

Food and Fairness Inquiry

Fair shares

Inequalities in health and nutrition

A report of the first evidence hearing on
16th September 2009

Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Understanding the problem	4
2.1. Underlying themes	4
2.2. Levels of analysis	4
2.3. Food-specific, or wider social and economic perspectives	5
2.4. Nutrition and diet	5
2.5. 'Free market' economics	6
3. Solutions and responsibilities	7
3.1. Tensions	7
3.2. Food, and social and economic policy.....	7
3.3. The minimum income standard.....	8
3.4. Global food prices.....	8
3.5. Government responsibilities.....	9
3.6. Business responsibilities.....	9

1. Introduction

The aim of the Food Ethics Council's 'Food and Fairness Inquiry' is to put social justice at the heart of efforts to promote sustainable food and farming. To achieve this end, the Food Ethics Council has established a Committee of Inquiry, comprising experts from across the food sector. To aid the Committee's deliberations we have organised a series of three hearings to explore different perspectives on social justice in food and farming: *Fair shares* (equality of outcome); *Fair play* (equality of opportunity); and *Fair say* (autonomy and voice). This report summarises the proceedings of first hearing of the Inquiry.

The Fair Shares hearing heard evidence from three expert witnesses on different aspects of inequalities of outcome in relation to food and farming:

- Bill Gray, National Officer, Community Food and Health Scotland, who gave evidence on *Food poverty in the UK*;
- Steve Wiggins, Research Fellow, Rural Policy and Governance Group, Overseas Development Institute, who gave evidence on *How incomes affect food security internationally*; and
- Donald Hirsch, Head of Income Studies, Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University, who gave evidence on *Inequalities and economic policy*.

This report draws out the main themes and issues that emerged from the evidence presented by our three witnesses, and from the discussions provoked by their presentations. However, comments are not attributed, and the report should not be taken as representing the views of the Food Ethics Council, or of any of the Committee members or witnesses.

The report reflects the spirit of the Inquiry, which recognises that there are genuine ethical dilemmas or tensions involved in understanding and promoting social justice in food and farming, and that there are unlikely to be many easy answers. A crucial objective of the Inquiry – particularly in its early stages – is therefore to identify these tensions, and resist the temptation to reach premature conclusions regarding either the root causes of any problems or the best means of addressing them.

2. Understanding the problem

2.1. Underlying themes

The dossier that accompanies this report – ‘Fair shares: evidence dossier’ – provides an overview of the existing evidence on inequalities of outcome relating to food and farming, with a particular focus on health and nutrition. The Fair Shares hearing explored many of the issues presented in the dossier, which had been provided to the Committee in advance of the hearing, along with wider aspects of outcome-related inequality. Two general, underlying themes emerged from these discussions: the importance of distinguishing between different levels of analysis; and the extent to which the inequalities under consideration should be regarded – and therefore addressed – as food-specific, or as part of wider social and economic trends and phenomena.

2.2. Levels of analysis

Whatever aspect of inequality one is considering – the nature of the problem, causes and solutions, or respective responsibilities for addressing the problem – the answers will depend on the level of analysis. This is perhaps most obvious in terms of whether one is considering inequalities globally or domestically, where the causes of health inequalities associated with food, for example, will differ significantly, as will the solutions. For the purposes of the Food and Fairness Inquiry, the important practical distinction here is that in considering causes and solutions, the Inquiry will be concerned with both domestic and global inequalities of outcome; but when it comes to assessing respective responsibilities for addressing these inequalities – responsibilities of government, of business, and of civil society – the focus will be on the UK (including the responsibilities of UK actors for leadership of, and engagement in, action at international level).

It is, however, equally important to clarify the level of analysis within discussions of domestic inequality. Apart from the fact that levels of poverty and income inequality vary significantly between and within regions of the UK, there is the further consideration that even at the most localised level, statistics about average incomes or diet will hide substantial disparities at the level of individuals and households.

The importance of focusing on the individual – domestically and globally – is reinforced by the FAO definition food security:

“Food security exists when **all people** at **all times** have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

2.3. Food-specific, or wider social and economic perspectives

The second general theme that runs through a consideration of food-related inequalities of outcome is the extent to which problems and solutions should be regarded as specifically or primarily issues about 'food' and 'food policy'; or whether they are more accurately and usefully approached from the perspective of broader economic and social trends and policy.

This can be seen, for example, in relation to community food projects, which are as much about fulfilling wider social aims as they are about improving access to affordable and healthy food. Indeed, if one were to assess the impact of such projects in relation to narrowly-defined health intervention or income maximisation targets, the results would often be modest; but when their contribution to a broad range of social indicators – including social inclusion, community cohesion, supporting people with mental health problems, etc. – is taken into account, the benefits are enormous. The reverse is also true, in that assessments of food projects used to assist refugee integration, for example, should not only consider the wider social benefits in the context of community cohesion, but should also recognise the positive results in relation to improved access to healthy food.

As these considerations suggest, it is also important to bear in mind just how central food is to our notions of both self-identity and community – and so resist the notion that there is a strict division between 'food' and wider social activities and phenomena.

