

Food as a commodity, human right or common good: how conceptual framings shape policy development

Authors:

Peter Jackson*, University of Sheffield (UK): p.a.jackson@sheffield.ac.uk

Marta Guadalupe Rivera-Ferre*, University of Vic-Central University of Catalonia (Spain): martaguadalupe.rivera@uvic.cat

Jeroen Candel, Wageningen University and Research (The Netherlands): jeroen.candel@wur.nl

Anna Davies, Trinity College Dublin (Ireland): DAVIESA@tcd.ie

Cristiane Derani, University of Santa Catarina (Brazil): cd599@hermes.cam.ac.uk

Hugo de Vries, French National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and the Environment (France): hugo.de-vries@inrae.fr

Verica Dragović-Uzelac, University of Zagreb (Croatia): vdragov@pbf.hr

Alf Håkon Hoel, University of Tromsø (Norway): alf.hakon.hoel@uit.no

Lotte Holm, University of Copenhagen (Denmark): loho@ifro.ku.dk

Erik Mathijs, University of Leuven (Belgium): erik.mathijs@kuleuven.be

Piergiuseppe Morone, Unitelma Sapienza - University of Rome (Italy):

piergiuseppe.morone@unitelmasapienza.it

Marianne Penker, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna (Austria):

marianne.penker@boku.ac.at

Ruta Śpiwak, Polish Academy of Sciences, Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development (Poland):

ruta.spiewak@irwirpan.waw.pl

Katrien Termeer, Wageningen University and Research (The Netherlands): katrien.termeer@wur.nl

John Thøgersen, Aarhus University (Denmark): jbt@mgmt.au.dk

Abstract:

The European Commission's recently published 'Farm to Fork' strategy seeks to facilitate a transition towards a sustainable food system. The strategy moves from a linear understanding of the food system towards a more circular view of the system's complex interdependencies. Despite these laudable intentions, it does not follow the guidance of the EU's Group of Chief Scientific Advisors that the path to a more sustainable food system requires 'moving from food as a commodity to food as more of a common good'. Drawing on our recent experience as authors of an Evidence Review Report on the European food system, we discuss how different framings of food shape the development of food policy, using the 'Farm to Fork' strategy as a key example.

Main:

In their recent advice to the European Commission, the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors to the European Commission concluded that the path to a more sustainable food system requires '*moving from food as a commodity to food as more of a common good*' (GCSA 2020). The GCSA's conclusions imply a need for deep reforms in food policy that touch upon every part of the food system. Though it was intended to shape the Commission's new 'Farm-to-Fork' (F2F) strategy (EC 2020), the GCSA's recommendations have only partially been followed and the strategy is still cast largely within a 'food as commodity' narrative.

The GCSA's advice was informed by an Evidence Review (ER) Report (SAPEA 2020) which was written by the authors of this Comment. The separation of the ER from the GCSA's Scientific Opinion was designed to ensure the ERR's independence and academic rigour and to prevent accusations of

political bias. Here, we use the F2F case to show the importance of the way food is ‘framed’ in the process of policy development. We begin by outlining several different ‘framings’ of food before taking the F2F case to show their influence in shaping policy development.

Framings of contemporary food systems

‘Framing’ refers to the process of identifying and defining problems and the procedures for their solution (SAPEA 2019). While frames are often taken-for-granted, they are rarely neutral in their political effects, reflecting underlying values which shape the problems to be solved and potential policy responses (Rivera-Ferre 2012; Candel et al. 2014). Without appropriate scrutiny, framing can involve subjectively-based value judgments (Leach et al. 2010) potentially leading to the exclusion of particular options while making others appear more rational and reasonable. As a consequence the frames used by certain groups may prevail over others, highlighting the importance of power asymmetries in the process of policy development.

In food systems research, scholars from diverse disciplines have deployed several different framings of food.¹ Our Evidence Review (SAPEA 2020) identified three such framings: food as commodity, human right, and common good. Table 1 shows how these framings map on to different policy interventions, highlighting the limited way that the F2F strategy engages with alternatives to the food-as-commodity view.

