

Food summits, policies and ethics – from 1974 to 2021 and beyond¹

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The author reviews some 50 years of working on different aspects of the food system, as he steps down as a member of the Food Ethics Council after 21 years. He discusses some of the major changes since the first World Food Conference in 1974 to the UN Food System Summit in 2021. Shifts in who has what power and control over our food and who carries the risks and benefits from changes in the food system provide a lens through which to see the challenges and choices facing us in the 21st century.

Introduction

The Glasgow Climate Summit (COP 26) is the latest in a long line of conferences trying to address global problems, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, hunger and malnutrition. We know today's food systems are major contributors to climate destabilisation. They are also badly affected by it, but with suitable transformations food systems could help mitigate a potential climate catastrophe. The questions are in what way, in whose interests, by what means and to what ends will this transformation occur?

In recent years, numerous reports have called for transformation in our food systems because, as the report on *Food Finance Architecture* (World Bank, 2021) summarised it 'food systems have come a long way, but are no longer fit for purpose'. Here, I briefly reflect on some of the huge shifts in thinking about food security, in science and technology, in the global rules and power dynamics in our food systems since the 1970s that have led to the food systems we have today.

Origins

Fifty years ago, in the summer of 1971, I was excited to be working at the oldest agricultural research institution in the world in Rothamsted in southern England. This was part of my soil science degree at the University of Aberdeen. I didn't think about ethics – and certainly never heard the word in my lectures - but simply thought that doing something that might help feed people would be a good thing.

Soil science was a wonderfully integrative degree, connecting biology, geology, physics, chemistry, microbiology, thermodynamics, and more to try to understand this most complex system that lies beneath our feet. But I felt something was missing - people. People decide what is done with the soil, what happens to biodiversity and our natural resources. Postgraduate work in the history and social studies of science and technology and economic history helped give me broader understanding of their importance in driving the direction of change. My first job led me to help develop, launch and edit a new journal on *Food Policy*.

In 1970, over 460 million people were estimated to be undernourished, excluding the centrally planned Asian economies. In the early 1970s, there were droughts and famines in parts of Africa, grain price rises, and a dramatic fourfold rise in the price of crude oil by OPEC in 1973-74. There were also concerns about population growth and how the world would manage its resources, highlighted by the publication of the Club of Rome's *Limits to*

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Growth report in 1972. This looked at potential problems 40 to 50 years ahead. The first environmental summit was held in Stockholm in 1972, then a World Population Conference in August 1974 and the first World Food Conference in Rome in November 1974.

World Food Conference 1974 and food policy

At the World Food Conference, governments solemnly proclaimed that "every man, woman and child has the inalienable right to be free from hunger and malnutrition in order to develop their physical and mental faculties" (UN, 1975), something we are clearly still a long way from achieving. This Conference put the highest priority on accelerating food production in developing countries, measures to assure world food security to protect consumers in times of crop failures, and new international institutions to maintain the political will towards action and to promote greater investment in food production. A new International Fund for Agricultural Development was established, as well as a new global information early warning system on food and agriculture at FAO, a Committee on Food Security and the World Food Council amongst other things. The Council was supposed to be the UN's umbrella organisation for food matters but was never effectual and ceased to exist in 1993.

It was at this 1974 Conference that food security was narrowly defined as:

‘the availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices’ (UN, 1975)²

A year later, the first issue of *Food Policy* in November 1975 opened with this quote from a document prepared for the Rome Conference:

‘The food crisis of the past 2 years has drawn attention dramatically to both the interdependence of production, trade, stocks and prices and the serious unpreparedness of the world as a whole to meet the vagaries of the weather’ (UN, 1974)

You could almost have written that today. Looking through that first issue there are so many familiar themes in what is being discussed today. Agricultural economist Tim Josling's article highlighted 2 major approaches to securing adequate world food supplies. One focused on production, the other on distribution. He also commented:

‘Food issues are in fact becoming more closely related to general economic and social concerns in most countries of the world. It is the vital but elusive ingredient of political will that sets the pace for a resolution of these issues.’ (Josling, 1975)

The political will issue is still very much with us today, as you can see in Glasgow at COP26.

