

No Such Thing as a Free Lunch?

A summary of the discussion at the Scottish Parliament on 7th March 2007

Summary

In Spring 2007, the Sustainable Development Commission Scotland (SDC) held a discussion event on food, health and sustainable development in Scotland. The discussion signalled that there was a clear desire to develop a holistic policy approach to these issues. The group concluded the following:

- **Food is intimately connected to the sustainable development agenda** in multitudinous ways
- **Present unsustainable trends in food** include frequent transportation of foods by air freight contributing to increased CO₂ emissions; excessive packaging of food leading to increased waste; over-reliance on convenience foods often having high salt and fat content with knock-on negative health impacts
- **Governance** would be strengthened by a sustainable food policy which would link up the sustainable development, food and health agendas: a joined up approach would in turn help address some of the major political issues currently facing Scotland such as climate change and building a sustainable economy
- The **outcomes** of such a policy could include increased investment in Scottish agriculture and increased sourcing of locally produced food; improved access to/availability of healthy foods especially for those in low-income communities; greater understanding/awareness of the links between diet and health and well-being.

About the SDC

The Sustainable Development Commission Scotland is the Scottish Executive's independent advisory body on sustainable development.

The Commission reports to the First Minister of Scotland on key policy areas including regeneration, sustainable buildings, local government, energy, climate change and food quality assurance. SDC helps government departments, local authorities, voluntary sector and businesses put sustainable development at the heart of what they do.

Commissioners and secretariat work with Scottish Government and its agencies to promote sustainable development. We also work with a range of policy networks, such as the Scottish Sustainable Development Forum and the Sustainable Scotland Network. The two Scottish Commissioners are Professor Jan Bebbington and Hugh Raven. Secretariat support is provided by a team led by Scottish Director Maf Smith.

Introduction

In March 2007, the Sustainable Development Commission Scotland brought together a high-level audience of politicians, policy makers and practitioners working in the food and health sectors and representing industry, farming and consumer interests. The aim was to explore the links between sustainable development, food and health. The event, entitled 'No Such Thing as a Free Lunch?' was held at the Scottish Parliament and sought to stimulate debate and exchange ideas about the sustainability of current policies in this area, looking in particular at how such policies might be shaped in the future in Scotland.

During the May 2007 Scottish elections, one of the issues that came up high on the agenda (and has been for the last 10 years) is how Scotland can better tackle the challenge of improving health through changes to the nation's diet.

Following the election, the SDC is publishing the review of the March 2007 discussion to help inform next steps in this work.

A key point is that Scotland's food chain is changing. Driven by a wide range of issues - including changes in legislation, new consumer demands and the growing importance of other factors such as climate change, waste minimisation, local produce, organics, and food miles - Scotland's food industry is having to evolve and adapt to survive.

In late 2006 the Scottish Executive published its 10 year Review of the Scottish Diet Action Plan (SDAP). The Review Panel - chaired by Professor Tim Lang - recommended a number of initiatives including the integration of sustainable development with food policy.

In summer 2007 the Sustainable Development Commission Scotland will also publish its Review of Food Quality Assurance Schemes for the Scottish Executive.

SDC Scotland has also undertaken its First Annual Assessment of '*Choosing our Future* - Scotland's Sustainable Development Strategy' and expects to report on this in autumn 2007.

In order to build on these and other initiatives, the discussion, (conducted under Chatham House Rules), sought to address the following questions:

1. What are the key challenges and opportunities for Scotland in responding to the SDAP Review?
2. What does a Sustainable Food and Health Policy look like?
3. What good examples of such a policy already exist in Scotland?
4. What are the challenges and opportunities of linking ecological concerns to health and food?
5. Which organisations have responsibility (and for what) for taking a sustainable food and health policy forwards?

This short report presents the main issues emerging from the discussion and suggests future actions. This record of the meeting has sought to capture the range of issues: not necessarily to draw all findings to a coherent conclusion. As such the views set out are those raised by the participants, and are not necessarily the views of the Sustainable Development Commission. However, there was much common ground over the course of the debate amongst all participants, although different participants had different priorities and perspectives on elements of this debate.