2.4. Nutrition and diet

One key area where both of these underlying themes are evident is inequalities of outcome relating to health and diet. Looking at the UK as a whole, there are some clear differences in the diets of people who are poor and those who are not – particularly in the consumption of fruit and vegetables. However, at this aggregated level, these differences in nutrient intake are not sufficient to account for the differences in health outcomes. Similarly, average differences in the consumption of micronutrients cannot be explained solely on the basis of income – they are more about the wider cultural determinants of what people eat.

On the other hand, once one looks beyond area- or community-based averages – for example, through in-depth qualitative research – one can see huge differences in nutrient and micronutrient intake.

Turning to the issue of overweight, there are marked differences of opinion regarding the relationship between poverty and obesity. There is a substantial body of research that points to a correlation between poverty and obesity; but, at the same time, the government's Expert Advisory Group on Obesity has expressed concerns about the dangers of over-playing obesity as an issue of poverty.

At the international level, it is notable that in terms of the immediate causes of child malnutrition, death and disability, disease is the main factor, rather than inadequate dietary intake. A comparison between Burkina Faso and Senegal illustrates the complicated nature of the relationship between access to food, and nutrition. Burkina Faso has achieved substantial increases in the production of cereals, while Senegal's agricultural policy is regarded as a relative failure. Despite this, Burkina Faso has not seen any improvement in child nutrition, whereas Senegal is a stunning success story. The full explanation of this very different experience will be complex, but there is an encouraging message in that the measures necessary to address disease – such as health care and clean water – can be (relatively) straightforward.

As even these brief considerations indicate, the solutions that one will advocate for nutrition-related inequalities will be very different at the domestic and global levels.

2.5. 'Free market' economics

The workings of the 'free market' economy will be central to any discussion of food-related inequalities of outcome – as part of both the problem and the solution. One way of conceptualising domestic and global inequalities of outcome is in terms of 'ethical market failure'. In the words of one Committee member: "in ethical terms there is market failure...we need a common definition of this market failure, framed in ethical terms". Part of the issue here is that, as shown by the strong performance of fair trade products during the recession, consumers are willing to pay for 'added ethical value'. But much work remains to be done in understating what, exactly, this means in relation to the functioning of the market.

An alternative perspective on how free market economics relates to food-related inequalities is the suggestion that low food prices are intrinsic to capitalist society, because they enable employers to maintain low rates of pay.

Globally, one of the main features of the recent economic history of farming is the reciprocal relationship between increased agricultural productivity and falling prices. On the one hand, the fall in prices can be seen as the result of increased productivity – partly as the direct effect of increased supply, and partly because farmers continue to produce when classical economic logic suggests they should exit the market, so perpetuating over-supply; on the other, increasing productivity is the only way that farmers can maintain economic viability in the context of falling prices – that is, productivity increases as a response to falling prices.

This is illustrated by the case of Bangladeshi rice farmers, who were able to cope with a 50% reduction in the real price of rice over 20 years by more than doubling their productivity over the same period. And this has been true of farmers everywhere for the past half-century, who have survived through continued innovation. However, we should also recognise that many farmers 'fall off the treadmill' – as productivity increases, it becomes impossible for traditional small-holders to generate enough, at prevailing prices, to sustain an income comparable to that available elsewhere in the economy.

3. Solutions and responsibilities

3.1. Tensions

Moving towards the attempt to identify solutions to these inequalities of outcome, we immediately encounter a number of dilemmas, or tensions. One widely recognised example is the potential adverse effects of ethically-motivated promotion of local, sustainable food in the UK, in terms of its implications for international development. A less familiar example of the same general issue – the detrimental international knock-on effects of domestic policy – arises from the UK business community’s increasingly vocal support for effective regulation. This is motivated by the desire to prevent less scrupulous businesses from under-cutting their more progressive counterparts. However, one response to the more effective enforcement of domestic regulations may be for some companies to switch their production to other countries with less demanding standards in relation both to employment conditions and sustainability.

Tensions are also evident in the context of community food initiatives, where, for example, a breakfast club can be criticised for providing sugary cereals (although this is clearly better for the recipient than no breakfast at all); or where dental hygienists suggest eating crisps rather than apples because crisps are better for our teeth. The key lesson here is to ‘start from where you are’, rather than being preoccupied with immediately trying to achieve the ideal world. In the same spirit of realism, we must not lose sight of the fact that these are real, practical problems – and that we therefore need real, practical solutions.

3.2. Food, and social and economic policy

The search for solutions also brings us back to the relationship between food-specific policy and practice, and wider social and economic policy. One way of posing the question is: “are there things particular to the food system that make an unfair world more unfair...what would you fix within the food system?” The Committee member who posed this question suggested that it was hard to find such food sector-specific causes and solutions. A similar question can be asked about the ways in which the trade in food creates or addresses inequalities of outcome – are these primarily issues about food or about trade?

