

# Food Justice

The report of the Food and Fairness Inquiry



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**Helen Browning OBE**

Director of External Affairs

National Trust

Chair of the Food Ethics Council

## Foreword

The Food Ethics Council commissioned the Food and Fairness Inquiry because we were worried that issues of social justice were being underplayed in debates about food policy. The findings presented in this report amply vindicate our concern on two counts. The sheer scale of unfairness across all aspects of the food system demands urgent attention in its own right. We also saw how a fairer food system is a prerequisite for meeting our wider sustainability and health goals.

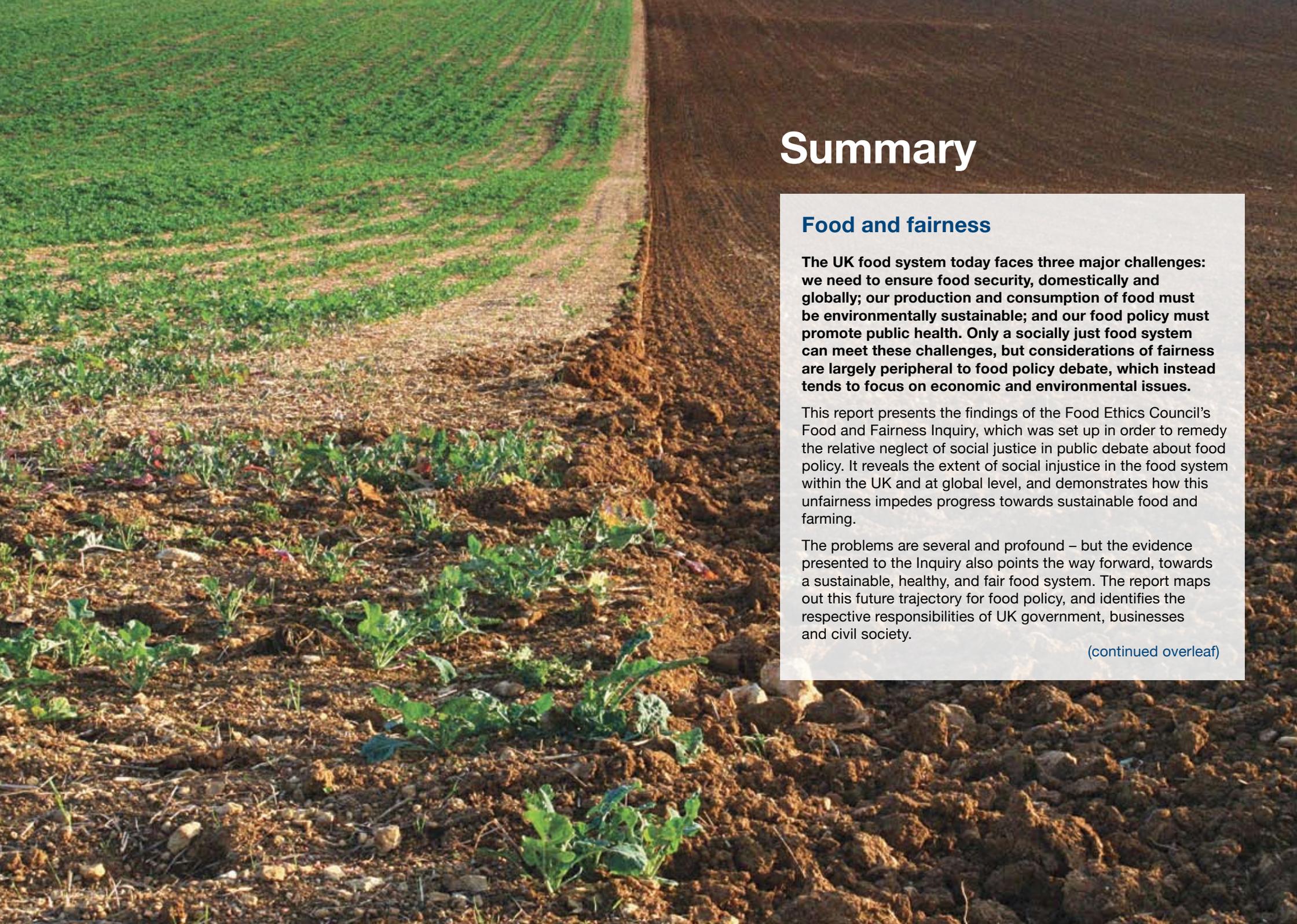
The challenges are formidable. However, I believe that the message from our Inquiry is a genuinely positive one. There are three reasons for this belief. The first is that the Inquiry committee has formulated a series of recommendations that are realistic, because grounded in the members' vast experience and expertise, and that will represent real progress towards a fairer food system. The second is the shared commitment and determination to tackle social injustice that I have seen in the course of the Inquiry – from my colleagues on the committee, from our witnesses, and through the extensive evidence that we received.

The third reason for my optimism is that the Inquiry process itself has exemplified what needs to happen in the wider world – and showed that it is possible. We brought together a diverse range of perspectives – sometime conflicting, but all equally legitimate; we challenged each other and were forced to reassess our preconceptions; and we emerged with a common understanding of the nature and urgency of the task ahead.

It has been a privilege to have chaired this Inquiry. I have every confidence that its findings will resonate widely with the ever increasing numbers of people who care about a fair, just and kind food system.

**Helen Browning**

Chair, Food and Fairness Inquiry

A photograph of a field with a dirt path and young plants in the foreground. The path is on the right, and the field is on the left. The plants are small and green, growing in rows. The soil is dark brown and appears to be recently tilled.

# Summary

## Food and fairness

**The UK food system today faces three major challenges: we need to ensure food security, domestically and globally; our production and consumption of food must be environmentally sustainable; and our food policy must promote public health. Only a socially just food system can meet these challenges, but considerations of fairness are largely peripheral to food policy debate, which instead tends to focus on economic and environmental issues.**

This report presents the findings of the Food Ethics Council's Food and Fairness Inquiry, which was set up in order to remedy the relative neglect of social justice in public debate about food policy. It reveals the extent of social injustice in the food system within the UK and at global level, and demonstrates how this unfairness impedes progress towards sustainable food and farming.

The problems are several and profound – but the evidence presented to the Inquiry also points the way forward, towards a sustainable, healthy, and fair food system. The report maps out this future trajectory for food policy, and identifies the respective responsibilities of UK government, businesses and civil society.

(continued overleaf)

(Summary continued)

## The issues

### The ethical framework

For each of the challenges facing our food system we considered three different perspectives on social justice: 'fair shares', or equality of outcome; 'fair play', or equality of opportunity; and 'fair say', or autonomy and voice.

### Food security

**Fair shares:** Global food production and productivity has increased significantly over recent decades, yet more than one billion people are hungry worldwide. The overwhelming majority of the hungry live in poor countries. Food poverty is also a serious problem in the UK, with substantial numbers of households experiencing food insecurity.

Globally, part of the problem is that many of the poorest people simply cannot benefit from the increased production of food, because they still cannot afford it, or because they cannot gain access to it. Additionally, the methods of agricultural production that have increased productivity have themselves pushed new people into poverty. Broadly, industrialisation in agriculture has benefited larger-scale producers, and undermined the livelihoods of small-scale subsistence farmers.

**Fair play:** The livelihoods of small-scale farmers have also been jeopardised by constraints on the opportunity to produce, through restricted access to the resources – such as land and capital – needed to farm; and on the opportunity to sell, through restricted access to local and global markets. The costs involved in meeting various kinds of standards are one significant barrier to export, while subsidised imports can damage the competitiveness of farmers in domestic markets.

**Fair say:** Smallholders and peasants have very limited influence on areas of domestic and international food policy that directly affect them. Agricultural research is a particularly important aspect of policy development, but priorities are increasingly determined by the private sector.

## Sustainability

**Fair shares:** Poor people and countries are disproportionately vulnerable to the effects of environmental problems, such as climate change, water scarcity and biodiversity loss. These problems compound the constraints on access to resources that are experienced by the rural poor.

Measures to address environmental problems may be detrimental to poorer consumers. If taking proper account of the environmental costs of food production leads to higher prices, then social support to people on low incomes will need to be improved accordingly.

**Fair play:** Food producers in poor rural economies often have no option but to degrade scarce natural resources, and so need support to be able to invest in more sustainable farming. Fair trade provides one model for providing this support, by giving producers a fairer return, investing in community development, and enhancing environmental integrity.

**Fair say:** Consumer behaviour needs to change if we are going to reduce the environmental impact of the food system. However, people will only make the necessary changes if they feel that their voices are being heard by policy makers, and the evidence suggests that they do not.

Industrialisation in agriculture  
has undermined the livelihoods of  
small-scale subsistence farmers

## Health

**Fair shares:** Globally and domestically, unequal access to healthy food contributes to diet-related ill-health. This is partly explained by the fact that many poor people cannot afford a healthy diet, but other social and cultural factors play a part too. There is also evidence that social inequality itself contributes to diet-related health problems.

## Geoff Tansey

Joseph Rowntree Visionary for  
a Just and Peaceful World  
Trustee of the Food Ethics Council



In this Inquiry process I've seen:

- That there is goodwill across the system around making it fairer, but that when it comes to letting go of the specific vested interests we each have, that is much harder.
- That fairness is not as simple as it seems but is an essential pillar alongside sustainability and health (for people and plants and animals) – but no, I knew that before, rather it has been spelled out more clearly.
- That what may seem fair for us in the UK/Europe does not seem so fair when you look at our history and role in shaping the world of today – with its huge degree of inequality and unfairness. And for a fairer food system and world, it is we here who need to make major changes and rethink the meaning of, and how we achieve, prosperity – as Tim Jackson reminded us very eloquently in his evidence.
- That if we want to make the system fairer then we need to change the frameworks in which people and businesses operate so that social justice is a core element of what is expected.

And finally, if ever there was a time to embrace fairness, it is now. We've seen what allowing increasing inequality, ever widening gaps between the rich and poor, can do in a system of financial fiction capitalism. Food is a lens and a connector that shows the reality of the world, and a good place to begin changing it.

**Viewpoint**  
from the Inquiry committee

**Fair play:** Some workers in the UK food sector experience adverse employment conditions, including health and safety problems. The trend towards casualisation, and the increasing dependence upon migrant labour, exacerbates the vulnerability of agricultural workers. Some workers in poor countries also experience unfair working conditions that are detrimental to their physical and mental well-being.

**Fair say:** Food labelling has been a prominent element in attempts to enable consumers to choose a healthy diet. However, many people find labels hard to understand and, in any event, nutritional content is not a priority for most shoppers. Reformulating processed foods to improve their nutritional profile offers a way of respecting people's assumptions that the food they buy is healthy. There have been relatively few attempts to involve the public in the development of policy relating to food, including on research, innovation and product development.

## The rules of the game

The issues of injustice summarised above hint at the intense pressures on stakeholders in the food system – consumers, producers, retailers, workers – which drive them to exploit each other and themselves. The Inquiry explored how 'the rules of the game' – the factors that shape how we produce, sell and consume our food – could be changed to alleviate these pressures.

## Agriculture

Agricultural employment in the UK and globally is dominated by three trends towards: fewer farmers and landowners; a growing share of the work done by landless labourers; and increasing flexibility in employment. These trends, which contribute to inequalities within the food system, can be explained in part by centuries of technological innovation and increases in efficiency within agriculture. However, they are also driven by restructuring upstream and downstream, among companies selling technology and other inputs, and among processors and retailers, which is shifting risk onto farmers.

In particular, consolidation in food retail has resulted in large businesses that are able to place great pressure on producers to satisfy a range of customer demands, including for quality, safety, price, volume and year-round availability. Producers who depend

on contracts with these retailers may have little alternative but to transfer the risk onto their workers though less favourable conditions.

The UK has seen efforts to address both the causes and the symptoms of the pressures that consolidation places on producers and their workers. For instance, the new Grocery Supply Code of Practice is designed to govern the relationship between supermarkets and their suppliers, while the role of the Gangmasters Licensing Authority is to ensure that suppliers of labour to agricultural and related industries comply with their legal obligations.

## Processing and retail

The restructuring of retail is a consequence of financial and other competitive pressures experienced by retail businesses, and of the regulatory environment in which they operate. To attract consumers on a competitive basis, retailers need to ensure that their products satisfy a wide variety of standards – on quality and safety, but also in relation to social and environmental concerns. These standards bring benefits to consumers, and can benefit some producers by facilitating trade. However, the costs of compliance mean that they also have the effect of excluding many smaller producers from market.

Another source of pressure on retailers is the expectation of short-term returns on the part of shareholders and financial intermediaries. There is a potential tension between these expectations and the interests of other stakeholders – such as corporate social responsibility departments, producers and workers – who might favour longer-term investments in environmentally and socially responsible business activity. The recent entry into the food sector of high-risk, high-return financial instruments such as private-equity funds has heightened this potential for tension, although the effect varies according to the particular circumstances of the food business concerned.

## Consumption

Consumers influence retailers in different ways. Retailers invest time and money in understanding (and, in their turn, influencing) the aggregate effects of consumer demand. But at the individual level, the ability of consumers to shape the retail environment is limited – their purchasing options are heavily constrained by retailers' decisions on stocking, sourcing, price and promotion.

The growth of 'ethical consumption' reflects consumers' desire to pursue ethical and political values through their consumption.

Consumers want to pursue ethical and political values through their consumption

This form of value-based consumption has had a demonstrable positive impact on the lives of many farmers and communities in poor countries, although there are inevitable variations in its impact. However, inasmuch as basing purchasing decisions on social and environmental values carries a higher price tag, it is not even an option for many people, notably the 20% of poor households who regularly reduce or skip meals because of financial constraints.

## Recommendations

On the basis of the evidence presented to it, the Inquiry committee proposes the following recommendations for promoting social justice in the food sector (section numbers refer the sections of the report that set out the evidence and analysis in support of these recommendations):

- The UK government should play a leading role in international efforts to reduce food price volatility, by strengthening financial regulation to limit speculation on the price of food – for example, supporting European efforts to set up an agency with a similar mandate to the US Commodity Futures Trading Commission – and by rebuilding public commodity stocks. (Section 3.1.1)
- The UK government should hold the European Commission to its commitments that poor countries should be free to protect their fragile food and farming sectors, ensuring that European Partnership Agreements carry no risk of dumping. (3.1.2)
- All publicly-funded institutions undertaking research to promote food security should explicitly ground their research strategies in the principles set out by the IAASTD report and build on the experience of relevant initiatives such as Fairtrade. (3.1.3)

## Elizabeth Dowler

Professor of Food and Social Policy  
in the Department of Sociology  
University of Warwick  
Trustee of the Food Ethics Council



As an academic working mostly on food and poverty interventions, and consumer perceptions, I have found taking part in the Food and Fairness Inquiry challenging and inspiring. Challenging because, though I am familiar with the written evidence, I was stunned by the breadth and depth of injustices within the food system. Hearing directly from witnesses, seeing video and slides, being confronted by real people's day-to-day realities, has been eye-opening, shocking and often unforgettable. Inspiring because we have heard from so many people working to bring about changes, sometimes in major elements, sometimes in small things, which contribute to addressing injustices, and thus point to better ways of doing things.

And as a committee, coming from different positions and thinking, we managed to confront seemingly intractable problems with courtesy and understanding, and so embodied new ways of working to effect change. I know from my professional work and own life that many people in the UK and elsewhere want food for themselves and their families that is justly grown or reared, processed, retailed and consumed. This is even more true as almost apocalyptic visions of climate change and economic recession are piled onto existing problems. The Inquiry has produced powerful key messages for politicians, for those with responsibilities for food at all levels of British society and beyond, and for ordinary people, in their capacity as citizens, consumers and voters as well as nurturers. Acting on these messages will go a long way to meet people's desire for fairer food.

**Viewpoint**  
from the Inquiry committee

- The UK government should show international leadership in developing resource-based accounting systems that take proper account of natural, human and community capital (in addition to physical and economic capital). (3.2.1)
- Identifying and supporting fair models of investment should be a key plank of sustainability strategies for food businesses and government. (3.2.2)
- The UK government should work with the OFT and consumer groups to develop publicly accountable mechanisms whereby businesses can collaborate to make progress on sustainability that is in the public interest. (3.2.3)
- Benefit levels and minimum wage rates should be set at levels that allow families to achieve a minimum socially acceptable standard of living, including adequate food and dietary intake, as defined by members of the public. (3.3.1)
- The UK government should reinforce measures that improve health and safety throughout our food supply chains, including enforcement and support for training. (3.3.2)
- Public or community involvement should be a requirement for all public sector or publicly financed programmes and strategies relating to food, including initiatives around innovation. (3.3.3)
- The UK government should review the public interest consequences of international trends towards corporate consolidation, and UK and EU options to influence those trends. (4.1)
- Businesses should, in their CSR reports, state their tax payments as share of turnover for each country in which they operate. (4.2)
- As the UK's biggest consumer, government should ensure that it only buys food that has been produced fairly and sustainably, and can help the people it serves eat a healthy diet. (4.3)

## Key messages

The Food and Fairness Inquiry was motivated by the concern that policy debate around sustainable food and farming does not attach due weight to issues of social justice. In addition to proposing the recommendations above, the Inquiry committee also formulated a series of 'key messages' that encapsulate how the debate about food policy needs to change, in order to reflect the seriousness of social justice issues, and the ways in which they relate to

concerns about environmental sustainability and public health. The rationale for these messages, set out below, is explained in Chapter 5.

- Food policy is central to meeting recognised ecological sustainability challenges.
- Social justice issues around food are at the heart of recognised environmental and health challenges.
- Addressing food-related social injustice mainly requires wider social and economic policy solutions.
- Social justice does not mean treating everyone the same.
- We need to find ways to engage people, and society as a whole, with food policy.
- To enable people to change their behaviour, we need to address the inequalities that underpin their behaviour.
- ‘Cheap food’ is no longer a legitimate social policy objective.
- The market, including the financial market, has to work differently.
- There are limits to what can be achieved through market mechanisms, so we need government leadership.
- The current international trade regime presents significant obstacles to addressing social injustice in food and farming.
- All stakeholders face limits to what they can achieve themselves but, for their commitment to social justice to be credible, they must openly support whatever measures are necessary but beyond their own capacity.

