

Book

A call for food system change

In shutting down entire societies, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the fundamental inequities and inadequacies of market-driven economies that prioritise profits over human welfare. Inequities show up in businesses that furlough employees while paying high salaries and bonuses to executives. They are also revealed by the dependence of food systems on poorly paid workers and cheap global supply chains. The COVID-19 crisis demonstrates how current food systems fail to protect populations from hunger and diet-influenced non-communicable diseases and why the poor, disenfranchised, discriminated against, and chronically ill are those most vulnerable to this disease.

In the USA, the pandemic has caused massive unemployment and impoverishment. But it has brought to public attention the plight of formerly invisible low-wage food workers, many of them migrants or immigrants, whose jobs on farms and in slaughterhouses, meat-packing plants, and grocery stores rarely provide sick leave or health-care benefits yet put them at risk of contagion. Their work is now deemed essential. Suddenly, the inadequacies of US policies on labour, immigration, health care, food assistance, and international trade are visible to all. Some farmers are culling livestock and discarding unsold milk, eggs, and vegetables while the newly destitute wait in long lines for foods distributed by volunteer-run food bank charities, now the front line of food assistance to the poor.

A food system unable to respond to a viral pandemic is broken. In 2019, reports from two landmark *Lancet* Commissions established a roadmap for creating resilient food systems capable of preventing hunger, non-communicable diseases, and the environmental damage caused by industrial food production. The

EAT–*Lancet* Commission on Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems proposed a Great Food Transformation of dietary improvements to accomplish this goal. The *Lancet* Commission on the Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition, and Climate Change called for recognition of food as a fundamental human right and of food systems as a means to promote human health and environmental

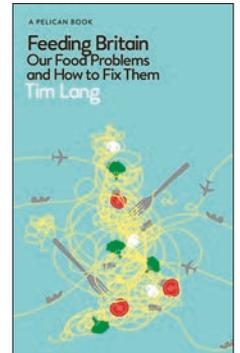
“The COVID-19 crisis demonstrates how current food systems fail to protect populations from hunger and diet-influenced non-communicable diseases and why the poor, disenfranchised, discriminated against, and chronically ill are those most vulnerable to this disease.”

sustainability—and also to make societies stronger and more democratic.

In this context, Tim Lang’s *Feeding Britain: Our Food Problems and How to Fix Them* is a case study of what’s wrong with one country’s food system and what can be done to change it. Although Lang wrote his book before

the COVID-19 pandemic, it thoroughly explains the governmental weaknesses that led to the UK’s food vulnerability and delayed and inadequate response to the crisis. Lang could not be more expert; he knows the British food policy scene from the inside, having started his career as a hill farmer, spending decades as a food advocate, academic, and adviser to domestic and international agencies, and having written previous books on food systems. His purpose here is to convince British politicians to take food issues seriously, to assume moral and political leadership, and to transform the UK’s food system to one that is more self-sufficient, more resilient, and better able to reduce food insecurity, prevent obesity, and reduce environmental damage.

Lang paints a bleak picture of the UK’s food system, viewing it as excessively devoted to providing an abundance of cheap food at the expense of health and environmental sustainability. Industrial agriculture pollutes water and soil. People’s attraction to heavily marketed and artificially cheap meat, dairy, and ultraprocessed “junk” foods normalises diet-related ill health. Such consumption also normalises public payment of the costs of ill



Feeding Britain: Our Food Problems and How to Fix Them
Tim Lang
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Citizens form lines to receive free food from a food pantry in May, 2020, in Brooklyn, NY, USA

health and environmental damage. Social inequalities are what Lang calls a “running sore” of UK politics, locking “unacceptable numbers of fellow citizens into poor diets and life chances”. The UK’s food supply chains are vulnerable to disruption. Lang thinks the UK should produce more of its own food—better quality, healthier, and more sustainable.

