Food Talks – Summary notes from online discussion
FROM EMERGENCY TO RECOVERY

28th April 2020, 12.00-13.30

The overarching theme of our #FoodTalks in 2020 is '*We are all emergency respondents now*.' We want to explore in what ways our food systems need to be transformed in order to tackle the intersecting climate, nature, obesity and democracy emergencies – and now, urgently, the Covid-19 pandemic. The coronavirus is proving devastating for people and businesses alike. It is also putting the food sector through its toughest test in living memory.

The UK will bounce back, but let's not bounce back to business-as-usual. Let's reset how our food systems work and make them fair for all. In our first #FoodTalks of the year, we looked at the initial emergency response to the crisis. Amidst the distress, uncertainty and sporadic stockpiling that the pandemic has unleashed, we have seen people, organisations and communities responding in amazing ways. But emergency food aid is a short-term response. How do we ensure we do not further entrench a model that doesn't tackle root causes, and instead focus on resilience?

In this, our second #FoodTalks, we explored how we can switch **from emergency to recovery** in our response. The NHS was born following WWII. What will emerge from COVID-19? Once we are through the worst of this pandemic, what opportunities might there be to build the foundations for a new world and new food systems? How can we help food systems bounce back onto a more resilient, fairer path? We, as a collective, need to discuss what resilient food systems mean and what practical steps we should take to create lasting positive change.

In challenging times, it is important to carve out spaces to discuss the issues we face, to share thoughts, experience and expertise, and to work out ways to collectively move forward. This event was an online discussion, hosted by Dan Crossley, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council, and included short contributions from food, economic, and systems change experts:

- **Trewin Restorick**, CEO of Hubbub
- **Henry Leveson-Gower**, founder/ CEO, Promoting Economic Pluralism; editor, Mint Magazine
- **Jyoti Fernandes**, Landworkers' Alliance
- **Professor Corinna Hawkes**, Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London
- **Pete Ritchie**, Director of Nourish Scotland and member of the Food Ethics Council

The event was aimed at people working to create positive change in the food system (including London Food Link members) and members of Impact Hub Kings Cross, but was open to all.

The following notes are a summary of the many questions, insights, experiences, and knowledge shared between the four speakers and 250+ participants. **The video recording can be found here.**

#FoodTalks is brought to you by a partnership of the Food Ethics Council, Impact Hub Kings Cross, Organico, and London Food Link, part of Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming.

Identifying resilience in the current crisis

The current economic situation is unusual. Most economic crises are brought about under the normal cycles of capitalism. This crisis was generated externally by a drastic cut to consumption. Food is an exception to that, since all still need to eat, and so the food sector is in a somewhat unique position.

Resilience: The capacity of a food system to ensure that all people are eating healthy and secure diets whilst supporting decent and fair livelihoods, and protecting nature and society in the face of shocks.

Diversity is a foundation principle to creating resilience. This means diversity in supply chains, sources of food, businesses, skills, etc.

Where do we need to start creating this resilience? There are many dimensions to food systems, including:

- healthy eating
- better economic margins
- flexibility in decision-making structures to build resilience in governance
- strong community connections
- no environmental degradation activities

It makes sense to learn from instances where we see resilience in the existing system and learn how to scale up the networks and infrastructures which have created these examples. This could be done by:

1. **Performing a food systems resilience audit:** focusing on assets, assess where there are examples of resilience already, i.e. positive deviants, across the food supply chain.
2. **Analysing what has enabled these instances to occur:** finding out which policies, economics and structures have created resilience will help us work out how to scale them up.
3. **Creating an economic plan for food,** based on this information, that explicitly creates resilience. The government will be focussed on rebuilding the economy in the coming months and so we need to work out how resilient food systems can align with that aim.

Below are some of the positive deviants' that speakers and participants identified.

Positive shifts during COVID-19 in…

… narrative

- There has been a shift in government narrative, from sustainability to resilience. This requires a broader conversation on the fairness of food systems, it is about creating more sustainable agricultural systems that produce less waste and can cope with future shocks (including impacts of Brexit and the end of CAP).

… issue focus
- There is increased attention on food, where it comes from and who produces it.
- (Single-use) Plastic has fallen off the radar, but has been replaced by other issues, such as climate change.

… community and connection
- This period has been about physical distancing but social connection. (1) Connection to local food (2) Connection to care and community (albeit in new forms) (3) Connection between food, nature and seasons.
- There has been a stronger connection between producers and the general public due to the diversification of food sources (away from the dominant supermarkets) and through this, a shortening of supply chains.

… cooking and eating habits
- Hubbub's survey shows that 44% of people are enjoying cooking more since the restrictions began and 47% of people are enjoying spending more time eating with their family or housemates. Over a third of people see the lockdown as an opportunity to improve their cooking skills, increasing to almost half amongst 16 to24-year-olds.
- Over half of people are valuing food more with 48% saying they are throwing away less food. Of those wasting less, people say they are planning meals more carefully (51%) and are getting better at using leftovers (41%). People are also making better use of their freezer, and now giving more accurate portion sizes and leaving less on the plate.
- Respondents also said they wasted less food thanks to meal planning, portion control, better use of leftovers and greater use of freezers). This is, of course, only representative of those who responded to the survey and other sources indicate a rise in food waste instead.