One possible response to this line of inquiry is to recognise that issues of food-related inequality are, indeed, fundamentally about wider social and economic policy – but, at the same time, to suggest that because food is so central to our understanding of well-being and community (for example), food-related inequalities provide a particularly important gauge of the success or otherwise of social and economic policy.

Food prices are crucial to the relationship between food inequalities and economic policy. To what extent, for example, might policies to reduce food prices contribute to addressing food-related inequalities of outcome? Research does indicate that reductions in the price of fruit and vegetables result in increased consumption – but the effect is limited, and in any case does not affect health

inequalities, because price reductions don't differentially boost consumption among low-income families. We also need to recognise that cost is not the only factor influencing food consumption, including for those living on low incomes – it is also about values and aspirations. For example, some forms of tinned fruit might now be extremely cheap, but they are not what people want to eat.

3.3. The minimum income standard

One useful way of approaching the issue of food prices is through a consideration of the 'minimum income standard' – the measure of what level of income British people consider to be the minimum required to enable someone to have an acceptable standard of living. The level of this minimum income is calculated by aggregating all the different items of expenditure that are considered necessary. Food prices are an especially important element in this calculation, because poor people spend a relatively large proportion of their income on food, compared with the population as a whole. In recent years, the low cost of food has been crucial in maintaining the living standards of people on low incomes, because all of the other necessary items – such as fuel, water, public transport – have increased above the rate of inflation. This means that the more recent rises in food prices will be all the more difficult for poor households to cope with.

This does not, however, mean that because poor people spend a greater proportion of their income on food, food prices need to be kept low. The point is rather that social policy needs to be more sensitive to this feature of the expenditure of people on low incomes. This means that in setting benefit levels, or the National Minimum Wage, for example, the government should adopt more realistic measures of 'inflation', based on what people actually have to buy.

Interestingly, in the context of the place of food in our understandings of community and society, the latest minimum income survey suggests that the British public are again thinking about poverty in terms of people's ability to feed themselves – reversing the trend of recent years, which had placed increasing emphasis on wider criteria such as having enough money to participate in social activities.

3.4. Global food prices

As described above, farmers across the world have continually needed to improve their productivity in order to cope with the falling prices attracted by their produce, often at the expense of the environment and long-term sustainability. One way to tackle the problem might be to increase prices through state intervention, but this would have adverse consequences for the urban poor who would be faced with higher prices (and who, as noted above, spend a relatively large proportion of their income on food). This is just one of the ways in which support for farmers will be paid for by consumers, including poor consumers; and it therefore raises an important general question for the Inquiry: to what extent does the financially poor consumer owe the poor farmer a living?

Investment in public goods such as roads, health, education, and agricultural research will also be crucial to the long-term viability of international agriculture, along with measures to correct market failures such as high transaction costs.

3.5. Government responsibilities

A fundamental question for the Inquiry is: “what is the legitimate level of government intervention in free markets?” One way of responding to this question is to point to the increasing levels of public concern about sustaining the local economy, along with the recognition that, globally, we need to do more than support fair trade initiatives. This growing sense of responsibility gives the government licence to raise standards domestically, and to take a more leading and progressive role in implementing fairer trading agreements with poor countries. International leadership is seen as crucially important, given the limited scope for addressing global inequality through unilateral action. These domestic and international responsibilities are inter-related: harmonisation at the EU level is one way of addressing the tension identified above, whereby higher domestic standards see production ‘leak’ to countries with lower standards.

One important means of government intervention is through public procurement. However, efforts to date have been hindered by implementation problems, such as the difficulty of centrally directing the activities of the huge number of independent public sector food procurers. There are fundamental disagreements about whether public contracts should include stipulations about fair employment practices – which doesn’t bode well for public procurement as an avenue for addressing food-related inequalities. It is also suggested that there is a lack of political support at all levels for ethical public procurement.

Other government responsibilities include the provision of public information (with the five-a-day campaign regarded as having been relatively successful in getting the message across, if not in changing eating habits); and the obligation to “listen to those who on a daily basis juggle impossible budgets” – in other words, seeing people on low incomes as part of the solution as well as part of the problem.

3.6. Business responsibilities

Progressive companies incorporate ethical values into their business proposition, and use them to gain a competitive edge. However, this depends to a large extent on the commitment and influence of particular individuals in companies, and on their ability to present a convincing business case. This becomes harder as the costs associated with ethical standards are perceived to increase.

Returning to the earlier point about business support for better regulation and a level playing field, the fact that the food industry is ‘consumer-facing’ is a key factor – with similar concerns expressed by clothing retailers, for example. The same support for effective regulation is not expressed in other, less publicly recognisable industries.

Other aspects of corporate responsibility were the perception that businesses are in a position to act much more quickly than governments; the recognition that they have an important role in shaping consumer choice; and the firm view that they should be expected to do more than simply 'do no harm'.

Food Ethics Council
39-41 Surrey Street
Brighton BN1 3PB
United Kingdom

t: +44 (0)1273 766 654
f: +44 (0)1273 766 653

info@foodethicscouncil.org
www.foodethicscouncil.org

The Food Ethics Council is a company limited by guarantee (03901671)
and a registered charity (1101885).