Rural Economy and Land Use Programme
Unlocking Change in the Food Chain
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Chair's introduction

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The extraordinary thing about food is that it is implicated in so many of the really big policy challenges for government. You only have to look back over the past week or so.

It's a major public health challenge – confirmed by last week's World Cancer Research Fund review on diet, exercise and cancer, and the Foresight obesity report last month.

It's an environmental challenge. Between a quarter and a third of all greenhouse gas emissions have their origin in the food chain.

Food security is still a major global issue, so is competition for water and land use. Two billion people worldwide suffer from chronic under-nutrition and 18 million die each year.

Cross-government policy on food is currently under scrutiny, with the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit compiling a report for next spring.

One thing it will confirm is that the food chain has changed enormously over the past few decades.

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At the one end, we farm and import different things in very different ways.

At the other end, we cook less and have much more choice.

In the 1980s, we spent an hour a day preparing a meal. That's down to 12 minutes.

In 1980 Sainsbury's sold 7,000 different food items. They now sell 26,000.

The challenge is in steering changes in the right direction. But not just that – it's also in determining what the 'right' direction is, given all the competing interests and demands.

Are local tomatoes grown in a heated greenhouse better than Spanish tomatoes shipped to the UK? Apparently not if you do the carbon calculations.

If you discourage imports of food for climate change reasons, would prices go up? Would that have a knock-on effect on the amount of fruit and vegetables people eat – particularly those on low incomes? Would it have consequences for producers in developing countries?

Price is still a key driver in food choice, though consumers are definitely becoming more interested in other issues around what they eat – like animal welfare, sustainability, and particularly health.

In our own annual surveys of consumer attitudes, the top concerns for the past two years have been the amount of fat, sugar and salt in food.

But how do we give consumers the information in a way that helps them to make the ‘right choices’ for themselves –particularly when deciding what is right can be so complex?

I’m a firm believer in harnessing consumer demand. Markets move much more efficiently in response to their consumers than they do to the diktats of the regulator.

This is where RELU was particularly far-sighted when it initiated a broadly-based programme in 2003. We are about to hear from research across all aspects of the food chain, including consumer behaviour.

So you have projects that give farmers a better insight into what consumers want – so that they can change and make money, which they have to do.

And you have projects that look at how consumers think about risk, so that we can make the regulation of food safety more proportionate and cost effective for business, taxpayers and ultimately the consumer.

Research like this is incredibly important to the Food Standards Agency as an evidence-based organisation, and we have been closely involved with the RELU programme in general and a number of the individual projects being highlighted today.

This is the sort of research that helps us develop policies that can unlock change.

There are a number of strands to this process.

One strand is the hard scientific evidence. The numbers and facts that define the size and nature of a risk or issue. How much dioxin is in the fish? How much fish do we eat and how often? How much dioxin seems to cause cancer?

Scientific evidence supplies the facts – it supplies the sound and essential basis for judgement. But it doesn't make judgements about what to do.

So another strand of policymaking is to gain an understanding of people's different appetites for a risk or issue, to inform the judgement about what action, if any, to take.

- Do we have any personal choice about taking the risk?
- Do we have accurate, useable information on which to make a choice?
- What are our perceptions of the risk? Human BSE is much rarer than food poisoning, but much more frightening.
- What are the trade-offs between benefits and costs?

Yet another strand is the evidence about what actions work in practice – particularly what is realistic for business to do.

Policymaking is about weaving all these strands together, and the RELU programme contributes to all of them.

I'm convinced that the best outcome of this process is one that puts consumers in a position to make the 'right' choices for themselves. By 'right' I mean the choices that actually reflect what people want for themselves.

Conclusion

So I'm very much looking forward to hearing about the seven projects being reported on today – both from personal and professional perspectives.

I hope I have made clear the importance of scientific research to the Agency, both as a significant funder of research ourselves – we commission about £20m of research every year – but also as source of evidence to inform our policymaking process.

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I think it is also apparent that the scientific community's contribution to food policy has never been more important, or higher profile, than it is at the moment.

Like many of the big issues facing government – anti-social behaviour, alcohol abuse, sexual health and so on – food issues are largely about changing behaviour.

RELU has recognised this from the start, and has emphasised the importance of the social sciences alongside the natural sciences.

Consistent with that approach, we ourselves are in the process of adding a new social science advisory committee to our network of independent scientific advisory committees.

We expect a great deal from food producers, retailers and the food service sector – to provide us with plentiful, affordable, healthy, ethically-produced food that enhances our environment and doesn't harm the planet.

That's a tall order, given how inter-related the challenges are. Whether we are food producers, consumers, policy-makers, natural or social scientists – beavering away in silos is not a good way to work.

So I applaud the RELU programme for its unique approach to bringing together teams of the very top scientists from a range of natural and social disciplines to look for solutions that have real, practical benefits for all of us.

This first wave of projects that we will hear about today cover a wide spectrum of the whole food chain, and will, I'm sure, provide some fascinating insights.

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