The UK is an unfair society in a deeply unfair world. The Food and Fairness Inquiry has shown how all of us – in government, business, and civil society – are to some extent implicated. This means that we all have responsibilities for doing something about it. We can each do much more before we run up against the limits to our responsibilities.



# Food Justice 1. Introduction

**Two years is a long time in politics. In July 2008, the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit published the results of its major review of food policy, *Food Matters*. The review had been prompted by the recognition that the government needed an over-arching food policy that would enable it to achieve three core goals:**

*“to ensure our long-term food security, the sustainability of food production and consumption, and the promotion of public health.”<sup>1</sup>*

*Food Matters* was, by and large, welcomed by people with a stake in the food sector as it laid the foundations for a coherent policy approach. The Food Ethics Council (FEC) was among those endorsing the report, though with reservations. In particular, the FEC was concerned that *Food Matters* did not devote sufficient attention to social justice issues in food and farming.

Social justice is, or should be, central to all three of the policy aims at the heart of *Food Matters*: food security, sustainability and public health. Food security is inherently an issue of social justice, as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation’s (FAO) widely-cited definition makes clear:

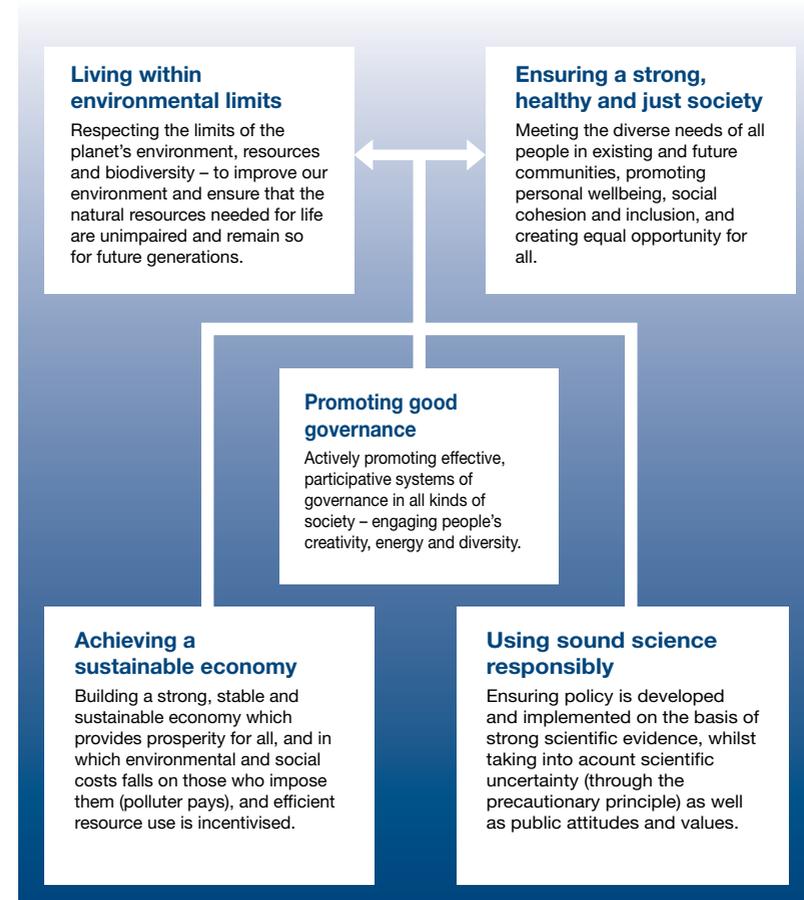
*“Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”<sup>2</sup>*

The relationship between social justice and sustainability is perhaps less immediately obvious, but the framework for sustainable development that has been in place for the past five years in the UK again highlights the importance of social justice considerations such as “ensuring a just society” and “creating equal opportunity for all”. Figure 1 (see facing page) shows how these considerations feature in the overall framework.

Regarding public health, the recent ‘Marmot Review’ of health inequalities is just the latest in a series of studies to confirm that

*“[c]reating a fairer society is fundamental to improving the health of the whole population.”<sup>3</sup>*

While *Food Matters* did recognise the social justice dimension to food policy, this recognition was not carried through into its analysis and policy proposals. In this relative neglect of social justice, *Food Matters* conformed to a wider tendency in food policy debate. As a rule, the environmental and economic pillars of sustainable food receive far greater attention than the third pillar of social justice. Where social justice concerns are considered in policies on food security and health, they are generally treated superficially, tackling the symptoms rather than the underlying causes.



**Figure 1:** The UK framework for sustainable development.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, unfairness in our food system is not being adequately addressed. Furthermore, social justice is so central to the aims of ensuring sustainability, food security and public health that those goals cannot be met without making our food system fairer.

It was on the basis of these considerations that, in the summer of 2008, the FEC decided to commission the Food and Fairness Inquiry. There have been a number of significant, and relevant, developments during the two years that it has taken to establish, conduct and conclude the Inquiry. The Labour government’s *Food 2030*<sup>5</sup> strategy, published in January 2010, retained the three-fold emphasis on food security, sustainability and public health. However, our own report is published in the early months of a new Conservative-Liberal

## Andrew Opie

Food Policy Director  
British Retail Consortium



The BRC was happy to be part of the Inquiry.

Social justice is a key part of our members' businesses – they realise that a successful, sustainable business model is one based on fairness. Whilst we might not agree with all the conclusions and recommendations, we certainly agree with the thrust of the report, that we need a comprehensive approach to fairness in the food supply.

As well as fair treatment of suppliers we are also concerned with a fair deal for consumers to provide affordable, high quality, nutritious food available to all. Balancing all the competing demands on food consumption is something retailers do every day.

We believe the market is a more powerful force for good than has been suggested in the report. Supermarkets have taken a proactive responsible approach as consumers continue to demand more improvements in how their food is produced. This has led to advances in environmental and animal welfare standards and protection for workers both in the UK and the global supply chain. These high standards needn't act as a barrier to suppliers. The best retailers work with their suppliers to ensure they can raise their standards and maintain their place in the market.

There are many factors influencing the shape of our supply chain and to make sustainable changes we need comprehensive, joined up policy. We believe the report will help the current discussion on food policy in the UK and challenge all of us to consider the type of supply chain we want and how to deliver it.

**Viewpoint**  
from the Inquiry committee

Democrat government, and it remains to be seen just how much of the food strategy developed under the previous administration will be retained or whether gaps, especially those of social justice, will be filled.

Another development is that 'fairness' emerged as a shared priority across the political spectrum during the 2010 General Election. Time will tell whether this marks a genuine shift in emphasis onto social justice, but it at least provides an opportunity to review policy through the lens of fairness.

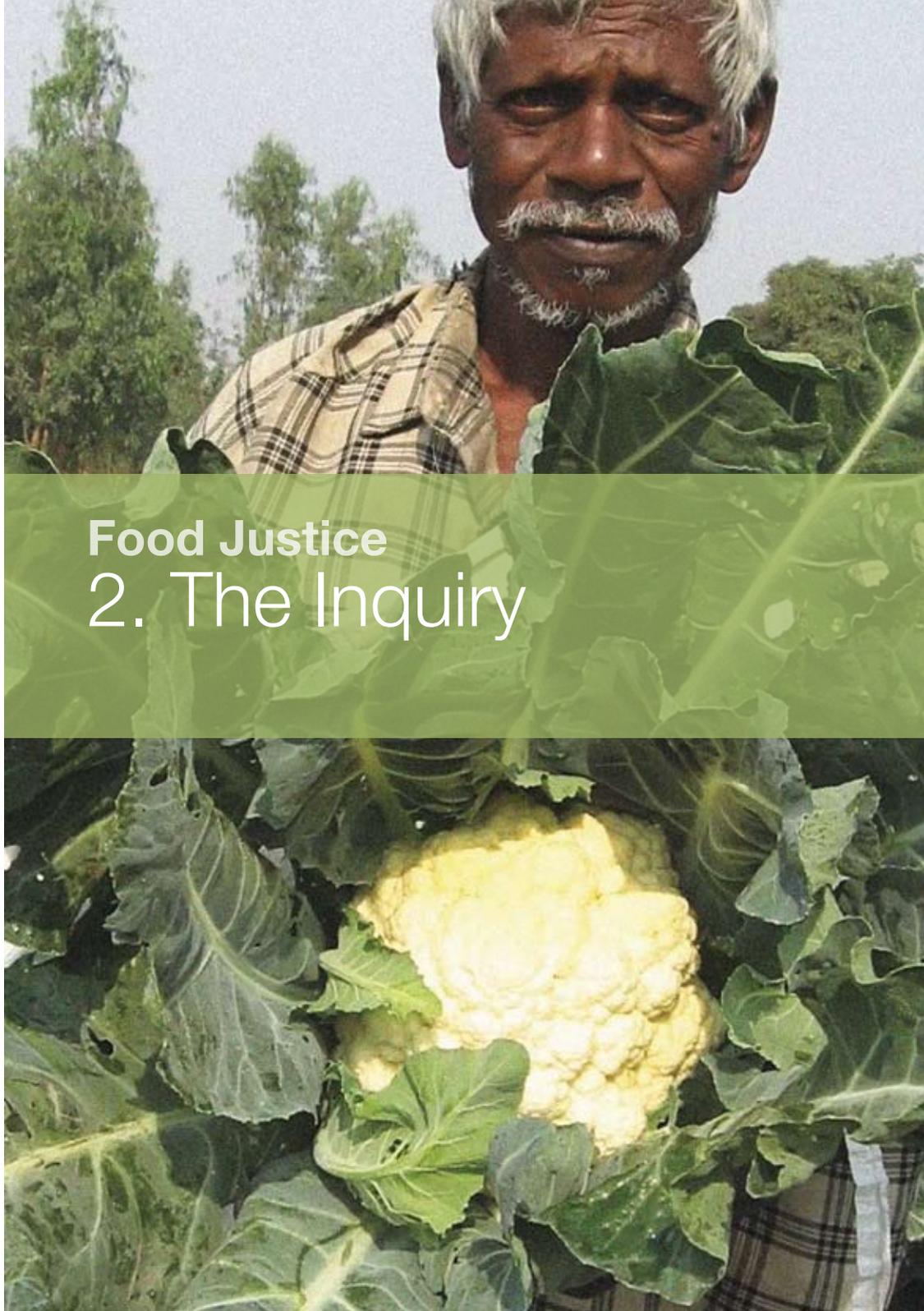
'Fairness' emerged as a shared  
priority across the political spectrum  
during the 2010 General Election

More fundamental still has been how, over the past 24 months, the full ramifications of the global financial crisis have begun to sink in. The start of the so-called 'credit crunch' has been pinpointed to 9 August 2007,<sup>6</sup> but it was only in 2008 – with the nationalisation of banks in the UK and elsewhere – that it became apparent that the relationship between the state, the private sector and civil society had changed. The growing recognition of the scale of the challenge presented by climate change, and by 'peak oil', has heightened this sense of a changed world, one where 'business as usual is not an option'.

So, the political landscape has changed significantly since the Food and Fairness Inquiry was first conceived. Does this mean that the subject matter of the Inquiry is less relevant than was envisaged two years ago? The evidence and analysis presented in the following chapters suggests precisely the opposite. The Inquiry findings conclusively establish that (i) promoting social justice must be a priority across the range of food policy issues; (ii) social justice is a prerequisite for achieving wider sustainability and health objectives; and (iii) changing our relationship with food – what we eat and how we produce it – will play a key role in meeting the profound challenges that confront us all today.

Chapter 2 sets the scene for this analysis by describing the Inquiry process, how the committee gathered evidence and the ethical framework for its deliberations. Chapter 3 presents the Inquiry's findings on the main social justice issues that the committee found

in the food system, structured around the three strands of policy debate identified above – food security, sustainability and health. Chapter 4 develops this analysis by looking at the rules of the game, examining the structural factors that lie behind the problems and tensions that the Inquiry revealed. Drawing on this analysis, Chapter 5 identifies the key messages that emerge from the committee’s deliberations, and what they mean for the terms of policy and public debate. Chapter 6 spells out responsibilities that this analysis implies for government, business and civil society.



## Food Justice 2. The Inquiry

**Harriet Lamb**

Chief Executive Officer  
Fairtrade Foundation



This report goes to the absolute heart of what the Fairtrade movement is grappling with – that an effective and sustainable food policy must take account of social justice. We know there is no such thing as a free lunch. So the question is: Who will pick up the bill? Will it continue to be the poor and the environment, or can we ensure that the better-off pay their dues?

This report demonstrates the imperative to consider food policy together with other global challenges, such as inequality, global security and climate change. We cannot treat these as unrelated challenges to be met through isolated policy approaches, and this Inquiry goes a long way to demonstrating how the thinking on the ‘food security’ challenge can be considered in a coherent framework.

Ensuring future food security is about far more than simply producing more food. Market signals must be changed or regulated to ensure that food is produced and directed to those that need more, rather than those that already consume too much. The fact that this report engages not just with ‘fairness’ of opportunity but also fairness of outcome and fairness of voice is critical.

The report recommends that “all publicly-funded institutions undertaking research to promote food security should explicitly ground their research strategies in the principles set out by the IAASTD report and build on the experience of relevant initiatives such as Fairtrade”. It is indeed vital that food policy is not just realigned to include social and environmental objectives but is also based on comprehensive research and, above all else, practical experience.

**Viewpoint**  
from the Inquiry committee

## 2.1. The Inquiry process

**This report presents the findings of the Food Ethics Council’s Food and Fairness Inquiry.** The Food Ethics Council (FEC) commissioned the Inquiry in order to address the neglect of social justice issues in policy debates about food and farming. The Inquiry was undertaken by a committee of 14 members, seven of whom were members of the FEC, while the remaining seven were leading figures from sectors and communities with a stake in food and farming.

A crucial feature of the Inquiry process was the representation of a wide range of perspectives on the Inquiry committee. This safeguarded the integrity of the process, by ensuring that conflicting interests and analyses were brought to bear on the issues under investigation. It also contributed to the value of the process itself, as a means of engaging this group of influential stakeholders in debates that genuinely challenged their existing understanding of the issues. The committee members are listed in the inside back cover, and their individual comments on the findings punctuate this report.

The terms of reference of the Inquiry were:

*“To examine whether, in government, businesses and the public, we are doing enough to ensure food is produced and distributed fairly. What are our responsibilities and what are their limits?”*

The Inquiry was formally launched in June 2009, with a public call for evidence setting out the issues that would fall within its remit (see Figure 2 overleaf). During the course of the Inquiry, more than 100 items of evidence were submitted. The evidence presented in these submissions was supplemented through background research undertaken by the Inquiry Secretariat. The call for evidence, a note of submissions, and the dossiers of background research can be found at the Food Ethics Council website: [www.foodethicscouncil.org](http://www.foodethicscouncil.org).

As well as considering the evidence, submissions and other relevant research and statistical data, the Inquiry committee held three hearings during Autumn 2009, where expert witnesses presented evidence on different aspects of food-related social justice. See the Appendix for details of the hearings.

## 2.2. The scope of the Inquiry

**The remit of the Inquiry encompassed all aspects of social justice pertaining to food and farming.** In exploring the *manifestations* of social justice, the Inquiry committee considered evidence relating to unfairness within the UK and at a global level. When it turned its attention to *causes and solutions*, the committee considered policies and practices that are internal to the food system, and also those that concern wider social and economic policy. In formulating its conclusions and recommendations, the committee restricted its assessment to the *responsibilities* of UK government, businesses and civil society.

This is a very broad scope. It was never the committee's role or intention to consider every aspect of social justice that fell within the Inquiry's remit. Similarly, this report does not attempt to cover every issue that the committee considered during the course of the Inquiry – let alone every issue identified in the evidence submitted to the Inquiry. Inevitably, then, there are a number of significant issues of social justice that could legitimately have featured in this report, but which are either omitted or only touched upon. Examples include the particular experiences of children; the role of the catering sector in promoting social justice; and ethical considerations relating to farmed animals.

## 2.3. Ethical framework

**Social justice is a difficult concept to get to grips with.** For some people, it implies assessing and imposing 'just deserts'. For others, social justice is more about notions of 'equality' and 'fairness'. But it is far from clear exactly what we mean when we talk about justice, equality and fairness, including how these different views of social justice relate to one another. This lack of clarity sometimes extends to the question: justice for *whom*?

Does this matter? We might not all agree on precisely what we mean by 'social justice', but that is the case for lots of the terms we use when we talk about politics and ethics, and it does not prevent us having fruitful discussions.

The reason that we need to be clear what we mean when we talk about social justice, and in particular the relationship between equality and fairness, is that we need to be able to distinguish between scenarios that are ethically unacceptable (and that therefore need to be avoided or rectified), and those that are acceptable.