I left *Food Policy* in 1977 and came to Turkey in 1978 to help establish an Agricultural Extension and Communications Centre at Ege University. That was my first of many visits to Turkey – some for further work, as with the TUYAP project in 1986-88 – others to write about agricultural and other developments. I later worked in Albania, Mongolia and

² While this is the generally used version, see <https://www.fao.org/3/y4671e/y4671e06.htm#TopOfPage>, Resolution XVII in the full text in the Report of the Conference is ‘availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs, particularly so as to avoid acute food shortages in the event of a widespread crop failure, natural or other disasters, to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption in countries with low levels of *per capita* intake and to offset fluctuations in production and prices’.

Kazakhstan and travelled widely to various food and farming projects, most memorably in Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi after the genocide in the mid 1990s.

Major trends and changing rules

While much attention focused on developing countries and problems of undernutrition and production in the 1970s, the opposite problem arose in the richer world. The post Second World War focus on increasing food production through intensification of farming, via mechanisation, monocultures, fertilisers and pesticides involved huge subsidies and led to a problem of overproduction of basic grain and feed crops in North America and Europe. In a 1981 report on Food Policy, the rich world's club – the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 1981) - discussed how this overproduction, coupled with limited demand and saturated markets were driving food system innovation.

The big problem for any food and farming business in a market economy predicated on continual economic growth is that you don't need that much food for an active and healthy life. You only need enough. And far too much food was being produced for populations on relatively traditional diets in saturated markets. This put increased competitive pressure on businesses to look for technological innovations to give them an edge, increase productivity from the land, labour and capital they used and to diversify. Responses to this included turning cheap commodity crops into meat and dairy through animals, and a massive meatification of diets. Others included exporting subsidised crops to developing countries undermining local farming systems but providing cheap food for urban populations, encouraging the use of soy and grain-based feeding systems for animals and promoting changed dietary patterns.

The OECD report also identified three major trends affecting food and farming. One was an economic concentration of power. This has accelerated since then and is taking place across all sectors in the food system from energy production, input provision, catering, retailing, wholesaling, machinery manufacture and seed production but is also happening far more widely in social media, communications and more.

A second trend was serving global markets through long supply chains, which accelerated after the fall of the USSR and opening up of China. Products from seeds to foodstuffs that can be sold widely are developed, reducing agricultural biodiversity, producing similar crops and animals across the world and leading to more homogenised diets. It remains to be seen if the fragility of long supply chains highlighted during the pandemic impact on this continued trend.

A third trend was trying to increase control over the variables within which an actor in the system has to work, whether that's managing the land, the workforce, the business, information or markets. These tools for control include political, economic and military power – which are what extended European control over much of the world from the 1500s. Others are science and technology, information, management, laws and regulations to further particular interests or restrain them, and market power through takeovers and mergers.

Major developments in science and technology have underpinned some of the big changes underway by providing new tools for control. One was the discovery of DNA. Subsequent developments in biology have enabled an unprecedented ability to manipulate organisms. This attracted former chemical companies into plant breeding. Developments in computing, communications and the capacity to analyse massive amounts of data was another

requirement for the development of biotechnology, just-in-time production systems, social media and more. Pressures also grew from industries whose business models require strong intellectual property rights (IPRs) and which sought to globalise them. This they achieved through the negotiations in the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) begun in 1986, which led to the establishment of the World Trade Organisation in 1994 and also brought agriculture into the trade rules (Drahos, 1995).

This occurred just before and partly precipitated the final big shift that is underway and has happened since the 1981 OECD report. It is geopolitical, as economic and military power shifts in the world, away from the west, Europe and North America, to the east and south, China, India, and beyond. This will play out in a massive, but as yet unclear way, this century.

I saw this geopolitical shift first hand for 10 years from the late 1990s in my work with negotiators at the World Trade Organisation. This work focussed on the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement and its impact on food security, biodiversity, trade and access to medicines. While the Quad – the USA, European Commission, Canada and Japan – may have set the initial agenda of the WTO, countries from the South began to organise and resist their demands and continue to do so in many on-going negotiations.

The new rules embedded in the WTO were just one of a number of changes in the global rules. Others affected biodiversity with the creation of the Convention on Biological Diversity after the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, control of plant varieties through the revision of the UPOV Convention and the creation of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture as well as developments in the World Intellectual Property Organisation. These rules have greatly increased the complexity for food system actors. There is no space for going into this in more detail in this short paper but you can read more about these in the free to download book *The Future Control of Food* (Tansey et al, 1995) as well as from the other materials on my website - www.tansey.org.uk.

