

HOUSE OF COMMONS ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE
INQUIRY INTO SUSTAINABLE FOOD

Evidence from Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming
28th March 2011

Summary of recommendations (in the order in which they appear in this submission)

Government should:

- invest in the research and development needed to expand rapidly ecological farming systems such as organic, both domestically and globally;
- reduce income inequalities by, for example, raising minimum wage levels and increasing benefits so that everyone can afford good food;
- give more powers to the forthcoming Groceries Code Adjudicator so that the oligopoly of the major retailers can be broken up and retail diversity can flourish;
- lobby at EU and global level to remove unsustainable products from the market by providing a “floor” but not a “ceiling” of harmonised sustainability standards;
- make good food education and skills (such as cooking and gardening) part of the compulsory curriculum in all schools; and extend the protection for children from junk food marketing on children’s TV to all media viewed by large numbers of children;
- provide adequate funding for food law enforcement officers and public analysts, and accelerate the development of a sustainable food labelling system to stimulate product reformulation alongside consumer choice;
- fund independent organisations to run creative campaigns promoting the many personal, social and environmental benefits of diets containing modest amounts of high welfare meat and dairy products;
- support the reintroduction of Joan Walley MP’s Public Bodies (Sustainable Food) Bill so that legally binding sustainability standards will cover all the food bought with tax payers’ money.

Many of these recommendations are echoed in the recently published final report on food from the Sustainable Development Commission¹.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Sustain advocates food and agriculture policies and practices that enhance the health and welfare of people and animals, improve the working and living environment, enrich society and culture and promote equity. We represent around 100 national public interest organisations, and are independent of the agri-food industry. More information about our work is available on our website www.sustainweb.org.
- 1.2 This submission does not represent the detailed views of all our member organisations. However, it is based on extensive work with them, now and in the past, and on their published policy positions on the issues covered by this inquiry, so the general principles outlined are widely supported.

¹ Sustainable Development Commission (2011). *Looking back, Looking Forward: Sustainability and UK food policy 2000 – 2011*. http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/FoodPolicy10_Report_final_w.pdf

2. *How can the environmental and climate change impacts of the food we choose to eat best be reduced? What are the land-use trade-offs that affect food production and supply and how should these be managed?*

2.1 As far as Sustain and its membership are aware, there is no “best” method to reduce the damage currently being caused by our unsustainable food and farming system. There is an increasingly wide range of policies that could be, and in some cases already are being put into practice, with varying degrees of success. We aim to touch on the major ones in this submission. The scale of the problems we are facing means that we are likely to need a combination of all of them plus, probably, others still to be devised and implemented by both the public and private sectors, along with citizens’ groups such as those in Sustain’s membership.

2.2 However, to say that all sectors need to be involved does not mean that government can absolve itself of responsibility. We are clear that it is government’s role to take the lead, and to take action – such as changing fiscal measures and regulations – that only government can take. This vital government leadership is expected by both significant sectors of industry², and by citizens.

2.3 For its part, Sustain continues to liaise with its membership to develop its work in progress - sustainable food guidelines <http://www.sustainweb.org/sustainablefood/>. These guidelines underpin all our projects and campaigns and can be summarised as follows:

- **Local, seasonally available ingredients** help to minimise energy used in food production, transport and storage.
- **Food from farming systems that protect the environment**, such as certified organic produce, needs public support.
- **We need to reduce the production and consumption of foods of animal origin (meat, dairy products and eggs)**, as livestock farming is one of the most significant contributors to climate change. What we do eat should be **produced to high environmental and animal welfare standards**.
- **Avoid fish species identified as most ‘at risk’** and buy **fish only from sustainable sources** – such as those accredited by the Marine Stewardship Council.
- **Fairtrade-certified products** for foods and drinks imported from poorer countries help to ensure a fair deal for disadvantaged producers.
- **Tap water** avoids the waste of energy, packaging and water involved in producing bottled water.
- **Healthy and sustainable food** comprises generous portions of vegetables, fruit and starchy staples like whole grains, cutting down on fat, salt and sugar and cutting out artificial additives.

