide further examples and to explore which questions would be most relevant for the Inquiry, the Food Ethics Council heard three more detailed case studies at a meeting on 25th of February 2009. They were case studies of products: chicken, wheat and South African apples (see Table 1). Our invited guests were: Jenny Ricks (Action Aid), talking about South African apple production; Christopher Stopes (Ecos Consultancy), focusing on chicken; and Lindy Sharpe (New Economics Foundation), discussing wheat.

We invited each speaker to identify:

- Examples of unjust **outcomes** related to their case study
- **Tensions** between stakeholders, and between social justice and other sustainable development concerns
- Underlying **causes** of these tensions – why are we in this fix?
- **Levers** of change – how do we get out of it?

Comparing the three case studies helped us identify the similarities between them, thus pointing to processes that might drive social injustice in food systems, and identifying possible routes to change them (see Table 2).

Table 1.	South African apples (Jenny Ricks)	Intensively farmed chicken (Christopher Stopes)	Wheat and bread (Lindy Sharpe)
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harsh terms of trade for suppliers • Pressures on workers, particularly casual, migrant and women workers • Non-implementation of national labour law • Poverty incomes, below South African (SA) minimum wage • Low unionisation • Health impacts from pesticide use • Women denied housing • Casualisation: workers employed on a daily basis, only employed in season 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crops diverted from human consumption • Health concerns relating to use of antibiotics and higher fat content of intensive poultry • Increased risks of zoonoses e.g. bird flu • Low animal welfare and behavioural freedom • High use of water; environmental destruction and pollution; fossil fuel intensive • Number of farmers making a living out of chicken production significantly decreased • Cheap vulnerable labour, work health hazards 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Half of wheat is used for feed • Prices are volatile • Self sufficiency in wheat possible but not desired for technical/quality reasons – dependency on imports of hard wheat. • Technology and fossil fuel intensive: jobs and small businesses are gone • Good working conditions in mills • Manufacturing technology drives type of crops • Process: less protein and more salt and yeast • Fortification: advantage or constraint?
Tensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic growth vs. labour standards • Trade for export vs. local trade • Environment (airfreight) vs. development (employment) • Lower consumer prices vs. labour rights • But also consumers have ethical concerns! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth/development vs. sustainability • Low prices vs. labour rights • Low prices vs. environmental costs • Low prices vs. quality and health • Higher standards vs. low market access • Hygiene vs. nutrition and wellbeing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Animal feed vs. human consumption • Fertilizer and Pesticide use vs. sustainability • Good nutrition is not the goal, except with fortification
Underlying causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Size, influence and bargaining power of supermarkets: pressures in the forms of costs and standards pressures • Tension between retail pressures and the implementation of labour laws in SA • Race and access to land in SA: why are rural SAs waged labourers and not farmers? What are barriers to land reform? • Patterns of gender exploitation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lifestyle choices and food culture – slow vs. fast food – skills in cooking/eating: gender and class elements; chicken consumption linked to perceptions of wealth • Governments aim to keep food prices low so salaries and social protection are low. • Corporate concentration, vertical integration, industrialisation • Technology drivers: knowledge and science 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Importance of bread as a ‘value’ item • High concentration, particularly in retail • Input and technology intensive production and manufacturing, including fossil fuels • Densely regulated • Millers’ requirements limit alternative sources (e.g. organic) of wheat • Technology drives production
Levers for change	<p><i>Multiple approach</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Voluntary changes: ethical auditing, multi-stakeholder initiatives 2. Regulatory side: supermarkets ombudsman; government definition of the ‘consumer interest’ and enforcement of company law 3. Worker empowerment-bargaining power 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness and promotion of food culture • Switch to more extensive (labour and land) and sustainable models of production • ‘Eat less, pay more’: sustainability required • Diet changes; health, food culture promotion • Improved standards, including labour • Corporate regulation 	Not discussed

Table 2: Similarities between two or more case studies

Outcomes	<p>Health</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staple crops displaced from human consumption towards the production of processed foods • Lower nutritional quality • Health hazards: particularly in chicken, increases in hygiene but in industrial-farming related diseases e.g. bird flu <p>Livelihoods</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of market access and livelihoods • Fewer farms that are more intensive and bigger • Cost and standard pressures on suppliers • Volatility of markets <p>Work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressive loss of food-related employment opportunities due to technology • Casualisation of labour • Poor labour conditions (salary, health, security)- not in UK wheat <p>Social exclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences outcomes according to class, gender, nationality, ethnic group
Tensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic growth/development vs. sustainability- environment and social justice. • Animal feed vs. human consumption • Consumer prices vs. sustainable development issues • Standards and procedures: quality/hygiene vs. market access and labour standards • Quality systems focus more in hygiene and less so in nutrition
Underlying causes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food cultures and lifestyles, values of food and perceptions of poverty • Function of cheap food to maintain low minimum wages and social protection schemes • Productivity and intensive models: high inputs, high technology, dependency on fossil fuels and high productivity • Dependence on low-cost casual labour • Low competition and financial regulation, and thus, • Corporate concentration • Retail power and consumer choice • International pressures undermine home countries labour laws
Levers for change	<p>Consumers and corporate image Minimum Incomes: ensuring wages and social protection cover costs of 'fair food'</p> <p>Voluntary regulation and codes of conduct</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choice editing • Social auditing • Multi stakeholder initiatives <p>Public regulation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfactory implementation of national labour law • Company law • Competition commission • Financial regulation <p>Increase information, awareness and voice Changing models of production towards less intensive but high quality and low risk</p>

Annex II. Lessons from experience

As well as exploring case studies, the Food Ethics Council meeting on 25th February discussed what the Inquiry could learn from previous attempts to understand social justice in relation to sustainable development. Professor Malcolm Eames (Cardiff University), who has led several major studies of environmental justice, introduced this topic and contributed to the discussion.

Key lessons to emerge from this were:

- The Inquiry should reflect on whose knowledge and whose values count, striving to bring in diverse voices and standpoints.
- Social justice can be a challenging term – more so even than inequality. The Inquiry should be sensitive to the possibility that stakeholders may use different language to discuss issues of social justice.
- The Inquiry will need to analyse global supply chains yet also explore what is happening beyond them. Research on marginal markets, local food production and household food production is fundamental to understanding social justice in food and farming.
- Oral testimonies could be an important source of evidence. The evidence sessions should include oral statements and it should be made sure that written evidence includes personal accounts that describe how the issues the Inquiry is examining have affected people's lives.
- The Inquiry will need to consider how citizens can engage with food and farming in ways besides making purchases, examining participation and decision-making in food policy. Examples might include participation in policy consultations, multi-stakeholder initiatives, social auditing, and ombudsman schemes.
- When the Inquiry thinks about inequality, it will need a fine-grained analysis of between whom inequalities arise. We must be able to point out the social groups that are most vulnerable in the current food systems. Stakeholders must be considered across space and time, including the needs of future generations. When analysing which groups are worse-off, we should unpack them as far as necessary to understand the factors that give rise to inequality. For example the categories 'urban vs. rural', or 'northern countries vs. southern countries', 'consumers vs. producers' would need to be further sub-divided to detect social injustice and the specific vulnerable groups.
- The Inquiry will need to take care in dealing with concepts of 'overconsumption' and 'underconsumption'. Who decides how much consumption is enough, or the standard? How much choice do people have in how much they consumer? Simply blaming the 'overconsumers' may lose sight of factors that influence levels of food consumption.