



Food Security – UK Policy

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Food security for the UK in peacetime has only recently been a subject of concern. This note describes UK Government policy, Conservative Party policy and quotes an independent report in 2009 arguing that the topic will be of continuing concern. A related note is [Food Miles](#) (SN/SC/4984)

Contents

1	Could food security be a problem for the UK?	2
2	Government food policy, 2008	3
2.1	The Cabinet Office report, <i>Food Matters</i>	3
2.2	Defra Discussion Paper, <i>Ensuring the UK's Food security in a Changing World</i>	4
2.3	Appointment of Council of Food Policy Advisers	5
3	Conservative Party policy on food security	7
4	Continued fears on UK food security, 2009	8
5	Defra publications, August 2009	9

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1 Could food security be a problem for the UK?

For centuries, UK peacetime food supply has been taken for granted. Agricultural policy, both in the UK and the EU, has moved away from subsidy of food production to payment for environmental benefits. However, concerns have increased in recent years, especially in 2008. Composite index data from the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) show that food prices rose by 64% between January 2007 and their peak in June 2008.¹ This was related to a dramatic increase in oil prices. Brent crude oil prices more than doubled from less than \$60 per barrel in January 2007 to a peak of almost \$150 per barrel in early July 2008.

Fuel price rises increased production costs, transport and fertiliser costs. Some poor countries suffered severe problems in affording enough for people to eat. Even in the UK, food prices increased sharply. Some people blamed legislation in the EU and USA encouraging the growing of crops for biofuels, rather than for food.² A further concern was that Eastern countries were increasing the amount of meat and dairy products in their diet, thus increasing international demand.³

The idea that the market will always operate also came under scrutiny. Some Asian rice producers suspended rice exports in 2008. The failure of the Doha Round of world trade talks increased the probability of bilateral deals and market protection.

Yet in the latter part of 2008, the problem appeared to go away again. The world oil price fell, with Brent crude oil prices below \$50 a barrel by the end of 2008. Food prices (FAO data) fell by 32% between June and December 2008. Attention concentrated upon the worsening financial crisis.

However, food policy issues concern the much longer term and the problems of 2008 might return. For a start, oil prices are expected to increase again because of depletion of world supplies. Not only does that increase farmers' fuel costs but it also raises fertiliser prices. In addition, climate change is almost certain to make food production more difficult. Although some cold northern areas should have a longer growing season, larger food production areas will become less efficient at food production through being too hot. The exceptionally hot summer of 2003 caused a decline of around 20% in European agricultural productivity.⁴ There are further potential problems through uncertain water supplies – floods in some areas and drought in others.

Indeed, climate change may already be affecting some major agricultural producers like Australia, where extreme temperatures may be undermining a major world supplier of wheat. A poor Australian wheat crop in turn reduces world stocks and means that other countries cannot rely upon being able to buy large amounts of wheat at low prices.

The question of whether food security is increased by subsidising domestic agriculture is a difficult one. The French Government is happy to use food security and recent high world

¹ FAO, [Food Price Indices](#), February 2009

² [Biofuels and Farming](#), (SN/SC/4269)

³ "Food costs set to leap as East looks West for meat and milk", *Times*, 29 August 2007

⁴ Ciais et al, "Europe-wide reduction in primary productivity caused by the heat and drought in 2003", *Nature*, Vol 437, 22 September 2005 pp529-533

prices as arguments for maintaining the Common Agricultural Policy.⁵ The UK Government takes the opposite approach, favouring open world markets. They argue, amongst other things, that food supply from domestic sources can be interrupted, for example by disease or extreme weather. World food supplies are not normally affected by such factors. The UK is a rich country that can afford to buy on the open market. The following paragraph sums up the UK Government position:

5.4. The UK believes that effectively functioning markets are fundamental to ensuring global food security. The Government is committed to continuing to liberalise markets through the Doha Development Round of trade negotiations and reform of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy.⁶

2 Government food policy, 2008

2.1 The Cabinet Office report, *Food Matters*

In July 2008, the Government published two reports on food policy. The Executive Summary of the Cabinet Office report flagged up some issues for food manufacturing:

Food manufacturing is the UK's single largest manufacturing sector. The food system faces a series of future challenges in relation to:

- economics and equity – recent increases in global commodity prices have brought to an end the long-term decline in the price of food, and few expect food prices to return to past lows;
- health – an estimated 70,000 premature deaths in the UK could be avoided each year if UK diets matched nutritional guidelines;
- safety – the food that we eat in the UK is safer than it has ever been but continuing vigilance is needed to minimise food contamination; and
- environment – the food chain has huge environmental impacts (around 18% of UK greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are related to food production and consumption).