Food as a commodity

The food-as-commodity approach highlights food as a tradable good, based on its economic value as measured by its market price (Vivero-Pol 2017). In the most extreme versions of this framing, the market can be relied upon to regulate the supply of food, with the state intervening only when there are market failures leading to temporary disruptions and perturbations. In practice, there is extensive state intervention in agri-food systems even when food is framed as a commodity. The commodification narrative is linked to the development of the industrial food system and, critics charge, enables the exchange value of food (its market price) to become dissociated from its use value in feeding people. Framing food as a commodity is often embedded in a linear narrative of economic growth and closely connected to a productionist view of the food system where state support (as in the Common Agricultural Policy) is geared towards an expansion of the supply of food to meet an apparently inexorable rise in demand. While this system has generated widespread benefits, it has incurred significant environmental, health and social costs.

Food as a human right

In this framing, food is considered a human right as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966. Anderson (2008) describes the food rights perspective in terms of democratic participation in food system choices; fair, transparent access to all necessary resources for food production and marketing; the presence of multiple independent buyers; the absence of human exploitation and excess resource exploitation; and no impingement on the ability of people in other locales to meet these criteria. This narrative provides the basis for different policy-framings of the food system such as food sovereignty (Claeys 2015; Wittman 2011). It also provides a moral basis for the idea of ‘good food’, understood in terms of access to healthy, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and associated values, such as taste and pleasure.

Food as a common good

A food-as-common-good perspective relies on complex social arrangements involving natural resources and their joint administration, designed to meet the needs of the community, who cooperate in the management of the commons through jointly adjusted rules. Calls for the de-commodification and commoning of food put sustainability at the centre of the analysis, challenging

¹ We accept that thinking in terms of ‘food systems’ is itself a form of framing.

the idea of food as a purely private good (Rundgren 2016). Food is framed as having multiple dimensions, each of which is equally and properly valued, requiring different governance structures and institutions. This framing moves away from the doctrine that market forces are the best way of allocating food-producing resources such as land, water, knowledge and seeds. In translating these proposals into practice, food is reimagined as an impure commons that can be better produced and distributed by a hybrid governance system comprised of market rules, public regulations and collective actions (Vivero-Pol, 2013).

The Farm to Fork strategy: implications of policy framing

In May 2020 the European Commission published the Farm to Fork (F2F) strategy, covering the whole food supply chain and designed to make food systems fair, healthy and environmentally sustainable. Based on overwhelming evidence that contemporary food systems are the source of economic, environmental and social problems (IAP 2018), the F2F strategy recognises the magnitude of the problems linked to food systems and the need to transform them.

The strategy was commended for its positive messages around shorter supply chains, support for organic farming and the promotion of a circular bio-based economy. It was also at pains to address food waste, food insecurity and the climate crisis, proposing ambitious targets for the reduction of pesticides and fertilizers; the development of bio-refineries that produce bio-fertilisers, protein feed, bioenergy, and bio-chemicals; and a reduction in the use of antimicrobials. But, we argue, it fell short in terms of addressing the social dimensions of food, failing to propose effective and ambitious measures to tackle the inequalities and unsustainable practices that permeate the current food system. In other words, it failed to reframe food systems in a way that would enable the development of a truly transformative, socially just and environmentally sustainable food policy.

