



Foresight Project on Global Food and Farming Futures

Workshop report: W6 Ethics in the food chain

Roger Brownsword

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Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Ethical and prudential reasoning	4
3. Who bears the responsibility?	6
4. To whom are the responsibilities owed?	8
5. What is the scope of our responsibilities?	10
6. Trade-offs	11
7. A food responsibility check list	12

1. Introduction

The nature of the challenge of feeding a global population of some nine billion people is as much ethical as it is practical-scientific and technological. The challenge starts with the sense that, if we can feed this population then we ought to do so – that is to say, we have an ethical responsibility to do so. However, simply to secure an adequate food supply for this population is not sufficient; if we are to do the right thing, we must ensure that the various measures that we adopt to feed the world, as well as the outcomes that we generate, are compatible with the full range of our ethical responsibilities.

In this report, which is drawn from the Ethics Workshop (held on May 18, 2010), the following five issues concerning our global feeding responsibilities are addressed:

- What is the rationale for our feeding responsibilities? Is it prudential or ethical or both?
- Which individuals, groups, associations and corporations bear the ethical responsibility?
- To whom are the relevant ethical responsibilities owed? In particular, does the present generation owe an ethical responsibility to future generations?
- What is the scope of our responsibilities? Is the responsibility simply to secure food, or a nutritious diet, or a 'decent culturally acceptable cuisine'? Furthermore, if every person has sufficient food to survive, but some are able to eat much better than others, is such inequality a cause for ethical concern?
- If sufficient food can be secured but only by sacrificing other valued resources, how are the trade-offs to be made in an ethically responsible way?

The report, reflecting a recurrent theme of the workshop discussions, concludes with a check list of our ethical responsibilities relating to the feeding needs of all humans.

2. Ethical and prudential reasoning

Already there is a great deal of human suffering occasioned by the disruption of food supplies or by an inability to access food. This suffering, which is both acute and chronic, is experienced disproportionately in the developing world and, with significant increases in the global population, the problem is likely to be exacerbated. In this situation, what are the responsibilities of governments, food producers and individuals in the developed world?

We might respond to this question in a way that denies any kind of cosmopolitan or internationalist concern for others. In this parochial spirit, some in the developed world might argue that, because they have neither caused nor contributed to famines or food shortages in the developing world, they have no responsibility to take steps to alleviate the conditions that occasion such suffering. Indeed, they might argue that neither they individually nor the political communities of which they are members have any such responsibility for the basic needs of others. However, where there is an increasing recognition of the inter-dependence and practical connectedness of our occupation of the planet – a growing awareness that we are all in this together – then a more plausible starting point is that we in the developed world have responsibilities to those who are less well-off. In principle, this shared recognition might be generated by either prudential (self-interested) or ethical considerations, or by both forms of reason.

From a prudential point of view, it may be that, in the short or longer run, it is in our own interest to act on these responsibilities. For example, we might judge that our own security or trading interests might be jeopardised if we do not ensure that humans, wherever they are in the world, are adequately fed. To the extent that such prudential reasoning is ‘enlightened’ it is so only in the

sense that it reflects a keener appreciation of what is actually in our own interest.

Alternatively, it might be ethics that leads us to acknowledge these responsibilities. Ethics, of course, is a broad church, with many rival views about the criterion for right action. In some cases, it is one ethic that distinctively purports to justify a particular view; however, in the case of feeding the world, we might plausibly be guided towards recognising our responsibilities by a variety of considerations (for example, by utility, respect for human rights and human dignity, equity, fairness, justice, and so on). Accordingly, we might expect there to be a high degree of consensus amongst ethicists that we have these responsibilities to one another.

Characteristically, ethics, in contrast to prudential reasoning, does not focus on our own self-interest, but on the legitimate interests of others and on respect for them as persons. In practice, so long as prudential and ethical reasons converge in supporting our sense of responsibility, it does not matter too much why we act in the way that we do – just as we might say that, so long as we comply with the criminal code, it does not matter too much whether we do so for prudential reasons (fearing detection and punishment) or for ethical reasons (respecting the interests of others). However, where there is a tension between what is prudentially indicated and what is ethically required, there is likely to be some defection in practice – and the greater the prudential cost (the greater the cost to our own interest), the less likely it is that humans will discharge their ethical responsibilities.

