

Fronting up: UK sustainable food systems in the spotlight

SUMMARY



Food Ethics Council

The task in hand

If the UK leaves the EU in 2019, it will have seismic implications for its food and farming systems. Brexit poses huge risks e.g. that UK food standards might be eroded in the rush to secure international trade deals. It raises questions about who will grow and produce our food in the future. But it may also bring opportunities to reshape the way that farmers are supported, effecting a move away from subsidies based on size of farms towards new mechanisms that reward farmers for delivering public goods.

Now more than ever, is an opportune time for the UK Government and Devolved Administrations to consider the UK's place in the world - including the importance attached to 'good' food and farming. There has arguably never been a more important time for food ethics.

Having an aspirational ambition for the UK to be a world leader on food, farming, animal welfare and environmental issues - as the Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has put forward - is a good starting point and an ethical imperative. However, for such an aspiration to become a reality, it needs other 'ingredients' that are currently lacking - from well-defined measures of success to in-depth ethical analysis.

The purpose of this publication is to shine a spotlight on the UK's position on the Food Sustainability Index ('FSI'), to ask how we are really doing and to set out initial steps for what the UK needs to do to become a true global leader on food, farming, health, the environment and animal welfare. This work is a snapshot analysis of the UK's performance, based on the 2017 iteration of the FSI, an index produced by the Barilla Center for

Food and Nutrition ('BCFN') Foundation and the Economist Intelligence Unit ('EIU').

We want the UK Government and Devolved Administrations to attach a higher priority to ethical concerns in food and farming policy. They need to be held to account for their progress (or otherwise) towards the ambition of being a global food sustainability leader. Hence why this analysis is so timely - at the start of a renewed journey towards global leadership on this agenda.

"We have a great opportunity to make sure our food and farming industry is leading the way in modern, creative thinking."

Rt. Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for Environment,
Food and Rural Affairs, 2017

Our aim is to create food systems that are fair and healthy for people, animals and the environment. Hence, we take a broad interpretation of food sustainability and of sustainable food systems. That was what drew us to the FSI. It was a useful (if not perfect) attempt to bring together a range of important food issues, including food waste and losses, human health and nutrition, the environmental impacts of food and farming, treatment of workers and animal welfare concerns.

Judging how sustainable food systems are is a difficult job, but it is an important one. We are using the FSI to help give a sense of how the UK is doing on sustainable food systems. The FSI has limitations, not least that it does not consider many of the impacts relating to food imported into countries, which is particularly important for high food-importing countries like the UK. Nonetheless, the FSI is still a valiant attempt and we are keen to help further strengthen it in future.

Taking an ethical approach in tackling the food issues we face means having a better understanding of the implications of our choices when dealing with concerns about human health, animal welfare, environmental protection or trade justice. It is important to consider as best as possible what the values we want to promote as a country are, what the most contentious issues are and what the consequences from particular courses of action are likely to be. Who are likely to be the biggest winners and losers? And how can national Governments - and others - address trade-offs head on?

We believe that food indexes - if done well - can engender healthy competition. What is more, they have the potential to drive a 'race to the top' on food sustainability. There are already several examples of indexes targeted at different actors in the food system, from Oxfam's influential Behind the Brands

company scorecard to IFPRI's Global Hunger Index to the FSI.

In this analysis we focus particularly on the FSI, first published in December 2016. Its aims are to promote food sustainability concerns, to be a benchmarking tool to help policymakers identify priority areas to act, and to integrate work within global efforts to achieve the SDGs by 2030. The second iteration of the FSI was published in December 2017 and this is what our snapshot analysis draws upon. We are grateful to EIU and BCFN Foundation for allowing us early embargoed access to the 2017 FSI data.

Whilst the occasion of this report is the publication of FSI 2017, this is a free-standing and wider report, not merely a footnote on the FSI.

The FSI contains 66 sub-indicators under three main 'domains' and in 2017 assesses 34 countries. A simplified version of the FSI's framework used is shown below:

Table 1: Simplified version of the FSI framework. (Source: adapted from 2017 FSI)

A. Food loss and waste
1. Food loss
2. End-user food waste
B. Sustainable agriculture
1. Water
2. Land (land use, biodiversity, human capital)
3. Air (GHG emissions)
C. Nutritional challenges
1. Life quality
2. Life expectancy
3. Dietary patterns

How is the UK doing?

UK food sustainability in the spotlight

If we look at a regional level, the UK is lagging behind many of its European neighbours. The UK comes eighth out of the ten European countries included in the 2017 FSI, only ahead of Russia and Greece.