… diversification of food sources
- Hubbub's survey also shows that a quarter of respondents are buying better quality food as they are not going out or spending money on other things. While more than a third of people are supporting smaller/local businesses more than ever before, 43% say they are buying fewer takeaways as they are worried about contamination.
- There are signs that this will continue once the restrictions are over. The majority (89%) of those who have made changes to how they access food say they will continue to use at least one of the new shopping alternatives to supermarkets once the restrictions have ended. Many will continue to use local shops, including butchers, farm shops and greengrocers. This is reflected in comments from the foodservice and retail industries.
- There has been a huge increase in demand for box schemes (113% increase in England and Wales). Some farmers are seeing up to a 400% increase in demand. Meanwhile supermarkets have struggled to cope with the demand for home deliveries. Local box schemes have expanded to respond to it, and this could mean long term customers as a result.

…small farms
- Agroecological farms have been generally resilient to the crisis, with farms usually smaller in size and diverse in types of produce, which means they can respond more easily.
- People are wanting to support a just and green transition at the moment, and this includes a transition to small-scale, agroecological farming.

… government action

- The Scottish government has put £350m into Community Food Fund and has broadly a cash-based approach, although it would have been better to have the Right to Food incorporated into it from the start.
- Alongside the UK-wide narrative of 'Build Back Better' that is emerging, the Scottish government has developed a plan for recovery to be "fairer, greener and more equal". There is commitment to link it to a wider climate change agenda.

Key actions to enable resilience

Invest in small and local

- Pivot to a local food economy, both as part of the National Food Strategy and Scotland's Good Food Nation Plan.
- Promote new business culture and models.
- Set up a Supply Chain Transition Fund, which would help farms switch to more direct-selling models, increase horticulture, diversify farm produce on individual farms, ensuring workers' rights.
- Invest in local logistics, perhaps by setting up a Community Resilience Fund, to focus on providing access to those most in need by enabling community integrated routes to market. Increase support to grow and maintain local food supply chains. If the dairy industry was broken down by supermarkets in the 50s and 60s, how can we rebuild it? This will take more than the goodwill of customers and will require structures and investments.
- Divestment of industrial agriculture.
- Government to look at programmes to support foodservice, and crucially those relying on this source of employment to live.

> *"At the core of the local food economy are relationships. This is fundamentally as much about people as it is about ploughing." – Pete Ritchie, Nourish Scotland*

Increase employment (and standards)

- Ensure more national food security by supporting UK production (from government policy to food citizenship action).
- The UK will need jobs, which the food & farming sector can create. If workers are properly valued, respected and funded, the jobs can be fulfilling and healthy. This will be achieved with interventions including improving farm working conditions, meaning better wages, providing start-up grants and better access to land schemes, and providing affordable housing.
- More agroecological farming practices happen to need more manual labour, creating an opportunity for jobs.
- We have got Picking for Britain, could we have Regenerating for Britain? Could this kick-start environmental land management? Could it draw on people in the food sector or elsewhere who are unemployed and furloughed? Could it be a way to increase investment in our natural capital? Inspiration from the Civilian Conservation Corps in USA.

Connect, connect, connect

- Seek to turn emerging collaborations into new robust structures that will outlast the current crisis, particularly local networks and local assets.
- Connect sustainability and climate agendas with a political focus on resilience.

- Create partnerships of stakeholders in ecosystems, including farmers, water companies, NGOs, local authorities, differentiating between urban and rural experiences.
- Watch out for digital exclusion, particularly people experience poverty, or for the elderly.

Cancel international debt
- Building Back Better is dependent on not only on what individual governments do, but there must be an international deal on debt cancellation. Without it, we will be dependent on the finance community for the next ten years.

Increase diverse representation
- **There is a divide of the nation.** A Hubbub survey discovered that 43% of respondents are worried about the extra cost of providing food for their household. This rises to 59% of those aged 35-44 and 54% of those aged 25-34.
- **Intersectionality is a crucial component when collecting data.** Certain groups are being disproportionately affected by the crisis. For example, 20% single parents, 20% disabled people, 20% unemployed people report food insecurity (Scottish Health Survey 2017, 2018), compared to 8% of the general population.

Honour the social contract (government)
- Need for **foundational economy** (housing, food, power, broadband) – government duty that people have access to this.
- Need for government recognition of the Right to Food.

Nurture food-related skills
- Nurturing these extra skills developed. Although it is important to note that cooking skills alone are not the only factor affecting cooking habits, as explained by Bags of Taste.
- This include as part of children's education. Could we have a land service scheme for young people coming out of school in the same way as old-style national service? Could we have A-level Food?

Support narrative shift
- Share the picture of new diversity in shopping habits and more broadly on how food is accessed, whether it is supporting a local store, sourcing directly from producers, or growing our own.
- Shift narrative from "unskilled" to "essential" - and really reward the essential (which actually requires a lot of skills).
- Opportunity to emphasise on links between food and health. Diabetes is a major confounding factor for COVID-19 and so is obesity.
- Supporting local not from a self-sufficiency perspective but as an opportunity to re-think how we produce food.