Appreciation for food, Lang says, is central to a decent society. He bemoans the lack of state interest in food and the absence of a national food policy. One of the book’s major themes is the country’s lack of food self-sufficiency. He notes that the UK last produced enough food to feed its population in the mid-18th century, but now produces only about half of what it needs. Lang is scathing about this insufficiency, variously describing it in terms such as risky, short-sighted, immoral, ludicrous, politically illiterate, and, my favourite, a post-imperial hangover. By this last term he means that the UK continues to import cheap food produced by cheap labour from former colonies, and that the greatest trade deficit is in precisely those foods that best promote health and sustainability—fruits and vegetables. He recognises that the UK cannot grow bananas, for example, but it can grow other fruits. Until the UK meets more of its food needs, the country risks having potentially counterfeit food imports and disrupted supply chains.

Lang makes these arguments at great length. *Feeding Britain* is the result of a prodigious analysis of research studies, consumer surveys, government documents, and more; it cites nearly 1100 references and provides nearly 80 charts, tables, and figures. The book is encyclopaedic in covering almost every conceivable aspect of the UK’s food system. Here are the data anyone could possibly need on which to base arguments for food system change. The book describes relevant aspects of British food history, defines terms, lists foods imported and exported, measures freight shipped through

UK airports, defines greenhouse gas emissions from livestock and crop production, documents food price trends, gives feed conversion rates for food animals, lists advertising spending by major food companies, explains water rights, and states how much land is owned by the British aristocracy, corporations, and Crown.

I mention the last item because this book seems to be written for readers far more in tune with British politics than I am. I frequently had to consult the book’s tables of abbreviations and look up definitions of terms to be brought up to speed on such matters as Defra (the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—the source of much of this book’s data), Henry Dimbleby (co-founder of restaurant chain Leon and of the Sustainable Restaurant Association and a member of the Defra board in charge of a hopeful National Food Strategy process, as yet incomplete), and the Operation Yellowhammer papers (which revealed that the UK Government knew in advance that Brexit would disrupt the food supply and increase food prices). Indeed, Brexit haunts this book, but is never formally introduced and readers are assumed to understand the politics behind it.

Lang was a member of the EAT-Lancet Commission and he calls on the UK Government to adopt the Commission’s Great Food Transformation recommendations to improve public health, the environment, food citizenship, wage scales, and democratic accountability, and to redistribute power in the food system. He suggests that the UK Government legislate and fund a Food Resilience and Sustainability Act similar to the Green New Deal proposed in the USA, and establish several commissions to conduct research, promote sustainability, audit progress, and issue dietary guidelines. He views these proposals as radical, but feasible and inevitable.

Lang makes this case persuasively, but his exclusive focus on government responsibility surprised me. He cites the report of the Lancet Commission

on the Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition, and Climate Change, which explains the policy inertia on food system change as the result of three major barriers: weak governance, weak civil society demand, and strong food industry opposition. This report argued for a transformative social movement to overcome all three barriers. Lang views British civil society demand as “vibrant”. But perhaps because it is my area of special interest, I wish he had said more about how the UK Government could stop the food industry from blocking food system change. He notes the power of corporations to punish or reward governments by relocating investment and jobs, but stops short of recognising the impossibility of system change without government curbs on corporate power. Among the recommendations of the Lancet Commission on the Global Syndemic of Obesity, Undernutrition, and Climate Change was a global Framework Convention on Food Systems to limit the political influence of Big Food. I view such an approach as essential for food system transformation and resiliency.

As I read it, *Feeding Britain* is invaluable for food policy students, food studies scholars, and food system advocates, who will be deeply grateful for the information and insights it provides. I hope Lang convinces the UK Government to take food policy seriously and do something about it, despite the book’s daunting length and level of detail.

Feeding Britain could not have come at a more opportune time. COVID-19 illustrates Lang’s warnings. International experts have published suggestions for food system change in response to COVID-19. Their recommendations echo Lang’s in arguing for the immediate need for such reform and transformation. If only governments would listen—and act.

Marion Nestle
marion.nestle@nyu.edu
@marionnestle
www.foodpolitics.com

Further reading

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