It follows that, while we can assume broad agreement (agreement based on a mixture of prudential and ethical reasons) in the developed world for the proposition that we have a responsibility to address the global food problem, we cannot assume either that this is wholly ethically driven or that there will never be prudential resistance to ethical requirements. Moreover, even in the developing world, particularly in countries where there is a fear of famine, prudential measures such as stockpiling and export limitation might not only prove counter-productive, but also they might actually be in tension with ethical requirements.

3. Who bears the responsibility?

Let us suppose that it is agreed that there is a cosmopolitan ethical responsibility to ensure that all humans have access to sufficient food; and, for convenience, let us call this the 'global feeding responsibility' (the GFR). Moreover, let us also suppose that the GFR implies both negative and positive responsibilities, a (negative) responsibility not to harm, directly or indirectly, the chances of others having access to sufficient food, and a (positive) responsibility to assist those who cannot, without such assistance, access food. Then the question arises: upon whom does the burden of the GFR fall?

In principle, the GFR falls on each of us – or, at any rate, it is a responsibility that we should each take into account relative to our own feeding decisions and practices. Hence, for example, consumers in affluent societies should consider whether their purchasing practices are compatible with the feeding needs, with the food security, of others. They should ask whether their purchasing power is being used in ways that expand the range of their palette but at the expense of undernourished and hungry populations. Drawing on the idea of the equity of each person's ecological footprint, they should ask whether they are supporting violations of a principle of fair access to limited food-producing resources. However, before individual consumers can make responsible choices, they need to be properly informed—and this presupposes that others (producers, NGOs, regulators, and so on) will assist those individuals who want to do the right thing. It follows that, although individuals are far from exempt from the demands set by the GFR, the ethical lead needs to be taken by those private enterprises that are major suppliers into the food market, and by those public bodies (national, regional, and international) that determine food policy as well as setting the relevant regulatory frameworks.

We can arrive at a similar point by a slightly different route. In modern politically-organised societies, governments act in the name of the people in much more than the formal sense of making international legal commitments. As individuals, we can endeavour to do the right thing, but it is only through the acts of government that, on the international stage, we can be seen

collectively to be trying to do the right thing. If the GFR is to have the right kind of profile internationally and if it is to be implemented effectively, it is essential that the key players are in the vanguard.

Starting with policy-makers and regulators, there needs to be a broadly embedded vigilance that actions are compliant with the GFR. As Amartya Sen and others have emphasised, there are many factors that contribute to the conditions for food security – it is not just the food and agriculture divisions that need to be sensitive to the impact of their policies on food security. Right across the range of top-down decision-making, there needs to be due diligence that policies are compatible with the GFR. In other words, to do justice to the GFR, it is not enough to be narrowly focused on food; a wider-screen approach is essential.

Policy-makers also need to think through the broader and longer-term consequences of their actions. Even well-intended actions might have undesirable side-effects. For example, there does not seem to be anything immediately objectionable in the agreement made between the EU and Senegal under which Senegal gained access to EU markets in return for granting Spanish fishing trawlers access to Senegalese waters. Indeed, in the last 25 years, partly due to trade with the EU, there has been a significant decrease in malnutrition rates in Senegal. Although this has come at a cost to local fishing communities, the Senegalese Government might defend its policy, all things considered, as reasonable and rational. However, subsidies given to recapitalise the Spanish fleet – like many examples of subsidisation – can have negative impacts relative to the GFR. In this case, the subsidy, in conjunction with the trade deal, serves to enhance the Spanish fish-based diet – which can be viewed in a positive light only if policy-makers are satisfied that such protection of relatively affluent consumers is compatible with the GFR.

Increasingly, policy-makers will have to address the opportunities presented by new food technologies, for example GM and nano food products. To maintain consistency with the GFR, it is essential that technological development is not governed by the needs of the biggest countries and

corporations. Rather, food technologies should be fit for the purpose of helping the people who are most in need. There is a need for dialogue, for example, between the vulnerable in India (where one in three children is under-nourished and where we find half the hungry people in the world) and technology developers.

