

A UK right to food law could tackle food poverty and environmental degradation

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Around 8.4 million people in the UK struggle to get enough to eat. At the same time, small-scale farmers and local grocery shops are disappearing, the country is increasingly dependent on food imports and healthy food is too often unavailable or unaffordable. Enshrining a right to food in law can end this situation.

About the research

The right to food requires States to take effective measures to reduce food inequality and guarantee that consumption and production of food is socio-environmentally sustainable. Any policy which could impact on the right to food, from agriculture to trade, must not infringe upon it.

The UK is a signatory to several international conventions that recognize the right to food, has adhered the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and has ratified the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Yet, the protection, respect and fulfilment of the right to food would be strengthened

by the establishment of a strong system of legal entitlements and the provision of easily accessible accountability mechanisms that redress violations and contribute to the improvement of citizens' wellbeing.

A recent workshop at the University of Bristol Law School brought together a number of experts on the subject and has led to the identification of several areas where the right to food is violated and where redressal can be facilitated by the enshrinement of the right into national legislation.



Photo by Franco Folini

Key findings

- In the UK, an estimated 8.4 million people were living with insufficient food in 2014. In 2017, more than 1,182,954 three-day emergency food supplies were delivered to people in crisis, 16.85% more than 2016. The situation has been worsened by the regressive impact of recent tax and welfare reforms.¹
- Due to inadequate city planning and financial conditions, more than a million UK residents live in 'food deserts' with limited access to affordable fresh food.
- Large-scale supermarkets have almost entirely replaced local grocery shops, significantly impacting on production, distribution, accessibility and consumption.²
- Misallocation of agricultural subsidies means the number of small-scale farmers is diminishing³ and the country is increasingly dependent on imports.⁴ This has significant implications for the long-term sustainability of the food system and on the ability of people to access adequate and sustainably produced food. Brexit could worsen the current situation.
- A right-based approach to food that considers both the social and environmental implications of the food system will improve quality of life for millions of people living in the UK, fulfil the UK's commitment to international conventions and the Paris Agreement and address a cause of severe inequality.

Policy implications

Legislate the Right to Food

1. The right to food should be enshrined in law and appropriate legal and regulatory structures introduced to guarantee its protection, respect and fulfilment.
2. This can be achieved via an Amendment to the UK Agriculture Bill 2017-2019 explicitly recognising these obligations and pledging a governmental commitment to publish a Right to Food Bill within this Parliament. A model for this should be the recognition of the right to education in the Human Rights Act 1998.
3. A new UK Right to Food Bill should adopt a holistic approach to the right to food, with the identification of principles, finalities, rights holders and duty bearers.

Audit and adapt public policies to protect the right to food

4. Existing public policies in areas directly or indirectly related to the right to food should be audited for their compatibility with the universal right to food.

5. A procedural requirement should be introduced that all primary and secondary regulations are compatible with the State's obligation to protect, respect and fulfil the right to food.

Establish adequate and accessible accountability mechanisms

6. Access to justice for violations of the right to food should be guaranteed by the provision of free and adequate accountability procedure. This may be obtained by expanding the accessibility of legal aid in cases concerning the right to food.

Establish an observatory on the Right to Food

7. An observatory on the right to food should be established, where stakeholders can assess the state of the right to food in the UK and define political priorities. This can be modelled on similar observatories in Spain and Latin America.

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Further reading

¹ Anna Taylor and Rachel Loopstra, Too Poor to Eat: Food Insecurity in the UK, The Food Foundation, May 2016

² Scott Corfe, What are the barriers to eating healthily in the UK, Social Market Foundation, October 2018.

³ Michael Winter and Matt Loble, Is there a future for the small family farm in the UK?, The Prince's Countryside Fund, June 2016

⁴ The Landworkers' Alliance, Feeding the Future, November 2014

Tomaso Ferrando and Julie Mansuy, The European Action Against Food Loss and Waste: Co-Regulation and Collisions on the Way to the Sustainable Development Goals, Yearbook of European Law, forthcoming.