

WHAT PRICE CHEAP FOOD?

A meeting held by the British Society of Animal Science and the Scottish Centre for Animal Welfare Sciences, April 2002

Summary

This meeting gathered together many of the UK's most senior animal scientists with representatives of the farming industry, consumer groups, animal welfare groups and environmentalists. There was strong consensus that the current economic structure of agriculture cannot adequately address major issues of concern to society: the impact of agriculture on farm incomes, food security and safety, developing countries, animal welfare and the environment. This economic structure is based primarily on competition between producers and retailers, driving food prices down, combined with externalization of many costs. These issues must be addressed by a combination of legislation, restructuring of the market and use of public funds. The workshops also made other recommendations for research and education. The most urgent requirement is recognition that change is needed and development of a vision for what that change must achieve.

Introduction

This meeting challenged the widespread assumption that cheaper food for consumers is unequivocally desirable. Speakers focused on the argument that pressure for cheap food production has been a factor in many negative developments: unreliable farm incomes, pressures on small-scale producers, reduced food security, concerns over food safety, loss of competitiveness for third-world producers, problems for animal welfare and environmental damage. Cheap food incurs other costs that are not reflected in the selling price, costs external to the agricultural economy. The meeting concentrated on food from animals, but many of the issues also apply to crop production. Workshops then discussed these issues and made recommendations on what should be done to address them.

Synopses of talks by speakers (full summaries in Appendix)

Overview and animal welfare: Michael Appleby

The proportion of income that people spend on food has declined for many years, but external costs of food production are considerable, estimated at £2.3 billion per year in the UK. Most people could readily pay more for food. Indeed, most already pay more than necessary, by buying specialist products or convenience foods. An important effect of pressure for cheap food production has been reduced animal welfare, for example by decreased space allowances. Yet major improvements in welfare could be achieved with only small increases in price to the consumer. The obstacle to change is economic inertia – producers resist change because buyers expect low prices. Deployment of public subsidies and gradual change could avoid these short-term effects, although protection is needed against imports from countries with lower welfare standards. Competition should no longer be the main determinant of food prices, where these affect issues of concern to society, notably the environment and animal welfare.

UK farmer's perspective: Neil Cutler

There has been a fall in farm incomes due to low world commodity prices, strong currency, BSE and FMD. Globalization and the power of the retail sector threaten sustainability of farming in the UK. Consumer surveys reveal concern for food safety, animal welfare and the environment but the highest priority is for cheap food. Food expenditure is a small part of average income and farm gate prices have fallen further than retail prices. It is vital that ways are found for a greater part of the retail price to find its way to the producer. Food is cheaper than it has ever been. Risk assessments must be agreed and applied to imports as well as home-produced

food. Monitoring of animal welfare and environmental standards presents problems and ways of paying for increased costs for public good should be sought.

Third world perspective: Andy Redfern

Much of our food comes from developing countries, and the value of this trade greatly outweighs that of aid, but low prices damage these countries' economies and mean that poor people stay poor. Yet if India, say, could have 4% growth for the next ten years, fairly distributed, this could raise everyone above the poverty line. We have the ability to pay more for the food we consume. Fair Trade seeks greater equity in international trade, contributing to sustainable development by offering fair prices and better trading conditions to marginalized producers. Fair prices are important, but so are other aspects of trade such as market access and long-term trading partnerships. Consumers will pay more for fairly traded food, but only if the cost of doing so is limited: it must be easily available, it must taste like their usual brand and the price differential must be less than 20%.

Food quality & safety: John Gazzard

It should be possible to take food safety for granted and the associated costs should not be an issue. Do farm assurance and traceability deliver what the consumer wants and do they demonstrate food safety assurance? Quality is about perception – nutritional value, taste, health aspects, methods of production, preparation and presentation, ethical and social responsibility, authenticity, welfare friendly, environmentally sensitive production systems. The producer is right to argue that these should be paid for but not all players in the food chain necessarily have the same view.

