

## The need for a Food Act in Wales.

### Terry Marsden<sup>i</sup>

This short note addresses the reasons why a Food Bill through statutory legislation is necessary.

The explanatory memorandum which underlies the outline Bill explains and analyses well the evolution of food policy in Wales and the need now to create a Food Act which will ; (i) specify primary and secondary food goals; (ii) Establish an independent Welsh Food Commission; (iii) create and evolve a national food strategy; and (iv) create the means for developing local food plans and planning.

Most of these objectives have been proposed in recent policy reports and I would argue that the time is now urgent to move in the direction of creating statutory legislation. Statutory legislation is needed in this field for a variety of reasons which have already been specified in the debates and memoranda, as well as communicated by many of the key stakeholders. These include the need for a more integrated, joined-up and system-wide approach to the food system, and the need to consolidate and focus on ‘all Wales’ strategies and delivery mechanisms which will promote (and scale-out) national food security across both household and territorial levels. I believe that there are at least three additional reasons why the Food Act is needed.

1. Recent external events and processes such as Brexit, Covid, Ukrainian war and not least the continuing and long running impacts of climate change, are demonstrating that food systems are highly vulnerable to collateral geo-political and external effects. In fact, as we have found in the past, during the post war era, food systems are dependent and affected by these wider geopolitical and international dimensions. It is likely that the 2020s and 2030’s will unfold amidst further disruption affecting the stability and vulnerability food systems both from an ecological and economic standpoint. We are thus witnessing a period of ‘permacrisis’, or perhaps more appropriately ‘poly-crisis’ (several perturbations occurring at once from different origins, e.g war, trade embargos and disruptions, inflation, rises in costs of living, food shortages, growing health problems and costs on health care etc), which demands that public bodies and especially *national governments develop far more proactive and strategic ways to protect their territories and their populations from these vulnerabilities*. This broadens and deepens the significance of food security and sovereignty and places the need for strategic food policy at the heart of public policy. In this sense I have argued that food policy needs to be raised in its governance status to a cross-sectoral (meta-) level of public policy.<sup>ii</sup>
2. Whilst the food system is very dependent and vulnerable to current rounds of ‘poly-crisis’, we know that it is also a central and interconnected ‘organ’ for proactively building economic, ecological and social resilience amongst populations. For instance, promoting the growing and selling of healthy foods and sustainable diets needs to go hand-in-hand; as do the needs to produce more affordable foods which at the same time sustain a renewable and vibrant (SNMR) land, soil and water system. However, these interconnected goals

cannot be achieved in isolation from one another, and there is a danger (especially as crises occur) that various reactive and responsive policy initiatives become fragmented and thus weakened in their overall effects. As such a systems *approach demands a joined-up and strategic food governance approach* which explicitly examines, reflects and co- designs food strategies which meet these multiple challenges.

3. Since Brexit especially, and the continuing (and what will be growing) debates about devolved sets of governance relations between the four nations of the UK<sup>iii</sup>, it is becoming clear that many of the central policy fields that impinge upon our food system (i.e trade policy, regional economic policy, environmental policy, food and farming policy) are now becoming more (rather than less) vulnerable to partisan party politics and the relatively short political cycles. We can no longer in Wales or across the UK rely upon seven-year planning and programming periods, for instance, as was the case under the structural funding mechanisms of the EU, or indeed the medium review periods of the CAP. Similarly, the political consensus around such support schemes has also diminished, and, indeed with the UK wide de-regulation of remaining EU regulations due to its 'sunset' clause by the end of 2023, (i.e the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform Bill, currently being processed in UK Parliament), we are likely to witness further deregulations across the interconnected fields which impinge upon food and environment. The internal market legislation and the bypassing of Welsh government in the allocation of Shared Prosperity funding also indicates a direction of travel which is based more upon political 'short-termism' and potential party-politically-led directed governance and funding. *There is a danger that this will lead to further fragmentation and geographical unevenness in policies which affect our food system* and thus reduce universal and strategic policy-making. Under these circumstances it would seem both pragmatic and strategic for the Welsh Parliament to build a more resilient and long- term statutory framework for its food policy. A framework which would operate in and beyond political cycles and across the changing funding realms associated with the current devolution settlement. Thus the Food Act would be, as indeed the Well Being and Future Generations Act is becoming a solid, principled, long-term and institutionally embedded framework for building food system resilience in the context of both disruptive poly-crises and indeed broader political disruptions and contestations (at both UK and International levels). In fact, beyond various party political nuances in Wales, I would argue that the Food Act can be a very good exemplar of building cross-party consensus around a national food strategy for now and the future generations. This would sit alongside and be compatible with the WBFG Act.

### **Fostering and Supporting a more diverse food economy in Wales: an integrating theme across the national food goals.**

A key priority regarding the delivery of both the primary and secondary food goals of the Bill will be the need to take a fresh and more strategic approach to growing the food economy in Wales, both in providing its population with a larger variety of healthy food options but also in enhancing its exporting potential both within the UK and abroad. The food goals need to be seen as interlinked goals which deliver this by having a vision for a more diverse food economy. This embraces not just the corporate food sector, but stimulates the SME, cooperative, social enterprise and community supported sectors. This needs to see the food sector as part of a wider heterodox and ecological economy.<sup>iv</sup> This also needs to a central role of the Food Commission's work and to incorporate three interlinked components at an 'all Wales' level : (i) scale-up and out short-supply chains at a territorial level; (ii) foster infrastructural development in the 'missing middle' , that is food hubs, local processing and logistics, facilitating the links between producers and consumers, and opening up public land for community and cooperative food enterprises; and (iii) enhance food skills and

business competences and skills. Sustainable farming and the rural economy would become integrated into these goals.

### **Conclusion: building a strategic investment in policy and people**

The medium and long term costs *of not* taking these strategic and integrating opportunities for a Food Act will be far greater than any actual costs of establishing these statutory mechanisms. These -do nothing- costs will take the form of further declines in food diets and health of the population, higher health costs, higher dependencies on imported foods, further losses of Welsh food businesses and facilities, further declines in food offers in the high street, and further losses in ecological systems. Public funding aimed at addressing these problems will remain fragmented and duplicated, short-term and unevenly applied, and key stakeholders will continue to compete across the different sectors of government. In short this will lead to further vulnerability of the Welsh population and create more dependence upon external political and geo-political disruptions to which the response will be reactive and crisis-driven. Instead we need clear vision and leadership supported by careful planning, integration and target setting so as to create a sustainable and resilient food system in Wales.<sup>v</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> Marsden et al, *op cit*: 'Food Policy as Public Policy'

<sup>iii</sup> See Gordon Brown's Commission on UK's Future Report Dec 5<sup>th</sup> 2022.

<sup>iv</sup> See for an elaboration of this using Wales case examples: Moragues-Faus, A, Marsden, T.K *et al* (2020) Building diverse, distributed and territorialised agri-food economies to deliver sustainability and food security. *Economic Geography*, 96,3, 219-243.

<sup>v</sup> See 'A Welsh Food system fit for Future Generations' *op cit*.