

OPINION ARTICLE

Shifting food policy from commodity to community thinking

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved]

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Abstract

Over the last five years, N8 AgriFood has united the expertise of food systems thinkers across the eight most research intensive universities in the North of England, in a programme working to address key issues around food systems resilience across the themes of food production, supply chains and consumer health. As the programme moves towards focusing the results of its research and combined multidisciplinary expertise into policy guidance, the authors of this paper from within N8 AgriFood take an overview of the work undertaken across the programme's eight member institutions. It explores work around linking communities to food, and the vital potential of the research to inform new policy that encapsulates societal sustainability into food systems thinking.

Keywords

food systems, food policy, food poverty, food waste, surplus food, food insecurity, food hubs, community resilience



This article is included in the [Sustainable Food Systems gateway](#).



This article is included in the [N8 AgriFood collection](#).

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1

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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Introduction

In an average household how well known are the challenges facing the sustainability of our global food system likely to be? Waste and recycling will no doubt be on consumers' agendas as the startling statistic that a third of all food produced goes to waste is now a well publicised fact, with some research claiming the figure is in fact closer to a half.

The conceptualisation of "food miles" in the early 1990s undoubtedly got people on board for a new era of consideration towards food origin, and more recently the heightened profile of climate change has turned attention to the food industry and the role it plays in contributing almost a quarter of all global greenhouse gas emissions. The average householder is growing more aware of sustainability issues in food production, particularly regarding global meat farming practices, which is reflected in the abundance of new vegetarian and vegan cookbooks now being released by a cohort of celebrity chefs looking to capitalise on growing consumer trends.

Public awareness sits hand in hand with policy awareness, and while interventions are required to improve the sustainability of food as a commodity in both production and supply, work undertaken across the [N8 AgriFood programme](#) has found consideration of these two aspects alone when looking at food challenges, can lead to negative effects on people's livelihoods, cultures and environments.

Instead, policy interventions must also be put in place to shape and inform community engagement with, and understanding of, food systems, with due credit given to the vital role food plays as an important tool for tackling many societal challenges around health, poverty, food insecurity, sustainability, and loneliness.

Unmasking hidden truths

Despite the UK being one of the world's largest economies, in 2014 it was home to 8.4 million people who were reported to be food insecure. Last year [a record 1.6 million food bank parcels were issued \(April 2018 to March 2019\)](#), and food poverty is now recognised as a national challenge.

Researchers in York, a city which boasts the second lowest benefits claimant count [among the UK's 63 largest cities](#), have produced a report which gives the first detailed overview of insecurity and food poverty in the city and the causes behind it.

Under N8 AgriFood's sister programme, IKnowFood, Dr Maddy Power, from the University of York, has positioned research findings directly behind calls on local and national government to implement "urgent action" to tackle the issues surrounding food poverty, which she describes as being a widespread yet hidden problem in the city.

The report, entitled "[Seeking Justice: How to understand and end food poverty in York](#)" (Power, 2019), highlights for policymakers the disadvantages of focusing solely on food bank usage as a measure of food poverty, citing a

survey which found that among the 612 households with children in primary school questioned, 24% had experienced food insecurity. However, only 8% of parents had used a food bank and, of this number, the majority had used the food bank only once. The findings align with previous research showing many people are deterred from using a food bank by stigma and pride. The data referred to in the report provides evidence to inform clear asks of policy makers. These are highlighted in the report through a set of separate recommendations to both local and national government.

Without publications such as this report, would governments fully grasp the complexities of food poverty and insecurity lying underneath the contrasting statistics that suggest affluence and wealth? In this case the report was produced by Dr Power in conjunction with the [York Food Justice Alliance](#); an initiative developed out of a realisation among local councillors, local third sector organisations and the local press of the presence of food poverty in the city, sitting alongside the lack of a defined network to strategically co-ordinate practice, action and policy to tackle the issue. So, not a case of simply laying the challenges of food poverty out on the table, but collectively creating an approach for overcoming them; an example of how research and academia can work together, not only proactively raising questions of policy agendas, but reactively supporting policymakers in answering existing questions.

The hub of the community

Communities coming together with researchers to tackle localised issues surrounding food can not only produce tangible impact on the ground, but often results in the setting of exemplary precedents, which in turn feed into a wider policy making environment.