2.4 Reducing food waste is not specifically mentioned above, but we consider it axiomatic that a sustainable food and farming system would reduce waste to minimal levels throughout the food chain (not just by consumers). Similarly, own-grown food (such as that grown in private gardens and allotments, and in a range of community spaces³) is not specifically mentioned, nor is the importance of retail diversity, but both are likely to feature in updated versions of the guidelines.

² “...there appears to be a strong desire from industry for government leadership through coherent and appropriate regulation and legislation”. Quoted in report by the Institute for Manufacturing, University of Cambridge (2010) *Future scenarios for the UK food and drink industry*. Food and Drink Federation.

³ See, for example, Sustain’s work to create 2012 new, food-growing spaces in London to celebrate the 2012 Olympic Games; <http://www.capitalgrowth.org/>

- 2.5 We assume that “land-use trade-offs” in the question refers to the argument that organic and other sustainable forms of farming are said to be less productive and so, given the predictions of a growing population and increasing need for food, we will be unable to “afford” the extra land needed for these less intensive forms of production. We do not believe this to be the case, for the following reasons.
- 2.6 It is widely taken as a “given” that there might be nine billion people on earth by 2050. Population issues are outside Sustain’s remit, but we are aware of many countries that have implemented socially progressive measures to educate and empower women, one result of which has been rapid declines in birth rates.⁴ Moreover, in terms of carbon emissions, for example, a single US citizen generates the same impact of 250 Ethiopians⁵, so it is vital also to address consumption levels.
- 2.7 Indeed, another often-quoted statement is that we need, roughly, to double food production. This is based on two premises: first, that there will be nine billion people, and second, that those nine billion people will eat a diet similar to what we eat now in rich, western countries. We have known for decades that the “western” diet (high in fat, sugar and salt and low in vitamins, minerals and fibre) is a major contributor to a long, and growing list of chronic diseases including cardiovascular diseases (heart disease and stroke), some cancers, diabetes (and other conditions exacerbated by obesity), and a number of oral and digestive disorders. It is not, therefore, sensible to accept that the rest of the world will adopt such a diet.
- 2.8 Rather, it is rich countries that should be adopting the dietary patterns of poorer ones i.e. diets that are based on starchy staple foods, are rich in a variety of vegetables and fruits, contain modest amounts of protein-rich foods (beans and pulses, or seafood or animal products) and that are steeped in cultural significance⁶. Colin Tudge⁷ is perhaps the foremost author to highlight that the world’s great cuisines are composed in this way and that, as well as being delicious, they go with the grain of nature and are more sustainable.
- 2.9 Finally, even if there were to be nine billion people (which we do not consider inevitable), organic and sustainable methods of farming can feed the world⁸. A series of major international reports^{9 10}, supported by the world’s leading food and agriculture experts, make the case (with copious evidence) that not only is ecological farming productive, it is also likely to be the only system able to feed us sustainably into the future. Put briefly this is because ecological farming systems, such as organic:

⁴ Iran, not China, achieved the world’s fastest fertility decline, with birth rates falling from 6.6 children per woman in 1970 to 1.9 children per woman by 2010. Measures to achieve this included dramatic increases in the educational level of younger women, especially in rural areas. Similar policies have been pursued in countries as diverse as Thailand (Buddhist), Kerala in India (Hindu), and Italy (Catholic). New Internationalist, January 2010, issue 429 on population <http://www.newint.org/issues/2010/01/01/>. The articles also list original sources.

⁵ Pearce, F. (2010) *Peoplequake: Mass Migration, Ageing Nations and the Coming Population Crash*

⁶ Sustain’s Real Bread Campaign - <http://www.sustainweb.org/realbread/> - is one of many signs that people are keen to rediscover the benefits of traditional, staple foods and their cultural origins.

⁷ <http://www.colintudge.com/>

⁸ Compassion in World Farming & Friends of the Earth (2009). *Eating the Planet: How we can feed the world without trashing it*. http://www.ciwf.org.uk/what_we_do/factory_farming/eating_the_planet.aspx

⁹ International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development, 2008 <http://www.agassessment.org/>

¹⁰ Olivier de Schutter, Special Rapporteur on the right to food (2011) *Agro-ecology and the right to food*. <http://www.srfood.org/index.php/en/component/content/article/1-latest-news/1174-report-agroecology-and-the-right-to-food>

- rely less than industrial farms on scarce and finite natural resources such as fossil fuels, artificial fertilizers and water;
- produce more than just food, being superior to intensive farming in “producing” more biodiversity¹¹, better animal welfare¹², and more jobs¹³.

