Food Ethics Council

‘Forgotten’ food issues

A case study of pesticides

A report of the Business Forum meeting on Tuesday 27th June 2017

Contents

About the Business Forum

Ethical questions around climate change, obesity, food security, people and animal welfare, and new technologies are becoming core concerns for food businesses. The Business Forum is a seminar series intended to help senior executives learn about these issues. Membership is by invitation only and numbers are strictly limited.

The Business Forum meets six times a year for an in-depth discussion over an early dinner at a London restaurant.

To read reports of previous meetings, visit foodethicscouncil.org/businessforum.

For further information contact:

Dan Crossley, Food Ethics Council

Phone: +44 (0)333 012 4147

dan@foodethicscouncil.org

www.foodethicscouncil.org

Introduction

A few food and farming issues seem to hog the limelight – in the media and in political and public discourse – meaning that many other important issues are often 'forgotten' or neglected in such debates.

One such contested but underplayed issue is that of pesticides – and specifically pesticide approval. Many argue that widespread use of chemical pesticides in industrialised farming has wiped out wildlife and destroyed soil, and that pesticide use as we know it is unsustainable in the long run. Others argue that pesticides perform a valuable role (are a 'necessary evil'?) or that steps are being taken to mitigate their potentially negative effects.

Little, though, is heard about the *approval* process for pesticides – hence the default assumption is that everything is fine and is safe. Yet some argue there is cause for serious concern. How can such an embedded component of industrial farming be unravelled – and how can issues like this get the spotlight that critics argue they merit?

The June 2017 meeting marked the 10th anniversary of the Business Forum. On this landmark occasion, the meeting considered several neglected issues relating to food and farming, particularly focusing on the issue of pesticide approval on which arguably little progress has been made in recent decades. It also explored ways of raising the profile of, and navigating, other contentious issues that 'fly below the radar'.

We are grateful to our keynote speakers, **Sheila Dillon**, food journalist and longstanding presenter of Radio 4's widely-respected 'The Food Programme' and **Helen Browning OBE**, organic farmer, Chief Executive of the Soil Association and Council member of the Food Ethics Council. The meeting was chaired by **David Pink**, Emeritus Professor of Crop Improvement at Harper Adams University and Trustee of the Food Ethics Council.

The report was compiled by Anna Cura, Liz Barling and Dan Crossley and outlines points raised during the meeting. The report does not necessarily represent the views of the Food Ethics Council, the Business Forum, or its members.

Key Points

- Whilst certain issues tend to stay high on the agenda, there are others that *have* been underplayed, but have recently seen a resurgence in public, corporate and political profiles. Examples of such 'formerly neglected' issues include soil health and the routine use of antibiotics.
- One person's 'forgotten' issue might be another person's 'top priority'. Hence any debate about 'forgotten' food issues is contentious and is immediately riddled with tensions about what is important (or not) to different groups.
- One example of a major food and farming issue that is far too low down the 'priority list' is climate change. At least three reasons were suggested for its lack of prominence in debates: the argument that it can be 'left to another day'; the fact that it requires consensus and unified action; and the excuse that it can always be 'someone else's fault'.
- Pesticide *approval* is one issue that has arguably failed to garner sufficient attention (from the public, media and policymakers). It was suggested that this has resulted in a range of negative issues – from potential damage to human health to entrenching an industrialised and unsustainable food system.
- It was argued that the approval process for pesticides tends to focus only on the short-term, immediate effects of the chemical input, and often neglects to look at how the chemical interacts with other chemicals in food. In the UK regulators have made *some* positive steps in tackling toxicity concerns, but other regulatory regimes – e.g. in the US – have been slow to make changes.
- At the heart of the pesticides debate is the dependence of a particular approach to food and farming upon their widespread use. A farming system locking those working in food value chains into an unsustainable food system is deeply flawed.
- There are positive developments taking place in the wider sector, which should not be ignored. It was argued that there is surely value in finding common ground, rather than rushing to polarise debates that are seldom 'black and white'.
- The risk is that there are so many issues on everyone's plates that only short-term concerns will ever rise to the surface. In debates around what will happen post-Brexit, it is vital that important food and farming issues are not side-lined further.

Shifting sands

The approaches of many food and farming businesses have changed significantly in the decade since the Food Ethics Council's first Business Forum. A decade ago, NGO pressure on business was often to encourage them to identify environmental (and to a lesser extent social) impacts and take measures to drive down those impacts. This brought the twin benefit of reducing a company's impacts on the planet with making the company more profitable (through efficiency savings).