Environmental impact: John Milne

Environmental outputs of agriculture have in some instances greater importance than food production. However, there is often insufficient knowledge of how to deliver and cost desired environmental outputs, hence the difficulty of governments in developing appropriate policies. Current livestock systems have produced less desirable environmental outputs: more emissions to the atmosphere, increased loss of nutrients into watercourses, reduced biota diversity and alteration in landscape structure. Land managers should be paid to provide desirable environmental outputs, once identified, with income from secondary food production offsetting some of the payments to produce environmental goods. From this analysis cheap food and environmental outputs or impacts need not necessarily be positively correlated.

Workshop discussions

Animal welfare

Issues raised

- On the part of the consumer, the major issue relates to a lack of knowledge about aspects of animal welfare in relation to food production. Current labelling practices cause confusion and there is a gap in the thinking between the consumer and the producer.
- For the producer, any animal welfare legislation is seen to have cost implications in terms of extra capital investment for welfare friendly buildings, higher labour costs to attract quality stockpersons and apply quality stockmanship and investment in new genetic lines. Currently these are not balanced by increased profits.
- Finally, there are many farm quality assurance schemes that include welfare codes but there is a lack of monitoring in these schemes.

Recommendations

- Improvements to farm animal welfare should be paid for by taxing citizens rather than charging consumers. In this way all farm animals will benefit, not just those supplied to niche markets.

- A programme should be implemented to improve education about animal welfare issues of everyone in the chain from stockpersons to producers to consumers and the large corporations.
- A greater integration of the food chain would allow the extra income for high welfare products to trickle down to the producer and stockperson.

Farm incomes and security of food supplies

Issues raised

- The main issue discussed concerned the need to attain sustainable farm incomes. Without these any attempts to improve welfare, quality and safety will fail.

Recommendations

- There should be greater cooperation between producers in the processing and marketing of products. This requires increased organization by producers.
- More direct marketing to consumers (e.g. niche marketing) would improve producer incomes.
- There should be a strengthening of the dialogue between the links in the producer to consumer chain. Again improved organization is required to achieve this.
- Producers should avail themselves of every opportunity to get the realities across to consumers directly. It is realised that this is easier said than done!

Food safety and quality

Issues raised

- Imported products are cheaper but not necessarily less safe.
- Legislation is often seen as excessive and objective cost-benefit analyses are required.
- There is a need to define clearly how food safety is measured.
- Safety is expected but quality is an extra to be paid for.

Recommendations

- Apolitical methods of measuring food safety should be developed.
- Legislation of food safety should be harmonised.

Environment

Issues raised

- There is a lack of clarity about what is a desirable environment and on whether public opinion is fully informed, for example on GMOs and organic farming
- Important issues include: unknown risks from climate change (those on the margins of existence are particularly vulnerable); maintaining environmental biodiversity in relation to plants/animals/ecosystems; environmental accountability, minimizing pollution and protecting potentially fragile systems.
- How do we pay for environmental gains when there is lack of correlation between attitudes and behaviour in food choice? For agricultural support vs. environmental objectives, can we develop a simple “environmental cost index” in relation to agriculture that consumers will understand?

Recommendations

- Scientific debate on the impact of animal production on the environment is needed to provide evidence and highlight research priorities. This should include animal scientists, environmental scientists, geographers and ecologists.
- It is necessary to reconcile conflicting goals in environment vs. animal welfare and environment vs. organic farming.

Action

These Proceedings have been sent in an open letter to the Prime Minister of the UK, the Right Honorable Tony Blair, signed by Professor John Milne, Past-President of the British Society of Animal Science, Mr David Henderson, Convenor of the Scottish Centre for Animal Welfare and Dr Michael Appleby on behalf of the meeting organizers. Copies were sent to other public figures involved with agriculture throughout the UK and the European Union. The letter urged the Prime Minister to use his office to continue the process of change recommended by the Curry Report (2002), by initiating further discussion of how agricultural economics can take society's broader concerns into account. This discussion will necessarily involve animal scientists, farmers, consumer groups and environmentalists as well as economists. The British Society of Animal Science and the Scottish Centre for Animal Welfare are keen to contribute to such a process.

Reference

Policy Commission on the Future of Farming and Food (chaired by Sir Donald Curry) 2002 Farming and Food: A Sustainable Future. Cabinet Office, London, UK.