The Government's vision for the food system is one that is more sustainable – economically, socially and environmentally. The future strategic policy objectives for food should be to secure: fair prices, choice, access to food and food security through open and competitive markets; continuous improvement in the safety of food; a further transition to healthier diets; and a more environmentally sustainable food chain.

Many of the elements required for a comprehensive food policy are already in place. But central government needs to better integrate them and to work with the public, food chain businesses and other stakeholders, and in consultation with other tiers of government, to put a new policy framework in place.

Proposed key actions included:

- Well-functioning, competitive markets should provide fair prices for consumers and a fair deal throughout the supply chain. Reducing distortions in agricultural trade and raising agricultural productivity in the developing world would improve global food security.

⁵ "Sarkozy sets out vision of "new" CAP", *Agra Europe*, 14 September 2007

⁶ Defra, [Ensuring the UK's Food Security in a Changing World](#), July 2008

- Recent rises in food commodity prices call for a concerted international response. The UK Government has acted promptly to address the challenges posed by increases in global food prices. Actions taken include a £455 million aid package and work with international agencies to redouble efforts to raise agricultural productivity, especially in Africa.

Maintaining global food security while responding to climate change is a critical collective challenge for the 21st century.⁷

2.2 Defra Discussion Paper, *Ensuring the UK's Food security in a Changing World*

Defra also published a discussion paper on food security, with the following conclusions, restating the Government view:

5.1. The UK currently enjoys a high level of national food security, which reflects the diverse and abundant supply of foodstuffs available in our supermarkets. We produce much of our food ourselves, and because the UK is a developed economy, we are able to access the food we need on the global market.

5.2. The recent increases in global food prices have, however, focused the attention of Governments around the world on short-term supply and long-term challenges to our food system. Rising global demand, climate change, high oil prices and new pressures on land such as biofuels have undermined global food security. These pressures are compounded by trade distorting subsidies and protectionist policies imposed in the US, EU and other countries

5.3. To address the global food price increases, the UK has committed to a substantial aid package to help the most vulnerable countries and called on the G8 to take coordinated action. The G8 has agreed to invest over \$10 billion to meet not just immediate humanitarian needs – including increases in food aid – but to improve food security and increase agricultural productivity over the longer term. This needs to be done in an environmentally sustainable way to maintain the natural resource base for the future. It makes sense to encourage food production in Africa, as a lack of production globally will force up prices which will affect consumers in the UK too.

5.4. The UK believes that effectively functioning markets are fundamental to ensuring global food security. The Government is committed to continuing to liberalise markets through the Doha Development Round of trade negotiations and reform of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy.

5.5. We believe that global food security means everyone having enough to eat, and we have committed to substantial investment in research and development to enable developing countries to improve their food production. Climate change presents one of the greatest threats to increasing agricultural productivity and the Government is leading the EU and the world in tackling climate change. In addition, we are investing in research and development and capacity building to increase resilience in countries that will be most affected by climate change.

5.6. One of the most important contributions the UK can make to global, and our own, food security is having a thriving and productive agriculture sector in the UK, operating in a global market and responding to what consumers want. The Government is committed to supporting the agricultural sector including through investment in research and development, support on skills and ensuring the UK benefits from EU support under Rural Development Programmes.

⁷ Cabinet Office, [Food Matters](#), July 2008

5.7. We are also working with retailers and food suppliers to strengthen the resilience of our food chain, and reduce its energy dependence, so it is less vulnerable to shocks which could put our food security at risk.

5.8. The UK is taking significant action internationally and at home to ensure UK food security. This may not be enough however, as the impact of future challenges cannot be fully known, and new challenges may emerge. We have proposed, therefore, a set of headline and supporting food security indicators which will allow us to assess and monitor our food security over time across five areas:

(i) global availability; (ii) diversity of supply; (iii) food chain resilience; (iv) affordability; and (v) safety and confidence.⁸

2.3 Appointment of Council of Food Policy Advisers

In October 2008 Defra Secretary Hilary Benn announced the appointment of a Council of Food Policy Advisers.⁹ A statement followed in December 2008:

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Hilary Benn): In July of this year, I published a discussion paper entitled “Ensuring UK Food Security in a Changing World”. I wanted to start a debate on the long-term challenges to our food security such as climate change, increased demand—particularly for some foods—and the energy dependence of our food supply. I also wanted to assess the impact of shorter term issues, including export bans and rises in commodity prices, that are in part a consequence of these same challenges.