Whilst these arguments remain valid, it was suggested that such an approach is not sufficient, given the scale of the challenges faced. Leading businesses should now be going beyond this – and seeking to influence the governance of the environmental resources in the places where their business operations are and where their supply chains are drawing from.

Using the example of a tea company, the company in question should go to its suppliers and ask 'what do we need to do in the tea landscape where our tea is coming from, in order to make both the environment and social conditions in that place better' (plus animal welfare for sectors where that is relevant)? It involves engaging in land use (or sea use or water planning) for that region – becoming a business which holds both politicians and public resource managers to account, in concert with the other actors in that locality (or watershed). Hence, it was argued that progressive businesses can be a positive driving force in jurisdictional spatial planning solutions and environmental resource management.

Much as the approaches taken by progressive businesses on sustainability change over time, the attention given to some food and farming issues also changes considerably over time. Whilst certain issues tend to stay high on the agenda, others have been underplayed in the past (by the media, government and businesses), but have seen a resurgence in recent times. Examples of such 'formerly neglected' issues – whose public, corporate and political profiles have risen considerably in the last few years – include soil health and the routine use of antibiotics.

Examples of neglected issues

One example of a major issue that it seems nearly everyone can be distracted from is food, farming and **climate change**. A challenge was laid down as to why this is not at the top of the 'to-do' lists of all politicians, business leaders and individuals. It is food and farming in particular where climate change seems to fly below the radar – and this despite the major impact that food and farming has on climate change, and vice versa.

It is instructive to consider why the threat of climate change in the sector does not get the prominence it merits. At least three reasons were put forward: the argument that it can be 'left to another day'; the fact that it requires consensus and unified action; and the excuse that it is always 'someone else's fault'. Surely attention should turn soon to how to accelerate urgent action towards zero carbon food and farming systems. The issue of climate change in relation to food and farming cannot remain on the backburner any longer. Leading food and farming businesses must move away from incremental carbon reduction towards radical decarbonisation – and fast.

Another example of an issue lacking sufficient systemic attention is **malnutrition** – not just in the Global South, but in the Global North too. In general, people associate malnutrition with undernutrition. However, the obesity crisis is also a malnutrition crisis. It was argued that the unhealthiness of so much of the population is a scandal. Rather than putting the sole burden on individual responsibility, what is required is an environment that makes it easy for people to live healthy lives.

A related issue which deserves more attention is the way that the **diet industry** seems to sell its products by using people's insecurities, undermining their confidence in the way it markets food and other products – particularly, but not exclusively, to women. Instead, organisations should be helping build people's confidence and self-respect, and giving them the right kinds of environments to enable them to make better choices.

Another example of a neglected issue that was given is an understanding and **appreciation of the complexity of natural systems**, particularly in a farming context. The prevailing orthodoxy seems

to be of specialisation and deep (rather than wide) knowledge being valued above all else. It was argued that while specialisation is of course important, there are very few people – in food and farming businesses, and beyond – in positions where they can 'see the big picture' and join the dots.

At the farm level, many farmers seem to think that the 'answer' lies in a simplified approach to farming that relies on efficiencies of scale, that is – seemingly – easier to manage. Yet such systems are largely deeply flawed and the reality is that nature is complex and diverse. Hence farming that works *with* nature, rather than against it, is more likely to succeed in the long-run.

It was claimed that there has been an over-investment in 'over-specialised efficient systems', locking farmers into their investments, which means they cannot change their approach when the market changes. There is a need for those working in food and farming to get better at managing complex systems.

Identifying 'forgotten' issues

One person's 'forgotten' issue might be another person's 'top priority'. Hence any debate about 'forgotten' food issues is contentious and is immediately riddled with tensions about what is important (or not) to different groups and why certain issues get more attention than others.

The question of which food and farming issues are 'forgotten' begs several further questions – such as what we mean by 'forgotten'; forgotten by whom; and how one can judge which issues are neglected?

One possible answer to the last question around identifying issues that do not get much (or sufficient) attention, is to look at work such as the Food Ethics Council's Food Issues Census[1] . This was a survey of civil society capacity on food and farming in the UK, originally done in 2011, and repeated in 2016-17. Amongst other things, it highlights the 'least popular' issues amongst food and farming-related NGOs. It is important to caveat this, as the survey was answered by around 140 organisations and so represents views of a subset of the total NGO population working on food and farming.