Appendix: Spoken papers

What price cheap food? Overview and animal welfare

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The proportion of income that people spend on food has declined for many years. The decline was initiated by public policies in favour of more abundant, cheaper food. However, in recent years it has acquired its own momentum. Continuing decline in food prices is sometimes attributed to pressure from the consumers themselves, but it would be more accurate to say that it now primarily results from competition between producers and retailers. It is generally regarded as beneficial, and availability of cheap food is itself advantageous, if that food is nutritious and safe. However, it can also be argued that pressure for cheap food production has been a major factor in many negative developments: concerns over food quality and safety, unreliable farm incomes, pressures on small-scale producers, loss of competitiveness for third-world producers, reduced food security, problems for animal welfare and environmental damage. Cheap food incurs other costs that are not reflected in the selling price, costs external to the agricultural economy. For example, one third of surface water pollution in the USA is from agriculture. These externalities are considerable. They are estimated to cost £2.3 billion per year in the UK (Pretty et al 2000) and \$35 billion per year in the USA (Pretty 2000). It has been said that we pay for our food three times: through our wallets, through our taxes and through our health.

One specific example illustrates the extraordinary results of this pressure for cheap food. Production of milk involves maintenance of cows and many other complex processes with impacts on the workers, the local community and the environment. Yet in the supermarket, milk is cheaper than water.

Some people seek out more expensive food because they consider it better for taste, nutrition, health, the environment or animal welfare: organic food, free range eggs and similar products. However, it is not enough to argue that the proportion of such food produced will thereby come to match the proportion of those willing to pay for it. Such people want all food produced in this way. So do most other people. It is inappropriate to put responsibility for protection of animals and the environment on customers at point of sale, when they have other priorities to juggle and can see others around them buying the cheaper products. Society does not burden shoppers with day-by-day responsibility for the safety of the people who produced their purchases, and neither should it do so with environmental or animal care. The only case in which this choice has been properly put to the public was in Switzerland. In 1978 the Swiss public voted in a referendum to ban battery cages, even though they were fully informed that this would put up the price of eggs. Several studies have shown that people are willing to pay more for food that is produced in responsible ways. The fact that less people actually seek out such food in the shops does not gainsay the validity of those surveys, in which people are responding as citizens, not just as consumers.

There is a small proportion of consumers who would have genuine difficulty in paying more for food, but this is insufficient argument for providing cheap food for everyone: such people can be supported in other ways. Most people could readily pay more for food. Indeed, most already pay more than necessary, some by buying specialist products and more by buying convenience foods. Standard of living is not simply determined by cost of living: it is affected not just by the cost of our food, but also by our assurance that our food is good for us and that its production does not damage animals, other people or the environment.

Turning specifically to the relationship between economics and animal welfare, there are many instances where improvement of welfare will reduce the costs incurred by farmers, for example

measures to reduce disease and mortality. However, there are others where improving welfare would increase costs, for example increasing space allowances for livestock. Sometimes increased costs can be offset by increased income, by obtaining price premiums for products that are perceived to be associated with high welfare, such as free range eggs. More usually, though, reducing cost has taken priority over increasing welfare. An important point to recognise is that profits achieved by cutting costs are short-term, as they are constantly pared away by competition on prices. Yet some such cuts – including those achieved by reducing space allowances – have produced long-term reductions in welfare.

Despite the relationship between cost and welfare on farms, it turns out, surprisingly, that major improvements in farm animal welfare could be achieved with only minor increases in the price paid for food by consumers. As one illustration, the capital costs of animal production (housing and so on) typically account for about 10% of production costs. Suppose we double the space and facilities provided for the animals, increasing production costs by 10%, and introduce new disease control measures at a cost that also amounts to 10% of the original total. Cost of production has then been increased by 20%. When a consumer buys a meal in a supermarket or restaurant, the cost of animal products in that meal accounts for only about 5% of its purchase price. So increasing the cost of production by 20%, with considerable improvement in animal welfare and food safety, need only add 1% to the price of the meal. Most consumers would not even notice such a change and would support it if asked.