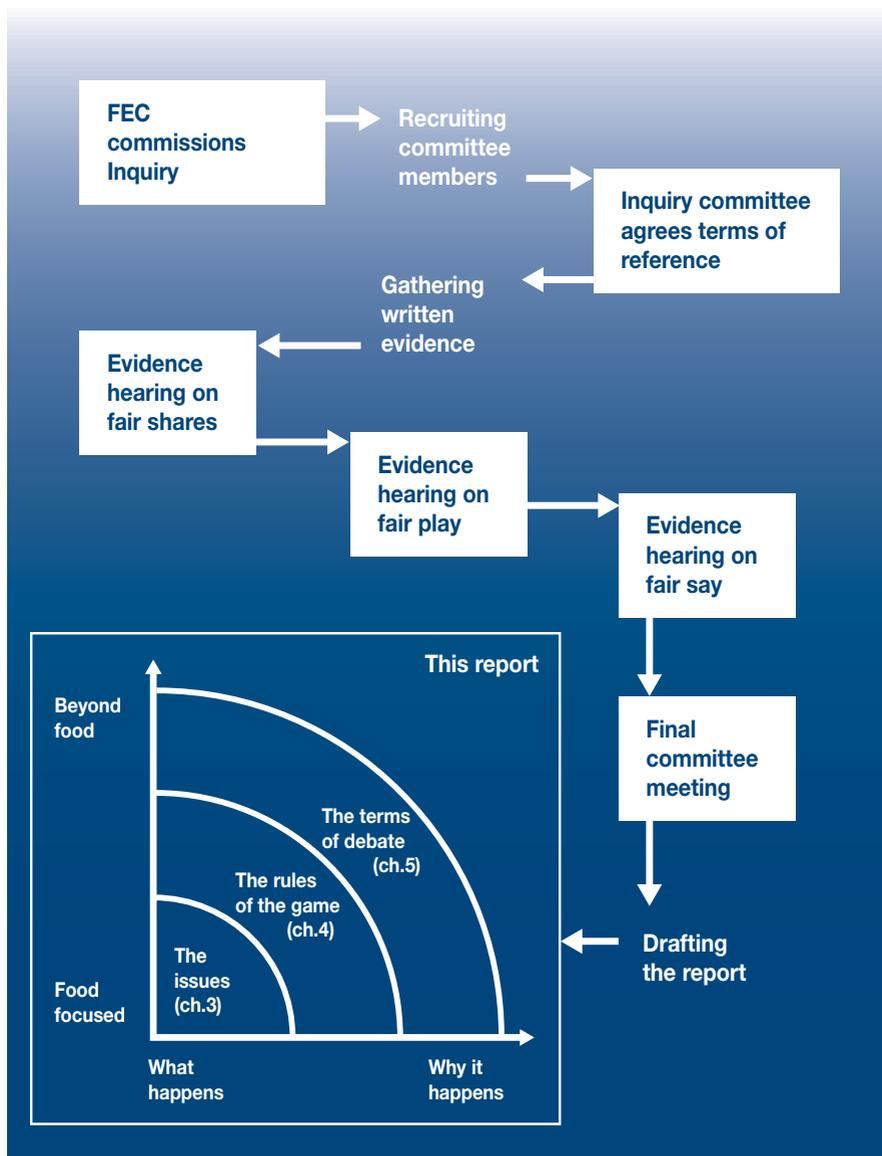


Figure 2: The Inquiry process.



## Ben Mepham

Special Professor in Applied Bioethics  
University of Nottingham

Visiting Professor in Bioethics  
University of Lincoln

Member of the Food Ethics Council



In the non-human world, biological responses to changing circumstances conform to a utilitarian logic, in which the extent to which 'benefits' outweigh 'costs' is measured in terms of reproductive success. The 'best' courses of action are those that ensure kin survival.

But humans' rational ethical principles surpass mere cost/benefit calculations by insisting that rights rather than luck should determine outcomes and that the measure of success is not biological fertility but flourishing and harmonious societies. In the same way that a scientific theory, however elegant, must be rejected if it doesn't square with the facts, so social arrangements, however efficient, must be rejected if they are unjust. It follows that justice, interpreted as fairness, demands that those factors over which individuals have no control – their gender, ethnicity, inherent physical and mental attributes, and the social, cultural and political circumstances of their birth and upbringing – must not form the basis of any discrimination in providing access to human necessities, of which food is paramount.

Seeking to ensure fairness in the global food system sounds a formidable task. But the most challenging constraint is our reticence to face its personal consequences – for achieving a world free of deprivation and exploitation depends on the 'haves' responding adequately to the needs of the 'have-nots.' That the disproportionate power of the rich over others' lives is malign is almost a truism ('power corrupts'). But this cannot be inevitable. Our real challenge is to overcome the barriers to fairness: ignorance; inconsistency; incompetence; insensitivity and insincerity.

# Viewpoint

from the Inquiry committee

Clarity will also help us to work out what action we need to take, by providing criteria for prioritising different social justice problems, and by showing how different aspects of social justice relate to one another and to other issues such as ecological sustainability.

For the purposes of the Inquiry, the committee decided to work on the basis that 'social justice' is essentially a matter of 'fairness', and these two terms are used more or less interchangeably in this report. While almost everyone would agree that a fair world is preferable to an unfair world, it is more difficult to pin down what actually counts as fairness in practice. For example, a fair society would doubtless be more equal than a world in which a billion people are hungry, but unfairness and inequalities are not the same thing. Inequalities in the incidence of diet-related disease might be unjust, but they are not necessarily so: if one person contracts diabetes and another does not, the first person might just be unlucky. However, if the reason the person gets diabetes is their poor diet, as a consequence of their social or economic status, then their ill-health does represent an injustice.

So, to understand what will constitute a fair food system, we need to be clear about which inequalities matter, and also whether they are unfair as opposed to merely unfortunate. Fairness is about what caused something to happen, not just about the end result.

To provide this clarity, the Inquiry adopted a framework of social justice comprising three of the main ways in which people understand what counts as fairness:

- Fairness as **equality of outcome ('fair shares')**. According to this view of fairness, what matters is how the food system distributes gains and burdens among different people. So it is differences in wellbeing – our health, wealth and happiness – that count in determining whether a given state of affairs is fair. Solely from this perspective, it does not matter what has *caused* the unequal distribution of gains and burdens; what matters is the end result, or outcome.
- Fairness as **equality of opportunity ('fair play')**. On this count, the essential characteristic of a fair society, or food system, is that everyone has equal *access to the means to bring about* favourable or desired outcomes. The fact that some people are healthier, wealthier or happier than others is not in itself unfair; that depends on how the unequal distribution came about. If the better-off people have gained their advantage by working harder than others, then their advantage might be considered fair. If some people are worse off because they have been denied the chance to work, then that is unfair.

- Fairness as **autonomy and voice ('fair say')**. This perspective builds on the ideas behind equality of outcome and of opportunity, by taking account of the fact that *people's needs, capabilities and values vary*. Here, fairness depends on ensuring that everyone has the freedom to lead lives they have reason to value, rather than attempting to assess fairness on the basis of 'objective' criteria (such as equality of incomes, or of educational opportunity). The notion of *voice*, or *participation*, is a crucial element of this sense of fairness – freedom to live the life I value entails that I am able to influence decisions that affect what sort of life I can lead. This means, among other things, that the fairness of a decision is as much a matter of the process by which the decision was made as it is about what happens as a result of the decision.

Each of these notions captures something at the heart of the ways most people think about fairness, but none of them is enough on its own. This has important implications for policy, because it means that promoting 'fairness' is likely to require striking a balance between different perspectives on what counts as fair – and that the appropriate balance may differ in different contexts.

The following chapter uses this ethical framework. For each of the strands of policy debate identified in the Introduction – food security, sustainability and health – it considers the key evidence in relation to fair shares, fair play and fair say. In doing so, it also shows how these three perspectives on fairness relate to one another. A further benefit of this approach is that it highlights aspects of the issues in question that are often neglected.

## Food Justice

### 3. The issues



**Chapter 1 explained how social justice is central to three challenges facing our food system: food security, sustainability and health. This chapter sets out the Inquiry's findings in relation to each of these three strands of policy debate, and proposes a series of key points and recommendations that follow from the findings.**

## 3.1. Food security

**Food security is about ensuring appropriate access to food for everyone: it is, by definition, a matter of fairness.** Although the FAO definition of food security (Chapter 1) is not unproblematic – it has been criticised for disregarding power relations in food production, and for overlooking issues of sustainability, for example<sup>7</sup> – these are disagreements about precisely how social justice features in food security, not whether it does so. However, efforts to address global food security have focused mainly on increasing the overall supply of food, paying less attention to issues of inequality. While food productivity has increased significantly – and prices have fallen – food insecurity persists.

### 3.1.1. Fair shares

**More than one billion people are undernourished worldwide, meaning that almost one-sixth of the world's population cannot meet their minimum energy requirements.**<sup>8</sup> The overwhelming majority of the world's hungry live in poorer countries with 65% living in just seven countries: India, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and Ethiopia (see box 'Rich and poor countries' on facing page).<sup>9</sup> Nearly 200 million children under five in poor countries are stunted or chronically undernourished, while close to 130 million are underweight.<sup>10</sup>

Food poverty is also a serious problem within the UK. The Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey (LIDNS), commissioned by the Food Standards Agency, found that substantial numbers of low-income households experience food insecurity (where 'low-income households' are, approximately, the bottom 15% of the population in terms of material deprivation). Thirty-nine percent worried about lack of money to pay for the food they needed, and one in five had regularly reduced or skipped meals because of financial constraints.<sup>11</sup> These domestic aspects of food security – in the context of their public health implications – are considered in Section 3.3.1 below.

As far as the fundamental global problem of feeding the world's growing population is concerned, the policy emphasis in the UK is firmly on increasing the supply of food through improved productivity. This is expected to be achieved through technological innovation (such as crop improvement, biotechnology, genetically modified crops and measures to reduce post-harvest losses), and the more efficient use of inputs such as fertiliser and water.<sup>12</sup> If there is more food to go round, goes the logic, then the inequalities matter less.

Inasmuch as agricultural productivity has risen steeply in recent history, while inequalities have proved persistent, this approach might seem prudent and pragmatic. In 1997/99, world agriculture produced 17% more calories per person than in 1964/66, despite the population having increased by 70% over the same period.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, market prices of staple foods have fallen by 55-60% in real terms since 1960.<sup>14</sup>

### Rich and poor countries

This report uses the terms 'poor(er) and richer(er) countries' to make the broad distinction that is often drawn between 'developing and developed countries' and 'countries of the global south and global north'. The exceptions to this rule are where other works are cited, or where the particular context means that an alternative terminology is more appropriate.

However, even in 2000, when food prices were at their lowest, 840 million people were undernourished; and, in 2001, 78% of malnourished children lived in countries with food surpluses.<sup>15</sup> We already produce enough staple foods to feed the global population.<sup>16</sup> As the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen and others have said, hunger exists amid plenty.<sup>17</sup>

The problem is not simply that people at the bottom of the heap cannot reach this newly available and newly affordable food. It is also that, even as more affordable food may have relieved hunger for some people in poverty, the changes in agriculture that have achieved that surplus have pushed new people into poverty.

By and large, the rapid increase in production has come from industrialisation in agriculture, based on capital-intensive inputs such as high-yielding varieties of seed, fertilisers, pesticides and irrigation systems. Since it is only larger producers who can afford

the necessary investments or who have access to sufficient credit, this trend leaves small-scale farmers at a disadvantage. As the majority of poor people in poor countries depend on smallholder agriculture, this can jeopardise rural incomes and increase vulnerability to hunger.

When hunger exists in the midst of highly productive commodity agriculture, it provides a stark illustration of this problem. The commodities in question are not only food crops but also, increasingly, biofuels and animal feed. The Inquiry committee watched video evidence provided by Ecostorm, showing how meat consumption in rich countries is contributing to an expanding soy industry in Paraguay, with severe adverse consequences for local food security, farmers' livelihoods and the environment. Land and food that had been used for direct human consumption is instead turned to food and fuel for consumption by wealthier economies.

Increasing supply to make food more affordable for the poor can push new people into poverty

These issues came under scrutiny when prices for the main global food commodities spiked in 2008, seeing a real increase of 64% in the Food and Agriculture Organisation's food price index between 2002 and mid- 2008.<sup>18</sup> While bad harvests, high oil prices, growing international demand for meat and dairy products, misconceived export bans and a policy-driven demand for biofuels all contributed to this, speculation in commodity markets is also regarded as having played a substantial role in amplifying price volatility.<sup>19</sup> Commodity markets provided a new home for capital leaving the failing US subprime mortgage derivatives that had sparked the financial crisis. Since financial institutions had been exempted from limits created to prevent speculation by traditional commodity traders, they were able to swamp futures markets. These factors, combined with knock-on effects for the real price of food around the world, saw an additional 75 million more people pushed into hunger in 2007, largely due to the price spike.<sup>20</sup>

What does taking fair shares seriously mean for food security? It certainly does not imply that agricultural productivity is irrelevant. But it underlines that tackling inequality is an inescapable and

central priority for successful efforts to reduce hunger and improve food security. This is for two reasons: first, increasing supply to make food more affordable for the poor can push new people into poverty; second, inequalities in purchasing power affect how much food people can afford even when it is plentiful, so people's relative poverty can lead to their absolute destitution. Many poor people simply cannot afford adequate food even at the lowest of prices.

**Key point:** Credible approaches to tackling food insecurity should recognise that reducing global poverty and inequality is as essential as boosting production and supply.

**Recommendation:** The UK government should play a leading role in international efforts to reduce food price volatility, by strengthening financial regulation to limit speculation on the price of food – for example, supporting European efforts to set up an agency with a similar mandate to the US Commodity Futures Trading Commission – and by rebuilding public commodity stocks.

### 3.1.2. Fair play

**Inequalities of outcome, including hunger, are underpinned and compounded by inequalities of opportunity.**

There are more than 1.3 billion small-scale farmers globally, either farming by hand or using animals for ploughing,<sup>21</sup> and most of the food in the world is grown, collected and harvested by these farmers.<sup>22</sup> Most of them are poor: 883 million poor people are directly or indirectly dependent upon small-scale agriculture for their livelihoods.<sup>23</sup> Evidence submitted to the Inquiry showed how these livelihoods are threatened by constraints on the opportunity to produce, in the form of restricted or unequal access to the resources needed to farm or find markets for their products (see box 'Producers or providers' overleaf).

Unequal access to land, for example, leaves many "ethnic minorities or indigenous people landless or with plots too small to meet their needs".<sup>24</sup> Evidence submitted by Share the World's Resources echoed concerns raised in the international press about how this inequality of access is being exacerbated by 'land grabbing', whereby countries and corporations are buying up huge areas of land in poorer countries.<sup>25</sup> Issues around access to other resources – water, seeds, knowledge, technology and agricultural inputs – are considered elsewhere in this report.

To make a living as a farmer you not only need access to productive resources but also to markets. For many farmers, particularly

small-scale producers, domestic and regional markets will be the most realistic and important destination, so measures to improve the functioning of these markets and to address issues around terms of trade assume a high priority. However, production for export is also an important option, particularly relevant to the UK's responsibilities, and evidence submitted to the Inquiry identified substantial constraints on small producers' access to global markets – primarily rich countries – over and above the constraints that arise simply from being small. In effect, food markets globally make increasing demands on producers to operate at a large scale. In order to coordinate their supply chains effectively, supermarkets no longer purchase from the wholesale market, but engage in close (yet flexible) relationships with a small number of global suppliers.<sup>26</sup> These suppliers must be able to provide large volumes of produce at a low price, with the flexibility required for just-in-time delivery, and in line with a wide range of quality standards.

### Producers or providers

The production and provision of food – by small-scale subsistence farmers through to multi-national agri-businesses – is a central theme of this report. In line with prevalent usage, the report refers to these individuals and enterprises as 'food producers'. This is a short-hand, in that it groups together a wide range of activities involved in the provision of food – including harvesting, gathering, and on-farm processing – as well as agricultural production.

The availability of produce that satisfies these standards on quality – and on safety, social and environmental concerns – is a welcome benefit for consumers in rich countries. For producers in poor countries, meeting these criteria requires sophisticated systems for implementation and control,<sup>27</sup> and entails costly documentation and certification processes.<sup>28</sup> These are requirements that, to a great extent, large organisations are best placed to satisfy, though retailers do provide some support to help smaller producers overcome the obstacles they face in meeting these standards. The effect is that price and standard pressures have pushed smaller-scale producers and processors out of the market across all sectors: meat and dairy;<sup>29</sup> horticulture<sup>30</sup> and fruit.<sup>31</sup>

FIAN International submitted evidence of how the WTO and European Partnership Agreements undermine poor farmers' livelihoods, putting pressure on poor countries to open their markets in spite of assurances to the contrary.<sup>32</sup> Subsidies create artificially low prices for food imported into poorer countries, while rules over origin, health and technical standards function as hidden tariffs on exports from those countries. As a result of Ghana's 1997 agreement on reciprocal trade liberalisation, for example, Ghana's imports of tomato puree increased by 650% between 1998 and 2004, while the national market share for domestic tomatoes declined from 92% to 57%. Evidence presented by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food stated that "[e]xport subsidies are the most harmful form of subsidies for the developing countries. They lead to subsidized products arriving on domestic markets and displacing local production..."<sup>33</sup> Government support to farmers in OECD countries amounted to US\$258 billion in 2007, representing 23% of total farm receipts.<sup>34</sup>

The WTO and European Partnership Agreements put pressure on poor countries to open their markets in spite of assurances to the contrary

**Key point:** Ensuring that small-scale producers can get access to land and markets is crucial to building food security globally.

**Recommendation:** The UK government should hold the European Commission to its commitments that poor countries should be free to protect their fragile food and farming sectors, ensuring that European Partnership Agreements carry no risk of dumping.

### 3.1.3. Fair say

**Policy interventions at local, national and international scales could correct some of the inequalities of opportunity facing small-scale producers.** In practice, however, smallholders and peasants in poor countries have very limited influence on decisions about the regulation of food and farming systems. When it comes to policy-making, "large scale farmers and agri-food corporations are

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Most, perhaps all, of the fairness issues raised during the Inquiry have been the subject of extensive previous deliberation; and the question therefore arises as to what “value-added” this Inquiry could contribute. In this context, I think that the main lesson to be learnt does not relate to a specific fairness issue, but to the merits of taking a systematic approach to ethical problems, underpinned by a philosophical framework.

There are two examples of this. First was the decision to change the name of the Inquiry from ‘Social Justice’ to ‘Fairness’. Ben Mepham – a fellow committee member – pointed out that, although ‘fairness’ is sometimes equated with justice, in common understanding it implies ‘equity’ rather than ‘just deserts’. Equity has more in common with ‘distributive justice’ (‘fair shares’) but there are alternative, legitimate, criteria for deciding what is a fair share, based on, for example, merit, effort, need, or equality.