To move this discussion on, we have sought to reflect what was discussed in the session, present the emerging conclusions and to set out what we see as the next steps in this work.

1. What are the key challenges and opportunities for Scotland in responding to the SDAP Review?

The Scottish Diet Action Plan (SDAP) responded in 1996 to issues concerning diet-related ill-health in Scotland, including high mortality and morbidity rates due to heart disease, cancer and obesity. The SDAP made no less than 71 recommendations with the overall objectives being to help to shape consumer tastes, supply food for a healthier diet, bring about a better understanding of food and enable influencing through local authorities, the NHS, supermarkets and consumer bodies.

The 10 Year Review identified several examples of where substantial progress has been made, including the formation of the Community Food and Health (Scotland) (formerly the Scottish Community Diet Project) which supports disadvantaged communities to improve and sustain food access, and the development of health promoting schools. However, the review also identified that the dietary targets set for 2005 have been not been met, with no change in the intake of fruit and vegetables and oil-rich fish and a fall in consumption of foods such as bread and potatoes.

Ten years on, the policy environment is significantly different and, in particular, sustainable development is increasingly seen and used as a framing device. This is recognised in the SDAP Review itself, with one of the proposed “directions of travel” being closer integration between the policy goals of improving Scotland’s diet-related health and those of sustainable development, social justice and agriculture. Therefore, it is not enough simply to focus on improving public health alone – sustainable development requires that food supply and production in Scotland must also be sustainable in economic and environmental terms.

In deciding on what kind of paradigm to base future policy on, it was pointed out that whereas public health is a mature discipline, sustainable development has not had the same profile, and so one way to approach this matter could be to see them as “two sides of the same coin”. In the future, however, public health is likely to become *intertwined with* sustainable development as

understanding about the objectives of sustainable development increases.

In light of this apparent dual approach, it is necessary to think about how to reconcile this in government and implement practical linkage so that sustainable development becomes mainstreamed in government policy. In responding to the SDAP Review, there is therefore a clear need for joined-up systems thinking resulting in the production of concrete measures such as legislation, guidance and toolkits with the whole of government taking responsibility, so as to address sustainability issues in a holistic manner.

POTENTIAL LESSONS

- The SDAP review showed that nutrition targets are overwhelmingly not being met and that there has been a patchy response to the 71 SDAP recommendations
- Having a large number (71) of recommendations was not seen as helpful, suggesting a need for greater focus and prioritisation of issues coupled with strong leadership and coordination
- Regulatory power is a useful tool, however there is also a need for incentives if targets are to be met
- Need to decide what kind of paradigm to proceed on: public health or sustainable development with a link to public health?

2. What does a Sustainable Food and Health Policy look like?

A sustainable food and health policy should consider sustainability from environmental, social and economic perspectives, and avoid the tendency to focus on environmental aspects at the expense of social ones. It is important to bear social justice in mind, and to consider the various cultural entry points in reaching different communities. A top-down approach would focus on shifts in personal behaviour and put the onus back onto the individual. However, this may not necessarily sit well with lower income groups who may find it more difficult to alter their patterns of behaviour.

Such a policy should also seek to understand the inherent ecological limits: whilst it is recognised that fresh fruit and vegetables are essential to a healthy lifestyle, ideally, consumption of the latter should not be at the expense of the environment whether this be through CO₂ emissions from the transportation of fruit and vegetables by air, or air pollution or soil and water contamination resulting from the use of pesticides. Furthermore, research shows that food is the average household's number one impact on climate change, responsible for nearly a third (31%) of our climate impact¹.

A sustainable food and health policy would also recognise those interdependencies inherent to a sustainable food system such that those who are responsible for supply and production of food are encouraged to understand the links between their businesses and public health. This in turn requires a governance structure that will link up the different aspects of food, health and sustainability to achieve concrete outcomes, working towards the vision of a vibrant economy where healthy food is produced and consumed without undermining the ecological base.

