

A Recipe for Inequality: Key questions for stakeholders

The Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty released its interim report, 'A Recipe for Inequality', on 16 March 2015. The report shows why the UK food system is leaving low-income households behind.

The Commissioners are now publishing a set of questions for parliamentary candidates and stakeholders. This document has one key question and five follow-up questions for parliamentary candidates, political parties, the food industry, civil society organisations and experts on the UK food system.

The key question:

The interim report from the Fabian Commission on Food and Poverty shows that overall advances in access to affordable food and health outcomes have left low-income households behind. The rising price of food and other key living costs, combined with a squeeze on household incomes, is meaning that more and more households in the UK are struggling to afford a nutritious diet. On top of this, low-income areas are often less likely to have physical access to nutritious, affordable food. As a result, low-income households are having to seek out calories over nutrients, which means the poorest are more likely to be obese, suffer from diabetes, and have lower life expectancies.

Q: How can we make universal access to nutritious, affordable food a political priority?

Follow-up questions:

1. Emergency food provision

According to reports from The Trussell Trust, the UK's largest food bank and emergency food provider, the number of people referred for emergency food has risen by 38 per cent in the last year, with over 900,000 people receiving three days of emergency food in 2013-14.

In December 2014 the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the UK proposed a new national network of emergency food providers working with government, civil society and the food industry as an answer to rising levels of hunger and food insecurity. But a recent joint statement from the leaders of Edinburgh and Glasgow Councils said that "food banks are a crisis response and will not solve the problem of food poverty".

Q: What is the role of emergency food provision in addressing hunger and food poverty in the UK - should we accept it as a permanent feature of society?

2. Access to affordable, nutritious food

While most of the people in the UK are spending less than ever on food as a proportion of their household budget, some of the poorest people can spend up to 35% of their income on food. This means that food price rises and shocks to income (such as losing work, having hours cut, or not receiving or losing access to social security benefits) can push low-income households into crisis, and deny them economic access to nutritious food. On top of this, low-income areas often have less physical access to affordable, nutritious food and as a result of all these factors, research has shown

that low-income households have to prioritise 'getting fed' over eating healthily, or being able to express an individual or group identity through their choice of food.

Q: What actions are needed, by whom, to ensure more people in low-income households have access to affordable, nutritious food?

3. The future of the UK's food production and health systems, and the true cost of food.

Professor Tim Benton, UK champion for global food security, told the Commission that the current ways in which we produce, sell and consume food are not sustainable. This is because we are not recognising many external costs in the price that we buy and sell food at. This includes the costs of the food production system's impact on the environment, the workforce and public health.

This unaccounted for impact comes in a number of guises. Environmental damage caused by greenhouse gas emissions - 30 per cent of which are produced by food production - is causing soil fertility, biodiversity and food production capability to decline in developing countries. Low pay and zero hour contracts that characterise much of the food industry workforce mean the public purse spends billions of pounds a year in tax credits and other in-work benefits. And the change in diets towards high fat, high salt, high sugar foods is increasing the burden on the National Health Service. While none of these costs are accounted for in food retail prices, their impact is accumulating.

Q: How should we balance the need for affordable food on the one hand with concerns over environmental damage, bad working conditions, and long-term health costs associated with intensive farming and bad diets on the other?

4. The role of advertisers in shaping food behaviour

The top seven food brands spend a combined ten times more on marketing than the entire budget of the government's leading healthy eating campaign. This comes as a recent report from the government's own leading obesity adviser has warned about retailers placing greater price promotions on high salt, high sugar, high fat food. Other studies by experts have linked advertising to unhealthy diets and raised concerns that regulations designed by government to protect children from television advertisements for junk food are not working.

Q: Is it right that big food brands are able to influence food choices and increase sales of sugary, salty, fatty foods through their advertising, and what should the role of government be in promoting more healthy diets?

5. The right to food

According to international law, everybody in the UK has a right to food. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) included a right to food and it was enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976), of which the UK is a signatory. However, critics including Graham Riches and Hannah Lambie-Mumford have questioned the extent to which the UK delivers on this human right, which includes a requirement for government to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food and so ensure everyone has access to an adequate diet.

Q: How can we meet this commitment to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food and how should we see that it is enforced?