Cyswllt Amgylchedd Cymru | Wales Environment Link

Sustainable food production and food security

March 2022

Summary

Since 2016 the Welsh food and agriculture industry has had to respond to an ever more challenging operational context. Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic made food security a key issue of concern. The global food system has also received repeated shocks, from climate-related impacts such as drought, flood and fire, to the horrific events unfolding in Ukraine.

The UK's first Food Security Report concludes that "The biggest medium to long term risk to the UK's domestic production comes from climate change and other environmental pressures like soil degradation, water quality and biodiversity. Wheat yields dropped by 40% in 2020 due to heavy rainfall and droughts at bad times in the growing season. Although they have bounced back in 2021, this is an indicator of the effect that increasingly unreliable weather patterns may have on future production."

It is clear that we can expect more challenges to our global food system, particularly from climate change, and must plan to manage these sustainably. Any short-term gains in food production at the expense of the environment will have much more significant impact on food production in the medium and long term.

The concept of food security is commonly misapplied in Welsh discourse, causing confusion over the role of Welsh farming in our national food supply. This briefing explains why food security may not be an appropriate focus for public funding and suggests food sovereignty as a more helpful alternative concept. We propose how Welsh Government should respond to this via the development of the new Sustainable Farming Scheme and future food strategies that may be developed, such as the Community Food Strategy.

Our key message is that a secure domestic and global food supply is reliant on a healthy natural environment and the resilience of the food system as a whole.

Further degradation of our environment would ultimately make our food system unsecure.

Food Security and Wales

Food security, as defined by the United Nations' Committee on World Food Security, means that “all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their food preferences and dietary needs for an active and healthy life.” Welsh food and agricultural policy affect both domestic and global food security, and both are impacted by Wales’ urgent need to respond to the growing Climate and Nature Emergency.

According to a survey for the Foods Standards Agency in Wales in 2019 (pre pandemic): 80% of households live with high food security, 10% in households classified as marginally food secure, and 10% reported living in a household with low or very low food security[1]. Globally, it is notable that in 2019, 690 million people went hungry worldwide[2]. This is suspected to be much worse now in the wake of the global pandemic.

Global food supply is often dominated by large agri-businesses that can, if left unchecked, drive unfair and unsustainable practices. Access to reasonably priced, nutritious food, is important for our society, and because of this, some would argue that food security should be a public good, despite the market value of food products. However, the concept of food security does not distinguish where food comes from or how it is produced and distributed. Payments linked to food security are therefore problematic, because certain interpretations of food security could result in support for environmentally damaging practices.

Introducing Food Sovereignty

Contrary to the concept of food security, how and where food is produced and consumed matters to the concept of food sovereignty. Change for Children (an organisation committed to sustainable development and community led solutions), states, “Food sovereignty emphasizes ecologically appropriate production,

[1] https://www.food.gov.uk/news-alerts/news/food-and-you-wave-five-survey-report-for-wales-published

[2] https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/food

distribution and consumption, social-economic justice and local food systems as ways to tackle hunger and poverty and guarantee sustainable food security for all peoples. It advocates trade and investment that serve the collective aspirations of society. It promotes community control of productive resources; agrarian reform and tenure security for small-scale producers; agro-ecology; biodiversity; local knowledge; the rights of peasants, women, indigenous peoples and workers; social protection and climate justice." WEL believes that food sovereignty (not to be confused with self-sufficiency) is a more helpful concept and political ambition for Wales' current needs.

The case for change

The Welsh food and agricultural industry is currently export orientated. While historic 'feeding the nation' narratives are still dominant, in reality the vast majority of what is produced is not consumed in Wales. Dairy, beef and lamb production makes up more than three quarters of Welsh domestic food production and poultry meat is 6.1%. Red meat makes up 41% of Welsh agricultural output in terms of value (£652million)[3]. In terms of consumption:

- 5% of lamb from Wales is consumed in Wales, approximately 60% is consumed in the rest of the UK, and 35% is consumed in export markets.
- 5% of beef from Wales is consumed in Wales, approximately 80% is consumed in the rest of the UK, and 15% is consumed in export markets.
- 90% of the milk processed in Wales is made into cheese where Welsh production runs towards 100,000 tonnes a year, with 80% or more exported. This amounts to around half the milk actually produced in Wales, with the rest being sent to England for processing due to lack of capacity in Wales.[4]

There is a view from some in the farming community in Wales that, due to Wales' climate and high rainfall, along with our topography and soils, our grass-based production systems enable us to produce high quality, comparatively low impact red meat for the global market: Welsh agriculture is contributing to global food security whilst minimising environmental impact. The same view of Welsh land and climate is used to challenge Welsh farming's ability to diversify. Global trade has resulted in specialisation of certain types of food production in different parts of the world,

[3] Hybu Cig Cymru website stats page : https://meatpromotion.wales/en/industry-statistics
[4] SMEs in the Welsh Food System, Foundational Economy Research, June 2021

creating monocultures and reducing diversity. The complexities of global trade are beyond the scope of this paper, but it is clear that by seeking to respond to other countries' increasing demand for meat and dairy, Wales is placing unsustainable pressure on its natural resources and ecosystems.