POTENTIAL LESSONS

- Social justice is key to the discussion: healthy food must be available, accessible and affordable to all, thus helping to ensure a strong, healthy and just society
- A narrow view of a sustainable food and health policy would be one that focused only issues such as obesity. A wider view would include issues such as carbon emissions, food miles and biofuels
- **Ecological public health** would take into account what is good not only for public health and nutrition but also for the environment.

¹ Tukker A, et al. *Environmental impact of products (EIPRO): Analysis of the life cycle environmental impacts related to the total final consumption of the EU25* (2005), European Science and Technology Observatory and Institute for Prospective Technological Studies, full draft report.

3. What good examples of such a policy already exist in Scotland?

Examples cited include:

- ***Hungry for Success*** programme
- **Forth Valley Food Links project:** encourages community development and brings together individuals and communities in partnership with food producers to increase access to fresh local produce enabling long-term social, environmental, health and economic benefits.
- ***Food for Life*** : 26 schools in East Ayrshire have signed up and in 2005 East Ayrshire also won *The Guardian* Hayes Public Service Award for its school meals service
- The City Farm movement
- Regulatory changes and promotional campaigns that have reduced salt content in food
- Work of **Community Food and Health (Scotland)**: supports initiatives in low-income communities which help people take up a healthy diet.

It is clear that although there are good examples in Scotland of food growth, delivery and consumption that fit with sustainable development, there is no widespread commitment at present to replicate good practice more widely. It is also clear from the examples that good initiatives do not always stem from policy. This current fragmented approach therefore needs to be addressed within a sustainable food and health policy, which should foster exchange of best practice and continuous learning.

4. What are the challenges and opportunities of linking ecological concerns to health and food?

The challenges in linking ecological concerns to health and food are rooted, amongst other things, in issues of social justice and equity from the perspective of both the supply-side of the food chain and also the end consumer. In terms of opportunities, it could be suggested that, if changes in advertising legislation and CAP reform had taken place 10 years ago, then perhaps the SDAP would have had a fairer chance. It should therefore be recognised that sometimes we do not have control of the important levers in Scotland. The question that needs to be addressed therefore is what are the levers over which we have little control in the next 10 years and how can we get around this.

However, one area we do have control over is public sector procurement, and this is highly relevant to ensuring that fresh, good quality and sustainable food is provided in schools, hospitals, prisons and other public institutions.

POTENTIAL LESSONS

- Food culture is politically delicate – those who are on a low income usually find it more difficult to alter their habits and therefore get left behind. The idea is to work towards food democracy and not food control
- On the supply side of the food chain, there is the difficulty of the seasonality of foods in Scotland
- There are also problems with the current way the market operates e.g. farm incomes suffer if supermarkets are able to lower prices at their own discretion
- There is a need to bring producers and consumers closer as currently there is no linkage between the farmer and the end consumer
- There is an over reliance on convenience foods which can have negative health impacts due to the higher fat and salt content of these foods, so there is therefore a strong case for teaching people how to cook. Currently the average time taken to prepare dinner is just 12 minutes.
- It is also important not to bombard consumers with different contradictory messages as this is likely to result in consumer confusion
- The experience of the soft fruit industry demonstrates how agriculture can restructure itself in a short space of time: following the closure of many processing factories, financial investment was diverted to the delivery of fruit to local markets and supermarkets, as well as technologies to expand the season
- Over £500m is spent on rural development and CAP market support each year in Scotland and this money should be used to encourage innovation in this sector.²
- SDC should facilitate connected conversations, imperative to taking this work forward, between relevant parties such as the Scottish Parliament, Scottish Government, farming, industry and consumer representatives

- It is suggested that the SDC equally has a role to play with regards to the issues of behaviour change and social justice, and, in particular, in relation to the following four issues:
 - (i) Squeezing carbon out of the food economy
 - (ii) Advertising – conditioning the market in order to promote sustainable development/public health³
 - (iii) Primary production – sustainability appraisals of policies for farming and food
 - (iv) Public procurement
- Scotland does not have the institutional structure at present to foster ecological public health. Countries such as Sweden, Denmark and Norway are trying to develop institutions to address the problem e.g. Norway's National Nutrition Council (NNC) is responsible for describing, analysing and evaluating food supply and diet situations in Norway and making recommendations for improvements⁴
- The SDAP suggests that the Government could host a pan-UK committee on turning this debate into one about ecological nutrition
- The Food and Health Council is technically closed and there is therefore a void to be potentially filled by a stakeholder committee such as the proposed Scottish Food Policy Committee.