A project funded through the N8 AgriFood programme "[Exploring the potential of Local Food Hubs in deprived areas: Enhancing Knowledge Exchange for developing best practice guidelines](#)", brought together an interdisciplinary team from Lancaster University, the University of Sheffield and Newcastle University. Working in collaboration with practitioners they used an action research approach to investigate the social, health, economic and environmental impact of food hubs in areas of poverty. Local Food Hubs are structures that act to connect food producers more closely with consumers, shortening supply chains and securing fairer prices for consumers and producers. The researchers identified that food hubs are often seen as "an elite phenomenon, mainly involving affluent areas and consumers" and they subsequently designed the project to examine the potential this approach could have as a model for tackling food poverty within deprived urban areas, where accessibility to fresh produce is limited by finances and locality.

Under the co-ordination of an existing online platform, run by the [Open Food Network \(OFN\)](#), community-based organisations The Larder, Northshields Community Centre and Myatt's Fields Park, came together to pilot the OFN local food hub exemplar in areas of deprivation in the cities of Preston and

Newcastle, as well as in Lambeth in London. The research project was developed in collaboration with these non-academic stakeholders in order to assess the potential and constraints of these local food hubs to tackle issues of poverty in deprived areas.

The project now counts several successes, including the publication of an [Action Pack](#) to guide other organisations looking to establish a food hub, and a £250,000 Big Lottery Funding win for project partners in Preston with a view to upscaling their local food hub model based on the principles of the Preston Co-Operative model. When the project started, food hubs did not exist in either Newcastle or Preston; there is now one hub in Newcastle and three new hubs in Preston. The increased supply of fresh produce in these areas was also accompanied by different approaches to developing community capacity and skills in using fresh produce, including cookery courses in Preston.

While the Action Pack provides a guide to best practice for those seeking to create a local food hub, the research resulted in an evidence base to address questions arising in the policy sector surrounding food hubs. These include questions such as identifying what exactly constitutes a food hub, what are they for, why do we need them, and why are they proliferating? Dr Christian Reynolds, an N8 AgriFood Knowledge Exchange Fellow at the University of Sheffield, and one of the researchers involved in the project, went on to use the research to co-author a Food Policy Guidance Note and a Food Policy Discussion paper in conjunction with the Centre for Food Policy's Food Research Collaboration, under the header "[Food hubs in the UK: Where are we and what next?](#)" (Guzman & Reynolds, 2019).

When solutions raise further questions

The N8 AgriFood Local Food Hubs project also ascertained barriers to success, including stigma around the usage of food banks, previously mentioned here in Dr Maddy Power's work. The project lead, Dr Katerina Psarikidou, then of Lancaster University, authored an accompanying paper, "[Local food hubs in deprived areas: de-stigmatising food poverty?](#)" (Psarikidou *et al.*, 2019), which actually concluded that, despite their efforts, local food hubs are unable to address stigma in food poverty by providing an alternative to food banks. Whilst the approach of food hubs in provision of food is an alternative, the stigma attached to food poverty was primarily addressed as a problem, or property of an individual to be solved through changes in practice or behaviour. The researchers argue that instead, broader policy and management strategies are needed to address the economic and social structures that cause and reproduce stigma in food poverty.

The necessity of tackling the systemic contributors to food poverty is a key theme in other N8 AgriFood research. Whilst the redistribution of food surplus to people affected by food poverty is recognised as having the potential to deliver both environmental (reducing food waste) and social benefits (feeding hungry people), such schemes in the UK have been

criticised for depoliticising hunger and creating an "industry" dependent on the provision of food surplus. Dr Effie Papargyroupoulou, of the University of Leeds, is the principal investigator of an ongoing N8 AgriFood funded project, FAmiSHed: Interactions between Food waste, Surplus and HungEr, which aims to critique the "win-win" narrative around food surplus redistribution. This project will propose alternative policies and practices that work towards tackling both the immediate urgent needs (providing a lifeline for the hungry), and more long-term priorities that tackle the originating causes of food poverty and systematic food waste. Also in this space, Dr Charlotte Spring, from the University of Sheffield, has produced a paper exploring the potential for political and ethical learning by comparing different approaches to food handling and teaching. The paper, entitled "[Sites of learning: Exploring political ecologies and visceral pedagogies of surplus food redistribution in the UK](#)" (Spring *et al.*, 2019), looks at the effective ways that the distinction between food and waste is taught, learned and ultimately understood. The authors look to question assumptions of the value of enriching learners' knowledge of food/waste distinctions as a potentially individualising strategy that can ignore the wider context of communities' food insecurity.

