

# Towards a Sustainable Food System in the UK: Consumer-Driven Veganism or the Right to Food?

Benjamin SELWYN<sup>1</sup>

*University of Sussex*

*Keywords: Food, Poverty, Inequality, UK, Sustainability*

## Introduction

The UK's food system is highly globalised, dynamic and concentrated – characterised by one of the highest degrees of retail and land concentration in the world – and because of these dynamics, it is highly environmentally destructive. It is also a vector through which food poverty and inequality are reproduced in the UK.

Mega retailers such as Tesco enjoy almost 30% market share of food sales in the UK while high street grocers have become increasingly marginal (Bedford 2022). Land ownership and use in the UK is highly concentrated, specialised, and wasteful, orientated around the dominant corporate-driven food system. In-work poverty, including with the food industry, (entailing low wages and 'flexible' working hours) means that an increasing number of people and their families across the UK cannot exercise a genuine choice over how and what to eat.

Rising popular awareness about the catastrophic effects of human-induced climate change has placed onto the political agenda the question of how to establish sustainable economies. The world food systems' contribution to green house gas (GHG) emissions (approximately 15% of total GHGs) has put it under the spotlight. Campaigns aiming to transform the system into one that is climate-friendly are proliferating in the UK, taking the form of what this article calls *consumer-driven veganism*. There are other campaigns, such as the *Right to Food*, struggling to eliminate food poverty. At present, there is not much dialogue between these campaigns, but this article argues that there is scope for a productive dialogue between them.

The article is organised as follows: First, it appraises the rise of consumer-driven veganism in the UK and argues that while the campaign has succeeded in highlighting the relationship between food and the environment, it failed to address many of the unequal and exploitative socio-economic dynamics that underpin the UK's food system. This gap is based, in part, on a

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Selwyn ([b.selwyn@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:b.selwyn@sussex.ac.uk)) is Professor of International Relations and International Development, Department of International Relations, University of Sussex, UK



narrow interpretation of the meaning of *veganism*. Next the article outlines some of the dynamics of food poverty and inequality in the UK. It then outlines the *Right to Food* campaign and argues that there is scope for productive dialogue and cooperation between it and advocates of veganism. The final section concludes.

### **Towards a Sustainable Food System via Consumer Veganism?**

The UK is the European country with the largest number of vegans (Chef's Pencil 2019). Veganism is promoted by large food corporations and the mainstream media as simultaneously a route to a healthier diet and the "single biggest way to reduce our environmental impact" (Petter 2018). Increasing numbers of people understand the ways in which meat production contributes to climate breakdown – e.g., deforestation, green house gases emitted by cattle, unsustainable irrigation of feed crops required to rear livestock – and want action taken. Plant-based products and 'ethical' consumer spending are booming, and a recent report reveals how 75% of UK consumers want supermarkets to stock produce from ethical and sustainable sources (Undercurrent news 2019).

The popularity of veganism is significant as it reveals (some) of the links between the food we eat and the fate of the world's environment. At present, its main focus is upon the environmental damage of meat production and consumption and how plant-based food represents more sustainable alternative. However, the conception of consumer-driven change – where shifts in consumption are held to feed back up the chain to transform production – is limited, and potentially counter-productive. While McDonalds' *McPlant* burger is represented as a "step to a greener world" (Matei 2020), McDonald's continues to be one of the world's largest buyers of beef and a key link in the global grain-livestock complex (Weis 2013). To posit its ability to generate substantial changes in the food system represents a triumph of corporate marketing ideology over the imperatives of environmental preservation. Put more robustly, consumer-veganism threatens to greenwash food corporations' contribution to climate breakdown and facilitate the continued exploitation of the environment (Selwyn 2020a).