A real example is provided by the UK ban on stalls and tethers for pregnant sows, for welfare reasons, which took effect in January 1999. McInerney (1998) estimated that this would increase pork production costs by 5%, but retail prices (which include transport, packing, marketing and so on) by only 1%. Householders might buy slightly less pork than hitherto, so their expenditure on food would stay level or very slightly decrease (by perhaps 0.03%). Meanwhile it should be possible for the farmers to maintain their profits, offsetting increased costs with increased selling prices.

An obstacle to such change, however, is what may be called economic inertia. Producers tend to resist legislation – or pressure from intermediary buyers – to improve conditions for animals because in existing price structures buyers continue to expect low prices. Any increased cost of production would therefore be borne by producers and they would suffer losses or reduced profits, at least short-term. If these short-term effects can be avoided, though, by making changes gradually or deploying public subsidy, a new situation with increased costs and increased income from increased food prices need not be disadvantageous to producers. A major consideration, of course, is protection against imports of food products from countries without similar legislation. Such protection, taking into account animal welfare standards, is already being sought by the European Union (supported by welfare groups) in negotiations at the World Trading Organization. Note, though, that producers who talk of whole industries going out of business in the absence of such protection may be overstating their position. For example, Denmark has for years required more space in battery cages than other European countries, without being able to restrict imports. Its egg industry survives, albeit perhaps smaller than it might otherwise have been.

As we have said, major improvements in farm animal welfare could be achieved with only minor increases in food prices. Mechanisms should be sought to achieve this.

A general conclusion is that competition should no longer be the main determinant of food prices, where these affect major issues of concern to society, notably the environment and animal welfare. Change will not be achieved quickly, but we need a vision for agriculture in the future that will be sustainable for our animals, our environment and ourselves.

References

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A UK farmer's perspective

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The crisis in UK agriculture in the past few years has seen real incomes in most sectors fall to levels below those of the recession in the 1930s. This has been caused by a combination of low world commodity prices, a strong currency and a series of disasters such as BSE and Foot & Mouth disease, along with a hugely increased bureaucratic burden adding to the costs of food production. Increasing globalisation of food production and the power of the retail sector on the home market has led many to believe that farming in the UK is no longer sustainable with the result that a large number are leaving the industry. A dramatic restructuring is taking place resulting in a growth in the number of large farms and also in very small, part time units, while the medium – sized family farms decline.

The current system of support for agriculture, the CAP, is widely regarded as being in desperate need of reform and many question whether the taxpayer should subsidise agriculture at all. These pressures, along with the influence of the W.T.O, lead to the conclusion that farmers must be closer to the market and more sensitive to the demands of the consumer.

So, what does the consumer want? Consumer attitude surveys suggest that the highest priority is food safety, followed closely by animal welfare and environmentally friendly techniques, but the reality seems to be that the highest priority is that food should be cheap – why else should the food retailers make this the mainstay of all their advertising?

Thus the role of policy makers must be to attempt to reconcile these different factors in order to create a sustainable future for UK agriculture. To do this several fundamental questions need to be answered. The first and perhaps most important is whether we need a policy at all. Is it necessary for food to be produced in the UK? If so what is the minimum level to ensure the production capacity and skills are available in case imports become unavailable for some reason?

If we agree that there is a requirement for food to be produced in this country then the price that consumers will pay is surely the next factor to consider. Food expenditure as a proportion of average income has fallen from 34% in 1946 to 12% in 1999. It is unreasonable to expect consumers to pay significantly more, indeed the adverse effect on the rest of the economy if they did would not be politically acceptable, but we need to question whether it is sustainable for this proportion to fall further. However farmgate prices have been falling at an even greater rate than the retail price. In order to increase income to sustainable levels, and to help pay for some of the higher standards demanded by the consumer, it is vital that ways are found for a greater part of the retail price to find its way to the primary producer.