Related to this, was the inspired decision to structure the Inquiry hearings around three alternative versions of fairness: equality of outcome (‘fair shares’); opportunity (‘fair play’) and autonomy (‘fair say’). This can be seen to have its origins in the three ‘ethical principles’ of welfare, autonomy and justice, which were used as part of the Ethical Matrix developed some years ago by the Food Ethics Council as an aid to ethical analysis of food issues.

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usually central in these debates, not small-scale producers and other citizens”.<sup>35</sup> Small-scale farmers are “comparatively neglected and marginalized”<sup>36</sup> in policy and have “little or no access to resources for political lobbying”.<sup>37</sup>

By contrast, large food and agricultural businesses are able to exercise significant influence on public debate and policy.<sup>38</sup> There are documented examples of policy in national governments and international agencies being affected by corporate lobbying.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, as multinational organisations themselves, very large businesses have a logistical advantage over nation states in influencing international agencies.<sup>40</sup>

Agricultural research is one area of policy and decision-making that has significant potential to alleviate the resource constraints facing small-scale producers and to promote food security. It can increase productivity by marginal producers, facilitate sustainable farming and help people gain secure livelihoods.<sup>41</sup> The challenge of feeding a growing population means that there is currently an unprecedented need for coordinated and effective agricultural research.<sup>42</sup> It is crucial to food security that small-scale producers have a fair say in decisions on priorities for agricultural research that will shape their opportunities for years to come.

There is currently an unprecedented need for coordinated and effective agricultural research

Globally the balance of agricultural research spending has been shifting from the public to the private sector, constraining opportunities for small-scale producers to participate in decision-making. Public spending on agricultural research has declined in recent times, including in research and development around productivity.<sup>43</sup>

Private sector agricultural research spending is focused on the most lucrative markets, which generally means farmers with capital or credit and access to markets, not smallholders on the margins of the global food system. Research is geared towards the 30 crops that now account for 90% of our nutrient intake, eroding genetic diversity and the resilience that it offers.<sup>44</sup> This has led the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) – the most comprehensive review to date of

the challenges and opportunities in improving food security globally – to conclude there is “a gap in research and technology that is relevant to the poorest”.<sup>45</sup>

### Fair trade and Fairtrade

Fair trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalised producers and workers – especially in the South. Fair trade organisations, backed by consumers, are engaged actively in supporting producers, awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade. This definition has been agreed by the main fair trade networks: the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International, the World Fair Trade Organization, the European Fair Trade Association and the Network of European World Shops.

Fairtrade certification is the process that acts as an assurance to consumers that those principles have been carried through in practice.

Fair trade is relevant to several of the issues considered by the Inquiry committee. This report considers the evidence relating to the impact of fair trade in relation some of these issues, reflecting the considerable progress that has been made to date, and also identifying some of the challenges that face the fair trade movement. The report does not attempt to provide an overall assessment of the ‘success’ of fair trade, or the Fairtrade certification process.

Correcting this is not simply a matter of increased public expenditure on agricultural research – in order to ensure that publicly funded research serves the public good, decision-making processes must be accountable. Promoting participatory research and rural development is therefore a priority, particularly by making the participation of small-scale producers a condition for most new public investment in research to promote food security.<sup>46</sup> Farmer field schools – where small groups of farmers share their experiences to develop mutual understanding, cooperative working and innovation – provide a valuable model for enhancing the role for small-scale

producers in developing their own solutions.<sup>47</sup> Initially focused on integrated pest management, these schools now address issues relating to livestock, land productivity, health and the environment.<sup>48</sup> Positive effects include increased feelings of social inclusion, improved local environmental quality and increased profit margins.

Fair trade is an example of how the private sector can channel investment to poor producer communities while fostering democracy, participation and representation (see box ‘Fair trade and Fairtrade’ on facing page). A review of research into the impact of Fairtrade found strong evidence of positive empowerment effects, including improved self-confidence and self-esteem, greater access to training, and improved market and export knowledge – in addition to positive effects such as increased democracy and levels of participation.<sup>49</sup>

However – as evidence presented by Catherine Dolan at the third Inquiry hearing showed – the challenges facing Fairtrade in fulfilling these aims are substantial. A study of Kenyan Fairtrade tea production found that, while some producers did experience empowerment effects through Fairtrade, the exclusion that some groups had experienced prior to the introduction of Fairtrade certification persisted. Women were under-represented on Fairtrade-related boards and committees, and voting for the Social Premium Committee was restricted to registered farmers, fewer than 20% of whom are women. This restriction also meant that landless people continued to be excluded from decision-making.

**Key message:** Ensuring that farmers, particularly small-scale producers, have a fair say in setting agricultural policy and research priorities is essential to building long-term food security.

**Recommendation:** All publicly-funded institutions undertaking research to promote food security should explicitly ground their research strategies in the principles set out by the IAASTD report<sup>50</sup> and build on the experience of relevant initiatives such as Fairtrade.

## 3.2. Sustainability

**Fairness has featured prominently in the UK’s overarching framework for sustainable development.** However, government policy on sustainable food and farming has to date placed the emphasis firmly on the economic and environmental elements of that framework rather than the social ones. In the food industry, it is common to talk about the environment and sustainability interchangeably. Even within the broader environmental movement,

some argue that saving the planet is a separate issue from how fairly people are treated. Since people have suffered injustice throughout history, they argue, we will not solve urgent problems like climate change if we wait to make the world fair first.

Fairness matters in its own right, in the way that some people also consider certain environmental issues, like biodiversity or the integrity of nature, to matter in their own right. However, for many environmental issues, such as climate change or water scarcity, much of the concern is about how they will harm people, and it is known that poor people are most vulnerable. In that respect, even if fairness is not seen as the priority, efforts to tackle environmental issues need to pass a 'fairness test' – that they will not make vulnerable people more vulnerable.

### 3.2.1. Fair shares

**Food production, distribution, consumption and waste contribute to environmental problems such as climate change, water scarcity and biodiversity loss.** Farming is also more exposed to their consequences than almost any other human activity.

Food accounts for about a fifth of the UK's consumption-related emissions of greenhouse gases, which contribute to climate change, rising to around a third if proportionate indirect emissions from global land use changes like deforestation are included.<sup>51</sup> Climate change is expected to present profound challenges to farming from more frequent storms, less predictable rainfall, droughts and flooding.<sup>52</sup>

Water scarcity is already a problem in many parts of the world and will get worse with climate change. Irrigated agriculture is the world's biggest water user, accounting for about 70% of abstracted water.<sup>53</sup> The share seems to be much lower in the UK but, of the 'virtual water' that we use here – the water it takes to grow what we consume – two-thirds is imported, much of it from water stressed regions.<sup>54</sup>

The story is similar on biodiversity. Food production is by far the biggest cause of land and marine species loss. Globally, over 4,000 assessed plant and animal species are threatened by agricultural expansion and intensification.<sup>55</sup> Of the thousand-plus threatened bird species worldwide, just short of 90% are threatened by agriculture. Agricultural biodiversity is itself under threat, with at least 20% of the world's livestock breeds (amongst 35 domesticated species of birds and mammals) at risk of extinction, reducing the genetic diversity needed to help us cope with a changing environment.<sup>56</sup>

Where those problems are global, like climate change, vulnerability to their effects is unevenly distributed, not only between regions and countries across the world, but according to personal circumstances and characteristics. One person in 19 from the world's poorest countries is at risk from climate change, compared to one in 1,500 in the wealthiest,<sup>57</sup> and research since the 1960s has shown that environmental hazards have been unfairly distributed by income and race.<sup>58</sup> Oxfam GB suggest that "[p]overty, more than any other factor, determines vulnerability to climate change".<sup>59</sup>

Where environmental problems are more localised, such as water scarcity, they compound the constraints on access to resources experienced by the rural poor. The degradation of water ecosystems is part of the reason that small-scale farmers often have less physical and economic access to water.<sup>60</sup>

One way of understanding the cause of these problems is that we are not paying the full environmental costs of production. We are undervaluing nature and those costs are being 'externalised'. Finding ways to ensure we pay those environmental costs – 'internalising the externalities' – is central to placing the global food system on a sustainable footing, because it provides a means of ensuring that consumers and retailers take financial responsibility for the environmental consequences of their behaviour.

We are not paying the full environmental costs of production... we are undervaluing nature

While there is broad consensus around this approach, there is an argument to say it is regressive because it would increase the price of food. One can question why these costs should automatically be translated into higher prices for consumers, rather than absorbed by retailers and their shareholders for example, but the reality is that paying the full environmental costs of production will mean higher prices. Internalising externalities should help vulnerable communities in the long-term by reducing environmental risks, but the more immediate effect will be that poorer consumers are hit hardest by the resultant price increases. While food and non-alcoholic drinks account for just 8% of total expenditure by the richest 10% of UK households, the poorest 10% spend proportionately twice that

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The Inquiry has viewed some of the inequalities and injustices of life in the early 21st century through the prism of the contemporary food system. It has posed itself challenging questions. Can the food system be fair when inequality is everywhere? Can it be truly sustainable when the global economic system, of which it is a major part, clearly is not? How are consumer and producer rights best balanced? Where do our individual responsibilities, as citizens and consumers, end? Definitive answers might remain elusive but we perhaps emerge with a clearer sense of a way forward.

I remain of the view that most of the problems, and many of their solutions, are systemic rather than food-system specific: protection of workers' rights and safety by laws fairly enforced, a social welfare safety net, education and healthcare services, and comprehensive development that creates off-farm jobs to absorb the labour no longer needed on the land. But making the food system fairer is worthwhile in itself, and there is much to be done.

Some of the most compelling evidence related to issues here in the UK, in particular the welfare of workers who have legitimately come to the UK to fill picking and packing jobs. They need better protection from exploitation and from unfair competition from those working here illegally.

And at a much larger scale, the absence of a sustainable economic model for a planet of finite resources is a problem that surely should be attracting more attention and support. Professor Jackson should not be left to plough this furrow alone.

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much, up to 17% of total expenditure.<sup>61</sup> In poorer countries, food can account for as much as 80% of household spending.<sup>62</sup>

Although pricing externalities appears to offer a market solution to environmental problems, this reasoning suggests that it may not pass the fairness test and may necessitate compensation for higher prices through welfare support for low-income households. Indeed, using green taxes to create incentives for sustainable production might sometimes be fairer. Both approaches depend on government intervention.

**Key point:** We need to value the environment more than we currently do, for its own sake and to protect vulnerable people. Pricing in the environmental costs of production will be an important part of the solution, but must be supplemented by other policy approaches, including regulation, taxation and incentives.

**Recommendation:** The UK government should show international leadership in developing resource-based accounting systems that take proper account of natural, human and community capital (in addition to physical and economic capital).

### 3.2.2. Fair play

**The Inquiry committee heard from Tim Jackson, a member of the Sustainable Development Commission (SDC), how material affluence is a factor in environmental damage.** His 2009 report, 'Prosperity without Growth' describes the 'Ehrlich equation', put forward by Paul Ehrlich and John Holdren in the 1970s, which has it that "the impact (I) of human activity is the product of three factors: the size of the population (P), its level of affluence (A) expressed as income per person, and a technology factor (T), which measures the impact associated with each dollar we spend".<sup>63</sup> In practice, increases in global per capita incomes (A) have outstripped decreases in the impact intensity of the money we spend (T), meaning that there has been an increase over recent decades in environmental impact per capita across a number of issues, including carbon emissions.

While part of this global rise in affluence reflects people coming out of poverty, it also includes rising incomes among the wealthy in rich countries. The best efforts to measure subjective wellbeing – how happy people feel – suggest that rising incomes in rich countries make little difference. On that basis, argues the SDC,<sup>64</sup> people could be as happy and prosperous, and have a lower environmental impact, if per capita incomes in rich countries ceased to grow. If

incomes kept growing for poor people, then inequalities would fall. Thus, reducing inequalities in income, with the opportunities it would seem to present, would make a significant contribution to living within environmental limits.

Yet inequalities of opportunity are central not only because of the environmental impact of high spenders, but also because a sustainable economy needs new forms of investment, and poverty is a barrier to that. Poor rural communities may degrade scarce resources out of vital, immediate need, and struggle to invest in tree-planting, agroforestry, water conservation or other projects that have a long-term return. Just as contemporary capital markets and financial structures demand a high and short-term return on their investments, so too, of necessity, do people living in poverty.

A sustainable economy needs new forms of investment, and poverty is a barrier to that

In the food sector and beyond, fair trade attempts to address this constraint by giving producers a fair return and investing in community development. The evidence presented by Catherine Dolan confirmed that many producers do receive economic benefits through stable minimum prices and the social premium – but again highlighted some of the remaining challenges in fulfilling the Fairtrade promise of a better deal for disadvantaged producers and workers. For example, long supply chains still exist for some products, undermining the aspiration to create secure, long-term partnerships to underpin community investment. There is also a concern that increasing demand for ‘ethical’ products could block out small producers, as larger co-operatives assume a greater role in meeting demand (see box ‘Ethical consumption’ on facing page).<sup>65</sup>

Notwithstanding these concerns, fair trade provides a rare way for consumers to tackle inequalities of opportunity through their purchasing. Built around mutual and industrial prudential society principles, fair trade connects ownership to production, and ownership and production to those who are drawing value out of the enterprise. It is one of several new models of investment and ownership that have developed within the food sector. Other examples include rural microfinance schemes and, in rich countries,

initiatives such as community supported agriculture, local public-private partnerships and the UK’s Landshare scheme.<sup>66</sup> The common factor is that they distribute surpluses in ways that are fairer, that support community, and that enhance environmental integrity. The Sustainable Development Commission is currently considering how such principles could be taken on within larger-

### Ethical consumption

Consumers’ increasing commitment to ensuring that their consumption reflects their ethical values has important implications for food-related fairness. This trend is widely referred to as ‘ethical consumption’. This is a convenient short-hand, but it carries the risk of suggesting that ethical action on the part of consumers is primarily a matter of selecting (and paying more for) an ‘ethical’ product instead of an ‘unethical’ one. As the analysis presented in this report shows, this would be a misleadingly narrow view of the ethical responsibilities – and opportunities for ethical action – that we experience in our roles as consumers.

This also raises a wider question of how our behaviour and obligations as consumers relates to our status as citizens. Because much of the analysis presented in this report concerns the production and consumption of food, people are frequently referred to as ‘consumers’. This should not be read as suggesting that our obligations as consumers are more important than our wider responsibilities as citizens.

scale investment structures, such as venture capital, risk capital financing and institutional investment.

**Key point:** Since affluence and poverty can both cause environmental damage, equitable models of finance must be a priority.

**Recommendation:** Identifying and supporting fair models of investment should be a key plank of sustainability strategies for food businesses and government.

### 3.2.3. Fair say

**Just as new models of investment that promote equality of opportunity are crucial to tackling environmental problems, so is giving people a fairer say in decisions affecting the environment.**

Put simply, reducing our environmental impact depends on changes in consumer behaviour, and the evidence suggests that people will only make those changes if they feel that their voices are being heard and that others are doing their bit too.

That consumer behaviour needs to change is accepted not only by environmental groups, but also by government and by leading businesses. *Food 2030* encourages consumers to “[u]se their influence and spending power to support those who produce sustainable and healthy food”,<sup>67</sup> while Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu and the World Economic Forum argue that “[w]ithout a fundamental shift in the way goods and services are consumed, the world faces the prospect of multiple, interlocking global crises for the environment, prosperity and security”.<sup>68</sup> Why? Inasmuch as consumption growth continues to outstrip increases in production efficiency (Section 3.2.2), there is a strong case that our economy will only become sustainable if we can flatten or invert that trajectory – this underpins the SDC’s argument for ‘prosperity without growth’. Moreover, projections suggest that we cannot meet key environmental targets, say for carbon reduction, simply by producing food more efficiently.<sup>69</sup> Even for technological optimists, who question such projections, considering changes in consumer behaviour as well as in production is prudent, as it keeps more options on the table and increases the opportunities to discover ‘win-wins’ – policies that square multiple environmental, social or economic objectives.

The Sustainable Consumption Roundtable – organised by the Sustainable Development Commission and the National Consumer Council – found that consumers were not keen to assume responsibility for ethical decisions about sustainability.<sup>70</sup> Participants in the project assumed that these decisions had been taken ‘upstream’ by someone else, and that was the way they wanted it, leaving them free to make choices on the basis of preferences, price and quality. Where consumers do want to assume this responsibility, they do not feel equipped to do so. At the third Inquiry hearing the committee heard from Tim Jackson how consumers feel that they have been “excluded from the conversation, sold a vision of consumption that does not compute”. They are expected by the market to make decisions based on price and quality, but asked by society to base their decisions on environmental and other sustainability criteria. Wherever high quality or low price do not tally with a lower environmental footprint, they are being asked to behave

irrationally, opting-in to promote the public interest while others get a free ride.

Other studies have found evidence that the wider ‘democratic deficit’ is reflected in policy on food and farming. With regard to food and sustainability, consumers “feel powerless, unable to impact the big picture, locked into high levels of harmful consumption”.<sup>71</sup> Many consumers – and farmers and workers – feel that food policies do not represent their needs or interests, and that they cannot influence these decision-making processes.<sup>72</sup>

Consumers “feel powerless, unable to impact the big picture, locked into high levels of harmful consumption”

Sampling of consumer opinion has repeatedly confirmed that most consumers consider themselves to be concerned about environmental issues, but only a minority of ‘green pioneers’ will go out on a limb to consume differently.<sup>73</sup> Most will only change their behaviour if price, quality and availability also guide them in that direction, and do not present contradictions. Thus for consumers to have a ‘fair’ choice requires that businesses and government make ‘upstream’ supply chain decisions accordingly. This can respect the voice and autonomy of consumers better than offering them an array of more or less sustainable products, where the sustainable versions cost more. Where businesses have noted their customers’ concerns, and offered a more limited choice of products which reflect those concerns – for example, Sainsbury’s selling only Fairtrade bananas, and Hellman’s mayonnaise containing only free-range eggs – this has been warmly welcomed by their customers.