If regulators and policy-makers are to keep faith with the GFR, they face some complexity as well as the pressure of promoting the national or regional interest. The constraint of self-interest applies *a fortiori* to large producers and suppliers in the food market. To take a reality check: how are profit-seeking enterprises to marry their ethical responsibilities with their (self-interested) business imperatives? Where there is an acknowledged deviation from the requirements of the GFR, is it enough to signal this through the price mechanism (in effect, imposing a purchase tax on non-conforming practice)? But why should consumer purchasers, rather than corporate stakeholders, bear this cost? On the other hand, where the requirements of the GFR are met, should this be signalled through labelling information (or some equivalent strategy, such as an Internet site that lists food products that are GFR-compliant)?

4. To whom are the responsibilities owed?

The assumption that underlies the GFR is that humans, occupying the same planetary space, with common food resources, and with common needs as humans, share a responsibility for one another's basic well-being. Food is the stuff of life; we should not deprive others of food; and it is wrong to allow others to starve when we can feed them. Living humans owe this at least to other living humans; and, according to the GFR, it is irrelevant where humans happen to be on the planet. Arguably, the responsibilities are even wider, being owed also to future humans and, possibly, to some non-humans.

Is it plausible to believe that present humans have responsibilities towards future human generations? From a number of leading ethical perspectives, the sphere of responsibility begins and ends with born humans; if we wish to

act as stewards on behalf of future generations, that is fine, but the living have no ethical obligation to leave a beneficial legacy. Indeed, the fashionable claim that future generations have rights (against the current generation) seems particularly inappropriate. To be sure, the rhetoric of rights is powerful; but one of the distinctive axioms of rights ethics is that rights-holders are able to operationalise their rights (to exercise their right to free expression, and so on) and to respond to their responsibilities. One day, what are now future generations will have their chance; but their time has not yet come; and they cannot yet be treated as rights-holders.

Having said this, so long as humans are actively reproductive and plan to have children, there is a strong argument that we have a responsibility not to compromise the interests of future generations – in a sense, so long as we routinely reproduce, the rights of future generations are projected into the present. Alternatively, the kind of stewardship and collective restraint that is demanded in the name of future generations might be advocated by a communitarian ethic; and, in many places, even if ethics does not require such action, it will be supported on prudential grounds – for, these future generations are, after all, our children and grandchildren.

Might the GFR be articulated so that humans are treated as having responsibilities towards non-human animals, particularly those animals that are directly consumed or indirectly endangered by our feeding practices? As is well known, there are many ethical positions in relation to animal rights and animal welfare. No agreement is in prospect on the sharpest of these issues. However, in the present context, it suffices to emphasise that the GFR is about the responsibilities that we as humans owe to one another. To be sure, as with the question of future generations, there might well be prudential reasons that persuade us that our present (particularly meat-eating) feeding preferences are not sustainable and that, in our own interests, we need to modify our practice; but this does not flow directly, or indirectly, from the GFR.

5. What is the scope of our responsibilities?

The GFR, we have assumed, implies: (i) that we should not engage in acts or practices that harm, directly or indirectly, the chances of others having access to sufficient food; and (ii) that we should assist those who cannot, without such assistance, access adequate food. Unpacking each of these requirements involves considerable work.

In relation to the first responsibility – quite apart from paying more attention to the distinction between direct and indirect harm – further reflection is needed as to the specification of sufficient or adequate food. Arguably, this implies that one's diet is sufficiently nutritious to secure one's basic wellbeing. However, such a functional baseline might be thought to be insufficient. Some might argue that the GFR implies that there is some variety in one's food and that one has access, so to speak, to a decent culturally-acceptable cuisine. Possibly, the economic benchmark for the GFR should be that one is in a position to access a cuisine that is interesting and varied and that meets nutritional requirements. In this way, the GFR might be related to the idea of a decent minimum standard.

In relation to the second responsibility, that of assistance, it is implicit that this goes beyond occasional famine relief and rescue operations to systematic support that is designed to enable others to become self-sufficient.