Despite the GCSA's steer towards a 'food-as-commons' framing, the Commission kept mostly within a 'food-as-commodity' framing, embedded in an economic growth narrative. This was most clearly exemplified in its emphasis on non-binding guidelines for business and in its focus on informed choice, addressing citizens in reductionist terms as consumers, capable of exercising free choice in their purchasing behaviour. While legally-binding targets were proposed on food waste, public procurement and consistent front-of-pack nutrition labelling, food businesses were only subject to voluntary guidelines and optional codes of conduct, albeit with some reference to the role of tax incentives and other fiscal measures. While there is some recognition of the 'food environment', the strategy failed to acknowledge the extent to which individual choices are shaped by wider institutional forces and social inequalities.²

The F2F strategy is equivocal in its reference to 'citizens' and 'consumers'. For example, the strategy 'invites all citizens and stakeholders to engage in a broad debate to formulate a sustainable food policy', reaching out 'to citizens ... in a coordinated way to encourage them to participate in transforming our food systems' (page 20). The predominant mode of address is, however, to 'consumers' rather than 'citizens' in repeated references to consumer health and quality of life (page 4), consumer safety (page 5), consumer trust (page 10), consumers' dietary choices (page 13) and consumer savings (page 15). This, we argue, over-emphasises consumer responsibility for the choices that are available to them and downplays their wider public role as members of civil society, beyond their narrowly-circumscribed marketplace role as 'consumers'.

The F2F strategy has also been criticised for presenting a falsely depoliticized picture of the food system, downplaying the importance of power asymmetries and the pivotal role that citizens should play in democratic societies (Davies 2020). Power asymmetries are widely acknowledged to affect

² The 'food environment' is defined in the F2F strategy as the physical, economic, political and socio-cultural context in which consumers engage with the food system to make decisions on acquiring, preparing and consuming food (page 5).

the food system, including the vested interests of land owners, agri-tech corporations and oligopolistic food retailers (Morgan et al. 2006). The F2F strategy alludes to this somewhat tangentially in its reference to food processors, food service operators and retailers who ‘shape the market and influence consumers’ dietary choices through the types and nutritional composition of the food they produce, their choice of suppliers, production methods and packaging, transport, merchandising and marketing practices’ (page 13). But this is a relatively under-developed part of the F2F strategy. More significantly, the framing of the F2F strategy is rooted in the EU’s long-standing sectoral policies including the Common Agricultural Policy and trade policies which perpetuate deeply institutionalised ways of thinking about food (Candel et al. 2014). These policies and their implicit framing of food-as-commodity perpetuate strong path dependencies from which it is hard to break free.

To explain why the F2F strategy failed to adopt alternative policy framings we turn to a previous Evidence Review (SAPEA 2019) that dealt with the science-policy interface under conditions of uncertainty and complexity. In translating evidence into policy, the report argued, policy-makers use heuristics to cope with an abundance of information, seeking to reduce its complexity. These heuristics involve implicit biases that influence how evidence is selected, presented and evaluated. Through the process of framing, particular problem definitions, knowledge claims and policy options are emphasised whilst others are downplayed or ignored. The framing of food-as-commodity, for example, may be so familiar as to be tacit—not consciously recognised as a means of admitting some possibilities into policy deliberations while excluding others. Scientific advice may be incongruent with this tacit knowledge which has been shaped by the socio-political environment in which policy-makers operate.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence presented in our Evidence Report (SAPEA 2020), this Comment has traced the impact of different framings of food in the policy domain with a particular focus on the ‘translation’ of the GCSA’s Scientific Opinion into the European Commission’s ‘Farm-to-Fork’ strategy, highlighting the tensions between scientific evidence, expert opinion and political expediency.³ Above all, however, we wish to assert that food is not *just* a tradable good and that additional framings should be deployed in the interests of developing a more socially inclusive, just and environmentally sustainable food system.

While transitioning to a more sustainable food system will require significant shifts in the policy-making process, above and beyond the process of reframing, the failure to build new narratives contributes to a policy ‘lock-in’. So, for example, the power dynamics that are in play across the food system cannot be adequately addressed by focusing on consumer choice or individual responsibility alone. A just food system would need to be anchored in legal structures that encourage the more equitable sharing of gains and losses while building a more sustainable and resilient system.⁴

Our analysis is supported by other experts, active in this space, including the Committee on World Food Security who prioritise a right-to-food narrative in their call to consolidate conceptual thinking around food security (HLPE 2020). Our argument contributes to a wider debate on the relationship between science and policy, where framing affects the way some problem definitions, knowledge

³ A more pluralistic approach to defining pathways and interventions for food system transformation has also been suggested by Leach et al. (2020).