2.10 Government should therefore, both domestically and globally:

- fund effective and socially progressive methods of stabilising and reducing population consumption levels;
- invest in the research and development needed to expand rapidly ecological farming systems such as organic.

3. *How can the Government help to deliver healthy food sustainably, whilst also delivering affordable food for all?*

3.1 It is widely assumed that sustainably produced food is significantly more expensive than industrially produced food and is, therefore, not affordable for people on low incomes. In fact, the price difference between organic and non-organic food varies significantly, depending on the product (it tends to be small for dairy products), and the place it is bought (direct sales can be cheaper than major retailers). Similarly the price premium on products certified as, for example, Fairtrade, Freedom Food, or by the Marine Stewardship Council tends to be small. The great majority of people can therefore easily afford the extra cost (where it exists) of more sustainable food and a growing proportion of people are doing so, even in the recession¹⁴.

3.2 For the, thankfully, small minority of people who genuinely cannot afford to pay more, the problem is not that food is too expensive but that wages and benefits are too low. As many have pointed out, we are paying the price of “cheap” food in the so-called “external” costs of damage to our health, our jobs, the quality of our environment and animal diseases (many of which can and do put human as well as animal health at risk). Keeping food prices low, alongside low wages and inadequate benefits, simply perpetuates this damaging downward spiral¹⁵.

3.3 Even at global level, the problem is not that food is too expensive or too scarce, it is that poor people lack the money and/or land to buy or grow the food they need. As Amartya Sen¹⁶ demonstrated long ago (to paraphrase), rich people never starve.

3.4 Reducing income inequalities is only one of the policies governments should implement to ensure that everyone can afford good food. The fact that this policy is usually regarded

¹¹ Soil Association (2000) *The biodiversity benefits of organic farming*. A review of nine studies, sponsored by WWF-UK <http://www.soilassociation.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=Xe2yOpM84w0%3D&tabid=385>

¹² See the Compassion in World Farming website: <http://www.ciwf.org/>

¹³ UNEP (2011). *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication*, United Nations Environment Programme. http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/Portals/88/documents/ger/GER_2_Agriculture.pdf

¹⁴ Up to dates sales figures are available, for example, for Fairtrade products from <http://www.fairtrade.org.uk>, for Marine Stewardship Council certified seafood from <http://www.msc.org>, for Freedom Food products from <http://www.rspca.org.uk/freedomfood>, and for organic food from the Soil Association <http://www.soilassociation.org>.

¹⁵ These issues are dealt with in more depth in Food Ethics Council (2010) *Food Justice: the report of the Food & Fairness Inquiry*. FEC.

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amartya_Sen

as separate from food and farming policy does not mean it should not be addressed by this Inquiry. The same applies to other issues that have a profound impact on sustainable food and farming, such as:

- Competition policy. Government should give more powers to the forthcoming Groceries Code Adjudicator so that the oligopoly of the major retailers can be effectively broken up and retail diversity can flourish;
- Trade policy. Standards should be harmonised globally to remove unsustainable products from the market and provide a “floor” but not a “ceiling” on standards, so national governments can raise sustainability standards and protect their markets from lower ones.
- Procurement policy. Please see our answer to question 7 below.

4. How can consumers best be helped to make more sustainable choices about food?

- 4.1 The concept of “choice editing” was perhaps first introduced to a wider audience in a report published by the then National Consumer Council (now Consumer Focus)¹⁷. Among other things, it notes that consumer choice is never “free” but is always edited by retailers and others through pricing, stock control, product placement in store, marketing and so on. There is nothing inherently sinister about this practice, and indeed citizens largely trust major retailing and manufacturing brands to do precisely this and offer them only high quality products.
- 4.2 Ideally, citizens would choose from a range of products where all of them are sustainable, and there is good evidence to show that this would be welcomed. Both the Co-operative and Sainsbury’s, for example, now provide only Fairtrade lines in some product categories such as bananas and chocolate, and their customers happily accept this. Indeed, to reverse the question posed, why would people want to make unsustainable food choices? Who would prefer to buy products that perpetuated exploitative labour practices, animal cruelty, or environmental damage?
- 4.3 This is not to say that information and education is unimportant. Sustain is among the many organisations that continue to campaign for food education and skills (including cooking¹⁸ and gardening¹⁹) to be a routine part of every child’s school experience. We also continue to campaign to protect children from misleading marketing²⁰, and are among those who have long argued for compulsory, comprehensive and comprehensible information on food labels²¹.