Annual food price inflation has now decreased from a peak of 14.5 per cent. in August 2008 to 11.2 per cent. in November. We expect it to continue to decline over the coming months, reflecting the falls we have seen in oil and commodity prices. The UK feed wheat price currently stands at £88 per tonne, less than half the peak of £185 back in March. Pig prices have edged down over recent weeks, where the change in the value of sterling continues to offset the impact of declining wider EU market prices, whilst cattle and sheep prices have remained relatively level. The average farm gate milk price in September—the latest month for which figures are available—was 27 per litre, 17 per cent. higher than a year earlier, but we have seen price falls in many dairy commodity markets over recent months. The proportion of income spent on food by the UK’s poorest 20 per cent. went up from 15.5 per cent. to 16.5 per cent. at the peak of food price inflation and is not likely to have changed substantially since July. We are doing further work to see what this has meant for food purchasing decisions.

We received over 100 written responses to July’s paper and held three workshops. It was clear that many people, from producers to retailers and consumers, feel strongly about agriculture and food. A wide range of views were expressed ranging from support for intensive farming to calls for a radical rethinking about the relationship between traditional agricultural inputs and the food we produce. Issues raised included landscapes, water, food distribution, agricultural research, nutrition, and skills in farming and food sciences.

Many of those responding agreed that we should not base our food security policy on the pursuit of self-sufficiency, and the debate has shifted to a broader discussion of the complex factors that contribute to our food security. Twenty six countries—including our own—provide 90 per cent. of our food consumption, with the majority coming from other EU countries. In addition, inputs to food production such as oil, fertiliser and feed, are globally traded commodities. Trade with developing countries is also important,

⁸ Defra, [Ensuring the UK’s Food Security in a Changing World](#), July 2008

⁹ Defra Press Release, [Government announces new Council of Food Policy Advisers](#), 6 October 2008

and respondents agreed that the Government needed to continue to pursue both radical CAP reform, and an agreement from the current Doha trade round. Nonetheless, UK production does—and will in the future—provide an important contribution to our food supply, which varies widely across sectors, from 10 per cent. in fruit, to over 100 per cent. in cereals.

As a result of all the comments we have had on our discussion paper, it seems clear that food security is most usefully looked at in terms of the resilience of our food supply chains, access to safe, nutritious, affordable and diverse foods, and ensuring the long-term environmental sustainability of the food and farming sector. Our agri-food sector, from farm gate to retail is hugely important. It is worth £79 billion and employs 3.7 million people.

I am today announcing that the membership of The Council of Food Policy Advisers, which I have established to support our work on food security, affordability and sustainability, under the Chairmanship of Dame Suzi Leather, will be: Sir Don Curry; Sue Davies, MBE; Professor Elizabeth Dowler; Professor Gareth Edwards-Jones; Iain Ferguson, CBE; Paul Kelly; Professor Tim Lang; Guy McCracken; Claire Pritchard; Dame Fiona Reynolds; Geetie Singh; Tim Smith; Stefan Tangermann;

Additional members will be announced later.

I will ask the council to advise on what may be necessary in future to ensure that we have a secure and sustainable food system in the UK. I will also invite the council to examine the draft indicators for food security that DEFRA has been developing in the light of the responses we have had. We will continue to work with stakeholders as we develop these and consider broader risks to our food security.

The UK's food security is strongly linked to global food security. The Foresight project on the future of food and farming, conducted by the Government's chief scientific adviser, Professor John Beddington's, is looking to 2050 and examining how we will feed a global population of 9 billion healthily, equitably, and sustainably, and what implications this has for UK policy.

Part of the answer lies in promoting environmentally sustainable agriculture throughout the world. The Government will continue to support this, drawing on domestic and international research and expertise including this year's International agricultural assessment headed by Professor Bob Watson, DEFRA's chief scientific adviser.

In addition, the Government will continue to press for the establishment of a Global Partnership For Agriculture And Food Security (GPAFS). GPAFS will bring together Governments, international institutions and civil society to help develop national and international plans for agriculture, food security and nutrition and support increased sustainable agricultural production.

I also welcome the EFRA Select Committee's announcement that they will be holding an inquiry into the strengths and weaknesses of the UK food system, and the opportunities and challenges the country faces in responding to the global demand for increased food production. DEFRA looks forward to submitting evidence.

