Food in a Common Weal Scotland

Pete Ritchie, August 2014

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Contents

Summary  Page 4
Introduction  Page 5
The Policy Agenda  Page 6
Inequality on a Plate: Closing the Gap  Page 7
Eating Better  Page 10
Food for a Small Planet  Page 12
Rethinking Food  Page 14
End Notes  Page 17
Summary

Scotland’s food is in transition, and as in all transitions there is a confusion of activity and messages.

On one side, the food and drink industry is still growing, and new businesses are emerging. There’s a bustle of activities in communities, with new growing projects and food networks. Household food waste seems to have dropped a little during the recession. Radical new proposals from the Land Reform Review Group challenge anachronistic patterns of land ownership.

On the other side, the dietary gap between rich and poor is if anything widening, with the rise in food banks the canary in the coal mine; and the public health impact of the Scottish diet is set to grow. While we have world-leading climate change targets we have not yet made a serious connection between climate change and our food system. The latest Common Agricultural Policy settlement has bought more time for farmers to continue business as usual, at the expense of the environment and rural development.

A Common Weal food system would put our resources and knowhow to work more effectively to ensure that all of us in Scotland can enjoy a healthy and sustainable diet. As a global food citizen, Scotland would reduce the environmental burden we place on the rest of the world through the way we produce and consume food; and we would share our agricultural knowhow, especially where it empowers communities to improve local nutrition and where it reduces the environmental impact of food production.

This paper proposes a transformation in our food system over the next generation, from one focused on production to one focused on sustainable nutrition.

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Civil society is central to this transformation. While the debate has been dominated in the past by farmers, food businesses and the agrochemical scientific-industrial complex, the future of food is not a technical question to be left to experts, nor a market question to be left to individual disempowered consumers. It’s central to the sort of society we want to create – in Scotland and globally.

There is no route map for this, and certainly no consensus yet in Scotland on why this is a good idea. But in preparation for the next stage of the conversation about how this could happen, this paper sets out some strategic actions and some tactical initiatives.

Strategic actions

- Continue to build a national food policy which reads across health, inequality, environment, community empowerment, education, planning, economy and social enterprise: work towards ‘people-centred food governance’.

- Build a civil society coalition – trade unions, churches, development trusts, non-government organisations in the fields of social and environmental justice, international development, animal welfare, health and education; schools, local government and academics across many fields – around this common cause.

- Work with other European governments to move from a Common Agricultural Policy to a Common Food Policy which aligns public subsidies clearly with public goods.

- Adopt the ISM (Individual, Social, Material) framework to guide public policy on dietary change.

- Move money upstream from dealing with consequences of ill health to improving nutrition.

- Reduce the target for non-milk extrinsic sugars from 11% to 5%.

- Invest in improving public food and cultural change in the public kitchen and show how this target can be achieved.

- Strengthen joined-up actions at city and local authority level, including the development of mixed economy of food, and the engagement of housing associations, social enterprises and development trusts as well as the private and voluntary sector.

- Make food part of the single outcome agreement past 2016, and support lead officers in local authorities to learn from each other, and from cities in the rest of the UK and Europe.

- Use the co-operation and LEADER provisions in the Rural Development Programme to invest in regional food economies connecting urban populations with rural producers – including community land ownership and community connected agriculture.

- Make the most of national and European research funding to support the shift to sustainable production and consumption.

- Support agroecological and organic production; value small and part-time farmers.
- Set and achieve ambitious targets for reducing food waste throughout the supply chain

**Tactical steps**

- Channel some of the plastic bag levy into a national funding stream for low carbon community food projects administered through the Big Lottery or Climate Challenge Fund.
- Keep encouraging people to grow their own food in private gardens, allotments and community gardens: deploy skilled community growing advisors as part of local authority food growing strategies
- Invest in replicable community-based alternatives – community food hubs, community bakeries, urban farms – which give communities more control over their food system
- Provide food and vegetables on prescription as part of primary care teams having a stronger role in promoting sustainable nutrition
- Encourage schools to develop ‘whole school food plans’ which connect the curriculum with the catering and the community: embed food into teacher education on sustainable development
- Extend Healthy Start scheme to all families with primary school age children, improve take-up
- Reduce VAT on vegetarian/vegan meals in cafes and restaurants
- Offer rent and rates free high street units for greengrocers selling local fresh fruit and vegetables
- Train front-line staff in independent retail to become informal advisors on sustainable nutrition
- Offer concessions on VAT or national insurance to encourage all food businesses to pay the living wage as part of valuing the people who work in food.

**Introduction**

No other aspect of Scottish life illustrates the gap between aspirations and reality as well as food.

We want to be green; but we’re bottom of the league for organic food in Europe, and for eating fruit and vegetables. We want to be fair – but we have a huge gap in diet between rich and poor, an iceberg of malnutrition of which food banks are the very visible tip: and the most unequal system of land ownership in the developed world.

We want to be healthy – but we’re top of the European league for obesity, and bottom for life expectancy.

So we need to be smart – and determined - if we want to change this pattern. Determined in the sense that there is much work to be done, but smart in the sense that the problem can’t be reduced to the rhetoric of individual responsibility.

**The challenge is to re-purpose the food and farming system so that we make it easy for everyone to eat well while enhancing natural capital in Scotland.**

This is not primarily about changing the behaviour of those with least power and least voice – children and people on low incomes. Yes, we need to improve food in schools and teach children better about food; and yes, we do want to ensure that people managing on a low budget have the cooking skills they need. But these useful initiatives are not enough. This is about all of us changing – government (national and local), food businesses, farmers, communities, professionals. The challenge is to re-purpose the food and farming system so that, using our astonishing richness of natural resources, skilled farmers and scientific knowhow, we make it easy for everyone to eat well while enhancing natural capital in Scotland.