Whilst we may have lower impact production systems compared to some other global nations, we know from highly respected scientific evidence bases like the State of Nature Report and the Welsh Government's Low Carbon Action Plan that current methods of unsustainable land management, which largely include agricultural production with livestock numbers beyond the natural carrying capacity of the land, are the largest drivers of nature's decline and a significant contributor to freshwater pollution and national carbon emissions.

We must get our own house in order as a starting point and recognise that sustainable food production is underpinned by a healthy environment. The collapse of our natural resource base is the biggest threat to food production in the long term, and without that natural base we will be unable to produce nutritious food in the amounts that we need to sustain our population and that of future generations. Wales' food sovereignty and food system resilience is jeopardised by the status-quo. Change is required to restore biodiversity and our natural resource base, secure net zero food production, and to better connect production with domestic needs. Furthermore, we need to consider the food system as a whole, from farm to fork, if we are to enable a food system that is resilient in Wales.

In rebalancing diets and in meeting Welsh Governments commitment in Net Zero Wales Carbon Budget 2 to promote a dietary shift in line with the Eatwell diet, we should be addressing the need for more diversity in our food production across Wales in line with climate-friendly and healthy diets. We need to be considering both what we eat and how we produce it, and how we better link production and consumption in Wales. Furthermore, arguments around food security need to take into account how much food waste there is across the supply chain.

The Nature Friendly Farming Network states that:

- Over half the arable crops grown in the UK are for animal feed
- In Scotland, 80% of crops are grown for alcohol or animal feed

- Globally, 30% of total food produced is wasted
- In the UK, food waste is around 9.5 million tonnes – 70% of which is edible and intended for consumption.

Drastically reducing food waste on and off-farm will have huge financial, economic and social benefits and counter a lot of arguments that we need to produce more food. Localising supply chains and better matching production and consumption should help in this regard.

Whole System Reform

Wales should aim for a resilient food system and the Sustainable Farming Scheme should reward actions and outcomes that contribute to the environmental, social and economic resilience of farming as a whole. For positive change to be achieved during this Senedd, the new Sustainable Farming Scheme must:

- set ambitious National Minimum Standards and design and implement a Scheme that shifts agricultural subsidies towards rewarding farmers appropriately for the production of environmental and social outcomes including improved soil health, clean air and water, boosting pollinator numbers, restoring and maintaining nature and reducing greenhouse gases;
- support and promote transition to agroecology: nature and climate friendly regenerative farming practices such as organic and agroforestry;
- improve farm resilience by working with the natural carrying capacity of the land and reducing reliance on economically and environmentally costly external inputs such as synthetic fertilizers and imported animal feed, such as soy, linked to habitat destruction overseas;
- strongly incentivise on-farm and strategic landscape/catchment scale nature creation/restoration interventions;
- support the wider industry and food supply chain by integrating Scheme support with the Community Food Strategy policy framework, creating the demand and markets for food produced sustainably, linking producers of agroecological food to consumers in more diverse ways through food hubs, community supported agriculture and public procurement so that food produced via nature and climate friendly regenerative farming practices is sold into local markets;

- ensure the Scheme's objectives and targets clearly set out its contribution to net zero climate change pathways, maximising nature-based solutions and creating and managing carbon-rich agricultural habitats such as woodland, hedgerows, heathlands, peatlands, species-rich grasslands, hay meadows and multispecies leys; and
- ensure the Scheme provides well-resourced advice, training and support for farmers to enable the transition to nature and climate friendly regenerative farming practices.

While future food strategies must:

- develop a systems approach to food-related policies enabling the delivery of interconnected policy targets on health and well-being, climate and nature, social justice and community resilience; and
- set targets to drive more diverse agricultural output in Wales, enabling better linkages between production and consumption in Wales, including the need to increase horticultural production through a mixed farming approach that is good for wildlife and nature;
- provide targeted support for local food[5] and food production outside farms, as this can make an important contribution to food sovereignty, improve diversity of food grown and include a wider range of people and communities in producing food;
- deliver on commitments in Net Zero Wales Carbon Budget 2 to promote a dietary shift in line with climate-friendly sustainable and healthy diets. Ensure this commitment enables better linkages between production and consumption in Wales; and
- sufficiently tackle food waste across the whole supply chain from farm waste through to household waste to save money and environmental impact.

[5] See further detail on ideas for targeted support for local food in this report: The Case for Local Food

Wales Environment Link (WEL) is a network of environmental, countryside and heritage Non-Governmental Organisations in Wales. WEL is a respected intermediary body connecting the government and the environmental NGO sector. Our vision is a thriving Welsh environment for future generations.

This paper represents the consensus view of a group of WEL members working in this specialist area. Members may also produce information individually in order to raise more detailed issues that are important to their particular organisation.



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