

UK Food Group



'Seeking solutions to the global crisis in food and agriculture'

UK Food Group contribution to the White Paper "Securing Our Common Future"

The UK Food Group (UKFG)¹ is making this submission to inform the preparation of the White Paper. These comments refer to four of the five questions posed in the White Paper consultation.

We argue that the UK government should include food and farming as an essential part of this White Paper, but that is not enough. It is essential that the government is both bold and radical in suggesting real and meaningful changes to the sustainable production and distribution of food. We argue that it should facilitate the implementation, without delay, of changes in its international development programme that will assist countries and communities to realise food sovereignty. For example, the IAASTD report, which the government approved, offers the way forward – sustainable agricultural production based on the wise and prudent and sustainable use of our environment. .

White Paper to focus on healthy food and a healthy environment

The White Paper should focus its attention on the provision of healthy food, sourced as locally as possible, within a healthy environment that is managed sustainably by local communities.³

A number of issues related to this are summarised below. These issues include, among others: the causes of the food crisis; growth and marginalisation; governance; trade policy; local control and the Right to Food; focus on healthy food and a healthy environment; gender; inclusion and participation of the organisations of all types of small-scale food producers in policy formulation; biodiversity and climate change resilience; agroecology; knowledge, science and technology - implementing IAASTD findings.

¹ The UK Food Group is the principal civil society network in the UK on global food and farming issues and is the UK focal point for many European and International networks. It represents BOND (British Overseas NGOs in Development) on these issues especially in CONCORD's European Food Security Group, which also has much to say on these issues (see the extract from CONCORD's Manifesto for the 2009 EP elections at ukabc.org/ukfg/efsg-concord-manifesto-ep-elections2009.pdf). Members of the UK Food Group include both large and smaller NGOs that work on development and environment issues related to food and farming, as well as farmer-centred and consumer NGOs. For more, see www.ukfg.org.uk

² UK Food Group members' experience: many UK Food Group members work closely with small-scale food producing communities in the global South. We would like to urge the White Paper propose that DFID should principally be promoting or supporting research and development, policy and practice for small-scale sustainable food provision, not 'industrial' agricultural practices at any scale. We are not advocating a return to subsistence agriculture but the promotion, above other considerations, of agricultural systems which enable communities to control their localised food systems and secure livelihoods in environmentally sustainable ways.

³ The White Paper could also refer to and take on board some of the processes in DEFRA for reform of the UK's food system, towards one that improves human health, animal welfare and environmental sustainability, and commit to similar goals for the provision of food to the majority, including the hungry.

- Building our common future: How to address the emerging challenges?

Food 'crisis'

We believe that the food crisis is not a transient phenomenon, but that it is chronic, structural and seasonal in the countries where UK Food Group members work, and there are no 'quick fix' solutions – the causes are long-term and as much about political change and redressing the influence of corporate control of the food system as about funding. There need to be commitments in the White Paper and in DFID's revised agricultural policy to address this increasing challenge.

- Global economic growth: How do we minimise the impact of the downturn on the poor?

Growth and marginalisation

We continue to express concerns about a focus on 'growth'. We are clearly not saying that growth of small-scale agriculture is a bad thing, but rather than an unqualified focus on food production volumes, the White Paper should focus instead on systems that promote and protect the right to adequate food and rural livelihoods and which also protect the environment. We recognise that different target populations may need 'safety net' strategies but it will be important to develop an explicit strategy for each group, providing food from sources as local as possible, if the poor are not to be further marginalized. There is a need for direct and indirect support to marginal, 'non-viable' subsistence farmers so that they can become viable, (with similar support for pastoralists, landless rural people, fisherfolk, forest dwellers and other small-scale food providers.) We would assert that non-viability is circumstantial and structural and that given the right policy framework, which would imply the removal of obstacles to their development, most farmers could become effective producers of an agricultural surplus. Issues such as 'land grabs' by foreign corporations and diversion of land resources from food to agrofuel production need to be urgently addressed as they undermine local food production options. Safety nets and social protection measures are, we believe, for emergency use only and should not take the place of interventions to transform the livelihoods of those who are impoverished in the first place by policies that support the concentration of productive resources in the hands of a few. Growth should never be at the expense of the poor.

