



Why we need the right to food

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Over the past century or so, the UK can reasonably claim to have been a food secure nation both through domestic production and imports. Yet even in a time of relative prosperity, 8.4 million people¹ in the UK currently suffer from household food insecurity. This means that they struggle to put food on the table or they are not sure where their next meal is coming from, affecting their life chances and health.

We are also facing the prospect of climate change and loss of soil and biodiversity, threatening the very basis of our planet's ability to provide the food we need, in a way that enables the farmers, fishers and food producers that we all rely on to make a decent living.

Sustain, the alliance for better food and farming believes that by incorporating the Right to Food into domestic legislation, our country would be taking serious strides

in the right direction to tackle the myriad of issues facing our food system, in a sensible and systematic way. It would put responsibilities on Government, public institutions and local authorities to act in the best interests of people and planet. It would also help establish a shared sense of purpose for our food system, and the policy decisions that affect our health, well-being and access to good food.

What is the Right to Food?

The Right to Food is defined by former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Jean Ziegler as:

"The right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and

*collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear."*²

The UK has ratified a number of international treaties that refer to the Right to Food and broader socio-economic rights. These include the International Covenant on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, the convention on the rights of the child or the convention on the rights of people with disabilities.

The Right to Food is about ensuring that all people regardless of their gender, race, immigration status or age are able to access food in a dignified way. This will look different for different people, but it will be underpinned by a work and welfare system that provides adequate incomes, and which controls other everyday costs. It will also include serious attention to the sustainability of food production, to secure healthy and affordable food now and for future generations.

Why we need to incorporate the Right to Food into UK law?

In domestic legislation, we have the Human Rights Act 1998 that upholds our civil rights, the Equalities Act 2010 that aims to prevent discrimination, but we do not have any equivalent legislation that upholds our economic and social rights, including our Right to Food. This is why the Sustain alliance is working to champion formal adoption of the Right to Food into UK law.

The UK is actually an outlier by not having incorporated any socio-economic rights. Around the world, ninety percent of constitutions recognise at least one socio-economic right, and in seventy percent of these countries this right is judicially enforceable.³

In the UK, Scotland is actively looking at the possibility of incorporating the Right to Food as part of the Good Food Nation Bill and is committed to incorporating the rights of the child, which would be an excellent first step. The Welsh Government has to have due regard to the convention on the rights of the child in its policy development.

Human rights allow us to focus on fixing the root causes of poverty and inequality as well as take into account how other issues affect people's ability to eat well, for example everyday housing and utility costs, income standards and public sector services.

What would incorporation of the Right to Food mean?

The recognition of the Right to Food would, for example, help embed the measurement of household food insecurity into domestic legislation, making this a key measure of the success or failure of social policy, for which public bodies should be held to account. It would give vulnerable people and their advocates the ability to call on local authorities, public institutions and government to take action on factors affecting their ability to access food.

Improving household food security is a cross-departmental responsibility and requires action by many players. Any legislation seeking to apportion duties and responsibilities must take into account the multi actor and balanced nature of this work. For example, if a person does not have adequate housing, or is paying too much in rent or utility bills, then it is unlikely they will be able to afford an adequate diet. Fair housing and rental policy, and utility regulation for affordable payment terms could help. Or if a working parent earns too little money to be able to afford food for the family and has to skip meals or buy nutritionally poor quality products, this will affect their right to the highest attainable standard of health. Fair pay and affordable childcare could help, as well as availability of emergency payments via local authorities.

This is why it is so important that Right to Food legislation ensures that the right mix of policy-makers must be in the room when making decisions about how to improve access to good food. Traditionally, responsibility for fixing the problems have been passed to the government departments dealing with welfare and the food and farming industries. But clearly, if action is needed on other important factors such as housing or childcare costs, or local authority responsibilities, then we need a more systemic, cross-departmental approach. Each department of government needs to understand – and be held to account for – playing their part in the bigger jigsaw puzzle of solutions.

People engaging with their rights

People need to be actively involved in the development of policies that are going to affect them. The quality and efficacy of policy will be improved by policy-makers spending meaningful time with and listening to individuals as well as their advocates to understand better the needs of the population as well as to flush out any inadvertent problems brought about by the introduction of a policy. It is also helpful to plan for how people can be involved in monitoring of their rights, helping to grow a culture of confidence and responsibility. There are now several models of involving 'experts by experience' that are worthwhile embedding into policy processes.

1 UN FAO, Voices of the Hungry: Technical Report, August 2016, p49

2 PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF ALL HUMAN RIGHTS, CIVIL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO DEVELOPMENT Report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Jean Ziegler paragraph 17

3 Courtney Jung, Ran Hirschl, Evan Rosevear Economic and Social Rights in National Constitutions <https://doi.org/10.5131/AJCL.2014.0030> 2014



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The Right to Food within planetary boundaries

Achieving the Right to Food is not just about ending food poverty. It takes us further, to more fundamental approach to changing our food system. Unfortunately, at the moment, our food system is a very large contributor to dangerous climate change and loss of soil and biodiversity, threatening the very basis of our planet's ability to provide the food we need. Our own food security is under threat, as well as that of our children, grandchildren and future generations. We must find ways to live well within sensible limits.

A better approach is expressed in the concept of 'food sovereignty'. This includes access to land, a safe and secure food supply, and sustainable production that ensures good food, produced so that farming and food processing plays its part in averting dangerous climate change, restores nature, protects natural resources and secures decent livelihoods for the food producers upon whom we all depend. This includes the impact of both domestic food production, and food production in other countries that we trade with. We must not simply 'export' low incomes, food insecurity and environmental damage to other people.

This is the difficult balancing act that faces us in the new era of climate and nature emergency. Yet face it we must. The Right to Food provides a rational and moral framework within which such decision-making can be balanced, and sensible decisions made, by decision-makers held to account by the people they serve.



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Sustain: The alliance for better food and farming, advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the living and working environment, enrich society and culture, and promote equity. It represents around 100 national public interest organisations working at international, national, regional and local level.



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