A Common Weal food culture would be inclusive, not class-based as at present. Everyone would be able not just to eat enough but to eat well enough. A Common Weal approach to food calls for a change in the governance and ownership of the food system. There’s a useful parallel with the recently published report from the Land Reform Review Group ‘The Land of Scotland and the Common Good’(1). The Review argues that land is not just another commodity and calls for a system of ‘people centred land governance’.

The two public goods of food and land are deeply intertwined. Food is by far the biggest economic system on the planet, shaping global land use, biodiversity, population health; and the planetary cycles of carbon, nitrogen and fresh water. Scotland – and the global community – needs a system of people centred food governance. A Common Weal Scotland would not just be a world leader in its ambitions to tackle climate change: it would also be a world leader in creating a people-friendly, planet-friendly food system.
This paper sets out proposals for a Common Weal food system for Scotland.

It does so with two caveats.

First, the food system is complex. It can be seen as four interacting systems: a biophysical production system with its flows of energy, soil, nutrients and water; a human nutrition system; a social and cultural system; and an economic/political/financial system.

Currently, the economic/political/financial system, driven by big food, dominates and distorts the other three systems. Building a countervailing ‘common weal’ system which better aligns money, power and public goods will need sustained action at community city, state and transnational levels.

Second, this is a new conversation in Scotland. There is not an established food policy community, nor are there ‘off the shelf’ models to follow. Food in Scotland reflects our history as well as our geography. It’s easy for food to become a class battleground, and we need better ways to talk about it.

The Policy Agenda

Food was invisible in public policy in Scotland for much of the thirty years before the food price spike in 2007. Production, manufacturing, distribution, retailing and catering were generally seen as a progressive private sector success story, bringing down the relative cost of food while increasing consumer choice.

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The impact of food on health was seen as a matter for public health to tackle through dietary advice; the subsidy system for farmers and landowners was treated as an industry debate for the department of agriculture; the impact of the food system on the wider environment was a concern mainly for the Greens and the organic movement; and the impact on the local food economy and food culture was just the price of progress. Until recently, we had food handouts and soup kitchens for homeless people in city centres, but not a national network of food banks.

The Scottish Government’s 2009 food and drink strategy ‘Recipe for Success’(2) for the first time sought to bring the different aspects of food together in a single policy.

Inevitably, the first five years of the plan have focused on food and drink exports, which have grown significantly.

While the recently published ‘Good Food Nation’(3) plan aspires to focus equally on health, the exports imperative has not gone away; and re-purposing the food and farming industry to deliver an equitable and sustainable diet for the people of Scotland is a complex and contested ask.

What’s the problem?

The current Western food system is a logistical triumph, connecting billions of urban customers with millions of farmers they have never met, allowing most of the people most of the time to take food for granted and to be blissfully unaware of seasons, droughts, floods, pestilence and plague.

The system is also ruthlessly focused on profit, not on feeding people well or preserving the planet for future generations. And the cost of consumer convenience in the West includes enduring hunger and an epidemic of obesity. Our global food system is also driving biodiversity loss, soil degradation and climate change, partly because these impacts are seen as ‘externalities’ which are not reflected in the cost of food or in any corporation’s balance sheet. Climate change is in turn making food production less predictable and increases the pressure on available soil and water (see for example IPCC(4) and SCAR(5)).

All of these global problems are reflected in Scotland, and we have the potential to transform our relationship with food over the next generation. But we can only do that if we acknowledge the scale, complexity and urgency of the issue. Broadly, we face three challenges:

Inequality on a plate

Food reflects the inequality which scars Scottish society. People on lower incomes have to spend much more of their weekly budget on food, which has become more than 20% dearer relative to income.

Fuel for cooking is also relatively more expensive. On average, people on low incomes eat less fruit and vegetables and fish anyway, and have cut back in the last five years because of rising prices.(6) People on low incomes are more likely to be overweight, and to die younger as a result.

Eating better

Put simply, most of us eat too much sugar, too much highly-processed food and too little vegetables, fruit and fibre. We could do with cutting back on meat, especially processed meat.
Food for a Small Planet

Through the food we import, and the way we produce food here in Scotland, we’re driving species to extinction, degrading top soil and using up fossil water. The food system is responsible for 25-30% of global greenhouse gas emissions, driving climate change which in turn makes future food production less dependable.

These three challenges can only be tackled through a joined-up, long-term and ambitious effort, led by government but delivered through a partnership with civil society and progressive food and farming businesses working at different levels, from EU to local government and local communities in Scotland.

There is massive inertia within the current system, maintained by marketing budgets which dwarf any conceivable public education spend by government. It’s not that nothing changes: there’s been some progress through reformulation on reducing salt in the UK diet, and many of the multiple retailers are investing in some form of ‘greening’ in their supply chains.

But change at the scale and pace required will need more than voluntary initiatives within the current free market paradigm. The first step is to imagine that another food system is possible.

In the following sections, I will examine these specific problems in more detail and suggest how a Common Weal Scotland might approach these issues.

Inequality on a plate: closing the gap

Scotland – like the rest of the UK – is an unequal society, with some 18% of adults living in absolute poverty (after housing costs).(7) Low income households spend proportionately more of their income on food (around 16% for the lowest decile, compared to 11% on average, and 8% for households in the highest income decile(8)) and at the same time get less food to eat, with typically a less varied and less nutritious diet. For many household budgets, food is one of the few squeezable items after meeting the costs of housing, heating and clothing.

The recession has made the food gap between rich and poor more acute. For the poorest 10% of households in the UK, household income after housing costs has fallen by 12% since 2005, while food prices have risen by 10% in real terms - making food 25% relatively more expensive. At the same time rent and heating costs have increased significantly for many households.