Nevertheless, it gives a useful steer on the issues that are getting less NGO attention[2]. In 2016-17, the issues in the bottom quartile of the list included additives, nanotechnology and air pollution – and pesticides.

Pesticide approval: a neglected issue?

Is the precautionary principle being ignored?

The proliferation of pesticide use around the world *might* imply that pesticides are inputs to the farming system that are safe, and accepted as so. However, there has been a failure to appreciate weaknesses in the pesticide approval process. In the last 50-60 years, some pesticides that were said to be safe have been subsequently banned (sometimes 25 years later) for being found to be toxic, such as DDT.

For some in food and farming sectors, 'pesticide approval' is on their daily radar, therefore it might seem odd to them to feature it as a 'forgotten' issue. However, others believe that it is neglected issue and that a failure to garner sufficient attention on it (from the public, media and policymakers) has resulted in a range of negative issues – from potential damage to human health to entrenching an industrialised and unsustainable food system.

It was suggested that the approval process for pesticides tends to focus only on the short-term, immediate effects of the chemical input, and often neglects to look at how the chemical interacts with other chemicals in food. It was also suggested that when a national government decides that a pesticide is not safe, the attitude of the maker can be that whilst it respects the oversight authority, it does not agree with the assessment. In presenting its counter-argument, it may rely heavily on the fact that the analysis does not show any actual risk to citizens. This inverse of the 'precautionary principle' appears to be symptomatic of a sector that is dominated by a few large players.

[1] Food Ethics Council (2017), The food issues census 2017, http://www.foodissuescensus.org/

[2] See P. 34 of *The food issues census 2017*. There will be a whole host of reasons why NGOs are working less on some issues e.g. because the issues are deemed relatively 'less important' (or have been adequately tackled), they are difficult to fund or they have simply fallen off the radar.

It was argued that surely the burden of proof should be on pesticide manufacturers to prove safety, rather than leaving it to environmental campaigners and people in the media to prove *danger*.

Do no harm?

There is a growing body of evidence around the world that pesticides may be harmful to human or animal health, even when they are regulated and only occur at what are deemed 'safe' levels. This research is heavily challenged by the industry itself, and by most regulatory bodies.

Taking the example of neonicotinoids: there is ample evidence to show that bees the world over are suffering from impaired flight orientation, which is indicative of a lot of other problems that the species are facing. Many believe that neonicotinoids are to blame, but it was argued that there is very little research being done by the pesticide industry to consider this matter, and very little trust in how good the available industry-led research is. It is worth noting that the public sector has carried out a significant amount of research on pollinators, both in the UK and the EU, including looking at the role of neonicotinoids.

Another example is glyphosate, the active ingredient of the world's most commonly used weed killer 'Roundup'. The International Agency for Research on Cancer ('IARC') said in 2015 that glyphosate was 'probably carcinogenic', but the European Food Safety Authority's PPR panel deemed it safe shortly after the IARC report was published. The European Chemical Agency also published a report saying glyphosate does not present a risk to human health.

However, there was a difference in how the IARC and the European regulatory bodies looked at the evidence. The former looked both at pure glyphosate and glyphosate compounds, as well as drawing on all publicly available and pertinent studies by independent experts free from vested interests. The EU regulatory bodies, on the other hand, only tested pure glyphosate, and crucially did not test any of the formulations that farmers and gardeners can buy. They also drew on studies they say are not made public due to industry concerns about protecting intellectual property. It begs the question about how rigorous these studies were that cannot be scrutinised by independent experts.

Links between pesticides and harm to humans are hotly disputed – and there are ongoing court cases, including about glyphosate and alleged links to non-Hodgkin's lymphoma for example.

It was argued that, whilst the US regulatory regime has been slow to make changes, in the UK, regulators have made some positive steps in tackling toxicity concerns. In addition, the EU's approach to removing pesticides that cannot be justified was thought to have been overwhelmingly positive. The relationship that the UK ends up having with the EU post-Brexit will therefore be important in influencing a future UK approach to pesticide approval and use.

Lock-in to an unsustainable system?

At the heart of the debate about pesticides is the dependence of a particular approach to food and farming upon their widespread use. A farming system which locks those working in food value chains into an unsustainable food system is deeply flawed.