Table 2: Overall ranking of European countries included in 2017 FSI

(Source: 2017 FSI)

Overall ranking in FSI	Country	FSI Score
1	France	74.8
2	Germany	70.6
3	Spain	70.4
4	Sweden	69.7
5	Portugal	69.5
6	Italy	69.0
7	Hungary	68.4
8	UK	68.0
9	Russia	62.1
10	Greece	61.6

Food loss and waste

The UK ranks seventh out of 34 countries for food loss and waste. An estimated 30-50% of food is lost, or wasted globally, at some point along the chain. But why does food loss and waste matter? The problem is not simply the environmental impact of having to dispose of wasted food but more fundamentally, the wasted resources that have gone into growing and making that food in the first place.

The UK is often held up anecdotally as a global leader on food waste and food loss and, if FSI data is to be accepted, on the face of it the UK is performing reasonably well. But, the UK is not leading and there is a real risk that great progress made in recent years may be undermined.

There is growing awareness of the problem, growing consensus around the need to tackle it and a strong business case for cutting food waste all the way along supply chains, from farm to fork and beyond. That said, food waste and losses in UK food systems - including global supply chains the UK sources from - are still unacceptably high.

Food waste is arguably one of the biggest injustices of our time. Indeed, any index that shows how well a country is doing should only be viewed as provisional if a significant proportion of the food waste occurs outside the country. The UK still imports substantial volumes from some countries performing less well on food loss and waste - notably India and Brazil. As such, food waste should be viewed in the context of a country's trading relations and with an understanding that those that import food have some responsibility for waste along the chain.

Food waste can also be a useful proxy for understanding how much people value food. UK performance contrasts with France which, according to the FSI, is a leader on food waste - helped by a suite of approaches, including having a mandate to educate children about waste.

Sustainable agriculture

The 'sustainable agriculture' category is the largest and most diverse of the three domains in the FSI. It includes environmental impacts from agriculture, animal welfare (although only one measure is present) and treatment of workers, but it has some limitations.

The figures presented paint a potentially worrying picture. On 'sustainable agriculture' impacts, the UK ranks in the bottom half of countries assessed in the FSI (20th out of 34 countries). The UK scores relatively well on water issues, including environmental impact of agriculture on water, water scarcity, water management, trade impact and sustainability of fisheries. One important exception though, is for 'total net imports of virtual blue water from crop and animal products' where the UK ranks 32nd out of 34.

The UK performs particularly poorly in the 'air' category because it does not have a dedicated agriculture policy that deals with climate change, hence scores badly on 'initiatives of agricultural techniques for climate change mitigation and adaptation.'

How *people* working in our food and farming supply chains are treated is also hugely important. By the one measure included in the FSI at least, the UK's position is worse than many might imagine.

On animal welfare, the UK ranks first in the FSI, which is very encouraging. However, the single animal welfare indicator used is 'quality of animal welfare regulation' and further outcome measures are needed to get a more complete picture.

Nutritional challenges

The UK comes eighth out of 34 countries on nutritional challenges and is performing well in some areas - like very low levels of stunting and wasting. However, the current (average) *healthy* life expectancy in the UK

is 71.4 years, which is outside the top ten of the FSI rankings and disguises significant differences between different parts of the UK. There are surely important lessons to be learned from countries at the top of healthy life expectancy rankings - notably Japan and South Korea.

In other areas, the picture is much more concerning. The UK ranks 20th out of 34 countries on prevalence of overweight in children and 24th out of 34 amongst adults (and the worst of the 10 European countries included in the FSI). The UK is the most obese country in western Europe, with 26.9% of the population obese in 2015¹.

Nutritional challenges are by their nature long-term. The UK is facing both a short-term emergency and a long-term crisis in relation to obesity. The introduction of a UK Childhood obesity plan in 2016/17 was welcome and contained some positive measures. However, it did not go anywhere near far enough and one year on very little progress has been made.

The UK comes bottom of the FSI on exclusive breastfeeding at six months. This matters for a range of reasons, not least because breastfeeding has been described as the *ultimate* healthy, sustainable diet.

As the FSI highlights, there is a worryingly high proportion of people below the national poverty line in the UK. If you look more specifically at household food insecurity, this highlights food-related challenges even more vividly. According to UN data, an estimated 8.4 million people were living in households reporting having insufficient food in 2014 in the UK².

1. OECD's annual Health at a Glance report <http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/healthier-lifestyles-and-better-health-policies-drive-life-expectancy-gains.htm>

2. <http://www.foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/FoodInsecurityBriefing-May-2016-FINAL.pdf>

Ethical tensions and responses

To provide an ethical response to food system challenges, we must consider the different values that affect our food choices. We must look at the consequences of those values and their likely impacts on different interest groups, then weigh them up and try to decide what is right, all things considered. There are three ethical principles we feel are particularly important – respect for fairness, wellbeing and autonomy.

