
Lessons from France: world leader on sustainable food & farming?

Report of Business Forum, 21st March 2018

France is held up as a global food leader

President Macron recently unveiled a €5bn investment plan for France's agricultural sector. As part of that, he urged farmers to embrace a 'cultural revolution' and move away from EU subsidies and intensive production methods. France is seemingly leading the world when it comes to sustainable food and farming, coming top of the recent Food Sustainability Index ('FSI'), by the Economist Intelligence Unit and the Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition. This compared 34 countries on a basket of measures (outcomes and policy responses) relating to food loss and waste, sustainable agriculture and nutrition. In contrast, the UK only came 8th out of the 10 European countries included in the FSI¹.

Comparing countries is valuable, but complex

Indexes like the FSI enable comparisons to be made of the sustainability of food and farming systems of different countries. There is huge value in learning how other countries tackle similar challenges, what has worked and what has not. There are important – often complex - cultural, economic and political differences between different countries that need to be considered. Such differences do not make policy comparisons redundant; it is just that policy responses need to be tailored to individual countries, rather than simply 'cut and pasted' from one country to another.

Time for an *entente cordiale* on food and farming?

France is a vital trading partner for the UK on food, feed and drink ('FFD') – with France accounting for c. 11% of UK's FFD exports and c. 10% of imports². There are similarities between the countries (e.g. temperate climates), but also stark differences, including the importance of agriculture to the economy and the type of policy responses. With Brexit approaching, there are likely to be opportunities for close ties between UK and France, even as the UK moves away from the Common Agricultural Policy and Common Fisheries Policy. Surely this should include knowledge exchange on approaches to sustainable food and farming.

“Every politician in France needs to say something about farmers... In France you can't change the food system without facing the important political weight of farmers.”

KEY POINTS FROM BUSINESS FORUM MEETING

- France is rightly cited as one of the global leaders on sustainable food and farming, with bold targets and strong, comprehensive policy responses, including on food loss and waste and on nutrition and health.
- France is likely to remain at the heart of the EU (with associated policies like CAP). Food culture in France is also different from the UK. That does not make policy comparisons redundant. While acknowledging that French food and farming systems have a long way to go to be sustainable, there is still much the UK can learn from what is happening in France and vice versa.
- Lessons for the UK include the importance of:
 - a holistic, whole systems approach
 - bold targets, including on public food procurement
 - transitioning towards an agroecological approach – underpinned by significant, targeted investment
 - having comprehensive plans on critical issues like childhood obesity and food waste, translating objectives into policy actions that drive meaningful change
 - tackling unfair shares in food value chains and exploring how to create more value
 - getting a healthy balance of education, incentives and regulation
- Key questions to ask include:
 - How can we reimagine food and farming policies that work in France in a UK context?
 - How can food and farming companies help the UK government translate rhetoric into bold, concrete plans for fair, healthy, humane and sustainable food and farming?
 - In what areas might regulation help deliver a 'level playing field' for UK food and farming businesses?
 - How can UK food and farming organisations develop informal or formal knowledge exchange with counterparts in France?
- Rather than a cut-throat 'race to the top', perhaps the UK's approach should be to drive a 'race to goodness', with the UK and France leading the way together?

¹<https://www.foodethicscouncil.org/our-work/index/fronting-up-uk-sustainable-systems-in-the-spotlight.html>

²https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/672119/AUK-2016-08jan18.pdf

Bold sustainability targets can be empowering

In early 2018, it was announced that at least half of all food bought by the public sector in France must be either organic or locally-produced, or come with a quality label, by 2022. France has set bold targets in the past and not always delivered. However, conditions for change have been built over several years and there is optimism that real progress is now possible. The new public procurement target should build the organic market in France, giving farmers, growers and food companies confidence to invest. The UK government could follow France's lead by ratcheting up its ambition on public procurement, a powerful lever for change.