Hunger persists, malnutrition grows

Despite the promises, hunger remained a persistent problem to which was added growing numbers of overweight and obese people affected by non-communicable diseases linked to poor dietary consumption patterns. In December 1992, an International Conference on Nutrition (ICN) was held in Rome, jointly organised by FAO and WHO. I was working as a consultant then and hired by FAO to write the initial Draft Declaration and Plan of Action. Once again governments pledged to make all efforts to eliminate famine and famine-related deaths, and to substantially reduce starvation and widespread chronic hunger and diet-related communicable and non-communicable diseases by 2000. However, it was made clear to me that the draft was to steer clear of any very specific targets.

I also wrote FAO's World Food Day booklet in 1992 called 'Creating a Well-fed World'. This involved extensive discussions with FAO's food security staff and we decided to focus on the ingredients that go to make up food security. These range from exchange rates to gender relations, income to storage facilities and many more. The balance needed varies for individuals, households or nations.

Thinking about the food system

Between 1990-1995, I researched and wrote *The Food System – A Guide* with Tony Worsley (Tansey et al, 1995). The term food system was rarely used at the time and it became one of

the first books about food systems. We took what has now become known as an ‘actor-based’ approach. The actors each have to deal with three basics - the system is biological, it is a product of a particular history, and food is central to human culture and human needs. But what happens in food systems is down to the social, economic and political environments that the main actors operate in.

Four key words strike me as important to reflect on when looking at what happens in food systems and the future: power, control, risk, benefits.

First, power. An important question to ask of any proposal or technological innovation is who or what people or institutions are empowered or disempowered by what is proposed – now and in the future? What outcomes may be locked in or out? Too often when you hear discussions about how food systems work they are abstracted from the reality of who drives what.

The next question is how do different kinds of power enable different actors to enhance or diminish their influence and control of over different aspects of the food system? Such control methods range from farming practices to cultural norms, legal regimes, such as those on trade rules, seed laws and intellectual property, to the direction of research and development, gender relations and whose knowledge is included and counted.

The other two words concern who and what carries the risks involved from the actions taken or not taken to transform food systems, and who gets the benefits from them, now and in the future. That is why polluter pays, precautionary principles and true cost accounting as well as strict liability regimes that hold innovators to account for harms that occur, unintended or not, are important to have. These are also questions of contemporary and intergenerational justice.

New thinking on food security

Twenty-two years after the first World Food Conference came a World Food Summit in 1996. The understanding of what made for food security had expanded to be:

‘A situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life’ (HLPE, 2020)³

The word ‘social’ was added after ‘physical’ in 2001 and this remains the main definition today (HLPE, 2020). Governments at the summit said that their goal was eradicating hunger and that they would halve the number of undernourished people by 2015. Later this and other goals were incorporated into the eight Millennium Development Goals agreed by global leaders at the UN in 2000, each of which had definite targets and prompted much action even if they failed to be fully met. In 2015, these goals were succeeded by 17 more interconnected and interdisciplinary Sustainable Development Goals, which include zero hunger by 2030.

Power, Sustainability and Rights missing

Crucially, still missing from the definition of food security was any consideration of who had power to decide what was done in the food system, nor any reference to the way food was produced and its impact on the environment and biodiversity. Also missing was a factor

³ This is a very condensed account of the changes and a fuller account is given in the HLPE report. See also Jennifer Clapp, Food Policy, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2021.102164>

highlighted by Simon Maxwell (1996): the absence of fear – fear that there would be no food in the lean period after the last harvest and before the next, or that you would not be able to feed yourself or family owing to lack of money, work or access to land.

A notable development from the 1996 world food summit was the growth of civil society movements of peasants and others from Latin America, Africa and Asia, which extended to Europe and North America and evolved into the Food Sovereignty movement, which embraced the missing elements.

In 2000, the then Commission on Human Rights established the role of the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. While the right to food is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (Art 25), much greater focus on this has developed in the last 20 years, with some countries including it in their constitutions and many civil society groups championing this.

Also in 2000, I was invited to join the Food Ethics Council, a voluntary not-for-profit group in the UK working for a fair food system. I hadn't heard of it at the time nor was food ethics much discussed. I was attracted by its attempt to look holistically at the food system. I liked how it framed ethical considerations around three pillars.

1. respect for the well-being of people, animals and the environment,
2. respect for autonomy enabling people and animals to have meaningful choice in their lives and control, and also
3. respect for justice in the sense of fairness.

For 10 years the Council promoted greater consideration of these issues as I have discussed in previous contributions to the earlier TARGET Congresses. We also brought a focus to the conditions people working through the food system face through our Food and Fairness Inquiry in 2010. This focussed on fair shares, fair play and fair say within food systems. This and other work has helped bring ethics more firmly onto the agenda in looking at food systems.