There is another reason why consumer-driven veganism is limited and potentially counter-productive to its stated objective of ameliorating the nexus between food system and environment. Veganism is placed in the service of (often big) business, commercialisation, and market expansion (Selwyn 2020b). Many of the underlying problems of the food system – private property, a highly commodified food system (where possession of money, rather than human rights, is the prime determinant of whether and what people eat), and corporate power – are strengthened. These social relations and dynamics of market expansion underpin the processes of environmental despoliation generated by the food system. In addition, consumer veganism generates a partial (limited) representation of the relationship between production and consumption within the food system. It obscures from view the socio-economic forces whereby large numbers of the UK's population are effectively forced to eat cheap, low-quality food because of their poverty (see below).

Consumer-driven veganism is derived from a narrow, limited notion of veganism. The *Vegan Society* was founded in 1944 in the UK. Its objective was to outline a way of living for humans that was as harmonious as possible with non-human animals and other humans. The

philosophy entailed a “way of life concerned with living without hurting others [...] which avoids exploitation whether it be of our fellow men, the animal population, or the soil upon which we all rely for our very existence” (Vegan Society 2021).

In contrast, consumer veganism focuses purely upon the relationship between food consumption and the environment, while excluding the question of exploitation of other humans. It does not address ways in which the exploitation of the environment (including animals) is co-constituted by the exploitation of humans. It views capitalist markets as part of the solution rather than as part of the underlying cause of environmental destruction. Consequently, it cuts itself off from campaigns that seek to establish a more environmentally sustainable food system through greater social justice. The broader notion of veganism, however, opens the door to just such cooperation. It could, potentially, view the market-based food system from the perspective of power differentials and the exploitative (of humans and of nature) relations upon which it rests. Indeed, this article argues that for the vegan movement to yield the kind of results that many of its proponents want – a more environmentally sustainable food system and a more healthy and less exploited human population – it needs to shift its orientation. It needs to root its critique of the food system in class-relational rather than individual consumerist terms. And it needs to ally with more radical movements aiming to transform the socio-economic basis of the food system, such as the trade-union and social movement-backed *Right to Food* campaign (Unite the Union 2022).

### **Two Faces of Food Poverty**

Food poverty in the UK takes the form of the paradoxical unity of opposites afflicting ever-larger sections of the population – an inability to consume sufficient calories and an inability to consume sufficiently healthy foods. As Jane Dixon (2009: 326) puts it, working classes in the global north “may now be portrayed as [...] over-consumers, but their overweight bodies are the result of insufficient incomes to consume fewer, less energy dense foods”. This interrelated tendency has become exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis.

In the UK, the Trussel Trust is the single largest emergency food package provider to poor people, distributing through its network of food banks. In 2020-21, approximately 2.5 million food bank parcels were given to people, of which 980,000 went to children. This was a 33% increase compared to the previous year. In 2015-16, just over 1 million food bank parcels were distributed by the Trussel Trust, increasing to 1.3 million (2016-19) before the current spike (Trussel Trust 2022).

Popular media and political commentary reproduce Victorian-era stereotypes about the ‘underserving poor’. Poor people are portrayed as out of work, benefit-dependent and incapable or uninterested in working their way out of poverty (Garthwaite 2016). A recent survey by the Bakers Food and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU) shows how even its own members, who work in the food sector and are crucial for the provision of food to the UK’s population, are often too poor to afford to purchase sufficient (still less sufficiently good) food (BFAWU 2021). During the COVID-19 crisis, 40% of its respondents reported that they had not eaten enough food due to lack of money. 20% lived in a household which had ran out of food due to insufficient income. 35% of respondents ate less to ensure that others in their household had enough

to eat. 20% relied on friends and relatives to put enough food on the table. Over 7% of respondents relied at least once on a foodbank to feed their household. The principal cause of food poverty amongst these workers is low wages. A female worker in the retail sector told the report that a pay rise would mean that “ [they] could eat properly and pay the bills”. A male worker in food processing described how he is “currently minimum wage, zero hours. A pay rise would mean [he] could start to get some more independence and perhaps escape what is a very difficult and unhealthy situation at home”.

Consuming insufficient calories is only one side of the face of food poverty in the UK. The other side is the rise of obesity. In 1980, the prevalence of obesity amongst men and women over 16 was 6% and 9% respectively, rising to 13% and 16% in 1993 and to 27% and 29% by 2019 (UKHSA 2021). The incidence of obesity in poor areas is higher than in rich areas of the UK. The production, availability and sale of highly processed foods has boomed over the last four decades worldwide. Buying and consuming cheap, processed, and unhealthy food is often a survival strategy for people who cannot afford more healthy foods.

