

Political Economy

Food, Sustainability and Regional Development in Wales

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There are lots of good things happening in Welsh food policy. The challenge is to apply the lessons being learned to wider sustainable development.

Food matters to Wales. How could it not in a nation where the landscape has been fundamentally shaped by animal husbandry, and where the quality of regional produce is a source of genuine pride? However, there is a 'disconnect'. Consumer behaviours in Wales are not markedly different with regard to food than in other parts of the UK, driven by convenience and income more than any notional appreciation of local quality of supply. Moreover, these common behaviours are problematic, contributing significantly to the degradation of global ecosystems, diminishing water availability and species extinction. Meanwhile, Welsh residents are becoming increasingly obese and unhealthy as a result of this unsustainable diet.

There is a real drive on the part of the Rural Affairs Department of the Assembly Government to change this, and at the same time to lever the economic benefits that might arise from increasing local sourcing, Welsh food quality and hence competitiveness.

The True Taste Wales awards are a case in point. This Assembly sponsored initiative, now in its 9th year, accredits the best of Wales's produce. Attracting over 1,000 entries, and with wide support amongst private sector producers and sponsors, the Awards are of great significance to Wales and perhaps beyond (www.truetaste.tv). The True Taste Contribution to Sustainable Development award is a specific category that acknowledges organisations like Calon Wen, Aberystwyth University and (this year) Birchgrove Eggs. These organisations have all made genuine strides towards lessening the environmental impact of their activities and protecting and heeding social outcomes, while at the same time, producing food of the best quality and achieving business success. Now in its 4th year the sustainability award not only shows recognition of and sensitivity to the issues faced by industry today, it also raises awareness and sets the standard to businesses in line with the Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to sustainable development.

Meanwhile, the Sustainable Supply Chains initiative seeks to increase the resilience of Welsh food supply chains and commercial viability of indigenous food business, and again lessen negative outcomes whilst leveraging social good (www.sustainablesupplychains.org.uk). Several pilot projects are underway that include:

- carbon footprinting and new product development in a dairy supply chain;
- the strategic development of community food co-operatives to increase the access of those on lower incomes to fresh fruit and vegetables and build the marketplace for the Welsh

horticulture industry;

- the development of a commitment to sustainable production and consumption amongst a collaborative group of Welsh wine makers;
- testing a new resilient model of horticultural enterprise, and;
- enabling supply chain ownership by local communities and developing collaborative marketing and distribution opportunities for small food producers to step up the availability of local food to trade buyers.

Outside the public arena, key figures such as Peter Segger and Patrick Holden in Pembrokeshire are global leading lights of long standing in the development of organic and permaculture techniques, seeking to fundamentally change the way farming operates. Importantly, the organic farming movement in Pembrokeshire sits within, and contributes to a wider group in Wales seeking alternatives to current unsustainable behaviours – including, for example the Centre for Alternative Technology and the more recent development of the Do Lectures (www.dolectures.com) – Wales' own version of the globally important TED talks (www.ted.com).

Individual Assembly actions sit within a wider policy framework that signal the importance of food to the Assembly. For example, you can read about the imminent food strategy elsewhere in this *Review*, whilst effort is underway to develop a food tourism trail. Meanwhile, whilst the Welsh horticultural strategy may not be especially radical, the fact Wales has a horticulture strategy at all is quite novel and certainly to be welcomed.

All is not rosy in the garden however. These welcome innovations and pilot projects remain just that. There are issues over how far the bulk of (conventional) farmers in Wales – around 95% – are involved in or open to these innovations, and consumers in

Wales stubbornly continue to eat, not what is good for them and the planet, but what they want, in a packet that's convenient, and at a price they can afford.

Influencing the global food system or even consumer responses to it is a massive task. But there are a number of reasons why it may be even more difficult for the Assembly than it need be. First, there is the lack of devolution of agriculture and food policy to the regional level in the UK and there is the added complication that most agricultural policy is supremely non-devolved, subject to the EU Common Agricultural Policy. Secondly, and partly deriving from this structure, is the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (Defra's) attitude to food production, seen through a European-competitive lens. This competitive paradigm emphasizes cost-cutting through rationalization and by increasing farm size: more a drive towards efficiency than true sustainability. And Defra, of course has UK wide responsibilities.

Despite this competitive UK paradigm for food and farming, the sector does not feature centrally - indeed hardly at all - in Assembly mainstream economic development policy. It is not one of Wales' six strategic sectors for example, but rather sector development remains the purview of the Department for Environment, Sustainability and Housing (DESH) rather than the Department for the Economy and Transport (DET). Whilst there are undoubtedly significant benefits to be gained from this separation, the sector risks losing out on genuine Assembly expertise on business support and local supply chain development to name but two areas, unless links between DET and the Food Division are well developed and well maintained.

There are, however, deeper problems to address. Wales has a comparative advantage in red meat and dairy that is, in anything greater than moderation,

unhealthy and unsustainable. It is far less developed (for in some cases good topographical reasons) in horticultural produce. There is a welter of evidence that for health, climate change and energy-intensity reasons diets should contain far less of the things Wales does particularly well, so this is a very complex policy area, especially for politicians and parties with a strongly rural constituency. The message to 'eat less but eat well(*sh*)' is one which may be amenable to stakeholders, but flies in the face of decades of policy which has prioritized the protection of sector output levels, and encouraged sector growth wherever possible.

Food policy in Wales then has much to recommend it, especially compared to the rest of the UK. The recently published food strategy for Wales, *Food for Wales, Food from Wales* makes explicit the environmental limits within which we must work, and the need to place these at the heart of decision making. But there remain inherent tensions between the drivers of competitiveness and the environmental limits within which we can farm sustainably. The focus in the food strategy is on sustainability, resilience, competitiveness, and profitability, and with the at least implicit assumption

that increases in the sustainability and resilience will lead to increased competitiveness and profitability. This may be true in the longer term, in the meantime it is difficult to see how ecological costs can be internalized within the Welsh food production system at the same time as produce remains cost-competitive internationally, and attractive to cost-conscious and cash strapped Welsh consumers. This is one of the most complex, politically-sensitive (and yet critically important) challenges of the Assembly's next decade.