

WRFFC 2023: Contradictions and crisis in the food system

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Starts 10 mins ends 17 mins

I'd like to look at the disconnect in the food system and I think this disconnect is because there is a lack of vision, lack of strategy for the food system in Wales. This is a theme which has been repeated throughout this conference, I suspect, and I think that we, as a country have fallen into the trap of looking at policies in silos. We don't look at the food system in its entirety and we concentrate on the different parts rather than the bigger picture. I don't think that food is a priority either in the Well-being of Future Generations Act either. And obviously food touches on all aspects of our lives. It is connected to the economy, rural communities, the environment, nature, climate, and also health. It is an extremely important field and needs the attention it deserves because it can do good across the whole of society.

So, just to look a little more at examples of the disconnect in the food system - one example is the Food and Drink Wales Industry Board in Wales. If you look at the Food and Drink Strategy's KPIs [Key Performance Indicators], in essence they are strategies rooted in economic targets, concentrating on economic growth for businesses creating more work etc. It is a very narrow vision of improving a food system.

And obviously we have the planning system too which allows intensive poultry units in a time of crisis with the climate and wildlife, so the two sides don't go together at all. And a closer look at the Sustainable Farming Scheme. We have talked throughout the conference about seeing more horticulture in Wales but to be able to enter the new Scheme you have to own or control at least 3 hectares of land. And of course a lot of horticultural units in Wales are very small indeed so they miss out on important support. So I'm not sure that policy doesn't leave a lot of farmers out.

And looking at farming systems more broadly, there is an organic farming scheme where if you are certified as organic, you can get payments for that. After reading the latest consultation, it looks like organic is exactly the type of farming the Government wants but there isn't any mention in the new plans for any payments to the organic sector. So is that sector, which is doing exactly what the government wants, under a disadvantage? And are farmers going to go back to conventional farming because of this?

Katie mentioned a report regarding Wales' responsibility to the wider world, a report written by WWF Cymru, Size of Wales and RSPB Cymru. An area the size of 40% of Wales is being used to produce seven items which Wales imports. These products are soya, palm oil, beef, leather, wood, pulp and paper. When we look more closely at the soya which is imported into the UK, 80% is used in the farming system to feed livestock. Mostly poultry and dairy cows. This 80% of soya comes from places like Brazil and South East Asia which are facing high levels of deforestation so how can we in Wales be behaving responsibly towards the wider world if we continue to import produce which drives up the destructive changes in the weather and wildlife internationally?

And I've got one last point before moving on. I'd like to mention the 'Cost of Sustainable Alternatives' (on a slide). I think it is important as well to think of where our food is coming from, whether that is meat or plant-based. The slide suggests that food other than meat is on the whole more sustainable, but of course it is worth while keeping in mind that some meat is raised with a positive impact on wildlife and the environment, just as much as plant-based food. And similarly there are systems of raising meat or growing vegetables which aren't sustainable. So I think labelling is also important.

Starts 33 min ends 36 mins

So what are we going to do about all this? One of the suggestions that the Nature Friendly Farmers Network advocates for is that we use the term food security more often and define it better. We often talk about food but what does that mean? I think a definition of food security should be based on six interconnected principles and this means concentrating on:

- Availability, so an adequate food supply;
- Access to food – everyone can get hold of it, economically and physically;
- Utilization – it should be healthy and gives us the energy we need.
- Stability - the food system should be resilient enough to cope with shocks, whether from the environment, economy or politics.
- Sustainability – the food system should be regenerative of nature, climate, our communities and the economy
- Food sovereignty. Individuals, groups and the community should be able to make decisions for ourselves, what we eat, what we produce, how we produce, process and distribute it and to be part of the decision making of the policies around food.

So I would suggest that food security (defined by these six principles) is included in the Food Bill and the Agriculture Bill, and some of the principles are in the Sustainable Farming Scheme. So there must be a legal obligation on the government to look at all of these areas, which are connected to every aspect of our society in order to improve things for everyone, and that every one of these is looked at equally.