The Government are committed to ensuring sustainable food security in the face of climate change and a rapidly increasing global population. To do so will require leadership in the UK, co-operation with other countries and a transformation in our international institutions. I will update the House as this work develops.¹⁰

¹⁰ HC Deb 10 December 2008 cc53-5WS

3 Conservative Party policy on food security

David Cameron stressed the importance of food security in a speech to the National Farmers Union in February 2008:

Some analysts are beginning to make some very worrying, very stark predictions. That competition for resources will become intense. That food prices will continue to rise. That there will be world shortages of food. And these analysts say that politicians should start to rank the issue of food security along side energy security and even national security.

The World Bank has warned that by 2030, food demand will double as world population increases by an additional two billion people. The OECD has suggested food-price rises of between 20% and 50% over the next decade. And recent reports in the journals Science and Nature suggest that one-third of ocean fisheries are in collapse, two-thirds will be in collapse by 2025, and all major ocean fisheries may be virtually gone by 2048.

These developments are difficult to imagine right now. Supermarkets have aisles of stocked shelves. More and more restaurants are opening, catering for a variety of tastes. And the internet has meant that you can get any type of food delivered to your doorstep at the click of a mouse.

But changes are happening in our world...changes like global economic progress and what this means for peoples' diets, climate change and the move to biofuels which directly affect the ability of the world's farmers to fulfil their essential purpose: to grow enough food for us all. We face the potential prospect that the abundance of food that we all take for granted will come to a crashing end. And so, it is argued we should now completely re-examine all our assumptions about how food is produced in our country.

(...)

The current Government has said that domestic production is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for food security. It thinks that we can rely on globalisation and foreign markets to fill any gap between domestic demand and domestic supply. And what a gap it is becoming. In 1996, the UK's self-sufficiency in food production was seventy-two percent. Today, it's sixty percent.

Yet just as we are relying - indeed, depending - more and more on foreign farmers to fill our shopping bags, cupboards and fridges ... so the days of abundant food from around the world may well be coming to an end. Three key factors - three key changes in the world - are converging to put global food production at risk, and undermine those who argue we can depend on foreign food.

The first is that as people around the world get richer - especially in China and India - so their diet is changing. In 1985, the average Chinese consumer ate 20 kilos of meat a year. Now, they eat more than 50 kilos. In developing countries as a whole, the demand for meat has doubled since 1980. Unsurprisingly, farmers are following suit - making the switch from grain to livestock to meet this intense shift in demand. And this is causing a crunch in global grain stocks. Calorie for calorie, you need more grain if you eat it transformed into meat than you do if you eat it turned into bread. You need three kilos of grain to produce a kilo of pork and eight to produce a kilo of beef. As a result, farmers now feed 250 million more tonnes of grain to their animals than they did twenty years ago. That's enough wheat to feed the population of Brazil - for twenty-five years.

The second change that is happening in the world is climate change. The result is reduced crop yields. According to the UN, drought, deforestation and climate instability is responsible for the loss of 250 million acres of fertile soil - each year. That's about the size of the whole of the Ukraine. Last year, Australia experienced its worst drought for over a century and saw its wheat crop shrink by more than sixty percent. And China's grain harvest alone has fallen by ten percent in the past seven years. But things will only get worse and our food security will only get more vulnerable.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimates that a one metre sea level rise will cause nearly one-third of world's total cropland to be swamped and rendered unusable. This isn't some prophecy thousands of years down the line: at current levels, that one metre rise will occur before the end of the century.

The third change that is happening is the global diversion to biofuels.¹¹

4 Continued fears on UK food security, 2009

In February 2009, a Chatham House report was published arguing that UK food security problems would return, unless action was taken:

Executive Summary

Over the next few decades, the global food system will come under renewed pressure from the combined effects of seven fundamental factors: population growth, the nutrition transition, energy, land, water, labour and climate change. The combined effects will create constraints on food supply and if action is not taken, there is a real potential for demand growth to outstrip increases in global food production. Effects on developing countries would be devastating. Developed countries will be affected too. Expectations of abundant and ever cheaper food could come under strain. The UK can no longer afford to take its food supply for granted.

Some of the effects of change are already being felt. Global food prices are subject to increasing volatility, and are provoking defensive trade and political responses that disrupt normal market behaviour. World trade structures could come under increased pressure as continued access to scarce resources becomes a strategic concern for many countries. The UK is not immune to such activities, being dependent on a small number of critical sources and inputs from the world market – soya-based animal feed and phosphate fertilizers among them. A food crisis in the UK is not unthinkable. And, added to all these factors, the environmental impacts of modern agriculture and of the broader overall food chain can no longer be ignored.