⁴ A recent blog-post from scholars at Wageningen University challenged the move towards a food-as-commons perspective, arguing that the food-as-commodity framing carries certain legal obligations that help ensure food safety and consumer rights: <https://europeanlawblog.eu/2020/06/08/the-sams-report-towards-a-sustainable-food-system-bites-the-hand-that-feeds-us/>

claims and policy options are emphasised, whilst others are downplayed or excluded. Some framings (e.g. of food-as-commodity) have become so dominant that they are often taken-for-granted among policy-makers. Our role as social scientists is to make such framings and their implications explicit.

While the F2F strategy advances some options to increase the sustainability of food systems, it fails to reflect sufficiently on alternative framings of food. This, we argue, could have led to the development of new insights, based on a wider evidence base, leading to alternative ways of thinking, the identification of new transition pathways and potentially disruptive measures for reaching a more just and sustainable food system.

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Competing Interests:

The authors have no competing interests.

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Table 1: Framings of food and their policy implications (adapted from SAPEA 2020: Table 3)

Framing	Narrative components	Possible policy interventions	Action points in F2F
Food as a commodity	<p>Meeting consumer demand.</p> <p>Global competitiveness based on food quality instead of price.</p> <p>Product differentiation</p> <p>Early mover advantage</p> <p>Sustainable intensification.</p>	<p>Support of businesses for sustainability innovations.</p> <p>Support for on-farm product differentiation (organic, animal welfare, and other sustainability improvements).</p> <p>Flexibility in administrative procedures and legislation affecting farmers and food businesses.</p> <p>Nudging initiatives to change consumer behaviour.</p>	<p>Consumer behaviour change towards sustainable and healthy diets, achieved through informed consumer choice</p> <p>Limited recognition of the relevance of the food environment and associated power asymmetries,</p>
Food as a human right	<p>Access to healthy and culturally appropriate food for everyone.</p> <p>Equitable access to means of food production.</p> <p>The state as the main guarantor of the right to food and fair production conditions (consistent with other human rights).</p> <p>No exploitation.</p>	<p>Shifting CAP support from per-ha payments to supporting farm labour and vulnerable consumer groups including support for healthy, sustainable and culturally appropriate food in schools, food banks and retirement homes).</p> <p>Public procurement, ensuring healthy and culturally appropriate food for everyone.</p> <p>Facilitating access to land and other means of production for farmers and new entrants to food production.</p>	<p>Recognition of the need for mandatory criteria for sustainable public procurement</p> <p>No actions to facilitate and guarantee equitable access to means of production by farmers.</p> <p>Recognition of exploitation of migrant workers but no actions to address this.</p>
Food as a common good	<p>Peer-governance to meet the food needs of diverse communities.</p> <p>Common responsibility for sustaining the shared natural and cultural resources needed for food provision.</p> <p>Multiple socio-cultural, economic, and ecological dimensions negotiated in new governance structures and institutions</p> <p>Strong participation of citizen-consumers (food democracy) through social organizations.</p>	<p>Polycentric collaborative governance structures, such as Food Councils and regional food strategies, legitimised by broad civil society participation.</p> <p>Emphasis on food embedded in regional territories/contexts/needs Rural-urban food coalitions directly linking producers and consumers (e.g. Community Supported Agriculture, direct marketing, box schemes, food coops, etc.).</p> <p>Coordination of multiple decentralised food policies on (supra-) national level to consider EU and national priorities and to foster learning across regions.</p>	<p>Invitation to citizens and stakeholders to engage in broad debate to formulate sustainable food policy.</p> <p>Emphasis on citizens as consumers, exercising individual choice, rather than wider civic role and democratic participation.</p>