As a result, low income families have bought 11% less food by weight – and specifically less fruit (-26%), less vegetables (-15%) and less unprocessed meat (-25%) but more processed meat (+5%). (9) Poorer families are spending more on food while eating less food, and less good food.

It is hard to know what the consequences of this nutritional squeeze will be on, for example, child health and development: but it’s clear that a significant minority of Scotland’s population is not eating well by current standards, and affordability is a key element within this.

Broadly, there are four approaches to reducing the nutritional gap between rich and poor.

The first is to question the concept of ‘food poverty’ and to argue that the issue is simply poverty. It follows from this that the focus should be on reducing poverty by increasing payment rates in social security and increasing the minimum wage. Once people on low incomes have more money, dietary inequalities will reduce.

Reducing overall inequalities of income and wealth in Scotland is at the heart of Common Weal policy, and it’s certainly true that as people’s incomes increase they can afford to spend more on food. However, there may well be a significant lag between rising income for the poorest in society and improving diets significantly. There are many pressures on household budgets, and spending on fruit and vegetables for example would have to increase significantly in low income households for consumption just to get back up to pre-recession levels.

Scotland should and must renounce the anti-poor discourse which has become widely acceptable in the UK just as income and wealth inequality has risen sharply. Scotland can also reconnect working age benefits to the cost of living and implement a ‘living wage’. However, these changes will not happen overnight and over the next 5-10 years there will still be many households struggling to afford a sustainable, healthy diet.

The second approach is for civil society to establish food banks and similar food distribution systems for people who are struggling to feed themselves and their family. While food banks have been a remarkable demonstration of social
solidarity, with thousands of people donating food and helping out as volunteers, they are clearly not a strategic response to dietary inequalities in Scotland.

Recent estimates(10) suggest that the Trussell Trust provided food for 639,000 meals in the year to April 2014. With 820,000 people in Scotland living in relative poverty (including 180,000 children) one free meal each, however nutritious, is not going to close the gap.

Food banks have made the issue of food poverty visible in Scotland, with the number of food banks and the numbers using them rising sharply from 2012 to 2014. Surveys suggest that referrals to food banks are typically triggered by a crisis caused by a sudden loss of earnings, or by sanctions or delays in benefit payments.

We no longer see food handouts as a sustainable way to tackle food poverty in developing countries - they do not generate sustainable economic activity and they disempower recipients who lose a sense of agency. Despite the best efforts of volunteers and organisers, the same is true of foodbanks.

The experience of states like Canada is that food banks - once institutionalised - are hard to dislodge.

Few people want to see food banks as a long-term feature of Scottish society, but the experience of states like Canada is that food banks - once institutionalised - are hard to dislodge. Professor Elaine Power of Queens University, Ontario described food banks as a sticking plaster on the gaping wound of poverty and gives this account(11):

Food banks emerged in Canada in the early 1980s as a stopgap, temporary measure to alleviate hunger during an economic downturn.

The good-hearted founders of food banks, who could not fathom that anyone would go hungry in a country as wealthy as Canada, expected that food banks would close their doors once the economy recovered.

Instead, 30 years on, they have become an institutionalised component of our social safety net.

In 2011, approximately 850,000 Canadians (2.5% of the population), received food from about 450 food banks.

Thirty-eight percent of food bank recipients were children.

Many Canadians participate regularly in activities to support food banks.

Food bank collection bins are ubiquitous in grocery stores and places of worship, such as churches and synagogues.

Special events, from music concerts to football games, feature donations to the food bank as an entrance fee.

Communities around the country hold food drives, with boy scouts, service clubs, and countless volunteers knocking on citizens’ doors asking for donations to stock the food bank shelves.

Politicians exhort voters to donate to their local food banks and social workers regularly refer clients to supplement their social assistance benefits.

I doubt that well-intentioned food bank founders had any idea of what would result from their concern to feed hungry Canadians.

Yet, despite all this activity, approximately 8% of Canadian households were classified as having been hungry in 2007-08.

Only about 1 in 4 hungry Canadians ever even gets to the food bank.

There are likely to be a variety of reasons for this, including lack of a food bank close by, inability to choose the food one receives, and the humiliation of having to go to a food bank.

Some hungry Canadians decide to leave the food for others who they believe need it more than they do.

And even those who do go to the food bank are still hungry. Food banks run on donations and can only provide the food they have on hand.

The third approach is to use selective government subsidies to reduce the cost of food for low income households. So, for example, around 100,000 school age children and young people take free school meals, and around 50,000 mothers with babies and young children are eligible for healthy start vouchers which can be used to buy milk, fruit and vegetables. Government funding is also used to enable community food and health schemes to distribute and sell healthy food at cost.

In many US cities, low income customers get a top-up at farmers’ markets so they get twice as much fresh produce for their money.
The Indian government has gone much further, with the 2013 National Food Security Act (NFSA) subsidising staple foods for two-thirds of the population – around 800 million people.

Delivery Challenges for India’s National Food Security Act 2013

“In this context, the NFSA marks a significant shift in strengthening such safety net targeting from the current welfare approach to a rights based approach. A legal right has now been conferred on eligible beneficiaries to receive entitled quantities of food grains at subsidized prices. This has been supplemented with conferring a similar right to women, children and other vulnerable groups to receive meals free of charge. Such rights have been backed in the Act by an internal grievance redressal mechanism that seeks to foster transparency and accountability in the last mile governance of public delivery structures i.e. 400,000 price shops. The backbone of the Act, of course, is the large scale distribution of food grains to 67% of the country’s population of 1.2 billion (perhaps the biggest ever program in the world to achieve food and nutritional security).”