Language and understanding of food within society plays an important part in understanding stigma, and addressing common misconceptions that are continually reinforced by the way we talk about food, particularly surplus food. The connotations that surplus food has, linking it to waste and commercial loss, often lead consumers to see surplus food as inferior food, despite how appropriate it is to eat, according to Dr Megan Blake, a researcher at the University of Sheffield's Department of Geography. She believes that if we can find new ways of talking about food, and choose our words more strategically, we could support a more healthy and sustainable relationship with the food that is available to all of us, whoever we are.

Writing for [The Conversation](#), Dr Blake states: "Some attempt to shame governments into changing social policy by calling it 'leftover food for leftover people'. While I agree that [austerity and welfare policies](#) are causing great harm to families and communities, I also know that donated surplus food is a resource that supports the resilience of organisations aiming to help struggling communities and households."

Dr Blake says the effect of framing surplus food as [second class](#) dismisses the positive social, cultural, environmental and economic values of this food, complicates how organisations aiming to help communities can do so while still preserving dignity, and for eaters, comes to signify a failure to engage with the commercial supply chain. All while giving the commercial sector a pass.

Instead, Dr Blake asks: "What if we referred to surplus food as shared or social food?". This language would reflect the social role this food plays and we would associate it more closely with the care of self, family, community and planet that this food enables.

Cultural considerations to a community approach

As charities and community organisations step in to address food insecurity and fill the gaps of state support amid the politics of austerity, are we in danger of going backwards? Dr Maddy Power, working with N8 AgriFood's University of York Chair, Professor Bob Doherty, believe this to be the case, following research into [community food aid in a multi-ethnic context](#) (Power *et al.*, 2017).

After scrutinising the provision of food aid by faith-based organisations in the city of Bradford, they warn that people in need from non-Christian faiths are at risk of being unintentionally excluded. The key word here is unintentionally, and thus there is a need for research to highlight shortcomings and recommendations to inform policy and practice going forward. Dr Power and Professor Doherty identified many possible forms of unintentional exclusion, predominantly by Christian food banks but also by some secular organisations. For example, most secular and Christian organisations were unable to cater for cultural diets, and did not provide halal meals, while in some food banks and soup kitchens, there was an expectation for clients to engage with Christian doctrine or symbols.

Little work has been done to investigate food insecurity service providers in terms of their performance, scope and political positioning. This leaves a limited picture of the food aid scene, particularly when you take into consideration the minimal attention given to the experience of people, who despite being in a position of food insecurity, do not use formalised food charity.

Again, following [research in a multi-ethnic, multi-faith city in the UK](#), (Power *et al.*, 2018) involving White British and Pakistani women in or at risk of food insecurity, Dr Power and Professor Doherty, warn of a "corrosive sense of shame" among service users, whose experiences are so far removed from the ideologies laid out in the system rationalities of service providers. They say their research evidences a gap in social learning, leaving us with a long way to go to achieving a mutual, reciprocal understanding in relation to either food insecurity or food aid. However, routes towards this have been identified, in particular the fostering of opportunities for service users to demonstrate social solidarity, mobilise for peer support and provide mutual care, as well as involving food aid service users in the governance of food aid organisations, for instance as trustees.

Community self-help and health

The ripples felt by local communities following dramatic changes in the tide of national policy leave welfare organisations vulnerable to shock, particularly those working in the field of food and poverty. The capacity to self-organise within communities is therefore vital for building resilience and social sustainability under uncertain national policy conditions.

Research into [food insecurity and resilience through community self-organising](#) (Blake, 2019) by Dr Megan Blake has

examined shocks imposed by the implementation of austerity policy and neoliberal welfare reform. She found that food insecurity effects are not only hunger and poor health experienced at the individual scale, but they also extend into places and communities. This is through the loss of social networks, erosion of community spaces, denigration of local foodscapes and collective deskilling that limits the community resources needed for self-organising.

Secondly, Dr Blake found that the ways in which food support is provided in communities has implications for how communities can regain the resources they need to be able to enact resilience in the face of trouble and difficulty. She states policy that focuses on self-organising is necessary, but not sufficient for enhancing resilience in low-income communities. Instead, Dr Blake argues a multi-scalar approach is needed that on the one hand redresses larger-scale policy, which undermines resources and creates shocks in the first place. On the other hand, she says greater support is needed at the local level that enhances the community-specific self-organisation capacity and resource needs.

