Food security

A briefing from the Farming and Land Use Network (FLUN)

Key Points

- A Food Security definition which focuses mainly on increasing food availability by maximising domestic production will fall short of addressing the multifaceted challenges we face today.
- Food security is about more than just food production; it encompasses nutritional quality, food accessibility, and stability of supply.
- With climate change, biodiversity loss, increasing food inequality and a public health crisis it's imperative to shift our food and farming systems towards a model that is sustainable, equitable, and resilient.
- A holistic approach which focuses on building the resilience of our food systems is needed to solve the multifaceted challenges currently being faced.
- A strategic approach to land-use is vital in building food security, supporting sensible land use decisions which help deliver the right mix of outputs in the right places.

Key Challenges

- **Over dependence on imported fruit and vegetables**: The UK imports 84% of its fruit and 47% of its vegetables, making our horticultural supply vulnerable to global supply chain disruptions.
- **Household Food Insecurity**: The poorest 20% of UK households would need to spend half their disposable income to afford a recommended healthy diet, highlighting significant disparities in food access. In 2018 2.2 million people were highly food insecure.
- **Environmental Degradation**: Extractive farming practices have contributed to the loss of biodiversity, soil degradation, and pollution, undermining the long-term viability and resilience of our food and farming system.
- **Land Use Inefficiency**: Over 40% of the UK's arable land and 50% of our wheat harvest is directed to animal feed on land that could be used to feed people directly.
- **Overseas Impacts**: Our current livestock systems are heavily reliant on imported soy and grains, imposing a heavy environmental burden in other countries.
- **Power imbalances**: Excessive corporate influence on the food system has created significant power imbalances, which do not serve the interests of farmers & citizens, or the ambition to build national food security.

Policy Recommendations

- **Revive the Horticulture Strategy**: Develop a coherent, long-term horticulture strategy to increase sustainable domestic fruit and vegetable production.
- **Introduce a Comprehensive Land Use Framework**: Develop, publish and implement a framework which guides sensible land use decisions and supports resilient farm landscapes.
- **Build a Progressive Trade Policy**: Develop a coherent trade strategy which serves to support, rather than undermine UK farming, while raising standards on a global stage.
- **Publish an Enhanced Food Strategy**: A holistic and robust National Food Strategy is required to address many of the interrelated challenges facing the UK's food system.
- **Enhance Food Accessibility**: Introduce policy measures to reduce household food insecurity, such as universal free school meals, an expanded school fruit and veg schemes.
- **Support Citizens to Transition to Healthier, more Sustainable Diets**: Introduce a range of interventions, such as transparent food labelling, public procurement strategies and joined-up collaboration with the supply chain.
- **Secure Fair and Transparent Food Supply Chains**: Implement stronger regulations which cover the whole food supply chain in order to ensure greater fairness, transparency and stability, enabling farmers to receive a fair return for sustainably produced food.
- **Continue to roll out well-funded Environmental Land Management (ELM) Schemes**: Ensure robust funding and support for farmers who are adopting nature-friendly farming practices.

Introduction

Faced with the impacts of a changing climate, evolving trade relationships, the growing cost of living crisis and increased geopolitical instability, it is right that we have a mature conversation about national food security. However, we must avoid overly simplistic solutions that rely on outdated approaches to boosting domestic food production. These will fall short of building genuine food security, which is influenced by a range of factors including global trends, trade, food waste, supply chain resilience, household economic status, climate change and biodiversity loss.

We need new approaches that harness the potential of agroecology to support domestic food production. Doing so will help build resilience throughout our food and farming systems, producing the food that people need in ways which restore functioning farm ecosystems, while reducing input dependence and exposure to external shocks.

Defining Food Security

The most widely accepted definition of food security recognises that it is achieved when "all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life". This concept is built on four pillars: supply, access, supply stability, and nutritional value. Recent discussions advocate for incorporating sustainability and agency as additional important dimensions in building a resilient food system.

Is the UK Food Secure?

The UK already has a relatively high degree of self-sufficiency, producing over 100% of the barley we consume, 90% of wheat, 80% of oilseeds, 70% of potatoes. By volume we also produce roughly the same amount of meat, milk and eggs as we consume. However, UK self-sufficiency in fruits and vegetables falls short, with only 53% of vegetables and 16% of fruits consumed being domestically produced.

Although the UK produces around three quarters of consumption for food that can easily be grown here, and 60% of all foods, our food and farming system is synonymous with high levels of waste and inefficiency. For example, the UK produced an estimated 9.5 million tonnes of post-farm gate food waste in 2018. Over 40% of our land is dedicated to the production of animal feed, representing high levels of inefficiency and high opportunity costs.

Despite high levels of self-sufficiency, household food insecurity represents a significant challenge. The UK consistently ranks as one of the most food insecure parts of Europe with 7.2 million people living in food insecure households in 2024. The Broken Plate Report by The Food Foundation reveals a distressing situation for food security within UK households, highlighting that the poorest 20% would have to allocate half of their disposable income to afford a diet that meets government health recommendations.

This is driving over-consumption of cheap, unhealthy ultra processed foods. By 2025 it is expected that 40% of the population will be suffering from obesity, with diets playing a major role. Clearly, the current food system is inadequate in providing affordable and nutritious options for everyone.

These figures highlight that the challenges with UK food security are less about calorie production and more about access, affordability, and diets.

Nature, Climate, & Food Security

Achieving food security is dependent on a resilient and thriving natural world. Defra's own Food Security Report identifies climate change and biodiversity loss as the greatest threats to UK food security. The UK is already one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth, and without healthy soils and thriving pollinators, farmers will find food production increasingly difficult. Farming in harmony with nature and climate underpins our food security.

Global shocks have been driving agricultural input prices through the roof, and with an increasingly unstable geo-political landscape, we can no longer rely on cheap imports of fossil fuel based inputs to over-inflate our yields beyond what is environmentally and ecologically sustainable. The way we farm, with a heavy reliance on chemical inputs is leaving farm businesses vulnerable to global economic volatility, while undermining the natural asset base on which all food production depends.

All of this impacts on our ability to feed people for the long term affordably, reliably and sustainably. Our reliance on external inputs at the expense of soils and the wider environment means that we are already seeing food become less affordable, as cost increases are reflected in the prices people pay at the till. With increasing climatic and geopolitical instability, we can expect these trends to continue unless we transition to more nature friendly, less input dependent ways of farming. Payment

schemes such as ELMs can thereby play a vital role in building food security and farm business resilience, helping farmers to work more closely with natural processes for the benefit of both.

Optimal, Multifunctional Land Use

Ultimately, food security should be focussed on the optimal and multifunctional use of land rather than a singular focus on increased production. Given the varied nature of land throughout the UK, there is a need to target interventions in order to successfully deliver a range of beneficial outcomes. A robust and well-designed Land Use Framework is a vital component in achieving this aim, working to deliver co-benefits for food production and nature, whilst avoiding unnecessary trade-offs.

Conclusion

The national debate on food security must look beyond just production metrics to consider the broader factors that contribute to a resilient and sustainable food system. By embracing a holistic approach and implementing the policies set out in this briefing, the UK can successfully create a productive and resilient food system that feeds people well, while benefiting the planet.

For more information please contact

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The Farming and Land Use Network (FLUN) is a coalition of food, farming and environmental organisations committed to securing positive changes to the UK's food and farming system. This briefing is supported by the following members:

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