The increasing demands for higher standards of food production are often confusing and contradictory. Average food production is probably safer than it has ever been, but consumer perceptions have been moulded by awareness of BSE, salmonella, listeria, and other zoonotic threats. Hazard is usually a matter of chemical contamination or zoonoses, both of which can be measured objectively. In the case of chemical contamination, such as pesticides and veterinary medicines, methods of detection are constantly improving, and complete absence of these contaminants may prove to be unattainable. What becomes increasingly important is the development of risk based assessments to define maximum acceptable levels. The same is true of zoonoses but with the additional need to define where in the food chain responsibility should reside. Once a

consensus is arrived at, the same standards can and should be applied to imports as well as home produced food.

Animal welfare presents different problems. While there are some aspects of welfare, in particular health, that can be monitored in the final food product, many others cannot. If the public choose to have higher standards, with the additional costs, which invariably apply, the market can only provide part of the recompense for these costs, and other methods need to be found to pay for these 'public goods'. This is even truer where higher environmental standards of production are applied.

Food in the UK is cheaper, more varied and safer than it has ever been. Consumers are unlikely to be willing to pay significantly more, and the pressures of globalisation of trade mean that for farming to be sustainable in Britain, farmers must be able to obtain a greater share of the retail price. This may go some way towards financing the higher standards required by the public. Application of the same standards to imported goods can only be achieved where those standards are objectively measurable in food products. Where this is not possible, as in aspects of animal welfare and environmental standards, the increased costs must be paid for by some other means.

Third world perspective

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Shoppers tend to buy the cheapest food available, and this is often costly to farmers, especially in developing countries. Much of our food comes from such countries. Coffee is the highest value traded foodstuff (and only surpassed in trading value by oil) and others are also important: tea, fruit juice, cocoa and bananas. These goods are mainly produced outside Europe and many African and Asian economies are dependent on them. The value of this trade greatly outweighs that of aid. The total value of trade into the UK from developing countries in 1997 was £48 billion, with UK companies earning about £6 billion from investments, compared to UK aid of about £2 billion. Low and unpredictable prices damage these countries' economies, causing pressure to increase production and to change land usage. At the 'micro' level, poor people stay poor, vulnerable people stay vulnerable and birth rates stay high to pay the bills. It is sometimes suggested that international business must benefit the poor by 'trickle down' and that any business is good business, but the reality is less encouraging. Between 1975 and 1993 raw coffee prices fell by 18% while the consumer price grew by 240%, and the World Bank estimates that \$96 billion was 'underpaid' for seven basic commodities. Unsustainable trade means poverty and hard choices: the political and economic situation in Columbia in the late 1980s led to drugs becoming the new cash crop, with consequences throughout the world including such places as New York.

India has nearly 40% of the world's poor, with 500 million – 50% of the population – below the poverty line of 12 rupees a day. If the economy could show 4% growth for the next ten years, fairly distributed, this would raise everyone above the poverty line. The bad news is that although 4% was the average growth in the 1990s, 150 million more people fell below the poverty line, with the income disparity between richest and poorest doubling.

Poor people are getting poorer while the rich pay less for more. Power is becoming increasingly consolidated in the hands of a few: for example, 90% of physical coffee is controlled by three companies, each with a turnover greater than most African nations. In local trade no one wants

to be seen as unfair, but in international trade no one gets to see what is going on. We will need to pay more for the food we consume.

Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers, especially in the South. Fair Trade's strategic intent is: deliberately to work with marginalised producers and workers in order to help them move from a position of vulnerability to security and economic self-sufficiency; to empower producers and workers as stakeholders in their own organisations; actively to play a wider role in the global arena to achieve greater equity in international trade.

So what is a fair price? It is the cost of sustainable production. For example Traidcraft pays a minimum of \$1.26 per kg for coffee, approximately the cost of production in Costa Rica. Fair prices are an important part of Fair Trade, but so are other aspects of trade such as: access to pre-export finance; skills and capacity building; quality training; market access; longevity of trading relationships. Producers in developing countries may also be disadvantaged by other factors such as the imposition of food standards by importing countries. For example, many developing countries would find it very difficult to comply with new phyto-sanitary legislation on honey, including all the requirements for certification. They ask whether these standards are really putting consumers first, or whether they are protectionism 'by the back door'.

