Food is at the heart of many cultures. Food is also at the heart of many of the problems faced by society today. Research is the bridge between the problems of today and the solutions for tomorrow.

Research is about addressing questions, but many questions underpinning the food and farming research agenda are seldom asked.

For whom? By whom? Serving whom? For what? We are not the first to ask these questions, and I hope we will not be the last. If they sound like big questions, it is because they are – unashamedly. When the future of our food systems is at stake, it is important to ask big questions. It is also vital to challenge assumptions, contest the status quo, and push for ways forward that address inequity, hunger and damage to ecosystems and agricultural biodiversity.

There are many tensions surrounding food and farming research. For starters, how can we ensure the impartiality of research but at the same time ensure it has practical relevance? What should the role of corporates be? And, if corporate involvement at some level is desirable or inevitable, then how to avoid conflicts of interest? Marion Nestle explores just that issue within the realm of nutrition research.

Several of our contributors call for the research-setting process to become considerably more inclusive. The most important voices are, it seems, too often not being heard. The questions ‘for whom is the research being done?’ and ‘who should be involved?’ are more pertinent than ever.

In highlighting lessons from farmer-led research in the UK, Tom MacMillan writes that “Farmers are in high demand… yet it is still unusual for farmers to be in the driving seat, setting the questions and getting centrally involved in research design and analysis.” This is echoed by Ibrahima Coulibaly’s powerful plea to “Listen to farmers! Listen to farmers! Listen to farmers!”

Contributors call for radical changes. Michel Pimbert argues that “Nothing less than a paradigm revolution is needed to democratise food and agricultural research for the common good and the wellbeing of the planet.” In this context, Claire Robinson asserts that “Food and farming research has taken a wrong turn in the UK due to successive governments’ obsession with genetically modified (GM) crops.” While, Clara Nicholls and Miguel Altieri present the case that “transitioning to an agriculture based on agroecological principles would provide rural families with significant social, economic and environmental benefits, and feed the
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In drawing out insights from the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science & Technology for Development (IAASTD) that took place a decade ago, Molly Anderson highlights the need for public sector research for the public good and argues the case for small-scale farmers, as being the “largest category of people suffering from chronic undernutrition.” In the context of small-scale ‘peasant’ producers who provide most people in the world with food, Pat Mooney points out “Peasants’ agroecology could be scaled up [but cannot] because of the intellectual property policies, the kinds of research orientations and the many ways the private sector has all the facetime with politicians.” Suman Sahai, writing from India, summarises the challenge as “the real problem however, is the traditional patriarchal approach to determining what’s good for agriculture and farmers.”

Indeed, we asked our ‘big question’ about ‘How can food and farming research deliver for the long-term public good?’. Much debate remains on the detail of the ‘how’, but that it should deliver for the long-term public good is surely not up for debate. We hear from a range of contributors on this, including Jonathon Porritt, shadow food and farming minister David Drew MP, Helen Browning and Liza Draper, to name but a few.

Professor Tim Lang rightly says that “in the UK, our food research agenda is currently paralysed by the enormity of Brexit,” which may increase the pressure, as Helen Paul warns, for “the UK … to export its industrial research platforms to other regions, especially Africa.” There is also talk of the need to ‘take back control’ from Liz Hosken, but this time not in a UK Brexit context. Liz writes of the power of community-led research and the need to build “affectionate alliances with communities in a process of taking back control of their knowledge, practices and decision making…”

Many will feel that progress in the past decade has been frustratingly slow. However, as last year’s IPES-Food report “From Uniformity to Diversity: A paradigm shift from industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems” shows, yet again solutions are available; much research by its nature is long-term - but not all. Long-term in the wrong direction is no good to anyone. We need a high-quality research agenda which strengthens a food system that serves people, the planet and animals - and that helps deliver ‘good food, for everyone, forever’ (to borrow a phrase from Colin Tudge).

Professor Ben Mepham, our founder, articulates the need for research policy to be revised to address the priorities for food supply, namely that they should be “sustainable, universal nutrition, by means that mitigate environmental degradation; and respect for the rights of humans and nonhumans while remaining sensitive to the diversity of cultural norms.”

There are three things we would like to see. Firstly, we want transparency in the research-setting process, so that everyone can see how it is funded and who is involved. Secondly, we want inclusivity in how the research agendas are set – with citizens put at the heart of this, including biodiversity-enhancing farmers, who have perhaps most to offer, most to gain and most to lose. And thirdly, we want a framework introduced to ensure that all research delivers for the long-term public good and that it contributes to fair, healthy, humane and environmentally sustainable food and farming systems both in the UK and internationally. In our ‘final viewpoint’, we share further thoughts on what we at the Food Ethics Council believe is needed.

No-one yet has all the answers. But we hope you agree that this publication brings together invaluable insights from history, from different geographies and from different perspectives. Together we can make an ethical food and farming research agenda a priority. And of the question ‘for whom?’ Surely the answer should be ‘for everyone’, including the children and grandchildren of the world? Hence, we as food citizens should get involved in shaping a better future for those that will inherit our legacy.

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