The fourth approach is to offer information and training for people on low incomes to help them stretch their food budget. There has been no shortage of advice on how to cook on a small budget – some popular (Jack Monroe) and some unpopular (Jamie Oliver) – and cooking classes are a popular element in many community food projects.

The argument is often made that cooking from fresh ingredients is cheaper than buying processed foods and takeaway meals.

It’s not clear that this is always true: 50 frozen sausage rolls (free from hydrogenated fat and without artificial colours or flavours) can be bought for 88 pence. These provide about 150% of a person’s daily calorie requirement, though admittedly much more saturated fat than is recommended. Using the same money to buy fresh fruit and vegetables may be healthier, but per calorie is likely to be more expensive.

But behind the argument on cost there lurks a moralising and dreary anti-poor message. Comfortable Scotland can often be heard lamenting that people on low incomes are spending their money unwisely on expensive takeaway meals.

Implicitly, poor people are being asked to spend less on the socially valued, well-marketed, readily available, taste-enhanced foods which everyone else in Scotland also eats in similar or even greater quantities; and to spend more on food which is plainer, less culturally valued, and requires more effort.

Behind the argument on cost there lurks a moralising and dreary anti-poor message.

There’s a ‘linen shirt’ issue here. David Hume famously argued that:

“A linen shirt is, strictly speaking, not a necessity of life. The Greeks and Romans lived, I suppose, very comfortably though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt.”

A MacDonald’s takeaway or a pizza is not, strictly speaking, a necessity of life. But in our culture it is an integral part of social life. In Scotland in 2012 there were 950 million ‘out of home visits’ to buy food and drink – more than 3 per week per person(13). Half of these were to ‘quick service restaurants’.

Making soup from root vegetables at home is fine if it’s a choice. It’s not so great when it’s a necessity. In a Common Weal society, everyone would be able to cook (though some would still cook better and more often than others): but also everyone would get to eat out sometimes - and the food which people eat when they go out would be healthier.

Common Weal takes an inclusive approach to reducing nutritional inequality. The aim is to make the gap in diet between rich and poor less than the gap in income (or wealth) – while at the same time working for a more equal society.

The Common Weal approach to ensuring this would use a mix of measures. It would be based on the notion of food security and a right to food rather than the provision of food welfare.

Universal provision would be favoured – for example free school meals for all children benefit poorer children disproportionately. Subsidies would be designed to be unobtrusive and non-stigmatising, enabling people on low incomes to use the same services and facilities as any other members of society. (For example free school meals are less obvious in cashless catering systems.)

A Common Weal approach would also support actions by communities not just individuals and households. As food consumers, we have become increasingly atomised, often
shopping and eating alone. As food citizens, we can join with others to take more control over what we eat, grow and buy.

For example, communities could be supported to develop and manage a network of 150-200 community food hubs across Scotland. These would be local co-operative ventures with each hub providing a number of food services, from procuring food in bulk direct from farmers and growers (both in Scotland and, through fair trade channels, globally) to running a community café or a community growing project. Many will emerge out of existing local food projects which already provide some of these services – and they would start to operate as a Scotland-wide nutritional grid rather than as isolated local projects. Some would include a community shop, others might have a bakery or a service providing meals to housebound people.

Communities could be supported to develop and manage a network of 150-200 community food hubs.

While the hubs would vary in terms of size, location, managing organisation and services provided, they would shape a common philosophy of encouragement, inclusion and empowerment. They would also borrow from the Trussell Trust experience of social franchising, defining a set of shared DNA which make replication easier. They would be open to all members of the community. Low income members could get food at a subsidised price or on a subscriber model, and could also get a certain amount of credit for buying food when the cash has run out.

Projects like this can operate as social enterprises, generating much of their own income – and can be supported by existing non-profit community organisations such as housing associations, development trusts and credit unions. New funding streams such as the plastic bag levy to include a community shop, others might have a bakery or a service providing meals to housebound people.

Eating Better

Overall, Scotland’s health is worse than our neighbours in Europe.

But this is a relatively recent phenomenon. We have slipped to the back of the pack in the last 40-50 years(14).

In 1996 the then Scottish Office launched the Scottish Diet Action Plan, which aimed among other things, to double the consumption of fruit and vegetables to more than 400g per day through a combination of education, training and policy initiatives.

The 2005 review noted that while many of the Action Plan’s recommendations had been implemented, there was no change in a decade in fruit and vegetable consumption, while consumption of whole meal bread, potatoes and fish went down and consumption of sugar went up. The level of obesity in Scotland has risen from 17% (which prompted the original plan) to 26%, though it now seems to have stabilised.

Clearly, diet is not the only preventable cause of ill health, but it’s becoming the most significant. Public Health England now put the cost to the NHS alone of diet and obesity related diseases at £11bn in England – indicating a £1bn cost to the NHS in Scotland. The economic cost in terms of lost productivity is higher – while obesity and related diseases also cause widespread human misery.

After thirty years of misdirection when we were told that fat was making us fat, the focus of nutritional attention is switching from fat to sugar. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recently consulted on reducing the guideline for non-milk extrinsic sugar in the diet from 10% to 5%(15).

Public Health England has taken this up and is planning a major campaign to reduce intake of extrinsic sugars(16), although the Scottish Government’s recently published ‘Supporting Healthy Choices Voluntary Framework’ retains a target of 11%. While there’s an argument to be had about the wisdom of focusing on one element of the diet, or of encouraging people simply to ‘swap’ one product for another without looking at wider food culture, we’re clearly hooked on sugar. We should follow the lead from WHO and revise the target down to 5%, while recognising that achieving this requires a dietary revolution.