The recent price spike has served to underline our global interdependency and demonstrated the political and social importance of affordable food. Despite today's deflationary pressures, the underlying upward pressure on EU/UK prices is likely to be maintained, particularly as the need to incorporate the true cost of resources into our food supply becomes more pressing. And as the wider impacts of food production and consumption on the nation's social and economic wellbeing become more starkly obvious, the food system will need to reflect society's choices as much as individual consumer preferences.

In this environment, 'business as usual' models could at worst fail, and at best be poor preparation for the coming period. EU/UK food supply arrangements will be required to operate profitably around a significantly higher price norm, one that reflects the true cost of resources and incorporates wider social and ecological considerations. A

¹¹ David Cameron, *Food Security must be a priority: speech to the NFU*, 18 February 2008

system that is able to reconcile the often conflicting goals of resilience, sustainability and competitiveness and that is able to meet and manage consumer expectations will become the new imperative.

New capabilities, policy frameworks and institutions will become the cornerstones of the new system. Domestic production will continue to play a significant role in the UK food's supply. But it will need to adapt to become both productive and sustainable; technological innovation and transfer of best practice will be key. Collaborative relationships around the supply network will take on a new importance and become part of the drive for a more integrated approach. Retailers in particular will need to adapt their practices to alter the balance of risk and reward throughout the chain. But it is currently unclear whether the sectors can easily reconcile traditional commercial imperatives with the wider public interest and move from its ingrained short-termism in order to develop the more strategic focus required. For the consumer, new uncertainties over the affordability of food, along with continuing environmental and health concerns, will mean changes in consumption patterns.

Action to address the more worrying trends and their effects on the UK needs to be put in hand now. The transition will be tough; finding the right way through will become a significant determinant of national economic wellbeing. In the UK itself, national and devolved governments must recognize their role as incubators of innovation and drivers of transformation.

A detailed strategic vision of the new system, one that will avoid the worst effects of change and starts to capitalize instead on newly created opportunities, has to be the way forward. The establishment of a consortium of government, supply network interests and societal groups (media, NGOs, universities) would be a good first step to facilitate the building of this vision. The partnership would need to undertake a proactive review of current arrangements in meeting policy objectives, delivering specifically: _

- a detailed picture of the new food systems needed;
- a set of indicators and metrics;
- a statement of UK's strategic and geo-political interests.

It will also be important to establish a clearer description of a sustainable diet and to develop communication and education strategies to engage the public on key food issues. Increased investment in public agriculture and food research will be needed, along with support for private public partnership frameworks to deliver technology transfer, particularly across agriculture. The UK will continue to rely heavily on the EU for its food supplies and as a market for its food exports. Many of the mechanisms to deliver the transformation lie at this level. UK isolation is not an option and the UK will need to work closely with the EU to develop the right policy frameworks.¹²

5 Defra publications, August 2009

On 10 August 2009, Defra published a series of documents related to food security on a web page.¹³ Their careful approach does not lead to a single headline conclusion, but the following extract from the assessment on energy is worth noting:

¹² S.Ambler-Edwards et al, [Food Futures: Rethinking UK Strategy](#), February 2009

¹³ Defra, [Secure and Sustainable Food](#)

The Government is keen to work with food chain businesses to ensure sufficient continuity planning occurs, particularly in light of the risks arising from just-in-time operations across the industry. The energy intensive nature of our food businesses makes this all the more vital as well.

Given this energy intensive profile, we have chosen to make energy dependency the headline indicator for the Assessment's resilience theme. Actual energy shortages might result in food production slow-downs or stoppages, with impacts on the availability and affordability of our food (and clear implications for the next Assessment theme, household food security). Defra believes the 2008 surge in energy prices was the most important driver of retail food inflation last year, reflecting this pervasive use of energy throughout the domestic food chain. Improvements in energy efficiency seen over recent decades mean, however, that the economy, and the food sector, are in better shape to withstand shocks to energy supply than previously. Energy intensity and absolute energy use is declining in UK agriculture and manufacturing, and the more recent surge in energy prices can be expected to increase the incentives to greater efficiency, as will pressures for more sustainable behaviours in food production and distribution.

While risks to our supplies of energy remain real whatever the level of intensity, the Assessment suggests that the trend over the next five to ten years will move from today's somewhat unfavourable position on energy dependency to a more positive one. This is not to say that we can relax our efforts to meet the low-carbon challenge. The Government will continue to encourage best practice and the use of technologies that can help our food supply chain to become even more energy efficient in future.¹⁴

¹⁴ Defra, [UK Food Security Assessment: Our approach](#), August 2009