The danger businesses face in taking such steps, wherever offering only sustainable options puts up the price, is that they get undercut by their competitors. In the absence of mandatory regulation, only a collaborative effort by businesses across the sector can get past this obstacle. However, such collaboration raises concerns about price-fixing and is vulnerable to challenge by the Office of Fair Trading (OFT).<sup>74</sup>

**Key point:** Sustainable consumption depends on ensuring consumers have a fair say in the market place. That means understanding their priorities and concerns as citizens, and respecting those in decisions upstream in the supply chain.

## Jeanette Longfield MBE

Coordinator  
Sustain – the alliance for better food and farming  
Member of the Food Ethics Council



This Inquiry has helped to reinforce, for me, three reasons why fairness should feature more prominently in Sustain's work to improve the sustainability of food and farming. First, it's the right thing to do. Although none of the evidence presented to the Inquiry was entirely new to me, it was powerful to be reminded of just how deeply ingrained injustice is, and how personally painful the consequences are to those directly affected.

Second, sustainable development that doesn't create fairness for people isn't, frankly, sustainable development. Most people accept that the concept has three inter-related elements – environmental, social and economic. Fairness is an intrinsic part of the social element, without which the whole idea falls down.

Third, being more explicit about the importance of fairness in the food and farming system might encourage more people to engage in the political process of improving that system. Too many people equate sustainability with 'the environment', an abstract notion that has something to do with 'being green' or 'the future of the planet' – nice, but nothing to do with them. In contrast, fairness for people is more relevant and immediate.

Unfortunately, it is not yet relevant and immediate enough. If it was, social injustice would already be gone from our food and farming system. This Inquiry is a step along the way to that goal.

**Viewpoint**  
from the Inquiry committee

**Recommendation:** The UK government should work with the OFT and consumer groups to develop publicly accountable mechanisms whereby businesses can collaborate to make progress on sustainability that is in the public interest.

## 3.3. Health

**Food and diet are among the key social determinants of health in the UK as elsewhere.**<sup>75</sup> Evidence presented to the Inquiry underlined the complexity of the relationship between income and diet-related ill-health, while also indicating some paths through that complexity. Poverty contributes to diet-related ill-health, but is by no means the whole story. Some studies suggest that inequalities in income – the relative differences, not only absolute poverty – may also be a factor. The Inquiry committee also received evidence that efforts to protect consumers can, in turn, put pressure on producers and workers, potentially compromising health and safety elsewhere in the food chain.

### 3.3.1. Fair shares

**The benefits of a healthy diet are unequally distributed.**

Globally, more than one billion people are undernourished,<sup>76</sup> whilst approximately 1.6 billion adults are overweight, 400 million of whom are clinically obese.<sup>77</sup> Three-and-a-half million children under five die every year, largely as a result of under-nutrition.<sup>78</sup> In the UK, around 66% of adults and around 30% of children are overweight or obese.<sup>79</sup> Hunger and micronutrient deficiencies increase susceptibility to infection, and obesity is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease, diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders and some cancers. Both of these poles of malnutrition can impair mental development and psychological wellbeing.<sup>80</sup>

The distribution of these health outcomes depends in part on development status. The majority of the world's hungry live in poor countries and these countries face a double-burden of diet-related disease as the prevalence of overweight and obesity increases. There are already more obese people in poor and newly industrialised countries than there are in rich, Western countries. The co-existence of hunger and obesity is particularly apparent in rapidly growing economies such as Brazil and China, where increased incomes are staving off under-nutrition, but low-income households rely on energy-rich, nutrient-poor diets.<sup>81</sup>

Diets also vary according to characteristics such as gender and ethnicity. Despite a lack of global data about hunger and poverty by gender, UNIFEM state that women and girls are likely to be worse off due to “the discrimination they face in access to education, healthcare and control of assets”.<sup>82</sup> However, obesity for women in poor countries is also likely to be higher than for men.<sup>83</sup> Women, generally, are most vulnerable to micronutrient deficiencies. For the UK, Nelson et al. suggest that over-representation of ethnic minorities in low income brackets makes it more likely that they will have unhealthy diets,<sup>84</sup> and several authors have expressed concern that people from minority ethnic groups are more likely to be obese.<sup>85</sup>

The co-existence of hunger and obesity is particularly apparent in rapidly growing economies

In the UK, the degree to which income, compared with these other factors, affects what people eat and their diet-related health is hotly debated. The FSA’s LIDNS survey, mentioned in Section 3.1.1, found that members of low-income households in the UK fail to meet population dietary targets, have poor micronutrient intake, and a high incidence of obesity and overweight.<sup>86</sup> They are more likely than the rest of the population to consume high levels of fat and sugar, processed food, and fast foods and snacks; and less likely to eat the kinds of food recommended for health, such as vegetables and fruit, wholemeal products, and unsaturated-fat spreads and lower-fat milk.<sup>87</sup>

The LIDNS should not, however, be interpreted as establishing a straightforward correlation between relative poverty and the incidence of diet-related ill-health. For one thing, the LIDNS does not allow direct contemporaneous comparison with those on higher incomes. Moreover, it is generally accepted that the differences in nutrient intake between people who are poor and the rest of the population are insufficient to account for the differences in health outcomes between the two groups, and wider determinants of health are also at play. In relation to obesity, the UK Foresight Report on Trends and Drivers in Obesity highlighted the wide range of social, environmental, technological and other causes of the rising incidence of overweight and obesity, and indicated that many of these factors can differentially affect those individuals in lower socio-economic groups.<sup>88</sup>

It is also argued that focusing on indicators of socio-economic status is likely to mask both complexities of social differentiation in societies such as the UK (of gender, ethnicity, religion, age, area and community), and the importance of particular household circumstances – such as the length of time people have been living in deprivation, the reason for their circumstances, and the specific nature of their living conditions.<sup>89</sup>

Evidence provided by Lobstein<sup>90</sup> and Deeming<sup>91</sup> indicates that the reason poor people base their diets on fatty, sugary foods is that they are filling, and are all that they can afford. Healthier foods, such as fruit, vegetables and wholemeal cereals are significantly more expensive – in terms of cost per calorie – than products with fats, oils, sugar and starch.<sup>92</sup> Survey respondents regularly report that not having enough money is what prevents them from buying food they know to be healthier,<sup>93</sup> with 20% of poor households regularly reducing or skipping meals because of financial constraints.<sup>94</sup> One reason that people on low incomes skip meals is that they are generally dealing with other imminent demands on their incomes that have to take precedence over food, such as rent, council tax, fuel bills, children’s needs and debt repayments, where non-payment often carries a mandatory penalty. In these circumstances, food becomes the biggest ‘flexible’ item in their budget.<sup>95</sup> In that respect, the unequal diet-related health outcomes are underpinned by inequalities of economic opportunity.

This indicates the extent to which the welfare benefit system, and the national minimum wage, fall short of providing an adequate subsistence-level income. The Inquiry heard evidence from Donald Hirsch about how food features in the ‘Minimum Income Standard’ (MIS), which measures what level of income British people consider is necessary to afford a minimum socially acceptable standard of living in the UK – taking account of what is an acceptable way to eat, as well as nutritional levels. The MIS brings together two approaches to setting budget standards: the ‘consensual’ negotiation of budgets by panels of non-experts, and budgets based on research evidence and expert judgements. For the MIS, members of the public negotiate budgets and experts check these decisions and advise where they think there is a case for amending them. The MIS shows that state income support and the minimum wage fall well below the required level. Significantly, most of the items that are taken into consideration in determining the MIS – fuel, water, public transport – have increased above the rate of inflation in recent years. This has placed even greater pressure on low-income families to save money on their food.

## Melanie Leech

Chief Executive  
Food and Drink Federation



I was delighted to be part of this Inquiry because I have found more and more over the last five years that whilst perspectives may differ there is a high degree of consensus amongst different parties about the challenges facing the food system. I have also found an equally high level of desire to tackle those challenges, across all the different players. All of us want to make a real difference to enhance people's lives and to contribute to the future for our planet, and our successors.

The Inquiry process has reinforced my view that what unites us should outweigh our differences. One of the unifying factors should be (and in my experience of the Inquiry was) a rejection of the lack of fairness in the current food system. I hope the Inquiry report will be a stimulus for further discussion and concrete action to tackle some of the issues that we have highlighted.

## Viewpoint from the Inquiry committee

It is hard to know the rationale for setting benefit levels and minimum wages. But even where they putatively rely on 'technical' calculations of minimum income needs, they fail to make sufficient provision for food purchase because they rely on 'reductionist' views of food. That is, they focus only on nutrient requirements, translated into 'least cost' diets which are both unlike what people actually eat, and whose costings come from the cheapest shops.<sup>96</sup> Such an approach to calculating food budgets fails to reflect the reality of living on low incomes: trying to eat what is normal for a given society within a minimal budget; and often shopping in areas where the choice of shops and the produce they sell can be limited, and where purchasing may be day-to-day rather than in bulk.

The welfare benefit system, and the national minimum wage, fall short of providing an adequate subsistence-level income

There is, then, a body of evidence showing that poor people are less healthy, that this is partly down to less healthy diets, and that this in turn is partly due to the relative costs of healthy and unhealthy food. However, food prices cannot be the only explanation of poor diet in low-income households since the prices of many healthy foods are low enough, at least in the major supermarkets, to be affordable to people on relatively low incomes, if not those on the lowest. One possibility is that poor people often have limited physical access to healthy foods, because local grocery shops have closed due to competition from large supermarkets – so they either have to pay for transport to the nearest supermarket, or use the remaining local shops that either do not sell healthy foods, or if they do, do so at comparatively higher prices.<sup>97</sup> The relevance of living in places where access to cheap, healthy food is difficult – referred to as 'food deserts' – for an analysis of health inequalities in the UK has been contested.<sup>98</sup> An alternative explanation is that the abundant availability of food with low nutritional value in deprived areas – for example, through convenience and fast-food outlets – is as relevant a factor in explaining unhealthy diets as the suggested inaccessibility of healthy food, as much convenience and fast food is not only a cheap source of calories, but also saves on fuel bills.

As well as affordability and accessibility, social and cultural factors also play an important role in determining food choice. Surveys indicate that

poor people themselves rate their personal tastes and beliefs about what is appropriate to eat as being as important as the availability of foods or physical access to large supermarkets.<sup>99</sup> The day-to-day reality of managing a low income is that a tight budget precludes experimentation with unfamiliar or perishable fresh food, because parents cannot run the risk of wastage.<sup>100</sup> This is one aspect of a more general tendency to buy food that one has become used to eating. Another way in which the wider social circumstances of poor people with jobs can militate against healthy diets is that they will often be working long hours, leaving them little time to cook their own food.<sup>101</sup>

Poor people with jobs will often be working long hours, leaving them little time to cook their own food as part of a healthy diet

The gradient of income inequality may also influence diets and health across society. In their influential book *The Spirit Level*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett show that levels of obesity tend to be lower in countries where income differences are smaller.<sup>102</sup> They suggest that stress levels (which are higher in more unequal societies) are an important factor: partly because people with a history of stress respond to food in a different way than people who are not stressed; and also that stress influences our food intake and food choices in ways that contribute to weight gain (or loss).

**Key point:** Understanding the complexity of the relationship between social inequality, food and health, and the realities faced by people on low incomes, should be a priority for economic policy-makers.

**Recommendation:** Benefit levels and minimum wage rates should be set at levels that allow families to achieve a minimum socially acceptable standard of living, including adequate food and dietary intake, as defined by members of the public.

### 3.3.2. Fair play

**Of course, consumers are not the only group whose health is affected by practices in the food sector – so too is the health and**

**safety of workers.** In the first quarter of 2009, 3.1 million people were employed in the UK food chain,<sup>103</sup> while globally 2.6 billion people earn their livelihoods directly or indirectly from agriculture,<sup>104</sup> so the state of workplace health and safety has implications for a substantial proportion of the population. In the UK, agriculture has the worst fatal injury rate of any industrial sector, with 9.7 deaths per 100,000 workers in 2007/8,<sup>105</sup> and the health of UK farm workers is, on average, worse than that of the population as a whole.<sup>106</sup> A recent report into the meat industry from Equalities and Human Rights Commission gave examples of practices that are detrimental to health, such as insisting pregnant women do heavy lifting under the threat of dismissal.<sup>107</sup> Global statistics present a similar picture: agriculture accounts for 170,000 of the 335,000 fatal workplace accidents each year, and more generally agriculture is one of the three most dangerous sectors to work in, along with mining and construction.<sup>108</sup>

The Inquiry committee heard a first-hand account of legally compliant working conditions in a fruit-packing plant: minimum pay eaten into by the agency bus fare; long but unreliable hours with restricted breaks; physically demanding work in low temperatures; and the constant threat of dismissal for making a mistake. One employer, for example, operates a ‘three strikes and you’re out’ policy for packers who miss bruised fruit. The trend in the UK food sector is towards increased casualisation of the workforce, with a preference for temporary, often migrant, agency workers.<sup>109</sup> Migrant workers are seen as having the required qualities of being “reliable, flexible and compliant”, and are valued not just as hard workers, but also as enforcers of tough workplace regimes.<sup>110</sup>

One employer operates a ‘three strikes and you’re out’ policy for packers who miss bruised fruit

At the global level, evidence submitted by Banana Link cited “violations of core labour standards”,<sup>111</sup> while ActionAid reported fruit growers in South Africa living on hunger wages, in dismal housing, exposed to pesticides, and denied benefits.<sup>112</sup> ActionAid also provided evidence of how women are often denied access to the more desirable work and are instead forced into the lowest paid, most dangerous jobs, often as informal or temporary workers who are denied the same rights and benefits as permanent staff.<sup>113</sup>

## Charlie Clutterbuck

Director  
Environmental Practice at Work  
Trustee of the Food Ethics Council



The main thing I have taken away from the Inquiry is the evidence at the second hearing from Shayne Tyler, Operations Manager with Manor Fresh, who are vegetable suppliers. He explained that the top tier of businesses in food supply chains is now pretty well inspected and controlled, but that the force of the regulations has pushed many of the key issues – including health and safety, and accommodation – further down the supply chain, where it is certain that there will be much less auditing and inspection, or even competence to know what to do.

This – to me – was a new development and has many implications in the emerging debate around immigration and employment.

## Viewpoint from the Inquiry committee

Further problems identified in evidence submitted to the Inquiry included exposure to pesticides – it is estimated that there are between two and five million pesticide poisonings per year, of which 40,000 are fatal<sup>114</sup> – and unfair working conditions that affect physical and mental well being.<sup>115</sup> The Inquiry also received evidence of good practice: Oxfam cited the example of the dairy company Danone collaborating with trade unions on health and safety programmes.<sup>116</sup>

Inasmuch as the pressures on producers and workers lead to lower prices at the till, there is a tension between treating them and consumers fairly. As with food security and sustainability, this is most apparent when supply chain standards act as a barrier to market entry for small producers. In particular, drives to protect food safety for consumers by reducing food-borne disease have led to the creation of more private and public standards, which entail significant compliance costs that small-scale farmers struggle to meet.<sup>117</sup> For example, thousands of farmers went out of business over a five year period in the extended Mercosur area – defined by the authors as comprising Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay as core members, and Chile and Bolivia as associate members – because they were unable to meet new quality and safety standards for milk production, which required large investments in equipment and buildings and a high level of coordination and management.<sup>118</sup> So achieving fairer outcomes for consumers may be detrimental to fairness of opportunity for producers.

**Key point:** Health and safety for workers is an important component of a healthy food system and there can be no excuse for compromising protection.

**Recommendation:** The UK government should reinforce measures that improve health and safety throughout our food supply chains, including enforcement and support for training.

### 3.3.3. Fair say

**What would it mean for people to have a fair say in decisions that affect the healthiness of their diets?** On the face of it, nutrition labels appear to offer a high degree of personal choice and autonomy to shoppers, and improvements in labelling have been a major focus for policy makers and the food industry.

Consumers often rely on labelling to guide their purchasing behaviour.<sup>119</sup> The inclusion of information about ingredients on packaging potentially gives consumers the option of choosing healthy food. However, labelling can be hard to understand. The Food Standards Agency ‘traffic light’ scheme is intended to provide

a simple and accessible tool to indicate nutrient content on the basis of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt. However, it has been the focus of tension between the agency and the industry. The Food and Drink Federation criticised the system as being crude and unhelpful, and implemented the Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA) system. The GDA system in turn has been criticised, with 40% of consumers reported to find it confusing and over 60% misunderstanding the labels.<sup>120</sup> A more recent study found that understanding of GDA labels was high in the UK, but that consumers did not always translate this knowledge into action when making purchasing decisions.<sup>121</sup>

Consumers typically take just four seconds to choose a product from a supermarket shelf

The traffic light and GDA systems represent attempts to mitigate the wide range of constraints on people basing their food purchases on nutritional information. Consumers typically take just four seconds to choose a product from a supermarket shelf.<sup>122</sup> Their choices will be influenced by the information they have been exposed to, and the £838 million spent on food and drink advertising in the UK in 2007 eclipsed public and civil society campaigns for healthy diets.<sup>123</sup> Evidence presented to the Inquiry committee by Caroline Moraes identified a number of further constraints on consumers' decision-making, including managerial practices such as loyalty cards, uncertainty over competing claims about healthy diets, habits and social norms.