¹⁷ National Consumer Council (2006) *I will if you will: Towards sustainable consumption*. http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/I_Will_If_You_Will.pdf

¹⁸ Sustain’s Children’s Food Campaign is among those urging the government to keep cooking in the school curriculum, in the current Department for Education consultation on slimming down the curriculum. http://www.sustainweb.org/childrensfoodcampaign/keep_kids_cooking/

¹⁹ Sustain (2011) *Every school a food growing school*. Produced with a range of organisations including the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, Garden Organic and the Royal Horticultural Society. http://www.sustainweb.org/childrensfoodcampaign/food_growing_in_schools/

²⁰ See <http://www.sustainweb.org/childrensfoodcampaign/>. In particular we successfully campaigned for children to be protected from junk food advertising during children’s TV programmes.

²¹ <http://www.sustainweb.org/labelling/>. Also House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee Sub-Committee Inquiry into environmental labeling. Memorandum by Sustain, October 2007

4.4 However, the main advantage of good product labelling – such as the traffic light labelling for nutrition²² – is that it can stimulate product reformulation (for example, so that the product can carry a green rather than amber label). In other words, good labelling can contribute to choice editing so that citizens are presented with both a more sustainable product, and a label that is easier to understand. Unfortunately, efforts to devise such an approach have been piecemeal, to date, so Government should take the lead in bringing together experts in this area to accelerate progress.

4.5 Finally, it is also vital to protect the public services – environmental health officers, trading standards officers and public analysts – without whom food labelling laws could not be enforced. It is arguable, in fact, whether we are already passed the point of inadequate enforcement given the lack of funding at local level for the staff, laboratories and legal expertise necessary. This not only leaves citizens unprotected from misleading labelling, but also allows unscrupulous companies to mislead with impunity, thereby undercutting those with higher standards.

5. Which aspects of the food production and supply chain are presenting the biggest problems for the sustainability of the food industry?

5.1 We noted in our answer to question 3 above that many of the biggest problems inhibiting sustainable development – such as trade and competition policy – include but are larger than food and farming policy. Within the sector, we have also noted the current food and farming system's dangerous reliance on finite natural resources such as fossil fuels, mined fertilizers and water, and a too narrow focus on "productivity" without accounting for "external" costs.

5.2 The current production and consumption of meat and dairy products epitomises this approach and could be said to be one of the biggest problems. Evidence continues to accumulate that eating fewer meat and dairy products, from high welfare extensive farming systems would be good for human health, improve animal health and welfare, protect the environment, and create jobs²³. Yet despite these considerable advantages much of the meat and dairy industry continue to oppose change. This is understandable, given their need for a return on their significant investments in intensive livestock systems, and the heavy downward pressure on prices exerted by the major retailers. These problems are compounded by deep cultural attachments to meat and dairy products that often signify wealth, status and even masculinity.

5.3 However, there are some promising signs of change. While the number of vegetarians in the UK has remained relatively stable, evidence suggests that more and more people are trying to eat less meat, with some research suggesting that 'meat reducers' account for 45% of the population²⁴. Similarly, the market for higher welfare meat and dairy products continues to rise, encouraged by, among other things, high profile TV campaigns by a number of celebrity chefs.

²² Links to information about traffic light labelling can be found here http://www.sustainweb.org/childrensfoodcampaign/clear_food_labelling/

²³ These arguments, and the evidence underpinning them, are set out in detail in Friends of the Earth (2011) *Factory farming's hidden impacts*. http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/factory_farming.pdf

²⁴ Data on market trends in consumers choosing to eat less meat are collected regularly by the TNS Family Food Panel (www.tns-global.com), and reported by the food industry's Food and Drink Federation on its dedicated Meat Free website: http://www.meat-free.org.uk/mf_market_trends.aspx

5.4 Government could support these welcome trends by funding a creative marketing campaign promoting the many benefits of a low meat and dairy diet. We would recommend that such a campaign should not be run by government, but by trusted independent bodies. This model worked very well to promote smoke-free campaigns, where government funded respected charities like the British Heart Foundation and Cancer Research UK. They, in turn, hired top quality advertising companies to run high profile, imaginative and popular ads with a smoke-free message.