Traidcraft's experience is that consumers will pay more for fairly traded food, but only if the cost of doing so is limited: it must be high quality, easily available and branded so they recognise it, it must taste like their usual brand and the price differential must be less than 20%. The fact that consumers will pay more is good news for sustainable development but hard work for marketing.

Food quality and safety

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The retail purchase price – the price that the consumer actually pays – does not necessarily reflect the levels of cost involved in production. One of the first in a series of objectives by the Food Standards Agency was the setting of a target to achieve a reduction of 20% in the incidence of foodborne illness by 2006. A recent study by the Consumers' Association indicated that the more expensive "premium" supermarket products did not necessarily guarantee a better tasting product when compared with the "standard" range.

These 3 comments all form part of the very active "Food" debate and combine the issues of cost, safety and quality, but where do they leave the consumer and the primary producer? Is there a common or shared view, or is there a very different perspective from either end of the food chain?

Food safety should be taken for granted and the associated costs should not be an issue. Unsafe food is not an option. However, it is necessary to understand what is meant by food safety. Food poisoning is the most common response but the subject area is wider and more complex. Physical and chemical contaminants are as important as microbiological contaminants. Failure to control food safety immediately hits the headlines.

Partially due to the challenge brought about by BSE and other concerns, the UK industry has moved into the era of farm assurance and traceability, and it will progress further down this road. Is this what the consumer wants, does it actively demonstrate a food safety assurance at point of

production, and can the same be said for the further processed imported product? All issues for discussion when considering cost in relation to food safety.

Quality is all about – perception? Consumer knowledge and expectations are huge variables but what does the average consumer understand by quality? Does it relate to nutritional value, taste, health aspects, method of production, preparation and presentation, ethical and social responsibility, authenticity, welfare friendly, environmentally sensitive production systems, and so on? The primary producer will quite rightly argue that there is a price to pay for some or may be all of these aspects, but do all of the players in the food chain see it this way?

Environmental impact

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Agricultural systems use a set of soil, plant, fossil fuel and human resources to produce food that has an economic value. Social and environmental outputs are also produced whose value is less easy to quantify. These environmental outputs can be potentially detrimental or beneficial. Examples of these outputs are emissions of methane, carbon dioxide and ammonia into the atmosphere, run-off of nutrients and other compounds into watercourses, contributions to biodiversity and the provision of landscapes. It is unfortunate that these outputs are often called impacts and considered to be of a negative nature. It can be argued that these outputs have in some instances equal or greater importance to food production. Cultural attitudes are shifting from resource exploitation to a paradigm of sustainable development and this implies a change in the weighting of food production, and its consequent economic and social benefits, in relation to environmental outputs.

A major difficulty is in translating this paradigm into practice. This is partly because society is still adjusting its view of a sustainable development paradigm. It is also partly because society finds it difficult to value environmental outputs such as clean air, water of a certain quality, ecosystems with a particular level of biodiversity and different landscapes. Equally there is often imperfect or insufficient knowledge of how to design agro-ecosystems to deliver desired environmental outputs and how much they will cost to create or maintain. Hence the difficulty of governments in developing policies that work and the fertile ground that it produces for pressure groups to invoke what evidence there is to support their case. These difficulties are most manifest in the developed world of which the UK typifies the issues well. An UK case study of an extensively managed livestock system is used to provide an example of the issues raised above.

The inferences that can be drawn from the case study are several. Current livestock systems, as they have become more specialised, have produced less desirable environmental outputs. They have produced more undesirable emissions to the atmosphere, increased the loss of nutrients into watercourses, reduced plant and associated biota diversity and altered the structure of landscapes. Creating greater quantities of desirable environmental outputs is not necessarily rapid, has considerable uncertainty attached to their production in some instances and can then be expensive to maintain.

It is argued that the extent to which land resources can be used to achieve multiple objectives with food production being the primary objective needs to be re-addressed with environmental objectives, at least in some parts of the UK, being the primary objective. Land managers should be paid to provide such objectives, once identified, with income from secondary food production

offsetting some of the payments to produce environmental goods. From this analysis cheap food and environmental outputs or impacts need not necessarily be positively correlated.