



## ‘Cheap food’ doesn’t always mean good food

### Sustain food and farming alliance 2018

The Sustain food and farming alliance works to achieve healthy, fair, humane and sustainable food system, including a lot of work to address food poverty. We have produced this briefing to express shared concerns about the push for ‘cheap food’ in international trade deals.

- We want affordable food, not ‘cheap’ food, which may be poor quality, unhealthy or unsafe to eat. Cheap, poor quality, imported food will come at a cost – to the farmer or food producer, to animal welfare, to the environment or jobs in UK food and farming. There may be hidden costs to our NHS and economy from food poisoning and lost days at work.
- Research shows foodbank use is rising in the UK and that the primary reason is low or uncertain income and delays or changes to benefits payments. These problems will not be solved simply by cheap food. We need to improve household incomes, control housing costs, link wages and benefits to the cost of living and fix the welfare safety net.
- British people should refuse to trade away food standards. Our UK farming industry has worked hard to reduce unnecessary antibiotic use and clean up meat production. We don’t want their farms and jobs put at risk by competition with cheap, poor quality imports.
- We want trade that doesn’t short-change farmers in the UK, or in poor countries, and which supports sustainable development and global commitments on issues like climate change. It is important to maintain good food and farming standards to help achieve these aims.

#### **Why can’t we just set 0% tariffs after Brexit and make food cheaper?**

As the [Government says](#), the most important drivers of change in the cost of food are not tariffs, but commodity prices, exchange rates and oil prices. Any potential savings [could be cancelled out](#) by a weak pound, currency movements and commodity fluctuations, and increases in the cost of food from European countries, from where we buy almost a third of our food. Even the slightest friction at our borders will create delays and [add costs](#).

#### **But cheap food is good for those on low incomes. How can you argue against that?**

In high income countries like the UK it is the poor who lose out with poor health. The cheapest food tends to be long shelf-life snacks and processed foods with higher fat, salt and sugar, and lower levels of fresh and healthy ingredients. It is worth noting that calorie for calorie, processed foods high in fat and sugar are [2.5 times cheaper than veg](#). These cause disease and will increase costs for the NHS, which is already struggling to cope with increased rates of obesity and diabetes.

#### ❖ *Jobs and Industry*

With [3.9m](#) million people in UK employed in food and farming – from farmers to caterers, manufacturers, supermarkets workers, this is the single largest sector of employment in the UK. We fear the closure of British farms and food companies as they won’t be able to compete with

cheap, low standard and low welfare imports. This could mean an end to buying British. If British farmers drop their standards they will lose their reputation and international export business.

❖ *Low standards and animal welfare*

We don't want to accept low standard, low animal welfare products, such as chlorinated chicken or hormone injected beef into our food chain. Or for our own industry to respond by dropping their standards. We also wouldn't like to see a situation where we end up eating cheap, poor quality food and exporting our high quality food. No requirements to label the origin of the meat in our schools, restaurants and hospitals will mean we won't know what we are eating.

❖ *Poor diets*

We are worried about inadvertently importing American levels of obesity alongside cheap, highly processed food imports. The Faculty of Public Health states, "In the UK, the poorer people are, the worse their diet, and the more diet-related diseases they suffer from". We don't want to exacerbate this with cheap, highly processed food. In addition, Sustain examined food poisoning data and found that ten times as many people suffer a foodborne illness every year in the US versus the UK. According to the Food Standards Agency foodborne diseases already cost the UK economy £1.5bn per year, with campylobacter costing the economy £900m per year. British industry and the NHS cannot afford more food-related illness and food scares.

**What is the Sustain alliance arguing for?**

1. Affordable and good, healthy food. Not just 'cheap' food. People in the UK don't use food banks because food is expensive; it is because they have suffered what the Trussell Trust calls an 'income shock' – this could be from losing a job or losing benefits, for example.
2. Improved household incomes, reduced food insecurity, and better promotion of access to good, healthy food. We should be aiming to help everyone to eat well, not normalising a culture of poor quality food and [charitable handouts](#).
3. A food system that is high quality, fair and transparent. UK farmers have made great strides over recent years to improve animal welfare, and to [reduce antibiotic use](#) and food poisoning, such as salmonella. More work still needs to be done, but our farmers shouldn't have to compete with cheap imports, produced abroad to standards we won't accept at home. With weak laws on labelling, especially in catering – including food for schools and hospitals, we won't know what we're eating.
4. Internationally, we also need to ensure any trade policy is also development-friendly, supporting sustainable food production in poor countries and ensuring we support global commitments on the environment, climate change, human rights and UN Sustainable Development Goals.

---

Sustain is the UK alliance for better food and farming. We represent around 100 not-for-profit national organisations and many more at local level, working together to achieve a prosperous, healthy, ethical and sustainable system for food, farming and fishing. We are non-party political, offer non-partisan advice and can provide further information on request.

[www.sustainweb.org/brexit](http://www.sustainweb.org/brexit)