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Covid-19 Policy Brief: A Regional Approach to Food System Reform

This brief draws on University of Huddersfield funded research: A safe and just local food system

Covid-19 has highlighted a number of vulnerabilities in food systems that require attention to enhance regional resilience to future shocks and crises. The policy brief provides a series of recommendations to strengthen and enhance the future resilience of the 'Kirklees food system'.

The food system principally consists of three elements, food environments, consumer behaviour and food supply chains, each of which are interrelated with diverse environmental, health, and economic impacts (see Table 1). There is increasing recognition that conventional food system models focused on food supply and value chains do not adequately represent the complexity of food system dynamics revolving around these trends (Ingram, 2011; Oliver et al. 2018; Zhang et al., 2018).

Table 1: Environmental, Health, and Economic impacts of Food Systems

- one third of all food is lost or wasted
- 800 million people in the world are hungry
- 2 billion people are suffering from micronutrient deficiencies
- 2 billion people are overweight or obese
- food systems are responsible for 70 per cent of water extraction
- food systems cause 60 per cent of biodiversity loss
- just nine crops account for almost 70 per cent of all crop production
- food systems generate up to one third of human greenhouse gas emissions
- over 75 per cent of all agricultural land is used for feed production, pasture and grazing for livestock
- overuse of antibiotics in livestock yield has caused antimicrobial resistance in both humans and animals.
- food systems have been linked to the spread of diseases like COVID-19.

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The food system is connected to a variety of complex policy fields (e.g. agriculture, environment, health, education, energy and planning). This situation gives rise to synergies, feedback loops, and trade-offs between different components of, and different sectors within, the food system. The competition for land for agricultural and economic needs, and the environmental impact of land use policies, is a key example (EC FOOD 2030 Expert Group, 2018). The issue was raised in Kirklees in recent years, when plans to improve public health by making better use of land to grow food came into direct conflict with economic development priorities laid out in the Local Plan (Kirklees 2015; Lever et al. 2019)

The systematic trends within the 'Kirklees food system' came into clear focus during the early weeks of the Covid-19 health pandemic, when the inequities and environmental limits of the food system came into view. At this time, regional food banks were inundated with requests for help from a new group of local people who could no longer source their usual supply of cheap food from supermarkets. A small number of national supermarket chains worked closely with food banks across the region throughout the crisis, and various Central Government initiatives, including £750 million in grants for food redistribution networks, subsequently emerged to prop up the national food system at pre-lockdown levels. However, the underlying food system trends (outlined in Table 1) remain firmly entrenched.

Notwithstanding the difficulties encountered by many small food businesses and local food artisans during Covid-19, the 'Kirklees food system' came into its own during this period, adapting quickly to a rapidly changing situation. As multiple food service outlets closed or locked down, local farmers, food producers, farm shops, independent retailers, and home delivery services experienced a sudden and rapid increase in demand. It soon became clear that the 'Kirklees food system' had the capacity and flexibility to respond to the crisis in new and innovative ways. Unhindered by complex international supply chains and the vulnerabilities of just-in-time delivery systems, local food system actors across the region adapted quickly to address the needs of local people and communities. This in turn raised the question of how the benefits that emerged for the local food economy during this period can be maintained into the future.

To transform complex entities such as food systems, we need a better understanding of the social, political, economic and technological dynamics that allow the food system to function in its current form. Because the food system involves multiple actors across various policy fields (EC FOOD 2030 Expert Group, 2018), a systemic approach must focus on the horizontal dimensions of governance (e.g. environment, health, infrastructure, and education) alongside

Contact: Dr John Lever, Department of Management. Telephone: 01484 473123 or e-mail: j.b.lever@hud.ac.uk

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the vertical dimensions of the food value chain (e.g. food production, processing, storage, transport, retail, consumption and waste) (Morgues et al., 2013). While problems in one part of the system (e.g. in agriculture, food safety and nutrition) are often addressed successfully, the lack of a systematic understanding means that an integrated perspective and understanding is rarely achieved. This contributes to, and often locks in, the issues outlined in Table 1.

To overcome these problems and address current uncertainties, we must develop collaborative solutions that foster more resilient place-based food systems (Sonnino et al., 2016; Lever et al., 2019). Such an approach potentially transforms cities/urban areas and their rural surroundings into self-reliant regions and places that produce, store, process, consume and dispose of food locally to the maximum extent possible (Rees, 2019). To address the complexity of regional food system dynamics and enhance the resilience of Kirklees to future shocks and crises, this policy briefing makes the five recommendations outlined in Table 2:

Table 2: Recommendations

1. Recognise and understand the interaction and relationships between each of the individual elements of the 'Kirklees food system'.
2. Engage and move all stakeholders across all policy fields towards a systematic understanding and mindset.
3. Build and support a new framework for a local food partnership to support the local food economy and improve coordination between diverse food system actors.
4. Invest in social innovation and experimentation to strengthen connections across the vertical and horizonal dimensions of local food governance.
5. Produce an on-line interactive regional food map as an information resource for all stakeholders and local populations.

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