Food Security versus Food Sovereignty

The food sovereignty policy framework was developed as a reaction to the impact of neoliberal trade and 'food security' policies. The definition of food security agreed by governments focuses on all peoples having enough food to eat each day. It is often realised through imports. But food security is silent about where the food comes from, who produces it, and how and under what conditions it has been grown. The result of this limited policy focus has been that smallholder farmers are increasingly forced off their lands as they cannot compete with increases in (often subsidised) imports of food. Food security policies may, thus, contribute to more poverty, marginalisation and hunger. Food sovereignty not only deals with power relations, trade issues, the right to food and knowledge systems, it also supports agricultural systems that have been developed based on principles of cooperation with nature. This has led to highly complex agroecological systems which provide multiple functions in support of food provision.

Food Sovereignty

Food sovereignty is a countervailing policy framework that addresses the issues at the heart of the White Paper enquiry. It is the policy proposal of small-scale farmers who know how to provide good, wholesome food. It puts them and other food providers centre-stage and prioritises the needs of consumers for nutritious foods, sourced as locally as possible.

The core principles of food sovereignty cover all dimensions of a food system that will provide food in the long-term rather than short-term profits, which externalises the environmental costs of industrial agriculture. It focuses on food for people rather than internationally tradeable commodities. It values food providers rather than eliminating them. It localises food systems rather than dependence on inequitable global trade. It puts control locally instead of by unaccountable corporations. It builds knowledge and skills that conserve and develop local food production and rejects alien technologies such as GMOs. It works with nature in diverse agroecological systems rather than energy-intensive production methods which damage the environment and contribute to global warming.

It is only through food sovereignty, using the knowledge and skills of these small-scale food providers and their technologies, that we will achieve a resilient food system, which will guarantee our future food.

Gender

It is vital that the voices of women farmers throughout the developing world to be heard. It is women farmers who are the major food producers in many parts of the world, and have most to lose from a focus on industrial scale farming, unfair trade systems and the focus on growth, rather than on securing food availability and the rights of individuals and communities to adequate food.

Inclusion and Participation

There is a need for opening up agriculture policy processes to more diverse forms of knowledge and embrace participatory decision-making approaches in policy-making processes and agenda setting for research and development of agricultural science and technology. Such decision making processes should include the representatives organisations of all types of small-scale food producers (small-scale farmers, pastoralists, fisherfolk, forest dwellers, indigenous peoples and other small-scale food providers) in policy formulation.

- Climate change: How do we build a low carbon and climate resilient world?

Biodiversity and Climate Change Resilience

In terms of production methods, the White Paper should be prioritising biodiverse climate resilient agricultural systems, which focus more on soil health and nutrition, rather than on feeding crops with fertilizers which are energy intensive both to produce and use and which contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. Redirecting support for emergency fertilizer subsidies to promoting agroecological practices would provide a long-term sustainable alternative. A shift towards agroecological practices, which at smaller scales can be more productive per unit area or unit of water, will mitigate the impacts of global warming and make food production more resilient and adaptive in the face of climate change.

Knowledge, Science and Technology – implementing IAASTD findings

The UK government approved the report of the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) in June 2008 but we

observe that there has not been any promotion of its 22 findings by DFID, DEFRA or Ministers. In the reports of IAASTD, for example, there are findings on the strategic protection of local markets and the necessary shift towards using agroecological knowledge, science and technology and farmer-led innovation. Actively supporting the implementation of the findings of this assessment would be an excellent recommendation, for in this way the White Paper could make clear the British government's commitment to implementing the required radical changes in agricultural policy and practice identified by the Assessment.

As highlighted by the IAASTD, GM crops are of questionable benefit for production and the avoidance of hunger. An acceptance of genetic engineering technology and increased use of pesticides and other agrochemicals as a way forward is not useful, for achieving global food security, we believe. A focus on GM crops is diversionary. Leaving aside the potential health, environmental and corporate control problems created by GM crops, a focus on these crops diverts resources from supporting viable small-scale agroecological practices, identified as the way forward by IAASTD. We hope the report makes this point clearly.