Even if the GFR were satisfied, there might still be large inequalities between the rich and the poor which express themselves, *inter alia*, in access to and consumption of food. Even if the GFR were satisfied, we might think that there is something seriously wrong with the rich being able to spend more on feeding their pets than the poor can spend on feeding their children, or with the rich dining in Michelin-star restaurants while the poor cannot afford to eat out. Even if the GFR is satisfied, there remain many long-standing ethical issues about freedom and equality.

6. Trade-offs

In a world where the GFR was taken seriously, there would still be hard choices to be made between competing claimants and hard cases inviting a trade-off between conflicting values.

The hard choice problem arises where we are able only to meet the GFR in relation to A or B, but not both A and B (where A and B might be an individual or a group of persons). Should we prioritise A or B? For example, if we can only feed A by adopting large-scale farming methods but at the price of damaging the feeding supply of B (small-scale farmers), should we proceed? In some cases, it might be clear that the needs of A are greater than those of B; but where the needs are equal and each relates to basic feeding requirements, ethics has no simple answers.

The problem of conflicting values is equally intractable. Ethics is riddled with puzzles about how to choose between values or valued states that are in tension with one another. How are such trade-offs to be made? Some ethics (utilitarianism is the obvious example) rely on a sovereign metric and require a robust choice to be made; in hard cases, decision-makers should simply place their bets on the course of action that they believe will generate the better consequences. Other ethics (for example, human rights) have a rough rank ordering which allows for some conflicts to be resolved fairly straightforwardly – for example, the right to life routinely outranks the right to privacy. However, where conflicting rights are roughly equally ranked (say, the right to privacy in tension with the right to free expression), it is less clear how the balance is to be struck. There are also ethics that are pluralistic in the sense that they openly recognise a range of values and invite a case-by-case resolution of conflicts. Nowhere is there an unproblematic strategy for dealing with such hard cases.

Against this background, where compliance with the GFR creates tensions with other values (for example, with environmental integrity), we cannot expect that there will always be an easy way of resolving the matter. Sometimes, though, the direction of the trade-offs will be perfectly clear – for

example, where food shortages cause acute life-threatening conditions, the arguments for urgent remedial action will weigh very heavily (and, usually, decisively) in any balance. However, there will be cases where it will be unclear what doing the right thing requires. For example, imagine that decision-makers consult a Venn diagram with five or six circles to test, at the point of intersection, a particular policy for GFR compliance. In one circle, there are employment values, in another environmental values, in another health values, and so on. To do the right thing is far from easy when decisions are made in a context of connection, complexity, conflict, and uncertainty. In such circumstances, it is the responsibility of policy-makers to devise policy programmes that, so far as it is possible, resolve these difficulties.

7. A food responsibility check list

Each and every one of us should take the GFR seriously. As individuals, we can at least attempt to set an example. Bottom-up ethical action is not futile. However, the lead should be taken principally by policy-makers and regulators; and this applies at all levels (local, national, regional and international). Such decision-makers should check that their actions are compliant with their global feeding responsibilities (GFR-compliant). This means that they should check that:

- Their actions do not cause direct harm to the feeding requirements of others, that is, to others meeting the benchmark of a decent culturally-acceptable standard (this includes a responsibility not to exploit economic advantage in times of world food scarcity).
- They do not waste or squander food resources.
- Their actions do not violate the principle of fair access to food-producing resources.
- Their actions do not indirectly harm the feeding requirements of others (this includes the responsibility to uphold a fair system of exchange and

trade, one that does not use illegitimate subsidies and controls, as well to ensure that the dumping of food is not damaging to local producers).

- They support those who are not otherwise able to meet their feeding requirements.
- Support for others is designed, wherever possible, to develop and sustain the local capacity to maintain an adequate food supply whether through production or trade.
- They take reasonable steps to assist consumers to make purchasing decisions that are GFR-compliant.
- They do not pass over opportunities to pursue scientific stock and crop breeding in ways that promote the GFR.

Not only should regulators and policy-makers check that their own actions and policies are GFR-compliant, they should also monitor the activities of major food companies for GFR compliance and take corrective action in the event of non-compliance.

All the reports and papers produced by the Foresight Project on Global Food and Farming Futures may be downloaded from the Foresight website (<http://www.bis.gov.uk/Foresight>).

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Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to:

Foresight, Government Office for Science
Department for Business, Innovation and Skills
1 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0ET

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