When the Act of Union was signed in 1707 we got by on 2kg of sugar per person per year. We now get through 20 times as much, despite most of us having sedentary jobs rather than working on the land. The current estimate is that teenagers on average get 15% of their total energy from sugar and for a significant minority this figure is 25-30%(17). (Even these figures are likely to be an underestimate as they are based on self-reporting.)
There is a strong consensus that we should replace some of the free sugar in our diet with vegetables. A recent analysis in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (18) concludes:

“We have shown that those eating seven or more portions of fruit and vegetables daily have the lowest risk of mortality from any cause. The majority of adults in the HSE 2007 knew they were recommended to eat five portions daily but stated barriers to improving their diet including: difficulty in changing habits, lack of time, cost, lack of motivation and eating what they were given.

… Fruit and vegetable consumption is inversely related to household income.

This is not surprising, given the perception in England that fruit and vegetables are more expensive than unhealthy foods and that health education without changing the environment in which individual choices are taken, tends to increase inequalities. (my emphasis)

With increasing evidence of their health benefits, policy-makers may need to consider broader initiatives to promote fruit and vegetable consumption, particularly vegetables and salad, as with the Australian guidance. In order to have an impact on those who are most socioeconomically disadvantaged, this should move beyond health education, for example, through fiscal policies.”

With almost 5% of our population now living with Type 2 diabetes, we have a herd problem, not just a problem for individuals. We need to change the material conditions and the social norms, rather than just trying to change behaviours by telling people what to do.

The ISM (individual, social, material) framework (19) is a helpful way to look at this. Although this is now becoming widely used by Scottish Government, it has not yet been applied systematically to the challenge of healthy eating.

The ISM approach recognises that what people do is shaped by material factors such as infrastructure, schedules, rules and regulations, technology, time and objects (stuff); and by social factors such as relationships, meanings, norms, institutions, roles and identity; as well as by individual factors such as habit, skills, agency, emotions, values, beliefs, attitudes and cost-benefit.

We have focused much of our ‘healthy eating’ effort on the ‘individual’ part of this matrix – trying to influence attitudes through public education when the wider food industry is spending a lot more money with better copywriters to influence attitudes back.

The dominant food system does work at the individual level of ‘behavioural economics’. It spares no effort in spelling out the cost-benefit argument, with most of the messaging on food being about price. But it also works at the level of infrastructure, stuff and schedules: it’s on every street, it’s at petrol stations, it’s open all hours. And it does meanings: brands mean a lot to us.

The challenge for Scotland to become a country which eats lots of green vegetables and not so many pies while cutting intake of sugary drinks by 2/3rds is truly formidable.

Producing the vegetables is not the problem – Scotland is broadly self-sufficient in vegetables and exports significant tonnages of carrots, swede and soft fruit as well as potatoes. (To provide the recommended 400g of vegetables per person per day in Scotland at a modest yield of 25t/ha would take around 30,000 hectares of productive land – much less than the 43,000 hectares of private gardens in urban Scotland (20))

It’s just that lots of us don’t much care for them. ‘Real men’ – here at least – don’t eat salad.

On top of that, it takes some effort and skill to turn vegetables into a tasty meal – and there are few outlets serving healthy vegetarian takeaways. At the same time, sugar – whether in fizzy drinks, low-fat yoghurt, cakes, fruit juice and breakfast cereal bars – is ubiquitous, cheap, and socially acceptable. And the food industry needs to sell us more, not less.

If we want people to eat more fruit and vegetables, we have to work on the social and material parts of the framework, not just keep telling them about five a day.

Little by little, we should see ourselves as worth looking after.

In this context, it’s worth noting that the age of the ‘household reference person’ is as important as income in shaping fruit and vegetable consumption. Older households are much more likely to be eating five a day than households where the reference person is under 40.

So what would change in a Common Weal Scotland?

Little by little, we should see ourselves as worth looking after. We should be more conscious of, and more willing to resist, the manipulation of our tastes and habits by a food industry which needs to grow at our expense. We should
have more individual, family and community control over the means of production: allotments, community gardens and farms in and around cities would provide a significant collective resource.

There should be some helpful gradients: fresh fruit and vegetable shops on the high street could be exempt from business rates, while the staff who work in them could be trained as informal providers of nutritional advice and encouragement.

Vegetarian and vegan meals could be exempt from VAT – bringing the cost of eating veggie meals down by 20%. A network of well-trained community growing advisors working alongside the local authority’s ‘food growing strategy’ (being introduced by the Community Empowerment Bill) could easily double urban production of fruit and vegetables.

Fruit and veg should be available on prescription.

Fruit and veg should be available on prescription, and primary care teams should be an integral part of improving public nutrition, just as they have helped to reduce smoking.

The healthy start voucher scheme should be extended to subsidise vegetables for all low income families. Currently, take up in Scotland is around 77% and the scheme costs around £10m a year. It would cost perhaps another £20m to include children in low income households through to the end of primary school. (Maybe a ‘farm healthy start’ scheme could provide even better value for money by linking families with young children directly with local farms for milk and vegetables).

Scotland, unlike the UK, might even join the EU’s €150m school fruit scheme.

Of course, our public food should be different – school and hospital meals should be prepared with fresh ingredients on site, and teachers should sit down to eat with children. Whole school food policies would integrate what’s taught with what’s eaten, as part of growing a generation of ‘global food citizens’. Food should be seen as an expression of care in hospitals and residential homes.

We should have high aspirations for public nutrition. In 1936, Boyd-Orr wrote:

“People have become accustomed to the use of a minimum diet for the maintenance of life in calculating the cost of living, and it is well-known that people can be kept alive for varying periods on diets with varying degrees of deficiency. The level of the standard adopted here – the optimum – is not just to provide a diet which will keep people alive, but a diet which will keep people in health; and the standard of health adopted is a state of well-being such that no improvement could be effected by a change in the diet..(my emphasis)”.