Agroecology

The IAASTD recognises the multifunctionality of agriculture, highlighting the interconnectedness of agriculture's different roles and functions. By acknowledging agriculture as a multi-output activity, encompassing both commodities and non-commodity outputs, it promotes agroecology and emphasises the impact it can have on ensuring sustainability into development goals. Agroecology is the foundation of sustainable agriculture and recognises the multifunctional dimensions of agriculture; it facilitates progress toward a broad range of equitable and sustainable development goals. Agroecology builds on the science of ecological traditional knowledge and accumulated principles and empirical evidence, to develop socially and environmentally sustainable and productive farming systems. A wide variety of technologies, practices and innovations, including local and traditional knowledge, draw on the science of agroecology, such as organic agriculture.

In the light of the current global context, and in agreement with the IAASTD, it is essential to shift agricultural policies towards systems that allow communities to feed themselves and secure livelihoods in environmentally sustainable ways. Agricultural systems must move away from a volume-centred approach and towards the recognition that the main challenges confronting our global food system are essentially due to the centralisation of power and control over the production and distribution of food, coupled with environmental concerns.

A large proportion of the world's poorest people are small-scale farmers, many of which are women. Agroecological systems are better able to contribute to more sustainable livelihoods and a decrease in food insecurity and poverty, as they are designed to feed people, to be diverse and resilient in the face of multiple threats from pests, diseases, droughts and flood, and to minimise the use of fossil fuels. This is particularly relevant in the light of climate change, which is likely to amplify all these threats.

Localised agroecological farming systems can at smaller scales can be more productive per unit area or unit of water, can mitigate the impacts of global warming and make food production more resilient and adaptive to climate change. In addition, it allows communities to utilise what they already have in a sustainable manner. Agroecological approaches are also more affordable to poor people, as they are not premised on purchased inputs but on local resources and knowledge. Because agroecological approaches support diversity, and because they tend to be positioned in local food systems, they allow for a more nutritious diet based on a broader range of fresher foods. The avoidance of the use of pesticides eliminates one major health hazard from the lives of farmers and their families, whether caused by exposure while working in the fields, through consumption or through pollution of watercourses.

Impacts of Europe's consumption

The White Paper could highlight one of the causes of the structural crisis in the food system – Europe's global footprint in terms of its consumption of agricultural commodities and use of global resources including land and water. It could also highlight a recognised threat to the provision of food to local people by the diversion of crops to fuel production, driven in a large part by EU policies and subsidy programmes. Finally it could address the high levels of EU and UK consumption of livestock products, which are placing huge pressures on land, water, biodiversity and natural resources, to produce grain and protein feeds, mostly from soy. These threats are resulting in price increases, food insecurity, landlessness, rural poverty, unemployment, natural resource depletion and greenhouse gas emissions, all of which threaten local food production.

- **International institutional reform: How can we work in partnership to deliver development**

Governance

In light of the recommendations and analysis of the UN High Level Task Force on the Global Food Crisis and the Comprehensive Framework for Action, the UK could contribute to the UN food agency reform process through support for a meta evaluation of the Rome-based UN food agencies and the renewal of FAO⁴, especially the strengthening of the Committee on Food Security as more inclusive and democratic space in which to determine and realise better governance of the food system. The UK should commit to using its influence to make real changes to UN-based governance of food and agriculture – including trade (commerce and agreements), aid, finance/speculation, and regulation – in favour of people and the environment.

Trade liberalisation

Possibly the biggest impact for small-scale producers would be the promotion of trade policies that protect their local and regional markets without fear of dumping of subsidised imports, and which allow the maintenance of strategic grain reserves. The forced trade liberalisation policies of the past have no place in a future food system that puts people and the environment first.

Local Control and the Right to Food

The UKFG has stressed to ministers and officials the importance of bringing food production under the control of national governments and food producing communities themselves. The recent increases in international food prices have shown the disastrous impact of relinquishing control over localised food systems to international commodity markets and transnational corporations. We believe the right to food, an important component of food sovereignty, cannot be realised unless food systems are localised and remain under the control of communities.

Conclusion

The UK Food Group is aware that some of the proposals above may appear too difficult to deliver today. We believe, however, that they will seem moderate to the policy makers of the future. They will face ever increasing social and environmental challenges in ensuring that all peoples of the world have access to sufficient, healthy food and with more control over where, how and by whom that food is produced and delivered.

⁴ See UKFG submission to the IDC enquiry on WFP and Global Food Security (attached) and at www.ukfg.org.uk/docs/IDC_Enquiry_WFP_Global_Food_Security.pdf