The agroecology transition is being embraced

There is a growing recognition in France (and elsewhere) that food and farming systems need to be redesigned away from agricultural intensification towards agroecological models. Stéphane Le Foll, former French minister, has been influential in highlighting the strong performance of French initiatives that use organic models and other agroecological approaches. The Agroecology Project³ is trying to bring a more sustainable approach to farming, recognising that improvements in agricultural performance should not come at the expense of environmental and social conditions. The French Ministry of Agriculture expects most French farmers to have signed up to the concept by 2025. Strong leadership has enabled such a transition to get underway, even if some challenge the pace of change.

A comprehensive approach to addressing food waste

France is arguably leading the way in tackling food loss and waste. The government is adopting a comprehensive approach with its national pact to fight against food waste, including a clear target set in 2013 of halving food waste by 2025 and a range of measures from food waste education in schools to marketing campaigns. It also introduced legislation in 2016 making it compulsory for large grocery stores to pass on certain unsold food to food banks and charities – albeit some may argue this risks institutionalising the food bank model. There is similar legislation for restaurants above a certain size and they must issue 'le doggy bag' to customers that request them.

An inclusive approach to tackling childhood obesity

Over half of food bought by families in the UK is 'ultra-processed' versus only 14.2% in France.⁴ France still has diet-related ill health concerns – including linked to high levels of meat and saturated fat consumption.

France though is reputedly leading the way in efforts to combat childhood obesity. Its EPODE programme ('Together Let's Prevent Childhood Obesity') has been running since 2004, is multi-faceted, multi-stakeholder and involves local communities. ANSES (the French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health and Safety) updated its food consumption guidelines⁵ in 2017, including recommending the need to limit meat consumption (excluding poultry) and sugar-sweetened drinks. With the UK's most recent childhood obesity plan being widely criticised for being too weak, there is much the UK can learn from France.

Tackling fair shares along food value chains is vital

President Macron has initiated debates amongst 35 value chains about how there can be a fairer share of value, particularly for farmers. This approach does not challenge the extent to which those products contribute to healthy diets in the first place. This notwithstanding, the 'head-on' tackling of the issue of 'fair share' is important. The conclusion from some French food businesses has been that a redistribution of value along chains needs to be accompanied by the creation of *more* value along food chains (which in some cases may mean higher prices at the checkout).

Concluding comments – no longer 'plus ça change'

French food and farming systems are far from perfect, and there have been false dawns before. However, there is cautious optimism that progress in France may now be sustained. France is further advanced than the UK on many aspects of fair, healthy, sustainable food. The reasons are complex, but a key factor is the French government's willingness to take bold action. The 'we have a different food culture' line should not be used as an excuse for inaction. The UK government can build on its (largely) positive rhetoric and follow France's lead by turning that into bold targets and meaningful action. The long-term aim could be for the UK to (at least) be on a par with France in the FSI, with both striving for continual improvement.

This is a report of the Business Forum meeting on 21st March 2018. We are grateful to our keynote speakers, **Sébastien Treyer**, Director of programmes at Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI); and **Martin Koehring**, Managing Editor & Global Healthcare Lead, Thought Leadership, Economist Intelligence Unit. The meeting was chaired by **Joanna Lewis**, Strategy & Policy Director, Food for Life, Soil Association and Trustee of the Food Ethics Council. The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Food Ethics Council, nor its members. For more information on the Business Forum, contact Dan Crossley dan@foodethicscouncil.org +44 (0) 333 012 4147.

³ <http://agriculture.gouv.fr/sites/minagri/files/1604-aec-aenfrance-dep-gb-bd1.pdf>

⁴ [https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/public-health-nutrition/article/household-availability-of-ultraprocessed-foods-](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/public-health-nutrition/article/household-availability-of-ultraprocessed-foods-and-obesity-in-nineteen-european-countries/D63EF7095E8EFE72BD825AFC2F331149/core-reader#)

[and-obesity-in-nineteen-european-countries/D63EF7095E8EFE72BD825AFC2F331149/core-reader#](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/public-health-nutrition/article/household-availability-of-ultraprocessed-foods-and-obesity-in-nineteen-european-countries/D63EF7095E8EFE72BD825AFC2F331149/core-reader#)

⁵ <https://www.anses.fr/en/content/anses-updates-its-food-consumption-guidelines-french-population>