Moreover, consumers themselves do not generally attach a high level of importance to the nutritional content of their food – their three main priorities for package information are price, use-by or best-before dates, and promotional information.<sup>124</sup> The importance of price appears to be increasing of late: price determined product choice for 47% of shoppers in 2010, compared to 36% in 2009.<sup>125</sup>

Research for the FSA identifies a number of factors, internal and external, that have limited the success of GDA labels in overcoming these constraints.<sup>126</sup> Internal factors include attitudes to healthy eating, the dominant role of the food provider in the family, lack of trust in labels, and familiarity and preference taking precedence over labelling information. External factors include competing information

on packaging, the appearance of the product, and confusion over portion size in relation to the label.<sup>127</sup> Additionally, labelling can be particularly inaccessible for certain vulnerable groups, including older people and disabled people: further FSA-commissioned research found that disabled people face significant barriers in understanding labels.<sup>128</sup>

These constraints on how people shop and the context in which they use labels means that labelling can only ever play a small part in providing people with a fair say in decisions about their diet-related health. Another strategy, also pursued by the FSA in partnership with industry, is reformulation – removing or reducing the levels of unhealthy food components, while maintaining characteristics such as flavour, texture and shelf-life. Through their salt reduction programme, for example, the FSA is aiming to ensure that adults eat no more than six grams of salt per day; and reformulation is a core element of the strategy.<sup>129</sup> The British Retail Consortium report that by reformulating their own-brand processed foods in recent years, major retailers have reduced levels of saturated fats, sugar and salt.<sup>130</sup> Although this approach may seem to compromise consumer voice because they have no direct say in the relevant production decisions, it does on the other hand respect their assumptions that the processed foods they buy should be healthy, and it also improves their life chances. From this perspective, it can be argued that such reformulation respects consumers' autonomy.

One way that people do influence which products end up on the shelves, and the nutritional content of those products, is when their shopping behaviour is aggregated into market data and informs business decision-making – but this is different from having a voice, and the business decisions are mediated by other commercial factors and strategic goals. Participation in market research exercises, such as taste tests, provides the same kind of opportunity to influence – though, again, people's voice in these cases is limited, because they are performing tasks specified by others.

In the UK there have been few open-ended processes designed to explore public priorities and aspirations relating to food, and to shape public or private sector research and policy priorities accordingly. The 'GM Nation?' debate in 2003 presented an opportunity for a process of public engagement in food policy, but was criticised as having been rushed and under-funded due to insufficient commitment from government.<sup>131</sup> Otherwise, research priority-setting exercises and innovation programmes have tended to engage professional stakeholders rather than consumers or the wider public – the DEFRA Research Priorities Group and the Technology Strategy Board's agriculture programme are two examples.

**Key point:** In addition to clear and transparent labelling, giving people a fair say in their diet and health depends on understanding what choices they want to make, and respecting those choices in research, innovation and product development.

**Recommendation:** Public or community involvement should be a requirement for all public sector or publicly financed programmes and strategies relating to food, including initiatives around innovation.

## Food Justice

### 4. The rules of the game



**Chapter 3 identified a number of specific issues raised by the evidence submitted to the Inquiry that are central to contemporary food policy debate. It highlighted that behind serious inequalities of outcome – in hunger, environmental problems and ill-health – are inequalities of opportunity and voice. Scattered throughout the food chain are people, communities and whole segments of society who are unfairly treated and marginalised. It hinted at some of the intense pressures that cause and perpetuate this, which overstep the mark of healthy competition and drive people to exploit their suppliers, customers, neighbours or even themselves.**

The analysis presented in Chapter 3 identified tensions between the interests of consumers, producers and workers. All too often, lower prices and higher standards for consumers carry a cost down the supply chain. In practice, both the benefit and the blow – the savings and quality, and the pressures on pay and conditions – fall frequently to the same individuals since, as Section 3.3.2 reported, food and farming are major sources of employment and livelihood in the UK and globally. Indeed, a large proportion of the ‘consumers’ in poor countries are producers themselves so, all else being equal, lower prices mean lower revenues from their sales.

When people are complicit in their own exploitation, the rules of the game clearly need to change. This chapter looks in more depth at those rules, focusing on three parts of the food system that we heard most about in the evidence put before the Inquiry committee. It explores how business consolidation upstream and downstream of the farm is putting agricultural producers under pressure to exploit workers. While retailers are often portrayed as the villains of the piece, it next considers how they also experience pressures, from shareholders and by having to compete for market share. Finally, it shows how consumers exert an aggregate influence on the marketplace while experiencing limited power as individuals.

## 4.1. Agriculture

The history of agricultural employment in the UK and world-wide is dominated by three trends towards: fewer farmers and landowners; a growing share of the work done by landless labourers; and, recently, increasing flexibility in their employment. Farm consolidation can both reflect and exacerbate constraints on market access for small-scale producers, while flexibility for employers all too often means insecurity for workers. Both these problems of fairness in food production are driven by restructuring upstream and downstream of the farm.

Farm consolidation has traditionally taken the form of a ‘technological treadmill’, where those who first adopt inventions and more efficient methods gain, while the majority who lag behind follow suit at a loss and those who trail furthest get pushed out of business.<sup>132</sup> Nowadays, however, the large size and market dominance of the businesses selling technology such as seeds, pesticides and fertilisers to farmers, and of the processors and retailers buying from them, provides additional impetus.

For example, farmers have traditionally saved seeds, and reused them or traded with each other. With the rise of modern agriculture, private companies have developed new varieties of seeds, often hybrids, and now patenting and other laws increasingly give them control over the sale, reproduction and export of their seeds. It is these hybrid seeds that produce the standardised products required by supermarkets, leaving farmers little option but to use them if they want market access.<sup>133</sup> The effect is to exclude those small-scale farmers who cannot afford the increased inputs of water, fertilisers and pesticides required by the high-yield varieties (nor the cost of purchasing new hybrids every season).<sup>134</sup>

Like farm consolidation, flexible employment has also been a feature of agriculture throughout history, because of seasonality. Again, however, there has been additional pressure on producers to work and employ flexibly due to restructuring elsewhere in the food chain.

Research on employment conditions in food production shows that they have been becoming more flexible, casual and informal: workers are increasingly contracted through labour providers, and contracts are more likely to be on a weekly or daily basis, and paid on piece rates.<sup>135</sup> In the UK meat and poultry sector, for example, large processing firms hire up to 50% of their staff on a temporary basis through labour providers – 70% of these agency workers being migrants.<sup>136</sup> This reliance upon migrant labour is a prominent feature of agricultural employment. In UK horticulture, growers have a need for “reliable, flexible and compliant” labour, all of which are said to be qualities of migrant workers.<sup>137</sup> More generally, employers in the food sector believe that businesses would suffer or possibly not survive without migrant labour.<sup>138</sup>

This flexibility is largely driven by demands producers face from their customers in retail, and catering. Price and standards pressures, coupled with flexible arrangements like ‘just-in-time’ delivery, short lead times and last-minute changes to orders have either displaced producers out of business or pushed them to transfer risk onto their workers, in the form of higher performance targets and less favourable contractual arrangements.<sup>139</sup> Consolidation and centralisation in food retail fuel these demands, as increasingly large

supermarket businesses want consistent quality, reliable supply and low storage overheads, and have the buying power to get it.

Indeed, food retail has undergone significant structural changes over the past two decades, and the position and operating practices of supermarkets have been at the centre of this transformation. Supermarkets have achieved a dramatic increase in market share: in the UK, the 'big four' chains – Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury's and Safeway (now owned by Morrisons) – took less than 50% of British shoppers' spending on food in supermarkets during the 1990s,<sup>140</sup> but this figure today stands at 76%.<sup>141</sup> Supermarkets have also become more prevalent globally, spreading to middle and low income markets.<sup>142</sup>

Behind the consolidation taking place upstream and downstream of the farm are pronounced market pressures. They include efforts "to improve product quality, consistency and differentiation; the need to manage food safety and ensure traceability... [and] drive down costs through more efficient supply chain management".<sup>143</sup> Concentration also allows business to expand into new sectors.<sup>144</sup> Mergers and acquisitions have additionally been a strategy for businesses to access the intellectual property of their competitors.<sup>145</sup>

Whether these pressures culminate in larger businesses depends on the regulatory environment. Consolidation has been made possible by an increasingly hands-off approach to anti-trust (competition) laws across the world.<sup>146</sup>

The UK has seen efforts to address both the causes and the symptoms of the pressures that consolidation places on farm workers. In February 2010, a new Grocery Supply Code of Practice came into force to govern the relationship between supermarkets and their suppliers. This is the latest turn in a series of events that began in 1999, when the Director General of Fair Trading requested the Competition Commission to investigate "the supply of groceries from multiple stores".<sup>147</sup>

Meanwhile, to the extent that some aspects of the employment experience of UK agricultural workers constitute breaches of employment law, the introduction of the Gangmasters Licensing Authority (GLA) has been a significant development. The purpose of the GLA is to ensure that employment law is followed by suppliers of labour in the agricultural, horticultural, food processing and packing, fish processing and shellfish industries. The GLA is generally considered to have been successful in performing this role, although a small number of labour providers are still using exploitative working conditions to enhance their profits.

## Measures to address social injustice in the domestic labour market may have the effect of 'exporting' unfairness

Insofar as the UK is regarded as having one of the least regulated labour markets in Western Europe, the creation of the GLA could be seen as something of an anomaly. The pursuit of 'light touch' regulation – on the part of the last Labour government and its Conservative predecessor – was motivated by concerns over economic performance and international competitiveness: higher levels of regulation are seen as driving up costs, and also run the risk of 'capital flight', with trans-national companies choosing to relocate to less 'burdensome' environments. These considerations point to another ethical dilemma: the fact that improvements in domestic labour standards – through stronger legislation and/or more effective enforcement – also carry the risk of undermining social justice. By increasing the cost of labour, they increase the attractiveness of mechanisation (with associated job losses). Indeed, the ready availability of cheap migrant labour may have militated against investment in mechanisation in the agricultural sector.

Furthermore, part of the attraction of relocating is that poorer countries often fail to implement legislation to prevent the abuse of workers, where such legislation exists. Evidence submitted by ActionAid described the pressures experienced by governments to "turn a blind eye" to breaches in labour laws, in order to remain competitive in the global market.<sup>148</sup> In other words, measures to address social injustice in the domestic labour market may have the effect of 'exporting' unfairness.

**Key point:** Efforts to address the symptoms of business consolidation can be effective in their own terms, but they are not sufficient solutions. There are, however, significant risks involved in implementing the necessary policy changes on a unilateral basis.

**Recommendation:** The UK government should review the public interest consequences of international trends towards corporate consolidation, and UK and EU options to influence those trends.

## Paul Whitehouse

Chair  
Gangmasters Licensing Authority



I was privileged during this Inquiry to learn a great deal about the complex relationships between those who produce and supply food all over the world and the rest of us who depend on them.

Increasing populations have growing expectations of what they can eat, but much less purchasing power than elsewhere. There are shortages of water in many places, and global warming may well worsen this situation.

In the UK we have become used to the all-year-round supply of food which used to be available on a seasonal basis. We have become ever more disconnected with the land and those who use it to produce our food. This process does not have to continue, and I hope that the report will help towards a better understanding of how our food is produced and distributed.

The Gangmasters Licensing Authority (GLA) was set up to combat exploitation in the food chain in the UK. It protects workers, good businesses and the taxpaying public. Independent researchers have concluded that it has had considerable success but there is still much to do. It's good that food is cheap, but those who produce it are entitled to a fair reward. We all have a part to play in achieving this.

## Viewpoint from the Inquiry committee

## 4.2. Processing and retail

**Research into the causes of worker exploitation and on barriers to market access highlights some of the effects of restructuring in food retail.** This restructuring has not happened of its own accord, but instead is a consequence of financial and other competitive pressures experienced by retail businesses, and of the regulatory environment in which they operate.

The previous section discussed how retail restructuring influences working conditions down the supply chain. A second significant development has been supermarkets' preferences for establishing direct trading relationships with a small number of suppliers, and so bypassing the traditional wholesale market. One of the advantages of this arrangement is that it enables supermarkets to uphold the wide variety of standards – quality standards, but also standards relating to safety, and to environmental and social concerns. It is the responsibility of these first tier suppliers to ensure that standards are satisfied by second tier suppliers and beyond, down to the producer. The preoccupation with standards is also explained by the way that competition between supermarkets has become increasingly based on product differentiation in terms of product and process attributes – spanning appearance, lack of contamination by pathogens or chemical residues, type of production, origin, environmental and social concerns, etc.<sup>149</sup>

Poorer countries have accused wealthier countries of impeding the 'level playing field' in international trade

Poorer countries have accused wealthier countries of impeding the 'level playing field' in international trade through the imposition of public food safety and quality standards. These public standards can act as significant barriers to trade, suggesting that private standards might have similar effects.<sup>150</sup> Standards can be argued to facilitate trade, by making explicit and harmonising buyer demands and so reducing transaction costs; however, poorer countries are often unable to meet the costs of compliance and of adapting their technical and administrative capacity.<sup>151</sup> So this is a case of tension between promoting equality of outcome

(by improving public health) and equality of opportunity (access to markets for poor countries).

Most supermarket businesses are listed on the stock exchange and thus owned by investors, and so corporate behaviour is shaped by shareholders' expectations. In recent years, the ways in which investors influence corporate behaviour has been transformed by the entry into the food sector – processing and manufacturing at least as much as retail – of high-risk, high-return financial instruments such as private-equity funds. This trend has been criticised for creating perverse incentives to restructure, cut costs, reduce jobs and eliminate productive capacity in order to generate cash for share buy-backs, and thereby boost share prices.<sup>152</sup> Critics contend that senior managers are decreasingly guided by the long-term success of the business because their salaries are linked to short-term stock price movements.

There may therefore be a tension between the demand from financial intermediaries for short-term financial gains and the interests of other stakeholders – such as institutional shareholders, corporate social responsibility (CSR) departments, producers and workers – who might favour longer-term investments in environmentally and socially responsible business activity (which may reduce business risk and provide longer-term profitability). This tension is argued to translate into managers not engaging in CSR initiatives unless the payback is immediate, making the impact on fairness cosmetic.<sup>153</sup> In practice, publicly listed retailers and other food businesses are diverse, and the extent to which they experience these pressures will depend on where they are listed, their shareholder profile, their position in the marketplace and a host of other factors.

Changes in investment are not the only arena where financial management appears to have become increasingly important to corporate performance, with the knock-on effects on sustainability. Some food businesses, alongside multinationals in other sectors, have restructured to reduce their corporate tax burden.<sup>154</sup> Globally, across all sectors, this practice is estimated to cost \$160 billion a year in lost tax revenue to poorer countries – more than the global aid budget – undermining claims to good corporate citizenship.<sup>155</sup>

**Key point:** Retailers are often portrayed as being responsible for exerting pressure down the supply chain. However, they and other food businesses also experience pressures themselves, from shareholders and by having to compete for market share, which are contributing to a growing focus on generating returns through financial management.

**Recommendation:** Businesses should, in their CSR reports, state their tax payments as share of turnover for each country in which they operate.

### 4.3. Consumption

**Consumer demand is a major influence on retailers, who have developed a range of methods to take account of, and influence, that demand.** An IGD survey found that substantial proportions of grocery retailers used the following types of information: long term consumer trends (used by 79% of companies); shopper insight/shopper missions (79%); category segmentation, based on analyses of customer decision-making (71%); and customer segmentation, such as loyalty cards (43%).<sup>156</sup> Retailers use information such as that provided by the UK Consumer Satisfaction Index to “retain existing shoppers, attract new shoppers and convert occasional users into main shoppers”.<sup>157</sup> Marketing and promotions are increasingly used by the grocery industry to influence demand: investment in the shopper, particularly shopper marketing, has doubled since 2004.<sup>158</sup>

So consumers have a strong collective influence on retailers but that influence is in aggregate. As individuals, they are in a weak strategic position to shape the retail environment. They may be able to choose where to shop (depending on where they live) but, once they are through the door, their options are heavily constrained by the retailer's decisions on stocking, sourcing, price and promotion. Even here, the degree of choice that consumers are left with is open to question – supermarkets provide a huge range of discrete items available for purchase, but whether this amounts to an opportunity to make significant discriminations is less clear.<sup>159</sup> Section 3.2.3 described how this leaves many consumers feeling “powerless, unable to impact the big picture, locked into high levels of harmful consumption”.<sup>160</sup>

Where does this leave ‘ethical consumption’? Between 1999 and 2007 consumers of all ages increased their predisposition to a range of ethically-motivated behaviours, such as recycling, supporting local shops, and choosing products and services on the basis of a company's reputation.<sup>161</sup> In 2009, an IPSOS/MORI poll found that issues of sustainability are becoming increasingly important for consumers.<sup>162</sup> Taken together with the impressive growth of Fairtrade, this confirms the emergence of the ‘consumer citizen’ – who pursues ethical and political values through their consumption – as a significant presence in the food market.

## Dr Susan Jebb

Head of Nutrition and Health Research  
MRC Human Nutrition Research



The Food and Fairness Inquiry has shown clearly that creating a fairer food system is fundamental to achieving health, environmental and economic sustainability goals.

In the UK, people make different choices about their food, reflecting their personal preferences, knowledge about food and the prevailing social and cultural norms of their communities. These dietary choices contribute to the differences in later health outcomes. Fairness is not about imposing the same diet on everyone, it's about creating a system that gives people fair opportunities to access healthy food. This will need to include fairness for producers too, if the system itself is to be sustainable in the broader context of environmental and economic goals. The challenge is even greater when we look ahead to the task of delivering sufficient safe and nutritious food to feed a global population of nine billion by 2050, in the face of diminishing resources.

All too often, considerations of public nutrition have been divorced from the wider food policy debate. This report shows how the basic human right to be treated fairly helps to frame a useful discussion around which food production, supply and consumption can be considered as an integrated whole. Moreover, given that food is one of our most basic needs, how we address fairness in food is emblematic of our societal commitment to fairness more generally.