² The Scottish Executive: Draft Budget 2004-05
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2003/09/18233/26802>

³ Some useful recent work had been done by UNEP and others on how advertising, branding and marketing communications can be used to sell both more sustainable products and the concept of sustainable consumption in broader terms. The impact of marketing and the media on a wider range of sustainability issues over a broader range of the population remains virtually unexplored and almost completely unregulated. An urgent policy initiative is needed to address this. See Sustainable Development Commission, *I Will if You Will Towards Sustainable Consumption* (2006) at p. 60

⁴ See also Lang, T. *Should the UK have a Food Policy Council?* (November 2002) http://www.sustainweb.org/pdf/afn_m3_p2.pdf

5. Which organisations have responsibility (and for what) for taking a sustainable food and health policy forwards?

The responsibility for taking this work forward lies primarily with the Government – however, this must extend to all government directorates. Furthermore the Government should engage in a dialogue with the Scottish Parliament, business and industry who are seen as key partners. The SDC's role will be one of an "honest broker" in bringing partners together and providing policy advice where appropriate. However, there was some scepticism about there being space for new structures – it was felt that educating people both within and outside government should be the first step in striving to achieve a policy which seeks to deliver on food, health and sustainable development.

Given the complex, cross-cutting nature of the discussion surrounding a sustainable food and health policy, and the difficulties in reconciling language and paradigms, the focus should be on developing a **sustainable food policy** as this may in its full implementation:

- Reduce environmental impacts by encouraging local sourcing of food thus cutting down on packaging and food miles
- Provide social benefits by educating people about healthier eating and improving access to healthier food especially for those living in low income communities
- Bring with it wider economic benefits by diverting money saved on food transportation and processing to investment in farming technologies in Scotland

POTENTIAL LESSONS

- Food and sustainable development is not only an issue for the Environmental and Rural directorates – it requires that the whole of government takes responsibility
- The Government needs to build a stronger relationship with its partners. The business community should be engaged because of social and economic costs which factor into this area. This can be illustrated by the example given in the discussion of a leading crisp company which at one time paid for potatoes by weight. The suppliers sprayed the potatoes with water in order to increase their weight, but the company then had to spend a significant amount of money and energy to dry the potatoes

Summary and Conclusion

The common themes which were agreed upon as being key to a sustainable food policy are:

- Social justice in food and health – equality of access to good food and fair prices for farmers
- Food production/carbon – farming methods, food miles, household emissions
- Consumption - advertising/labelling and their impact on behaviour relating to sustainability issues
- Obesity culture/lifestyle

This must be supported by the following enablers:

- Language and paradigms: sustainable development and public health
- Leadership – primarily from Government
- Evidence base (consumer choices/trends; Nordic experience)

A sustainable food policy would:

1. cut across ecological public health, sustainable development, SDAP etc
2. help get commitment across the whole of Government
3. be useful in terms of the global economy and social matrices

A sustainable food policy should address all of the above and develop clear, understandable and actionable messages. It is clear that behaviour change is key to the issues raised in this discussion, not only from the perspective of the consumer, but also in terms of the way in which businesses and the farming industry structures itself. The government therefore needs to be proactive in disseminating information and educating people, and the next step is therefore to decide what those messages should be.

In order to foster joined-up collaborative thinking and draw further on people's expertise, it was agreed that the discussion should be continued, focusing on the issues and themes which were agreed to be central to developing a sustainable food policy.

ACTIONS:

→ SDC to act as facilitator and organise another meeting to bring partners together and discuss in more detail what a sustainable food policy for Scotland might look like, based on the key issues detailed above.

→ SDC to support work scoping out what a sustainable food chain might look like and report on emerging policy recommendations.