These trends have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Around one in seven children is obese at the start of primary school in England. By the time they are 10 or 11 years old, these numbers have quadrupled. Between 2019 and 2021, the rate of obesity amongst 10 or 11-year-olds’ increased from 21% to over 25%. Children in poor neighbourhoods are twice as likely to be obese than those from wealthier areas. Amongst reception-aged children (4-5 years old) 20.3% are obese in the most deprived areas compared to 7.8% in the least deprived areas. Amongst year six pupils (11-12 years old) in these areas, the figures range from 33.8% to 14.3% respectively (Gregory 2021).

### **Food Inequality**

The inability of large segments of the UK’s population to feed themselves satisfactorily is rooted in poverty wages and increasingly generalised economic insecurity, including, for example, the proliferation of zero hours contracts which do not provide workers with guaranteed incomes. Such insecurity is a product of institutionalised capitalist social relations, foremost the exclusion of the mass of the population from the means of production. Private land ownership in the UK enables a small number of big farmers, landowners and investors to decide upon what is produced, to whom it is sold, and subsequently, how it is consumed. In England, around half of all land is owned by less than one per cent of the population – approximately 25,000 corporate entities and individuals. The public sector possesses 8% of land in England. By contrast, oligarchs and city bankers own 17%, corporations own 18%, and members of the gentry and aristocracy (including the Royal family) own about 30%. 432 landlords own half of private land in Scotland (Crichton 2013).

Private land use in the UK is environmentally harmful whilst failing to provide adequately for the public good. UK farming, particularly livestock, accounts for approximately 9 percent of national CO2 emissions (Selwyn 2021). The sector is also grossly inefficient. For example, sheep occupy about four million hectares of land in the UK, about as much as all crop land. However, they provide just one percent of calories in the UK diet (Monbiot 2017).

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## The Right to Food: Beyond Food Poverty and Inequality

While consumer-driven veganism aims to alter the UK food system through widespread changes in individual consumption patterns, other campaigns take a more class-relational approach to achieving such transformations. The Right to Food campaign portrays access to and consumption of food as a class issue, rooted in the unequal socio-economic relations in the UK. It draws upon Article 25 of the United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights. The latter states that:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control (United Nations 2022).

The UK was one of the 58 signatories to the declaration. That food poverty is so prevalent in the contemporary UK reveals the government to be in serious breach of one of the core principles of the declaration. The Right to Food campaign argues for the re-enshrinement and enforcement of the right to food in UK law. The campaign is not yet focused on the type of food produced within the UK's food system. If it were to promote plant-based food production and consumption, it would be able to a) establish a potentially productive dialogue and cooperation with parts of the vegan movement, and b) advance a radical, class-relational programme for transforming the UK's food system into one that is able to put public need before private profit whilst being more efficient.

Given that successive UK governments have failed to realise the right to food, it will require a considerable democratisation of economy, society and politics for class-based movements to be able to guide government policy. A more democratically representative and environment-orientated government could undertake many progressive policies that would contribute to realising the right to food. State funding and direct production of alternatives to meat could represent an important starting point. Currently the UK state subsidises the fossil fuel industry by over £10 billion a year, considerably greater than other EU countries (Carrington 2017). Under a more democratically representative and environmentally orientated government these subsidies could be redirected towards alternative energy and food sources.

Restructuring the UK's food system around principles of public good rather than private profit could be achieved in a number of ways. In 2020, Singapore passed legislation approving cultured meat production, commonly referred to as lab-grown meat (BBC 2020). Such steps could be emulated by the UK government, and investments could be channelled away from fossil fuels towards sustainable food sources. Such investments would help generate economies of scale, driving down production costs and enabling a generalised provision of healthy plant-based food to the public. The above-noted BGAWU report proposes other policies that could transform the right to food from abstract ideal to law and social reality. At its heart is the objective of decommodifying food. This could be achieved, in part, through redirecting public subsidies away from private capital, including in the farming sector, towards deployment for the public good. In fact, during the COVID-19 crisis the UK government did something like this.