6. *How might the changing powers of local authorities and the localism agenda hinder, or be used to encourage, more sustainable production and supply of food?*

6.1 A number of localities are already taking steps towards a sustainable food system, including London²⁵. Many more are implementing elements of such a system, such as becoming a Fairtrade Town²⁶, and Sustain's most recent campaign – inspired by Fairtrade Towns – is Sustainable Fish City²⁷. “Localism” could help to bolster such initiatives, and the planning system could also give local communities more power to make their food system more sustainable²⁸.

6.2 However, “localism” is being proposed at the same time as major cuts in government spending, including at local level. Given the dominant role of large national, and indeed multinational food and agriculture companies in shaping the world's food and farming system, our concern is that local authorities and other local actors will simply be too small and under-funded, in comparison. Their lack of power will severely limit the ability of “localism” to protect or create sustainable and local food systems.

6.3 Thus, for every local community that successfully prevents the opening of yet another major retailer, countless others fail to stop the march of the multiples. For every new food co-op or farmers market established²⁹, another community food project closes because its funding has ended. For each new local food policy³⁰, another is quietly shelved due to lack of funding to implement it.

7. *How could Government procurement practices be improved to promote better practice across the food sector?*

7.1 Each year government spends around £1 billion on food in schools hospitals, care homes and so forth. More than a decade of voluntary efforts to improve public sector catering have been an expensive failure³¹, costing an estimated £54 million. Sustain's

²⁵ London Development Agency (2006) *Healthy and Sustainable Food for London: The Mayor's Food Strategy* <http://www.london.gov.uk/londonfood/useful-Information/mayors-food-strategy-06.jsp>

²⁶ Fairtrade Towns http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/get_involved/campaigns/fairtrade_towns/default.aspx

²⁷ <http://www.sustainweb.org/sustainablefishcity/>

²⁸ Sustain (2011). Good planning for good food: How the planning system in England can support healthy and sustainable food. <http://www.sustainweb.org/publications/?id=192>

²⁹ Making Local Food Work (2011) *Making Local Food Work: Influencing consumer buying behaviour*. <http://www.makinglocalfoodwork.co.uk/>

³⁰ The most recent being Bristol, which launched *Who Feeds Bristol* on 6 March 2011 www.bristol.gov.uk/whofeedsbristol .

³¹ Sustain (2009) *A decade of hospital food failure*. Sustain (2010) *Yet more hospital food failure*. http://www.sustainweb.org/pdf/GFFOM_Hospital_Food_Second_Report.pdf

Good Food for Our Money campaign³² has marshalled compelling evidence and widespread support (including from the catering industry) for its call on government to introduce mandatory sustainability standards for this food.

7.2 There are three main reasons why this policy change is vital. First, creating a £1 billion boost to the market for sustainable food would have significant, positive effects on the whole food market. Second is the symbolic importance of government practising what it preaches. The main message of the “I will if you will” report referred to earlier³³ is that people are much more likely to, for example, buy more sustainable food if the agency advising them to do so is also buying sustainable food. Conversely, people react with understandable cynicism if they are being told to “do as I say, not as I do”.

7.3 Third, pending the rises in wages and benefits recommended in this submission, sustainable public sector food could help to address unequal access to good food. Elderly people in care homes, low income children on free school meals, young people in care homes, people who are ill in hospital – all of these vulnerable groups are more reliant than the average population on good quality food in public institutions.

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Jeanette Longfield, Co-ordinator
Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming
94 White Lion Street
London N1 9PF
Tel: 020-7837-1228 Fax: 020-7837-1141
Email: jeanette@sustainweb.org
Web: www.sustainweb.org

³² <http://www.sustainweb.org/goodfoodforourmoney/> The arguments and evidence are set out in Sustain (2010) *You fund it, government buys it and we all pay*. <http://www.sustainweb.org/publications/?id=184>

³³ National Consumer Council (2006) *I will if you will: Towards sustainable consumption*. http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/publications/downloads/I_Will_If_You_Will.pdf