The socio-economic forecast

The road to resilience following COVID-19 could be split into three phases:

1. **Coping**: living with COVID-19 until a medical solution (e.g. vaccine) is found – possibly a timeframe of 9-18 months.
2. **Transition**: rolling out medical solution globally – timeframe of a further c. 12 months.
3. **Recovery**: the economic depression that we are about to experience is likely to break down a lot of the economic/ financial structures and lead into a deep recession, with high, structural unemployment (as there won't be as many jobs to go back to).

What we can achieve in the 'coping' phase will spill over into the following two phases. The 'coping' phase will be characterised by:

- **Risk-based restrictions** and impacts on all sectors. In food: agriculture will probably have least restrictions where physical distancing will be *relatively* easy and since food is essential. Processing and factory work will be harder but still possible. Restaurants and bars could be facing restrictions over a longer timeframe, which will be difficult for businesses as physical distancing will not make re-opening premises economically viable. Overall, the food sector will probably do *relatively* well because the demand for food will continue. A lot will be expected of the food sector because it is likely to be doing comparatively better than other sectors.
- **Ongoing debate over revisions of support packages and benefits** will be front and centre. If people are going to follow these restrictions, social cohesion and acceptance of the restrictions will be crucial. These will need to be fair and reasonable, considering that different people are being affected differently. We already have a two-tier employment benefits system emerging, where 'lucky' people are on furloughs or self-employed getting support, versus people on universal benefits. Meanwhile government is offering loans to businesses, which do not really work well over the long-term.

Remaining questions

- How can we embed the positive social and environmental benefits created by new collaborations which have emerged in the current crisis and how can they become fixed into institutional forms that then have longer term benefits?
- How do organisations respond to the needs of the localities in which they are based? For example, will supermarkets be able to transform from logistical food hubs to intelligent food providers, able to adapt to local needs?
- How is the government going to rebuild the economy? There are talks to get the ball rolling on 'shovel-ready projects', and arguably there are many such opportunities ready to be tapped into in the food sector.
- Eating together as a community will be severely affected for a long time. What does it mean in terms of community cohesion, mental health, feelings of belonging?

As we respond to changing dynamics in complex (food) systems, we need to start where we are *now*, where the energy and potential is today. What issues are immediately relevant to people? How can we strengthen emerging relationships and encourage more collaboration? As these relationships unfold, we can learn from how systems respond to the crisis. It will also enable food issues being addressed within the context of other interrelated issues (health, gender, socio-economics, etc.), which is what will lead to learning and action that is truly systemic – and resilient – over the medium and longer-term.

Useful resources

COVID-19 shifts

- ❖ Hubbub's report State of the Nation's plate showcasing how COVID-19 is changing our eating habits in the UK. (+ contact Hubbub for access to raw data)

- ❖ Survey results showing the impacts of COVID-19 on food, commissioned by the RSA's Food, Farming & Countryside Commission, The Food Foundation, King's College London, and Guy's & St Thomas' Charity
- ❖ Eating Better analysis on 5 things COVID-19 has told us about food systems in the UK
- ❖ Nutrition amid the COVID-19 pandemic: a multi-level framework for action
- ❖ Farming through a pandemic: time for a rethink by Growing Communities
- ❖ COVID-19 and the crisis in food systems: Symptoms, causes, and potential solutions, Communiqué by IPES-Food, April 2020

Collaboration and campaigns

- ❖ Food, Farming and Countryside Commission's Road to Renewal, sharing stories emerging from COVID-19
- ❖ Sustain's campaign to keep local markets open here

Food systems

- ❖ Centre for Food Policy, City University, London, Understanding the food system: Why it matters for food policy [food systems 'flower' shared by Professor Corinna Hawkes]
- ❖ Farming and growing productivity and efficiency – a new perspective, by OF&G Organic

Health

- ❖ The Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition, and Climate Change: The Lancet Commission report

Frameworks and models

- ❖ Inspired by Elinor Ostrom and the FairShares Cooperative framework comes this analysis from our speaker Henry Leveson-Gower on how to create new equitable, purpose lead collaborative structures to 'make things stick'
- ❖ A Citizens' Assembly is a representative group of citizens who are selected at random from the population to learn about, deliberate upon, and make recommendations in relation to a particular issue or set of issues. These could be set up to discuss food issues at national but also local community level.
- ❖ Inspiring and enabling local communities: An Integrated Delivery Model for Localism and the Environment, shared by the Farming & Wildlife Advisory Group Southwest
- ❖ Landscape Enterprise Networks , a similar concept to the London Creative Enterprise Zones where food businesses and community food businesses and supply chains are supported (including information sharing and funding)
- ❖ Community Benefits Society model – and similarly in Germany with the community investment model
- ❖ Land sharing model, as described by OF&G Organic

Shovel-ready programmes

- ❖ Investment needs from Nature Friendly Farming Network

Networks

- ❖ Sustainable Food Places
- ❖ Public list of UK farms where people can buy directly
- ❖ Better Food Traders offering alternative routes to trade