During the summer and autumn of 2020, the government formulated an ‘eat out to help out’ policy, backed by major grants to restaurants. While the policy was short-lived and ill-thought out – contributing to accelerating the spread of coronavirus –, it did signal the possibility of direct state intervention to reduce the cost of food to consumers (Hern 2020). Such policies could be re-designed and re-deployed with the objective of decommodifying food over the longer term. School kitchens, which provide nutritious meals to children during weekdays, could be transformed into community social hubs – providing meals to neighbourhoods morning, noon and night, and providing cooking lessons, dining clubs and meals on wheels. Such a development would radically reduce the need for food banks. Publicly owned and funded community-run restaurants would also contribute to the decommodification of food (Selwyn 2021).

A shift by the UK’s population to a plant-based diet could liberate approximately 15 million hectares of land that are currently used for livestock and feed crops (Fairlie 2009). This land could be rewilded and contribute to the expansion of the UK’s carbon sink by diversifying habitats and re-introducing native animal and plant-species. It could also be made accessible for the public, for leisure and education about farming and the environment.

In the past in the UK county farm schemes enabled budding farmers to enter the sector. These farms were owned by local authorities and leased cheaply to farmers. From the late 1970s onwards, as a consequence of land privatisation and state funding cuts, the acreage of such farms declined from 426,695 acres in 1977 to 215,155 acres in 2017 (Who Owns England 2018). If such schemes were revived, they could encourage the entry of potential farmers into the food system, supported by a research and extension programme to disseminate agricultural techniques and technologies designed to facilitate relatively high food output with minimal chemical input (Monbiot et al. 2019).

In the UK agricultural workers wages are currently about two thirds of those in the rest of the economy (Clutterbuck 2017). A more socially just food system would increase these to, at least, living wages. In her first speech as prime minister, Theresa May promised to address the injustices of the UK’s economy. She even suggested placing workers on company boards (Watts 2016). This suggestion was quickly dropped, but it could be part and parcel of a re-centring of power relations within the food economy, away from private capital and towards unionised labour. Ending in-work poverty through a decent living wage of £15 an hour and eliminating zero-hours contracts are essential components of increasing the economic security of the UK’s workforce.

## **Conclusions**

The way the UK food system works is not good for the health of large sections of the population. It is not socially just, as millions of people now depend upon charity in the form of food packages. The food sector is itself highly exploitative, to the extent that even workers within it cannot afford to provide their families with sufficient quantities of adequate quality food. The food system is also enormously inefficient, wasteful and environmentally destructive.

The transformations advocated by consumer-driven veganism and the Right to Food campaign have important common goals – to improve the quality of food consumed by large swathes of the UK’s population. While these campaigns could potentially unite and pool their

resources to pack a greater political punch, they are based on diametrically different visions of the relationship between humans and nature. The social and environmental dynamics of the food systems' unsustainability and lack of social justice are intimately connected, like two sides of the same coin. However, consumer veganism seeks to address only the environmental side of the coin, and it advocates an expansion of market relations (entailing market expansion, private property rights, consumer sovereignty) as the means to address the environmental despoliation caused by the food system. Consumer-driven veganism might also be counter-productive to its stated goals of ameliorating the food system-environment nexus, as it threatens to greenwash food corporations' environmental destruction.

The Right to food campaign addresses the other side of the coin and promotes decommodification and economic democratisation. However, it does so without considering the actual foods that could be produced within the food system. If those within the consumer-driven veganism movement were to adopt a broader conception of veganism – including an opposition to the exploitation of human beings - and if the Right to Food campaign were to adopt a programme promoting plant-based foods, there could be a productive dialogue between the movements, potential cooperation, and a greater force to challenge and transform the existing corporate dominated system.

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers and the editors of socialpolicy.ch for helpful comments and feedback.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author did not receive any financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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