Nearly 80 years on, we should be prepared to match this aspiration in Scotland, though the challenge today is as much about eating less of the bad stuff as it is about eating more of the good stuff.

Health and food are both about more than nutrition. As Kevin Morgan commented recently “a community which cares about food cares about itself”. Sourcing, preparing and sharing a meal is at the heart of civilisation – and a society which allows these human habits to be eroded indefinitely is unlikely to be healthy, however well-calibrated its nutritional intake.

Food for a small planet

Since World War 2 the productionist mindset has been dominant, and the focus has been on increasing yields and taking more land into production to feed the world.

There will be greater demand, particularly if we assume that the whole world will adopt a Western diet high in animal protein, but some estimates have been inflated to argue the productionist case. It is worth noting that the rate of global population growth has halved in the last fifty years to around 1%, and that annual births peaked in the late 1980s. The population in China and in Europe is set to shrink rather than grow.

If our goal is sustainable human nutrition – greater equity in access to food, better global public health, and reducing the food system’s environmental impact – then reducing food waste, moderating consumption of grain-fed meat and dairy products, implementing agroecological methods and empowering poorer households are equally important strategies. And the focus of productivity improvements should be on where those improvements have the most direct connection to improving local nutrition and to reducing environmental impact – optimizing rather than maximizing.

Scotland has world-leading targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and we pride ourselves on our commitment to biodiversity. Yet food remains largely invisible in the debate, even though it is generally agreed that the food system accounts for 25-30% of greenhouse gas
emissions(21) and is the primary driver of habitat loss and species extinction. Much of the damage our food system does to the environment is out of sight in other countries.

As a global citizen, the first contribution Scotland can make to ‘feeding the world’ sustainably is to take responsibility for reducing the global impact of its own food consumption and production system. Although much of our island, hill and upland ground is classified in European terms as a ‘less favoured area’, Scotland is a hugely productive farming and fishing nation.

We’re a net food exporter, fifteen times self-sufficient in fish and lamb, six times self-sufficient in grain and potatoes; self-sufficient in most vegetables, milk, beef and eggs.

Globally, the rising demand for meat and dairy products has been a major driver of intensification, deforestation and pollution; there’s an environmental and social justice imperative for richer countries like Scotland to eat less and better meat.

For us, better meat is grass-fed beef, lamb and venison – because of Scotland’s climate and topography our main crop is grass, which grazing animals can convert to human edible protein (whether meat or milk) with low inputs of energy and water.

There’s great scope to make our livestock systems more environmentally friendly. For example, new research by the Green Cow Project(22) at Scotland’s Rural College has the potential to reduce methane emissions through selective breeding. Agroforestry systems where trees are planted in pasture can yield the same production as bare hillsides while generating 40% more biomass on the same area(23) and reducing the risks of soil erosion and flooding.

Unfortunately, commercial pressures push farmers in the opposite direction, with dairy farmers for example being encouraged to maximise milk yield per cow. This typically has damaging consequences for cow health and longevity. Ultimately, it makes no sense in terms of global resources, with typically 4kg of concentrate – which is grown on land which could provide food for people - being used to produce 1kg of milk dry matter. Currently we rely heavily on imported (and primarily GM) soya to feed our livestock.

We also rely heavily on imported fruit and vegetables, much of which has high levels of ‘embedded water’ from irrigation, yet comes from water-stressed areas of the planet.

Organic and agroecological farming systems generate more public goods in terms of greater biodiversity, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, reduced nitrogen emissions, more employment, better animal welfare and no pesticide residues in the environment and food. On average, small farms are more productive per unit of land (though not per unit of labour) – as any gardener knows.

Despite this, the dominant discourse assumes that small farms, using agroecological methods obviously can’t ‘feed the world’. It also assumes that if we want to feed poor people in Scotland we have to concentrate on getting the food to them as cheaply as possible, rather than worry about how that food was produced. In this context, ‘local’, ‘fair trade’ and ‘organic’ are seen as a luxury.

The apparent tension between sustainable food and affordability (caused in large measure by the ability of the farming system to shift environmental costs out of the industry and on to society at large) gets in the way of a proper discussion of the relationship between social and environmental justice.

Both globally and in Scotland, poor people pay the price of a food system driven by profit. It is two centuries since a generation of rural poor was driven from the land in Scotland to make way for more profitable sheep for export – a process being repeated all round the world as indigenous food economies are replaced with commodity production systems.

People on low incomes have poorer diets and more diet-related ill-health – and many jobs in the food industry are both poorly paid and insecure. Globally, poor people are most affected by climate change, deforestation and land grabs driven by an unsustainable food system.

A sustainable food system has to be both people-friendly and planet-friendly; these two goals are compatible with each other, but neither is compatible with the current profit-focused system.

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A Common Weal food system would start by seeing the land (and seas) of Scotland as a resource first and foremost for feeding everyone in Scotland well – and also as a store of carbon, biodiversity and ‘natural capital’ which should be enhanced and not depleted.

In line with food sovereignty principles, food for people would be privileged over food for export, with as much effort and attention going into developing resilient, health-promoting low carbon local food systems as into increasing commodity production for sale abroad.

The conversation between government, civil society and the owners and managers of land would be about creating
mutual benefits from a system where we eat more of what we grow, and we grow (and process) more of what we eat.

This will mean closer links between urban food economies and their rural hinterlands, through a variety of models for community-connected agriculture, including urban farms on some of our 25,000 acres of derelict land.

A Common Weal Scotland would also play its part as a global food citizen.

There are opportunities in the 2014-2020 rural development programme to support urban-rural co-operation; landscape level schemes to reduce water pollution and flooding risk and to increase biodiversity and local food production; developing agroforestry at scale; strengthening the organic sector and supporting new small farmers and growers.

