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The Landworkers' Alliance's Response to the 2021 National Food Strategy

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Summary

The 290 pages of the recently published **National Food Strategy** are without a doubt an important stepping stone on the pathway to realising food justice, holistic health and environmental sustainability in England.

The Landworkers' Alliance is pleased to see the extent to which Henry Dimbleby and his team have engaged with the many pressing problems of our contemporary food system. There does, however, remain a long way to go to ensure we give enough priority to our localised agroecological food producers in providing healthy and affordable food for all.

This response stems from a belief that a more just and equitable food system is possible. We envisage a system in which food is treated as a human right, food producers have dignified livelihoods, people enjoy good levels of mental and physical health and all of these social needs are met within the ecological limits of our Earth's natural systems.

We understand that this is an ambitious vision for our food system, and recognise the challenges we face in achieving it. However, to lack this ambition would mean we might never realise the change we want to see. We must therefore rise to these challenges together to create a food system in which both people and planet can flourish.



1 This first diagram represents the current situation: a food system in which a large proportion of food production, jobs and meeting the needs of human health are operating beyond the Earth's planetary boundaries (the environmental limits within which humanity can operate safely).

2 This is a food system in which food and income are unequally distributed, mental and physical health are compromised, food is sold at unrealistically low prices and labour is poorly rewarded.

3 We need to transition away from a situation where meeting the needs of our food system, our livelihoods and our health are treated as separate from one another, and the methods employed to meet these needs are ecologically unsustainable...

4 ...to a situation in which feeding people, providing dignified livelihoods and ensuring mental and physical wellbeing for all, are challenges that are addressed in conjunction with each other, and that meeting these needs does not come at the expense of the natural world.

5 The National Food Strategy should strive for every person to occupy the space in the centre of this second diagram where the three elements - food, livelihoods and health intersect and lie within the Earth's planetary boundaries. This is a food system in which everyone in society can access nutritious and healthy food and have meaningful jobs that pay a decent wage; enabling them to flourish physically and mentally.



Right to Food

The National Food Strategy's targets to bring in legislation for long-term change **don't go far enough in demanding meaningful legislative change.**

The suggestion that the Government should create a new governance structure for food policy, through a "Good Food Bill" is a welcome step, as are a number of the sub-recommendations such as the collection of data and obliging public organisations to spend money in line with specific procurement guidelines on healthy diet and sustainability.

However, **we are disappointed that the NFS fails to make a clear demand for a Right to Food to be enshrined in UK law.** We, along with many other campaign groups, will therefore be strongly advocating for Right to Food to be enshrined in law as a follow on to the NFS.

The UK government has a duty to deliver on its international obligations with respect to the right to food, and **so it is absolutely crucial that an explicit Right to Food finds its way into the forthcoming White Paper and Food Bill.**



Health

We welcome the re-framing of people's obesity-related suffering as being a symptom of an industrial food system which is grossly out of sync with human health. **We agree that systemic interventions, such as salt and sugar taxes and measures to make healthy food easier and more affordable to access than unhealthy food, are more effective than relying on individual will power.**

However, we believe that **the key to ensuring healthy diets is to enable people to have a closer working relationship with the food they eat and where it comes from; especially with regard to fresh fruit and vegetables.**

Be this fostering closer relationships between producers and consumers or enabling easier access to land to grow, we believe that everyone should have affordable access to seasonal local produce or a means to grow it themselves.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that the responsibility of providing healthy and affordable food does not sit solely with food providers, but that **people also need to be supported with living incomes through the provision of living wages or welfare in order to afford a healthy food basket.**

We also suggest that some of the revenue raised from the salt and sugar tax be used to support the development of urban and peri-urban horticulture schemes that simultaneously increase access to fruit and vegetables while also improving physical fitness and mental health by providing access to urban green spaces.

Standards

We welcome the explicit statement in the NFS that it would be hypocritical for the UK to improve its own environmental standards while at the same time relying on imported food produced to lower standards elsewhere. We are therefore pleased to see that the NFS is championing upholding minimum standards for trade and defending them fiercely.

Without robust trade standards, we feel strongly that all the effort that goes into ELMS, the Environment Bill and other measures to protect our climate and wildlife would be in vain.

It is essential that the Government implements this recommendation if the UK agriculture sector is to survive and we are to play our part in the global imperative to combat climate change and protect biodiversity, antibiotic effectiveness and animal welfare.

We believe that this commitment needs to go much further than recommendations, and that it ultimately must be enshrined in law.