Systems thinking on a community scale

Understanding the connections that individuals have with food and how these are shaped by their lived experience, their community and the wider socio-economic pressures will be essential when considering policy interventions to tackle the multi-faceted challenges around food. However, such interventions need to align with the needs of all players acting within a community and its food system.

Initiatives such as the [Sustainable Food Cities \(SFC\) network](#) look to support communities in fostering a more healthy, fair and sustainable food system. This approach is underpinned by partnerships of public/private organisations, businesses, community groups and individuals working across multiple aspects of food, including health, the environment and economy in their locality. The network was borne out of a collaboration between public, private and third sector organisations that are united in the belief of the power of food for fueling positive change. It is an affiliation of NGOs led by the Soil Association, Food Matters and Sustain, and is funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

Although each city food partnership functions differently, their uniting aim is to use food to improve people's health and wellbeing, create new businesses and jobs, and reduce our impact on the environment. Nationally the SFC network acts to facilitate knowledge exchange and sharing of innovative practice and policy between different cities and partnerships.

The role of academia in supporting partnerships and practitioners in building sustainable food communities

As part of its innovation cluster model, the N8 AgriFood programme is looking to develop a knowledge-sharing hub between N8 researchers and food partnerships across the North of England. The direction and focus of this cluster is being developed in collaboration with those working within the food partnerships. The aim is to create a space

where research findings can be shared, reflected upon and future research co-designed to meet the needs of the community. The cluster is being facilitated by Dr Rachel Marshall, N8 AgriFood's Knowledge Exchange Fellow at Lancaster University. Dr Marshall works with researchers and stakeholders to develop and co-design projects which look to transform how local food systems function. Through this cluster, she wants to ensure that academia is working to support regional communities and develop the capacity to inform institutional and government policy, as well as identifying practical solutions and addressing knowledge gaps collaboratively.

As highlighted in the UPP Foundation report 'Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places'

in these challenging times academic institutions should be actively supporting their communities. The report identified that best-practice in developing a truly civic university includes ensuring that engagement aligns with the needs of the locality and is developed in collaboration with other local institutions and partnerships. Just as food can connect individuals and communities, the emergence of food partnerships in regions and cities across the UK can help connect universities to their locality, fostering meaningful and sustained engagement and collaboration to improve our food system.

Data availability

Underlying data

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

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[Publisher Full Text](#)

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The paper provides an excellent overview of N8 Agrifood's research and community-focused activities. It is particularly useful to see the breadth of work done on connecting local communities with their food, the non-academic institutions and people being engaged with, and what is needed to fill in the gap.

There are some minor suggestions that will help improve how the paper is currently presented.

The paper title sets up the reader with the expectation that there will be an exploration of how food policy will be shifted from a commodity to community thinking approach. However, it is first not really explained what a 'commodity' focused policy turn is and how it manifests in UK food policy. It is implicit that this is related to food poverty, but a discussion what policies we need to turn away from would emphasize the value of the research findings even further. Right now, the paper demonstrates the value of establishing more community focused interventions to respond to food poverty in the UK.

The introduction of the paper discusses general food sustainability concerns that the research findings of the projects necessarily do not. I suggest a light rewriting of the introduction to better reflect the body of the paper.

Loneliness is mentioned in the introduction but it is not engaged with in the paper. It would be most useful to see if there are any research or policy findings around this aspect, particularly given the social nature of food consumption, and that the community is a core aspect of the paper.

If at all possible at this stage, please discuss the policy impact of each project discussed. The 'tangible' impacts are more apparent for some projects than others. For example, what will policymakers do with the recommendations and data presented in the IKnowFood report? What will happen for the multi-ethnic communities in terms of policy changes?

Finally, the paper will benefit from a conclusion that brings the main themes together. Currently the last section in the paper does not accomplish this purpose.

Minor points:

1. Citations needed for the contested/conflicting statistics for food waste
2. Citations needed for the GHG emissions from the 'food industry'. Please also clarify what the food industry means in this context.
3. Citations needed for the increasing awareness of the average householder in terms of sustainability issues. Where in the world is this householder situated?

Is the topic of the opinion article discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Partly

Are all factual statements correct and adequately supported by citations?

Partly

Are arguments sufficiently supported by evidence from the published literature?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn balanced and justified on the basis of the presented arguments?

Yes

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?

Yes

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?

Yes

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?

Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: food systems, urban food environments

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.