UK tensions

The FSI raises multiple tensions, contradictions and questions relevant to the UK. Examples of these tensions that key food system actors ought to deal with include:

1. Pushing the boundaries of responsibility

Much of FSI's data focuses on impacts of food produced within the country. However, around 50% of the food eaten in the UK is imported. These overseas impacts are not properly reflected and, as such, there is a risk the UK is offshoring many of its negative impacts and abrogating itself of responsibility. Some countries are resorting to 'land grabs'. However, in developing responses, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of those most affected – in this case citizens of those countries. **Key ethical questions: How can we ensure the needs of interest groups affected by UK food imports are taken into account? And how can we ensure our food choices are fair to people in other countries?**

2. Short and long-term

There is a need to balance action on both short-term and long-term concerns. Failing to act, or acting too slowly, will store up trouble and unfairly put the burden on future

generations. Failing to take preventative steps will see obesity rates spiral further out of control, with an accompanying health and financial burden. 'Short-termism' can also cloud deeper issues, and – unintentionally – exacerbate the problem in the long term. For example, establishing food banks may serve a vital function in the short term by providing an emergency response and feeding people in need. However, doing so may entrench charity food aid provision and allow the Government to step away from its obligation to provide a genuine safety net to people in need.

Key ethical question: How can we ensure approaches to food system challenges are fair to future generations while still addressing current needs?

3. High food standards and affordability

For every £1 that UK citizens pay at the checkout, it is estimated there are £1 of additional costs incurred.¹ We need to better reflect the true cost of food in the price we pay at the checkout. Unfortunately, it is often those on low incomes that are hit hardest. Whilst this is a hugely complex area, cheap food cannot be the answer. We need to get more people into work that pays and treats them well (including a real living wage), with the Government providing a proper safety net. This will allow everyone to access the high food standards we should strive for. **Key ethical question: How can Government make changes needed in wider society that will allow everyone to pay the true cost of food at the checkout in the future?**

3. <http://sustainablefoodtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/HCOF-Report-online-version.pdf>

Conclusions

Overall, the UK comes tenth out of 34 countries on food sustainability in the 2017 FSI. In short, that is not good enough.

The FSI gives a sense of how sustainable UK food systems are, if not a 'true' picture. The reality is that the UK is not yet a global leader on food sustainability – despite areas of encouraging performance. The UK is doing badly on iconic indicators like childhood obesity, exclusive breastfeeding rates and climate change action. The road ahead may be more like a game of snakes and ladders than a smooth race to the top.

Taking an ethical approach is vital to make UK food systems fair and fit for the future. The Food Ethics Council believes food system leadership for the UK must include:

- **Standing for excellence:** establishing itself as a country based on values that lead to high food standards. It is about continually raising the bar in a race for 'goodness' – and never settling for first place if that is simply 'the best of a bad lot', with unacceptable levels of harm.
- **Taking responsibility for impacts of food consumed:** active and transparent monitoring of food imports to ensure they are produced to the highest food standards.
- **Taking a long-term approach:** short-term responses can become entrenched and blind us from long-term solutions. We need a long-term commitment and framework to deliver fair food systems, focused on prevention rather than cure. This includes supporting the nation's long-term health by investing a significantly higher proportion of health service budget to public health.
- **Tackling trade-offs head on:** a forthright recognition that any sustainable food and farming policy needs to face up to trade-

offs between the interests of humans and animals, humans and the environment, or even different people and communities. Unlocking these tensions and trade-offs will be easier if we are not afraid to face them together and tackle their root causes.

- **Integrating policies:** having clear policy mechanisms to bring together environmental sustainability, agriculture and health at the Cabinet Office.
- **Pushing for outcomes as measures of success:** leading on identifying and implementing suitable metrics, including setting and embedding welfare outcome measures for all farm animal species, and introducing annual government-led measurement of household food insecurity.¹
- **Inclusive leadership:** treating everyone equally and including people in decisions that affect them will empower people and generate better solutions. Being trapped in a *consumer* mindset contributes to the lack of agency many feel. By contrast, adopting a *citizen* mindset opens up a range of opportunities for how people can participate in – and positively shape – our food systems.²

The FSI reinforces the fact that our food systems need to change. There are many hard truths to confront. The UK Government and Devolved Administrations should take a leadership position on sustainable food systems and we should all help fulfil that.

Let us work together to deliver the UK's global leadership ambitions and create a race for excellence.

1. The Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) advocates its Food Insecurity Experience Scale.

2. For further details, see our work with the New Citizenship Project on 'Food Citizenship' at www.foodcitizenship.info



The Food Ethics Council would like to thank the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for funding our key programmes, including this publication which is part of our *Unleashing the power of indexes* work programme.

We would also like to thank the Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition ('BCFN') Foundation and the Economist Intelligence Unit ('EIU') for sharing the embargoed data for the 2017 Food Sustainability Index ('FSI') with us in advance of the 2017 FSI launch, to enable us to do a snapshot analysis.

Note - this publication is from the Food Ethics Council and does not represent the views of the BCFN Foundation or the EIU.

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Published December 2017

www.foodethicscouncil.org/our-work/index



Food Ethics Council