## Viewpoint from the Inquiry committee

Fairtrade's strong performance through the recession appears to provide still further evidence of consumers' commitment to social justice, and their influence on the marketplace. Fairtrade sales rose by 12% during 2009,<sup>163</sup> compared to a 12.9% fall in sales of organic food, drink and other products.<sup>164</sup> However, the fact that major corporate commitments have made a significant contribution to recent Fairtrade sales suggests that consumer influence is not the whole story. Cadbury's Fairtrade chocolate bar will add £200 million of sales to Fairtrade products,<sup>165</sup> while Nestle's KitKat deal will increase Fairtrade chocolate sales by £43 million per year.<sup>166</sup>

These initiatives are reported to have been driven by concerns over security of supply as much as by corporate responsibility or consumer demand.<sup>167</sup> To the extent that security has been a strong motivating factor – and the motivations for any corporate venture of this kind will be complex – this has a number of interesting implications. It may indicate that consumer demand for Fairtrade is less influential than it seems. More positively, it shows that supply-chain driven initiatives, which are in effect forms of choice editing, can be powerful and progressive tools that are welcomed by consumers. Perhaps most significantly, we should recognise that this trend is potentially fragile, inasmuch as corporate approaches to security of supply depend on sector-specific conditions and are subject to change – there is no guarantee that these corporate, farmer and consumer interests will continue to align in the future.

Supply chain initiatives...can be powerful and progressive tools that are welcomed by consumers

Thus, even where consumers appear to be exerting a direct and conscious influence on the marketplace through their shopping, their power may in practice be quite limited. Indeed, inasmuch as basing purchasing decisions on social and environmental values carries a higher price tag, it is not even an option for many people, notably the 20% of poor households who regularly reduce or skip meals because of financial constraints (Section 3.3.1).

Government is the nation's biggest consumer, and the struggles it has faced in mobilising public procurement to support its sustainable food and farming objectives underlines the limits of purchasing

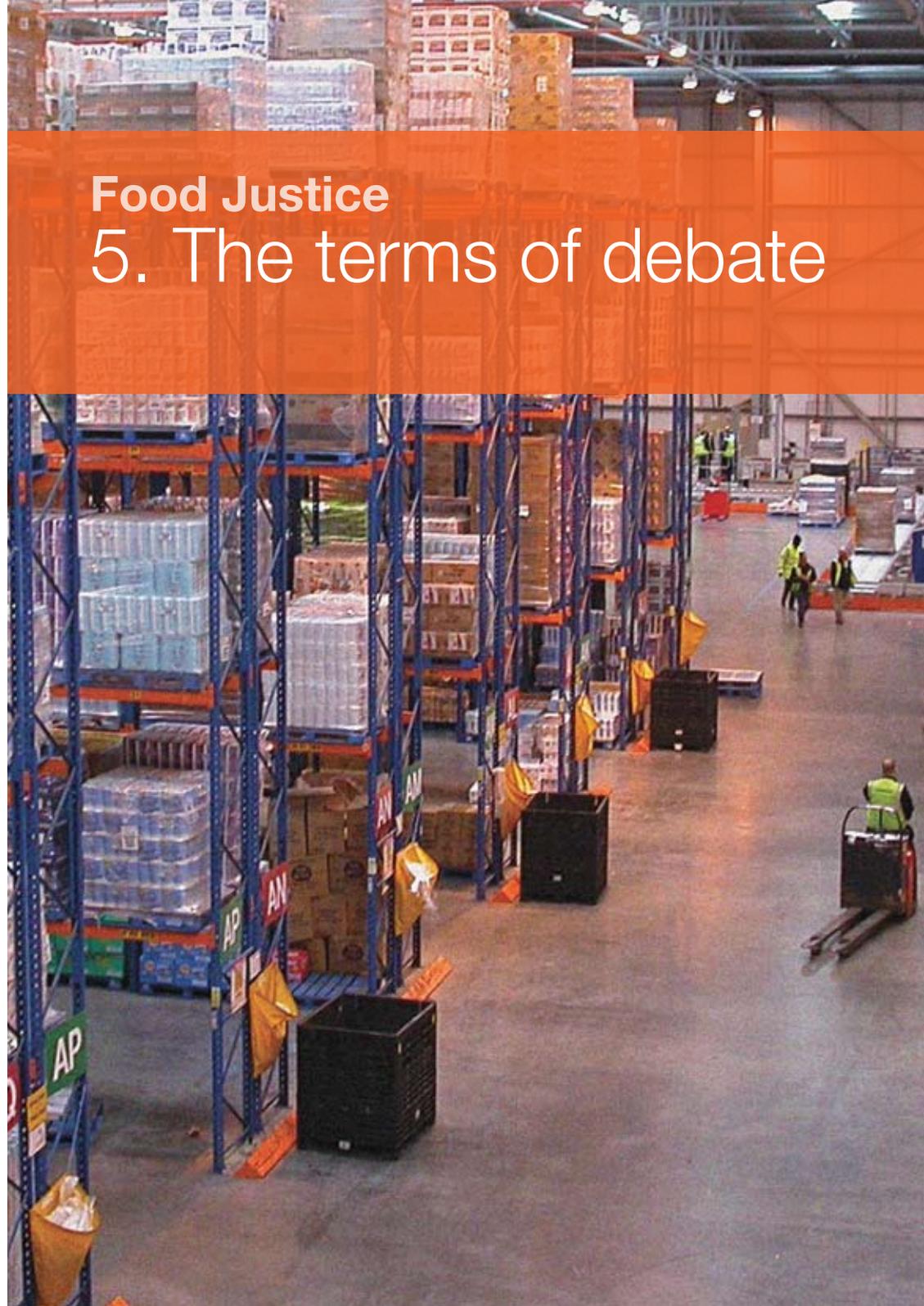
power as a motor of change. Almost a third of all meals served by caterers in the UK are served in public institutions, amounting to over a billion meals annually in England and Wales, and a bill of more than £2 billion in England alone.<sup>168</sup> Successive government initiatives have sought to harness the potential this offers to transform the food sector in the public interest, and achieving this remains an important prize.<sup>169</sup> To date, and despite some shining examples of success, these efforts have been frustrated by problems of co-ordination, infrastructure and political will. Until government is recognised as buying food that mainly supports its own social and environmental objectives, it cannot credibly portray consumers as powerful agents of change within the food sector.

**Key point:** It is important to recognise the limits of consumers' power in the marketplace, notwithstanding their aggregate influence.

**Recommendation:** As the UK's biggest consumer, government should ensure that it only buys food that has been produced fairly and sustainably, and can help the people it serves eat a healthy diet.

## Food Justice

# 5. The terms of debate



**Social injustice pervades all aspects of our food system, domestically and globally. Billions of people are hungry or suffer diet-related ill-health, poor people are unable to secure their livelihoods through agricultural production or labour, and the most adversely affected are powerless to change things.**

This endemic unfairness is disturbing and urgent in its own right, but this Inquiry has also demonstrated that social injustice is fundamentally bound up with equally profound issues around environmental sustainability. This chapter considers what the Inquiry can tell us about how to address these most pressing concerns.

## 5.1. Social justice tensions

**One of the benefits of the ‘fair shares, fair play, fair say’ framework is that it clarifies the different ways in which solutions to social justice problems conflict with one another.** A prominent example throughout the preceding analysis has been how standards that are intended to address inequalities of outcome – by promoting healthy diets, for example – can sometimes have detrimental effects in relation to equality of opportunity. The fact that workers on export farms in poor countries often have better health and incomes (‘fair shares’), but are nevertheless denied significant autonomy over their livelihoods (‘fair say’), is a more particular example<sup>170</sup>. A third example is the phenomenon of countries attempting to ensure their own food security by buying large tracts of land in other, poorer countries.

## 5.2. Social justice and the environment

**The relationship between social justice and environmental factors is more complex.** The main ways in which these two areas inter-relate include:

- *Social injustice as a cause of environmental harm*  
For example, poor people buy cheaper food, which can be lower priced because the environmental costs are excluded.
- *Measures to promote sustainability cause social injustice problems*  
The consequences of ‘internalising externalities’ – increasing the price of food to take account of environmental (and social) costs – can make it more difficult for people on low incomes to buy good food, for example.

- *Environmental problems as an element in social injustice*  
Environmental degradation contributing to the restricted access to water for many rural poor.
- *Measures to address social injustice having adverse implications for sustainability*  
Post-war efforts to improve food security and food access in Europe have contributed to global environmental degradation.
- *‘Win-wins’*  
Some measures have positive implications for both social justice and sustainability. The fact that small-scale agro-ecological production systems can improve efficiency in a sustainable way means that enhancing access to resources for smallholders can bring this kind of dual benefit.

These problems are rooted in structural features of ‘how the world works’

## 5.3. The scale of the challenge

**We are faced with social injustice across all aspects of the production and consumption of our food, and the inter-relationships within and between social justice and sustainability problems make the picture even more complicated.** The third dimension that has emerged from the preceding discussion is that, to a great extent, these problems are rooted in structural features of ‘how the world works’. Trade liberalisation, the role of global corporations, the influence of the financial sector, deregulation, socio-economic policy orthodoxy, consumption-led growth... these are the factors that the committee has found to underlie the unfairness and unsustainability of our food system.

This could make the challenge of achieving a socially just, sustainable future seem overwhelming or hopeless. But it should not – because we are at a moment where precisely these orthodoxies have been placed under unprecedented scrutiny, where it is widely accepted that ‘business as usual is not an option’.

Business as usual is not an option...  
we must fundamentally change the  
way we live

## 5.4. Key messages from the Inquiry

**In this unprecedented context, what can the Food and Fairness Inquiry tell us about how this different world will, or should, look and about what steps we need to take to get there?**

In answer, a series of ‘key messages’ can be drawn from what the committee heard.

Food policy is central to meeting recognised ecological sustainability challenges

**The cornerstone of the consensus that ‘business as usual is not an option’ is the shared recognition that we must fundamentally change the way we live in order to protect the planet for future generations.** The evidence and analysis presented in this report shows that changing how we produce and consume our food will be absolutely central to this endeavour. Since the main concern is to ensure that future generations can benefit from the ‘ecosystem services’ provided by our planet, this is a matter of social justice.

Social justice issues around food are at the heart of recognised environmental and health challenges

**As we saw in Chapter 3, issues of food-related social justice, sustainability and health are intrinsically related.** The directness, complexity and variety of these inter-relationships means that it is simply impossible to achieve our targets for sustainability and public health without simultaneously addressing food-related social injustice.

The Inquiry committee learned about the need to move on from consumption-based conceptions of prosperity and develop new models of human flourishing. Our relationship with our food can epitomise this transformation, moving away from food as something we produce and consume in order to survive, to a recognition of the central role that food plays in the emergence of our identities and communal existence.

Addressing food-related social injustice mainly requires wider social and economic policy solutions

**The committee’s discussions about solving social justice problems in the food sector generally pointed towards wider social and economic policy, for example on employment, benefit levels, competition and finance.** So many of the issues we face around food are shared with other sectors and some of the most powerful levers of change lie outside our immediate reach. But they are still our business: far from ruling those issues and actions off limits, the committee’s analysis implies that people working in the food sector have a responsibility to press for wide-reaching change.

Nevertheless, there is also scope for promoting social justice through food policy. The analysis and recommendations set out in this report highlight some of the aspects of food policy that contribute to unfair outcomes, unequal opportunities and restricted autonomy.

Social justice does not mean treating everyone the same

**It is easy to conflate ‘fairness’ and ‘equality’, but they are in fact very different notions.** Indeed, in an unfair world, treating everyone equally perpetuates injustice rather than addressing it. For example, the need of poor countries for “special and differential treatment” in trade policy is widely accepted.<sup>171</sup>

The recent Marmot Review of health inequalities coined the term “proportionate universalism” to encapsulate the idea that:

“To reduce the social gradient in health, actions must be universal, but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage.”<sup>172</sup>

## Terry Jones

Acting Director of Communications  
National Farmers' Union



Most of us would argue that fairness should be at the heart of the development of food policy but we know that the reality is that government, businesses and citizens take decisions everyday that are unfair. Nonetheless we should strive for social justice to be more prominent in debates on food policy, or else it seems impossible that the food and farming industries will be able to face up to some of the big challenges of the future.

Due to the complex interactions between food's big issues it is easy for policymakers either to be overwhelmed by the scale of the task or to discount some of the problems. Farmers themselves are bewildered by the contradictory demands being made of them. For more fair policies to be developed it seems likely that small but consistent changes will need to be made over time. Domestically where farmer, processor and retailer have come together to develop economically fairer supply chains, often the consumer has had a greater say and the environment has benefitted. An exploration of how more of these arrangements can be rolled out would seem to offer one of the next steps required for fairness to be at the heart of food.

**Viewpoint**  
from the Inquiry committee

We need to find ways to engage people, and society as a whole, with food policy

**Despite low levels of participation in electoral politics, there is evidence of a strong appetite for social and political engagement in the UK: more than half of Britons participate in community and charity work, and people are increasingly involved in 'pressure politics' – signing petitions, supporting consumer boycotts, joining campaign groups, etc.**<sup>173</sup> Consumers generally support the notion of fairness but may lack the knowledge or confidence to drive change. 'Ethical consumption' is just one of the ways in which people can potentially act upon their values in relation to food and farming. Other food-related examples include civil society movements across Europe opposing GM crops, and campaigns against supermarket power in the food system.<sup>174</sup>

Recent innovations in participatory democracy have largely failed to satisfy this desire for engagement.<sup>175</sup> Consultations on different aspects of food policy have been attacked for being tokenistic, with responses only being requested once the outlines of policy have been set,<sup>176</sup> while some policy areas have remained untouched by public debate. Economic policy has been 'depoliticised', with certain orthodoxies prevailing irrespective of which party holds power: trade and financial liberalisation, liberal competition policy, and privatisation.<sup>177</sup> As noted above, these policies play a significant part in explaining food-related social injustice.

Much policy debate around food centres on how to change people's behaviour

To enable people to change their behaviour, we need to address the inequalities that underpin their behaviour

**Much policy debate around food centres on how to change people's behaviour, especially in relation to healthy diets.** Campaigns such as '5-a-Day' and 'Change 4 Life' promote healthy lifestyles, and substantial effort has been put into developing nutritional labelling for food packaging. Some people advocate

teaching low-income families basic cooking and budgeting skills as a means of ensuring healthy diets.

While many households – across all income levels – can clearly benefit from such an approach, many people on low incomes are already highly skilled in these areas; they have to be, in order to survive. People on low incomes are not necessarily ignorant when it comes to nutrition: survey respondents regularly report that not having enough money is what prevents them from buying food they know to be healthier. When someone's economic, and wider social, circumstances make it impossible to satisfy their basic needs, no amount of information, exhortation and education is going to enable them to have a healthy diet.

'Cheap food' is no longer a legitimate social policy objective

**Industrial agriculture, combined with trade liberalisation and other aspects of national and international policy, has to a large extent 'succeeded' in meeting the post-war objective of 'cheap food'.** But, as we have seen, this has been at massive environmental and social cost. There is a shared responsibility for putting this era behind us. Citizens will need to accept food prices that reflect the full costs of production, including social and environmental costs. Frameworks for business must be such that business profitability is not dependent upon promoting and selling cheap food. And governments must ensure that income support and minimum wage levels are sufficient to pay for fully-costed, healthy food.

In other words, we need to develop a new understanding of what we mean by 'affordable food'.

Success in providing 'cheap food' has been at massive environmental and social cost

The market, including the financial market, has to work differently

**A recurrent theme over the course of the Inquiry was that the market does not currently enable consumers to act in accordance with their ethical values – a situation that could be described as 'ethical market failure'.** The strong performance of Fairtrade products during the recession shows that consumers are willing to pay for 'added ethical value', but as yet they are only able to do so to a limited extent. Part of the reason is that financial measures are a very poor proxy for environmental impact, so we need to develop some form of resource-based accounting to enable markets to provide the benefits of efficiency (which is what they are good at) in relation to environmental and social factors.

The market does not currently enable consumers to act in accordance with their ethical values – we have 'ethical market failure'

Similar points were made about financial markets. The demand for investment will be substantial if we are going to meet our ecological targets, including investment in low carbon technologies, resource productivity, and models of sustainable agriculture. Some of this investment will show conventional returns, but much of it will not. Many investments will have far longer periods of return, and some will not show any return at all unless one counts ecological and social returns long into the future. These are not the sort of investments that hold much appeal for existing capital markets, where investment is driven by the demand for short-term, high-return productivity gains tied to unsustainable consumption growth.

This suggests the need for another new understanding – this time for our notion of 'efficiency'. One of the contentious issues that arose during the Inquiry was whether large-scale agriculture is in fact more efficient than small-scale agriculture. There are grounds for both sides of this argument when efficiency is understood in conventional terms, but the case for small-scale agriculture can become much stronger if efficiency is extended to include the social costs. Small-scale agriculture can be more efficient in achieving poverty

reduction, because it provides benefits more directly to poorer producers, and the benefits are more likely to be retained at the local or community level.

There are limits to what can be achieved through market mechanisms, so we need government leadership

**The Inquiry committee identified a number of areas where government needs to show greater leadership in addressing the causes of food-related social injustice.** Responsible business leaders are increasingly vocal in calling for more effective regulation in order to secure a 'more level playing field' – to prevent less scrupulous businesses from under-cutting their more progressive counterparts. Action on labour standards and nutrition labelling were two examples cited; and it was recognised that public action on food safety standards had been driven by industry concerns along these lines.

The fact that so many of the issues raised through the Inquiry are in part explained by global economic factors means that we also need government leadership in inter-governmental fora. International leadership is one way of addressing a fundamental challenge that the Inquiry committee identified – that progressive action at the national level runs the risk of 'capital flight' and 'exporting unfairness' if other countries do not follow suit.