More summits and pressures to expand the definition

The continued failure to end hunger, dietary patterns producing high levels of obesity and concerns over global food security after the food price spikes of 2008/9 led to a World Summit on Food Security in Rome 2009. The growing food sovereignty movement organised a parallel people's summit alongside the formal food security summit. Food sovereignty was defined as:

‘the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.’ *Declaration of Nyéléni, 2007*

In 2020, a report to the Committee on Food Security expanded the accepted FAO definition to talk about 6 dimensions of food security (HLPE, 2020). These are availability, access (economic, social and physical), utilisation, stability, agency and sustainability. These latter two elements begin to address the omissions of power and environmental sustainability within earlier ways of thinking about food security.

Yet between 720 and 811 million people in the world faced hunger in 2020, according to FAO, for whom there was no food security.

In September 2021, there was a one day, virtual and contentious Food Systems Summit, called for by the UN Secretary General in 2019 in recognition of the need for change. It came as the global Covid-19 pandemic continued, with many countries yet to vaccinate their populations, and which highlighted, yet again, some of the continuing problems with our food and farming systems. Many civil society groups felt the supposedly inclusive summit had been hijacked by large agribusiness, industrial farming model interests, which had expanded greatly since the 1970s, and organised a counter summit along side it.

The 2021 *Food Finance Architecture* report noted that despite the apparent food system success over the last century in largely feeding a population that has risen from 1.6 billion in 1900 to 7.6 billion in 2020, while at the same time bringing down real food prices:

‘These accomplishments have not been universally shared, however, and carry unacknowledged environmental, health, social and economic costs. Today’s food systems generate hidden costs estimated at between \$6 trillion and \$12 trillion annually, while only generating a market value of around \$10 trillion per year. These costs are set to continue to rise under a business-as-usual scenario.’

Like Tim Josling’s comment from 1975, there are still two very different focuses on how to get away from the business-as-usual approaches for food system transformation. In 2011, a report for European Commission characterised them as the productivity and the sufficiency narratives. The first focuses on increased productivity and technology, the second on distribution and agro-ecological production approaches. The 2021 *Long Food Movement* report, which Matthias Kaiser spoke about at the start of the Congress, further elaborated on these (IPES-Food, 2021).

Thankfully over the past 10-15 years we have seen a much greater recognition of the need for a systems approach to address the challenges. There is also an understanding that the food system is part of a larger socio-economic system and political economy. It requires changes in these larger systems to fully address problems in the food system.

As was said in a webinar on ‘Power Relationships Within Food Systems’ in the run up to the Food Systems Summit, talking of food system transformation without addressing power relations is pointless⁴. Power is almost always absent from economic textbooks, which tend to ignore the respective bargaining power of parties involved, said Olivier De Schutter, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. If you want to discuss ethics, you must discuss power.

This is a far from complete overview of events and trends since I went to Rothamsted 50 years ago. I am convinced food is a crucial lens through which to see the world and how well it is working. We can never solve problems of hunger and malnutrition, sustainability or poverty by just producing more food, nor only by the use of science and technology. The central challenges to life on earth concern how we organise our societies, the nature of our economics and if we can learn to cooperate over how to use the world’s resources. These are not technical questions but ethical, social, cultural, political and economic ones. They have to be joined up together, and how our food systems function is a key indicator of success in this.

⁴ <https://www.chathamhouse.org/events/all/research-event/power-relationships-within-food-systems>

We need the kind of deliberative, constructive work that engages people across their divides that the Food Ethics Council, this Turkish Agricultural and Food Ethics Association and others can offer to help weave a way through these multiple challenges. I hope you will find the resources in the on-line Food Systems Academy, which I established and curate, helpful. And also the many interviews and other materials on the blog that goes with it.

It is a daunting task in the face of a set of world leaders seemingly singularly and collectively unsuited to address these challenges. The good news is that many people and groups around the world recognise the need for greater cooperation, are taking action and empowering themselves with knowledge. Our collective knowledge of how earth systems work is much greater than when I started and there are many opportunities for action. How we tackle the challenges for our food systems is central to the health and well being of all life on earth and to avoiding more wars and major conflicts this century. Throughout my life there has been enough food to feed everyone and there still is. The question is who eats what, where and how can everyone be empowered to have a fair, healthy, sustainable, diet? You can help see it is finally answered. Good luck.

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