But overall, the Common Agricultural Policy settlement to 2020 has been about preserving ‘business as usual’ – and Scotland will need to play its part in moving the agenda away from the current pattern of producer subsidies and towards a ‘Common Food Policy’ which reshapes the European food system around sustainable production and consumption.

A Common Weal Scotland would also play its part as a global food citizen, building on its status as a Fair Trade Nation to develop a ‘do no harm’ ethical food policy which ensures that the food we import has been produced in ways which are socially and environmentally just, while guaranteeing this conversely for the food which we export.

As a better global citizen, Scotland would also reduce meat consumption and would aim to be a world leader in stripping waste out of the food system at all stages of the supply chain.

The change in what and where and how we eat, should be mirrored by changes in how we farm. There’s already a target to bring 1 million acres into community ownership by 2020 – and part of this is about creating more small farms, through investment by individuals, community trusts and municipalities in land with the explicit purpose of building resilient healthy local food systems. (See for example Terre de Liens(24), which has raised €36m from 9,000 small investors to buy 100 farms and create 200 tenancies for new organic and biodynamic farmers)

We should start to see ourselves as global food citizens, with the confidence to think more about the impact on our bodies and on the environment of how we spend our food money.

There should be a step change in support for low carbon farming, with subsidies and advisory services redirected towards the wider imperatives of a sustainable food system. This in turn will enhance the brand value of Scottish food exports.

A food system based on Common Weal principles should have more jobs: small bakeries making better bread with less energy and wasting less; independent and community retailers employing 3-4 times as many people per unit of turnover as supermarkets, while also contributing some social glue and even some friendly nutritional advice.

And of course all food businesses should pay the living wage in return for a reduction in national insurance or VAT.

Rethinking food

Any strategy for change has to operate at different levels. It has to operate at population level, while focusing support on the people, groups and areas which are most likely to be poorly nourished. It has to influence both demand and supply – what we choose to eat, and how that food is produced – both what we grow in Scotland and what we import. It has to be about re-purposing the food industry both giant transnational companies and small businesses; but it’s also about restoring and strengthening the role of households and communities in the food economy.

We propose to start thinking and talking about food and farming as a service delivering public goods – human nutrition, good work, social cohesion and natural capital. While this may seem improbable, there’s an instructive comparison with the pharmaceutical industry where growing resistance to antibiotics is forcing a rethink led by the WHO at a global level:

“Our society already makes things that aren’t driven by profits from sales: taxpayer-funded public goods like roads, schools or basic research. Fixing the market failure in antibiotics production means transforming pharma companies – or parts of them – into public goods producers, with public interest rather than profit driving R&D and marketing.

The industry has little to lose: it isn’t making much money on antibiotics anyway. But the stakes are high for everyone else. Turning shareholder-owned pharma firms into socially motivated medicine-makers will not be easy.”

New Scientist 20 May 2014

The market failure in the food system is comparable. If research and development and marketing continue to be profit-driven, there are no market signals to prevent the
system generating increasingly irreversible environmental damage (loss of biodiversity, soil degradation and climate destabilising greenhouse gas emissions) along with an epidemic of obesity and malnutrition.

ASDA recently(25) published a report suggesting that 95% of its fresh food supply chain is vulnerable to climate change. It’s not clear that business as usual is going to sort this.

Turning shareholder owned food companies into socially motivated agents of sustainable nutrition will not be easy – but it is a conversation which needs to begin. If we are to meet the challenge of feeding nine billion people well and sustainably, we need to rethink the role, status and responsibility of the people and companies charged with this task on our behalf.

We have to see the core purpose of farming as feeding people, not the production of commodities; and farmers – like GPs – as public servants as well as small to medium enterprises. And we need to think of ourselves not as consumers but as co-producers of the food service, co-delivering benefits to our own health, our communities and our environment.

This new food system – like health, education and housing - should be characterised by a mixed economy, with a variety of social ownership models and not for profit management models. It should be an identified public policy domain, where the policy conversation ranges across human health, ecosystem services and agronomy.

Although Scotland is and will remain part of a global food system, importing and exporting food, it can use its powers both to reshape the parts of the local system and to influence the wider global conversation.

Feeding everyone in Scotland well, greening Scottish production and implementing an ethical food policy on imports cannot be left in the ‘too hard’ box.

Peter Singer concludes in his book Eating(26):

“No other human activity has had as great an impact on our planet as agriculture. When we buy food we are taking part in a vast global industry. In addition to its impact on over 6 billion humans, the food industry also directly affects more than fifty billion nonhuman land animals a year. For many of them, it controls almost every aspect of their lives, causing them to be brought into existence, reared in totally artificial factory-style production units and then slaughtered. Additional billions of fish and other sea creatures are swept up out of the sea and killed so we can eat them. Through the chemicals and hormones it puts into the rivers and seas and the spread of diseases like avian influenza, agroculture directly affects all living creatures. All of this happens because of our choices about what we eat. WE can make better choices.”

Peter Singer’s passionate plea for better choices on grounds of animal welfare could be matched by an equally strong plea for better choices to slow climate change, deforestation and loss of biodiversity.

And of course he is right – we could all make better individual choices. But this is not just about individual choices – it’s also about neighbourhoods, communities, professional organisations, schools, churches, trade unions, businesses and governments. The Common Weal is about what we do together, for each other, for now and for future generations. Food is a profoundly social issue – and it’s essential that we see it as an issue for citizen action, not just consumer choice.

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This massive system, so fundamental to human and planetary wellbeing - is curiously subject to almost no democratic governance, globally or within countries. It is dominated by a handful of large corporations – many with turnovers larger than Scotland’s GDP – not just in retailing but also in commodity trading, seed, pesticide and fertilizer production.