The current international trade regime presents significant obstacles to addressing social injustice in food and farming

**Many of the most serious aspects of social injustice identified through the Inquiry arise out of the operation of global corporations, whose ability to buy from suppliers all over the world is assured by the current liberalised trade regime.** Their dominant position in the global food market has been assisted by the relaxation of controls on foreign direct investment. Also, the global patent regime enables multinational companies to exploit their ownership of knowledge in ways that are described as amounting to a "private power of taxation".<sup>178</sup> In addition to facilitating some harmful activities by trans-national corporations, the 'flip side' of trade liberalisation is that it also prevents national governments from taking the necessary action to address domestic food-related social

injustice. As the IAASTD noted, "the poorest developing countries are net losers under most liberalization scenarios".<sup>179</sup>

The IAASTD report concluded that there is a need for "special and differential treatment accorded through trade negotiations... preserving national policy flexibility [that] allows developing countries to balance the needs of poor consumers (urban and rural landless) and rural small-scale farmers".<sup>180</sup> And, in evidence submitted to the Inquiry, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food suggested that huge differences in agricultural labour productivity undermine arguments that trade liberalisation establishes a level playing field. With productivity in the poorest countries below 1% of that in developed countries, this means that farmers in poor countries would only be able to compete if wages and agricultural prices in their regions are kept at very low levels.<sup>181</sup>

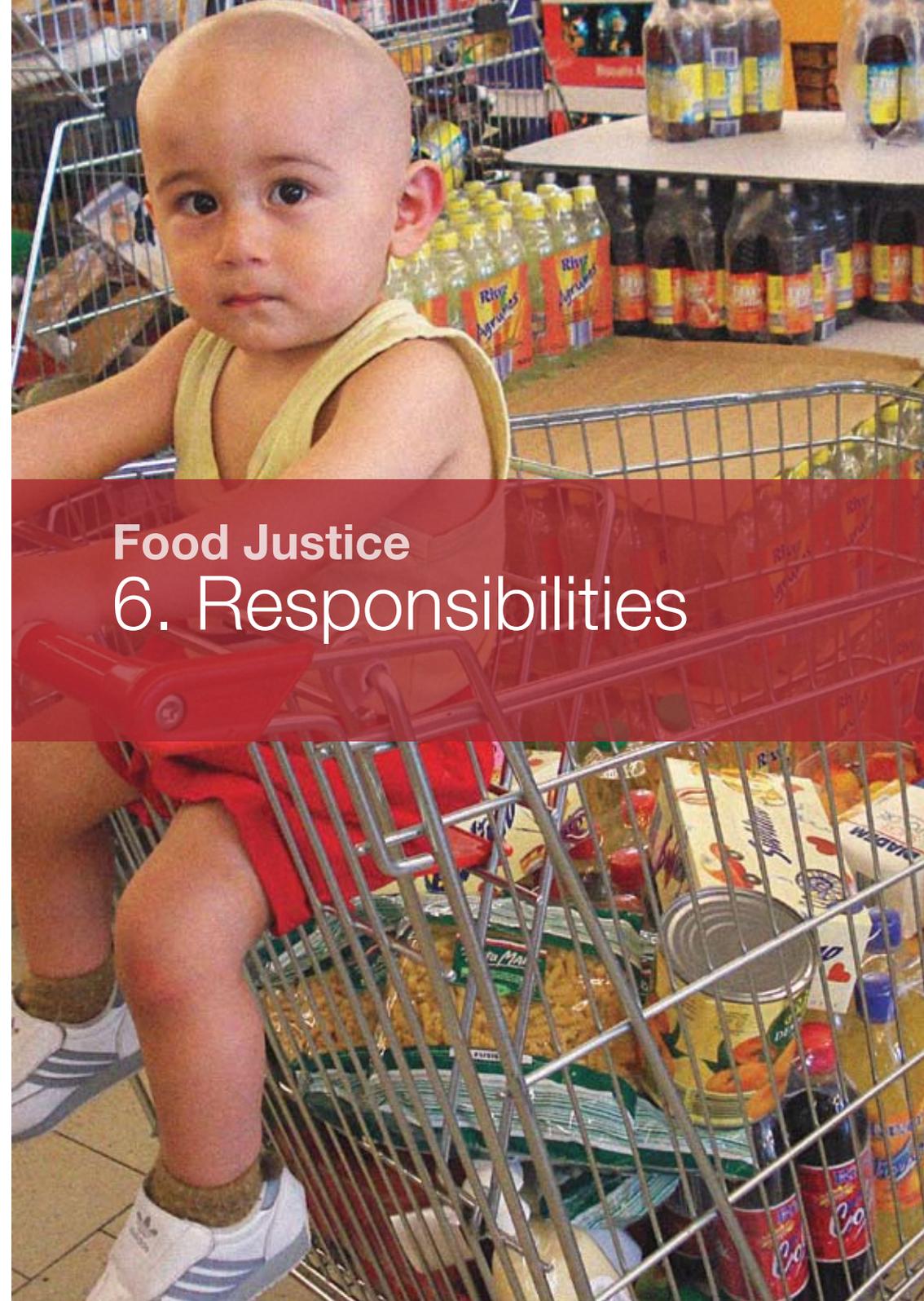
"the poorest developing countries are net losers under most liberalization scenarios"

All stakeholders face limits to what they can achieve themselves but, for their commitment to social justice to be credible, they must openly support whatever measures are necessary but beyond their own capacity

**The complex nature of food-related social injustice means that there are relatively few straightforward solutions.** This means that for many of the immediate proposals to remedy particular injustices, it will be possible to identify related issues that would also need to be addressed for the remedy to be effective. For example, businesses can only pay a living wage if competitors are prevented from undercutting them; the government can only agree favourable trade terms with poorer countries if they are enabled to by international commitments.

If private and public actors wish to be regarded as genuinely committed to social justice, then they must openly advocate for progressive policy change at the appropriate level, with UK business lobbying the UK government, and the UK government showing leadership within the European Union and in other inter-governmental

fora. Contributing to such collective action – openly demanding others to support your own actions to promote social justice – has become a condition of credibility for any organisation claiming to promote the public interest.



## Food Justice 6. Responsibilities

The UK is an unfair society in a deeply unfair world. The Food and Fairness Inquiry has shown how all of us – in government, business, and civil society – are to some extent implicated. This means that we all have responsibilities for doing something about it. We can each do much more before we run up against the limits to our responsibilities (Figure 3).

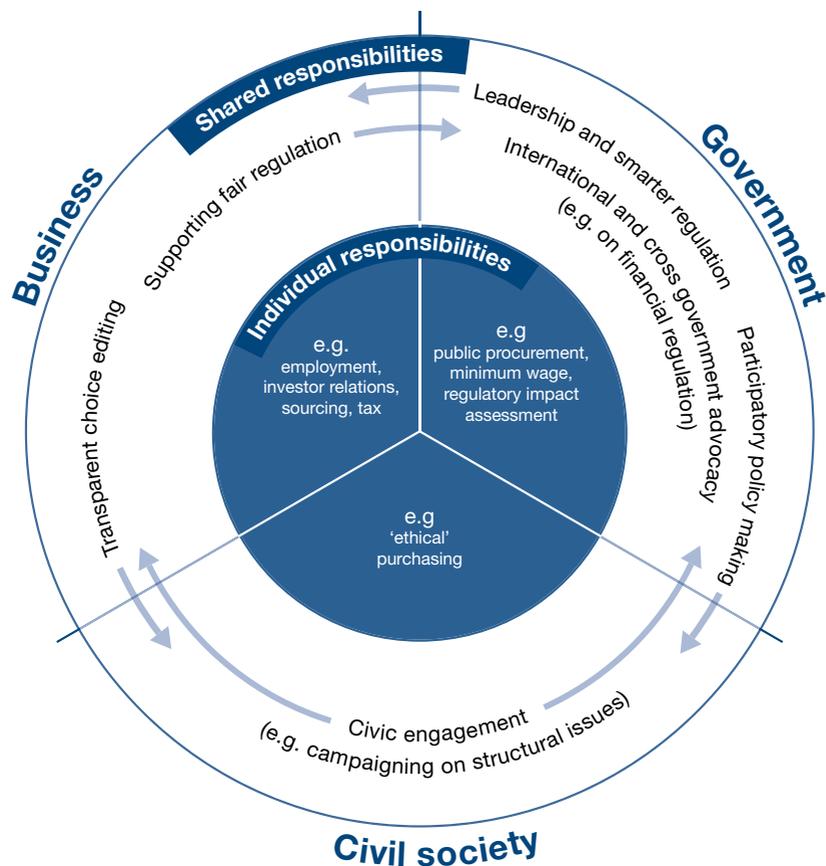


Figure 3: Government, business and civil society responsibilities.

## 6.1. Government

**Government must face up to the realities of the changing world that we live in.** Articles of faith about minimising the burdens on business and leaving it all to the market can no longer be sustained. Business and civil society are unable to address the challenges they face alone: they need and demand leadership from government.

Most of the recommendations in previous sections of this report are for government. The most urgent are about getting its house in order – not undoing with one hand what it seeks to achieve with the other – and require politicians and civil servants responsible for food and farming to lobby for action across government and internationally. The focus is on smarter regulation and on getting the balance right between meaningful participative policy making, and appropriate leadership.

Fairness must underpin every aspect of business operations, including employment, sourcing, investor relations and taxation

## 6.2. Business

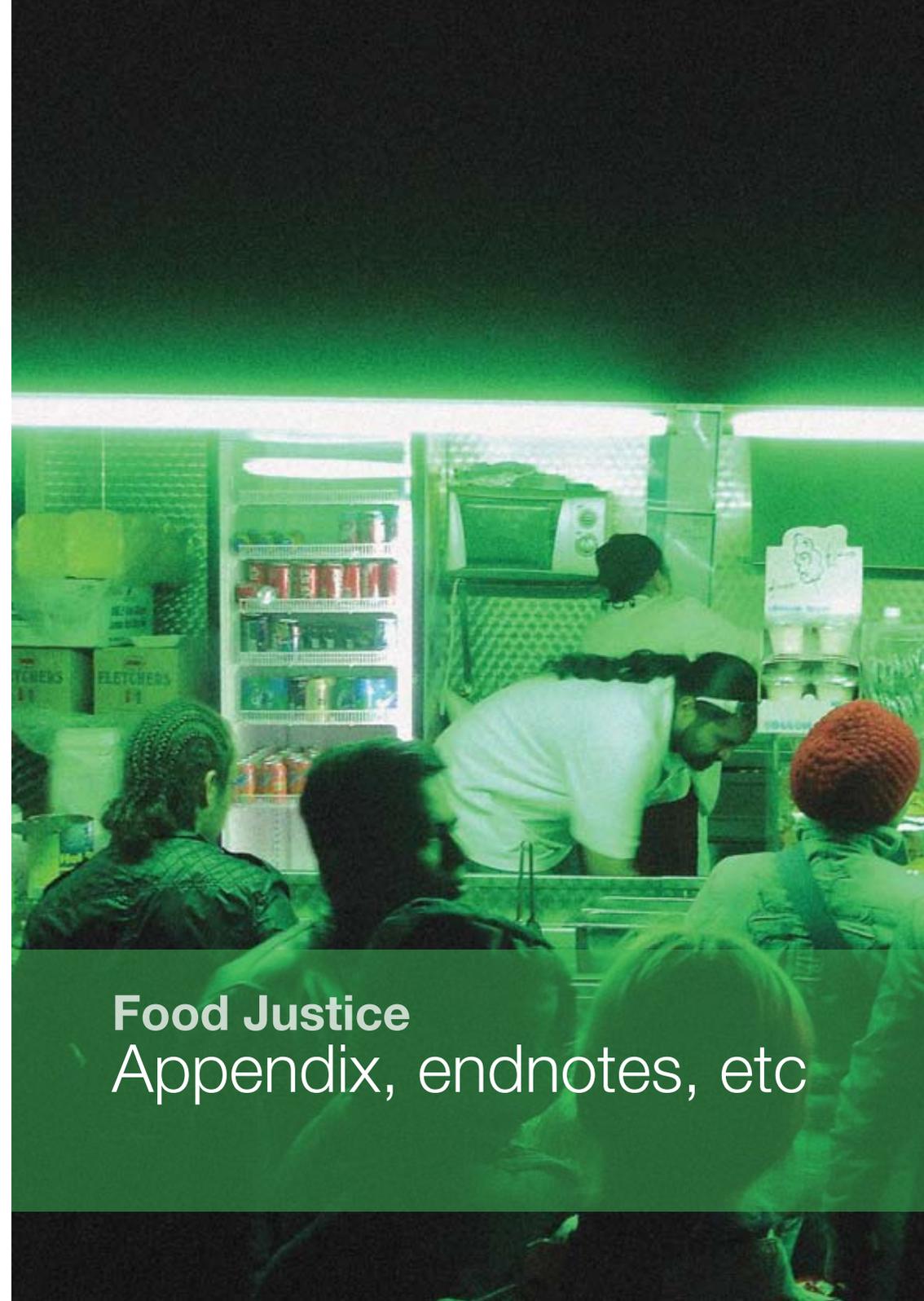
**Businesses too must develop new ways of understanding old paradigms.** Efficiency, return on investment, and competition all mean something different in a fair and sustainable marketplace. Fairness can no longer be seen as ‘nice to have’, a CSR add-on – fairness must underpin every aspect of business operations, including employment, sourcing, investor relations and taxation. That many of the issues discussed in this report cannot be tackled by businesses single-handedly is no excuse for inaction: their credibility will depend on naming these challenges and supporting wider efforts by other businesses, government and civil society to address them.

## 6.3. Civil society

**Citizens must accept that, through their consumption, they share responsibility for the unfairness documented in this report.** This

creates an obligation to address this unfairness. The limits of what can be achieved through 'ethical consumption' imply a need for wider civic engagement. This report has not only argued for citizens' entitlements to be strengthened, for instance through minimum wage rates, but also our responsibilities.

As consumers, this means accepting food prices that reflect the full social and environmental costs of production. As a society it implies changing our norms to expect civic engagement as the rule not the exception. For NGOs, it means holding government and businesses to account for tackling structural problems, tackling the root causes of unfairness as well as its symptoms.



## Food Justice Appendix, endnotes, etc

## Appendix: witnesses at the Inquiry hearings

The Food and Fairness Inquiry committee and the Food Ethics Council are very grateful to the following people for the stimulating and inspiring evidence that they provided at the Inquiry hearings:

### First hearing – Fair shares

Bill Gray, National Officer, Community Food and Health Scotland, who gave evidence on food poverty in the UK

Steve Wiggins, Research Fellow, Rural Policy and Governance Group, Overseas Development Institute, who gave evidence on how incomes affect food security internationally

Donald Hirsch, Head of Income Studies, Centre for Research in Social Policy, Loughborough University, who gave evidence on inequalities and economic policy

### Second hearing – Fair play

Karolina Krzywdzinska, who gave evidence of her experience as a fruit packer

Shayne Tyler, Manor Fresh Ltd, who gave evidence on ethical trading

Ben Rogaly, University of Sussex, who gave evidence on how food sector and agricultural restructuring affects suppliers and workers

Sophia Tickell, SustainAbility Ltd, who gave evidence on the social justice implications of sustainability challenges

### Third hearing – Fair say

Caroline Moraes, Birmingham Business School, who gave evidence on consumer autonomy in food choices

Catherine Dolan, Said Business School, University of Oxford, who gave evidence on the extent to which Fairtrade changes producer-consumer relationships

Tim Jackson, Centre for Environmental Strategy, University of Surrey, who gave evidence on structural challenges, particularly issues of accountability around sustainable consumption and production

## Endnotes

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## Acknowledgements

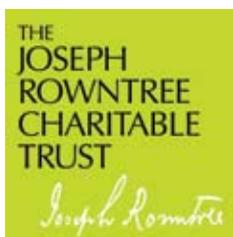
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## About the Food Ethics Council

The Food Ethics Council is a charity that provides independent advice on the ethics of food and farming. Our aim is to create a food system that is fair and healthy for people and the environment. We:

- Help guide the way through difficult issues by analysing problems, challenging accepted opinion and creating a space for dialogue; and
- Build tools to put ethics at the heart of decisions about food in business, policy and civil society.

Our Council members include bioethicists and moral philosophers, farmers and food industry executives, scientists and sociologists, academics and authors.

We work on issues ranging from the power of supermarkets, food poverty and workers' rights, to air freight, genetic modification, meat and climate change, and water scarcity.

Find out more about our work, including the members of the Council, our exclusive Business Forum, and our must-read magazine, Food Ethics, on our website at [www.foodethicscouncil.org](http://www.foodethicscouncil.org).

## Members of the Food and Fairness Inquiry committee

### **Helen Browning OBE\***

Chair of the Inquiry Committee  
Director of Food and Farming, Soil Association  
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Joseph Rowntree Visionary for a Just and Peaceful World  
Trustee of the Food Ethics Council

### **Paul Whitehouse**

Chair,  
Gangmasters Licensing Authority

\* Richard MacDonald retired from his position at the National Farmers' Union during the course of the Inquiry, and Terry Jones took his place.

\* Andrew Kuyk stood in for Melanie Leech at two of the Inquiry committee meetings.

\* Helen Browning moved from the Soil Association to the National Trust during the Inquiry.

Kevin Morgan was originally appointed to the Inquiry committee, and attended the initial committee meeting; but in the event was unfortunately unable to take part in the Inquiry process.

The committee members participated in the Inquiry in an individual capacity, not as representatives of the organisations that they work for or with. This report is the report of the Food and Fairness Inquiry committee; it does not necessarily represent the views of those organisations.



Our domestic and global food system is profoundly unfair, and this deep-rooted social injustice impedes our progress towards food security, sustainability and public health.

This report presents the findings of the Food and Fairness Inquiry. It examines the symptoms and causes of food-related injustices experienced by billions of people across the world, and analyses the complex relationships between unfairness, environmental degradation and ill-health.

The report makes practical recommendations pointing towards a sustainable, healthy and fair food system, identifying the respective responsibilities of UK government, businesses and civil society.

‘The Inquiry committee is united by our shared rejection of the lack of fairness in the current food system’

**Melanie Leech**  
**Chief Executive, Food and Drink Federation**  
Food and Fairness Inquiry committee member

‘Sustainable development that doesn’t create fairness for people isn’t, frankly, sustainable development’

**Jeanette Longfield MBE**  
**Coordinator, Sustain – the alliance for better food and farming**  
Food and Fairness Inquiry committee member



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