Agroecology

We are pleased to see the recognition in the NFS that agroecological Research and Development has been starved of funds, and encourage an agroecological approach to innovation supported by adequate funding. **This must translate into a substantial budget not only for the science of agroecology, but also for the social and market innovations that explore 'farmer focussed supply models' and innovative farming models that enable healthy food to be accessible to all, especially those on low incomes.**

Agroecology and organic production are pro-science (when the science is conducted responsibly). With adequate investment in Research and Development, training and skills, organic and agroecological productivity could be significantly increased through the application of science to issues such as low yields, pest and weed management, soil fertility and water efficiency.

British suppliers Hodmemdod's, for example, work with farmers to provide sustainably produced pulses and grains, offering alternative protein sources while also enhancing soil fertility as part of mixed farming systems. We would therefore urge the Government to commit to **at least matching lab-protein research funding with the same funding for research into agroecology and development of naturally grown pulses grown in the UK.**

Land-use

We welcome the idea of creating a rural land-use framework as an important step in reducing the impact of our global footprint. **We are pleased to see that agroecology is being recognised as a valuable and viable approach to land-use in parts of the NFS, however we believe that the "land-sharing" approach (integrating nature conservation with farming and food production) should play the most significant role in nature recovery in the Three Compartment Model.**

Over time, the "high yield" ambition within the "land sparing" approach should be aiming to maintain yields with lower external inputs, and we believe that such an approach should gradually converge with agroecological principles, with significant R&D dedicated to improving agroecological yields.

We strongly caution against placing too much emphasis on corporate controlled "technofix" solutions to increasing yields with lower inputs.

Solely relying on "agritech" solutions is likely to result in further concentration of corporate control over our food systems, thereby undermining the principles of agroecology and food sovereignty.



Horticulture

Meat

We welcome the recommendations for increasing fruit and vegetable consumption to improve health, however **we are surprised that no mention is made of who will grow all the extra produce needed to achieve these recommendations.** The UK currently imports 47% of its vegetables and 83% of its fruit; this is a situation which is far from sustainable, since many countries we import from are already water scarce.

We believe that it is essential that Defra shows leadership in supporting a thriving domestic horticulture sector that can meet the growing demand for fruit and vegetables from domestic sources as far as possible.

If all the imported vegetables we consume were instead produced domestically, they would have a market value of £3.2billion. This presents an opportunity to build a dynamic, market-led horticulture sector, but requires short-term investment for long-term gain.

The Landworkers' Alliance has a clear vision of how sustainable domestic fruit and vegetable production could be increased, whilst developing public engagement that would increase public consumption of fresh produce, improve physical and mental health and provide meaningful employment.

The conclusion reached in the NFS that the consumption of white meat is a more sustainable alternative to red meat **fails to acknowledge the nuances of the debate.**

It leaves out several important aspects such as antibiotic resistance arising from overuse of prophylactic antibiotics in intensive pig and poultry rearing; pollution from intensive poultry farms in Herefordshire and Shropshire resulting from a separation of livestock from arable land where the nutrients are needed; reliance of such systems on imported animal feed much of which is soya raised in Brazil and other countries where it is a driver for rainforest destruction; the benefits of grazing ruminants in the management of diverse pastures and the cutting of forage from meadows; as well as the economic benefits of grazing livestock in an arable rotation to provide a return on land that is in a fertility building phase with legumes or a herbal ley.

To reduce the issue of climate-friendly meat production down to a comparison of which animals produce least methane over their lifespan is to grossly oversimplify the issue.



Local Food Systems

We are pleased to see some attention paid to local food systems, **however we are concerned that the delegation of responsibility to local authorities in England to develop their own local food strategies could result in inaction if not met with adequate funding.** After ten years of austerity related funding cuts, local authorities are hard pressed to carry out statutory duties, let alone take on additional responsibilities.

For the last three decades, aggressive marketing by an increasingly concentrated supermarket sector has eroded the independent retail sector and infrastructure (abattoirs, wholesalers, processing facilities, markets) that supplies it. **While grassroots organisations and the voluntary sector are keen to mobilise and create thriving local food systems, they need central government leadership and funding to address the power imbalance in a food system dominated by supermarket competition and invest in the necessary local infrastructure.**

LWA therefore repeats its recommendation for a Local Food Infrastructure Fund as outlined in our Vocal for Local report, combined with legislation and regulations to curb the unfair advantage and market share of supermarkets in relation to local food systems.

Jobs & Livelihoods

The NFS fails to acknowledge the related issues around low farm gate prices, poorly paid jobs and labour shortages in the UK, which are steadily eroding our domestic food production system; especially in the horticulture sector.

While enshrining an explicit right to affordable and healthy food in law is top priority, the LWA also sees paying food producers and providers a fair price for their produce - a price that covers the cost of production and provides a reasonable livelihood - as an essential component of a more just food system.

We do not diminish the challenge of achieving both of these objectives simultaneously, but it is imperative that we rise to this challenge if we are to achieve the goal of a just, sustainable and healthy food system for all.



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