The current mainstream system relies on using chemical controls of pests, diseases and weeds to grow crops in large-scale monoculture. This has led to an 'arms race' which, it was argued 'nature will always win' as seen by the emergence of new variants of pests, diseases and weeds with pesticide resistance. The model in recent times has been to switch to a different chemical and repeat the whole process. It was suggested that there is a need to get away from an approach virtually totally dependent on chemistry to solving a biological problem (in food and farming), which does not work beyond the very short-term.

It was recognised that when talking about pesticide use, it is necessary to talk about the unsustainability of the whole food system. If farmers are contracted to grow to a certain market specification (e.g. every carrot needs to fit within a specific cosmetic size and shape with no blemishes), that can be done – but at a potential cost in terms of health of humans, animals and the environment.

There are farmers who are developing more holistic approaches to pest and disease control most of whom are still using some element of chemical control, but integrated with other means of control. There is a need to learn from these 'best practitioners'.

Why do pesticides continue to be used in the UK? It was suggested that in essence it is to do with the fact that it is a 'simple' solution for farmers to deliver against the – often unrealistic – expectations about food created for the mainstream retail model. The alternatives are often much more complex solutions which require more skilled labour and time input and are more challenging to manage. It was also felt that many farmers have invested heavily (often with borrowed capital) in the equipment and machinery necessary to farm a pesticide dependent monoculture system and simply cannot take the financial risk of changing.

One of the overriding problems is the continual drive for ever cheaper food. Unless the way that food is valued changes, it will be difficult to break out of a model of the quick, 'sticking plaster' fix, that creates more trouble in the long-term. Commercial relationships that are long-term and trust-based are surely going to be more effective in allowing farmers and producers to operate differently.

The dominant food and agricultural research agenda – not surprisingly – reinforces the dominant, conventional food and farming paradigm, because it is funded to 'support' the mainstream system, rather than challenge it. Again, short-termism in funding prevents development of strategic research programmes aimed at developing different controls.

It was pointed out that one particularly neglected aspect of chemical controls is the non-farming use of products in amenity horticulture, for examples, councils controlling weeds in the locality, and significant use in a domestic context by home gardeners. The impacts of these uses tend to be overlooked, yet they are potentially significant, particularly given the fact that domestic use may not be carried out in the prescribed way.

Corporate influence and power

Concerns have been raised about the integrity of academic research financed by agro-chemical companies. This prompts bigger questions about the role of the private sector in research for the public good. Who should be involved with, and who should fund (and who shouldn't) such research?

It was argued that there is another dimension to the question about the veracity of industry-led research. Governmental approval processes have many layers and can appear opaque. In some countries, it is difficult to find out who sits on these committees – albeit in the UK for example, all of FSA's (Food Standards Agency) expert panels are open to public scrutiny. It is known that – in the US at least – there are many agribusiness insiders who have moved to the FDA (Food and Drug Administration), EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) and Department of Agriculture.

A recent report by Corporate Europe Observatory[3], a research and campaigning group in Europe financed by foundations and trusts, summarised ongoing problems with EFSA scientists and their link with industry. In April 2017, the European Parliament strongly criticised the European Food Safety Authority's draft new independence policies. These do require clear public-facing 'conflict of interest' statements, which is a step forward. However, they still fail to introduce an effective two-year cooling off period between work involving the industry and making public decisions on public safety.

On the assumption that current planned mergers succeed, there will be three giant global corporations controlling the vast majority of the world's production (supply, sale, and PR) of pesticides. Those corporations' assets and cash reserves amount to many billions of US dollars, overshadowing many national economies.

Who has the power to disrupt the current agro-industrial system? Farmers have difficulty taking power because they are (in the UK at least) fragmented and because they are locked into supplying a retail model which requires them to overproduce.

Avoiding polarisation

It was strongly argued that focusing solely on the negative elements of many food and farming issues risks overshadowing many of the positive developments taking place in the wider sector. There is surely value in finding common ground, rather than rushing to polarise debates that are

[3] https://corporateeurope.org/sites/default/files/attachments/recruitment_errors_-_june_19_update.pdf

seldom 'black and white'. In terms of pesticide use, nobody is deliberately setting out to 'poison' people, animals or the environment by their activities, and there is a big effort to reduce pesticide use through targeted approaches and precision farming systems. It is highly expensive to develop a new pesticide and there is a financial driver for an agrochemical company to prolong the life of a product through integrating its use with other control measures.