Food sovereignty – the right of people to govern their food system and determine their own food futures - is a concept developed in and by the Global South in response to globalization, focus on cash crops for export at the expense of local food security, loss of small farmer livelihoods, and the imposition of new technologies including genetic modification. While some of the language is unfamiliar, the concepts resonate with the Common Weal, describing a food system which is pro-people, pro-poor and pro-planet.

**The six Food Sovereignty principles(27)**

1. **Focuses on Food for People:** Food sovereignty stresses the right to sufficient, healthy and culturally appropriate food for all individuals, peoples and communities, including those who are hungry or living under occupation, in conflict zones and marginalized. Food sovereignty rejects the proposition that food is just another commodity for international agribusiness.

2. **Values Food Providers:** Food sovereignty values and supports the contributions, and respects the rights, of women and men, peasants and small scale family farmers,
pastoralists, artisanal fishers, forest dwellers, indigenous peoples and agricultural and fisheries workers, including migrants, who cultivate, grow, harvest and process food; and rejects those policies, actions and programs that undervalue them, threaten their livelihoods and eliminate them.

3. **Localizes Food Systems:** Food sovereignty brings food providers and consumers together in common cause; puts providers and consumers at the center of decision-making on food issues; protects food providers from the dumping of food and food aid in local markets; protects consumers from poor quality and unhealthy food, inappropriate food aid and food tainted with genetically modified organisms; and resists governance structures, agreements and practices that depend on and promote unsustainable and inequitable international trade and give power to remote and unaccountable corporations.

4. **Makes Decisions Locally:** Food sovereignty seeks control over and access to territory, land, grazing, water, seeds, livestock and fish populations for local food providers. These resources ought to be used and shared in socially and environmentally sustainable ways which conserve diversity. Food sovereignty recognizes that local territories often cross geopolitical borders and advances the right of local communities to inhabit and use their territories; it promotes positive interaction between food providers in different regions and territories and from different sectors to resolve internal conflicts or conflicts with local and national authorities; and rejects the privatization of natural resources through laws, commercial contracts and intellectual property rights regimes.

5. **Builds Knowledge and Skills:** Food sovereignty builds on the skills and local knowledge of food providers and their local organizations that conserve, develop and manage localized food production and harvesting systems, developing appropriate research systems to support this and passing on this wisdom to future generations. Food sovereignty rejects technologies that undermine, threaten or contaminate these, e.g. genetic engineering.

6. **Works with Nature:** Food sovereignty uses the contributions of nature in diverse, low external input agroecological production and harvesting methods that maximize the contribution of ecosystems and improve resilience and adaptation, especially in the face of climate change. Food sovereignty seeks to heal the planet so that the planet may heal us; and, rejects methods that harm beneficial ecosystem functions, that depend on energy-intensive monocultures and livestock factories, destructive fishing practices and other industrialized production methods, which damage the environment and contribute to global warming.

Unlike health, education or housing, we don’t see food as a public good – so we don’t have democratic structures for planning, debate and accountability. We do have a regulatory approach to food safety and to weights and measures but even here quality is narrowly defined in terms of ‘doing what it says on the tin’ rather than wider considerations of environmental impact.

**Food is an area ideally suited for creative community planning.**

So in the education, health and housing sphere there are overlapping systems of governance such as school boards, patient advocacy groups, tenants associations. There are mandatory government targets and change programmes, inspections, enquiries, debates in Parliament. (Far more effort went into seeking the ‘Trojan horse’ in Birmingham’s education service in 2014 than into tracking down the flesh and blood horse in Birmingham’s food the previous year.)

But responsibility for food has been diffuse. There are no food committees in local authorities, and food has to date not been part of the single outcome agreement between local and national government. While the NHS spends a good deal of money dealing with the consequences of the food system it doesn’t have a significant role ‘upstream’. Food is an area ideally suited for creative community planning.

It’s not that the food system operates outside public policy:

- The Common Agricultural Policy directs the allocation of billions of pounds in farm subsidies, but these subsidies are poorly aligned with delivering public goods and strangely disconnected from any consideration of human nutrition. Many simply ‘flow through’ farmers to bring down the farm gate prices paid by multiple retailers while inflating the price of land.

- We subsidise the food industry by using tax credits to top up people on minimum wage in an industry characterised by low wages.

- Our planning policy has been remarkably relaxed about drive-to supermarkets hollowing out high streets.

It’s just that we don’t see food in the round as a domain for public policy-making and in a Common Weal Scotland this needs to change. There are positive signs of this in Scotland, with the Scottish Government developing an increasingly broad-based food strategy and a Cabinet Secretary for Food.

We have been living in hope that the interests of big food, unchecked, would deliver good food for all and a planet in
better shape to hand on to the next generation. But that is not the corporate strategy for Tesco. They did not just sack Philip Clarke in July 2014 because there's been an explosion of food banks under his watch, or because he's done so little to prevent deforestation in Indonesia to grow palm oil. He was sacked because falling like-for-like sales was making investors jittery.

So if these goals were not in the corporate strategy or reflected in investors' priorities, we must have been hoping that they would happen by serendipity, or through some Panglossian invisible hand aligning profitability with social and environmental outcomes.

If we want to develop a food system which helps everyone eat well and enhances natural capital – a people-friendly, planet-friendly food system – we know that it's technically possible. But we are where we were with the NHS just before 1947: we know it's doable but there is huge resistance to change – so we need a step change in commitment both from government and from civil society.

Commenting on the report showing that 95% of its fresh food supply chain was vulnerable to climate change, ASDA's Chris Brown commented "If we do nothing, we will leave a rubbish legacy for our children". Let's do something.

We are where we were with the NHS just before 1947: we know it's doable there is huge resistance to change.

End Notes

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