Whilst there are clearly different views on many of the 'solutions', ultimately all of those working in food and farming want sustainable food production and consumption. Surely that is a good basis on which to start to find common ground and build the partnerships needed to develop a new sustainable way to produce our food?

Multi-stakeholder collaborations – when done well – can be hugely effective at moving beyond polarised stalemates and can make tangible strides forward. Only by bringing people together in a safe space can they begin to understand each other's perspectives. Informal 'back channel' routes can be just as (sometimes more) important as formal routes.

Some of the opportunities emerging around ultra-precision agriculture, integrated crop management and biological controls are regarded as exciting opportunities for farming. It was argued that some of the new opportunities emerging may make the widespread use of pesticides a thing of the past in a decade's time.

Conclusions

A common theme that emerged was the perils of short-termism. Almost everything (including political cycles!) seems to be geared for short-termism. This does not marry well with sustainability, which is inherently long-term. It is vital that the barriers to long-term thinking and long-term planning are clearly identified and removed.

There is a need to build trust among all actors in the food system. Long-term collaborations are needed and these rely on open, *trust-based* relationships. Trust rightly should be earned and – appropriately – scrutinised.

A few food and farming issues have been 'forgotten' because for the time being they have been 'solved' (although a seemingly 'solved' issue can quickly become a problem again). However, most 'forgotten' issues have just been squeezed out or assumed to be lower priority, when the reality is that they should still be very much on the radar of Parliamentarians, civil servants, corporates, civil society organisations and the public. As the issue of pesticide approval highlights, when trust breaks down and when decisions are made based solely on short-term outcomes, problems mount up.

The media has an important role to play in shining a spotlight on 'forgotten' issues and on potential solutions – in a responsible way. But other actors have key roles too – from individual citizens to campaigning NGOs, from progressive food and farming businesses to those working *with* the food system (e.g. insurance providers) and those driving the apparent 'needs' of the food system (e.g. retailers).

The risk is that there are so many issues on everyone's plates that only short-term concerns will ever rise to the surface. In the debates around what will happen to UK food and farming post-Brexit, it is vital that important food and farming issues are not side-lined further.

Speaker biographies

Sheila Dillon comes from Hoghton, Lancashire. She has been a food journalist for almost three decades, beginning work as an editor and writer at the New York based magazine, Food Monitor. In the late 1980s and 90s she and Derek Cooper covered the breaking scandal of BSE, the rise of GM foods, the growth of the organic movement from muck and magic to multi-million-pound business, the birth of the World Trade Organisation and irradiation at a time when those subjects were not even a gleam in a newshound´s eye. For 20 years, she has worked on The Food Programme, first as reporter, then producer and now presenter. Her investigative work has won many awards including the Glaxo Science Prize, Caroline Walker award and several Glenfiddich Awards. In May 2017, she received 'Radio Programme of the Year' at the Fortnum & Mason food and drink awards for her Food & Dementia programme. She is also the creator of Radio 4's first interactive grocery show, Veg Talk.

Helen Browning runs a tenanted 1,350-acre organic livestock and arable farm in Wiltshire, which supplies branded pork products to multiple retailers, independent outlets and export, and runs the village pub too! Helen became Chief Executive of the Soil Association in March 2011, having been its Chair in the late 90s, and prior to that was Director of External Affairs at the National Trust. She is past Chair and still a member of the Food Ethics Council, and has been a member of several influential commissions around agriculture and food, including the Curry Commission on the Future of Farming and Food; the Agriculture and Environment Biotechnology Commission; the Meat and Livestock Commission, and was Chair of the England Implementation Group for the Animal Health and Welfare Strategy. She was awarded an OBE in 1998 for services to organic farming.

David Pink is Emeritus Professor of Crop Improvement at Harper Adams University and is a Trustee of the Food Ethics Council. David is an expert in plant breeding and crop genetics with 30 years' experience of breeding research. Until September 2010 he led the crop improvement group at Warwick HRI, University of Warwick in multidisciplinary research in field vegetables, narcissus and oil seed rape, funded by Defra, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council and breeding companies. He is a member of various organisations including the steering group for the BBSRC's horticulture and potato initiative, and the LEAF advisory board and is an assessor for the TSB agritech catalyst fund.

(David chaired the discussion)