

Food ethics in the UK – from small beginnings to food citizenship and beyond¹

Geoff Tansey,

Member, Food Ethics Council
Curator, Food Systems Academy

E-mail: geoff@tansey.org.uk

Building on the Food Ethics Council's approach and core concepts of respect for fairness, wellbeing and freedom, the author reflects personally on lessons learned from the Food Ethics Council's work over the past two decades. This experience highlights the importance of taking a systemic approach and the need to transform rules, incentives and mindsets to achieve ethical food systems. Treating each other as food citizens, rather than just consumers, is central to this. The paper discusses some of the ways the Council seeks, alongside others, to empower people to shape a better food system and address controversial issues in the face of climate destabilisation, biodiversity loss, changing trading relationships and growing inequality.

I first came to Izmir in December 1978 to help set up an agricultural extension and communication centre at the University of the Aegean. This city has clearly changed a lot since then, as has the world. The Food Ethics Council (FEC) in the UK was set up in 1998. It is an independent charity under UK law funded largely by grants from charitable bodies, and to a small extent by subscriptions to a business forum and fees for any project work undertaken. I discussed the Council's origins and its work since its establishment at the first Congress ([Tansey, 2017](#)).

The Food Ethics Council is not an academic research group, but an independent group of 15-20 people acting in a voluntary, unpaid capacity from a range of backgrounds – including academic, farming, business, non-governmental – and a small, paid, staff team, all concerned to accelerate the shift towards food systems that respect people, animals and the planet and celebrate diversity of crops, cultures and diets. To do this we believe putting the ethical challenges at the centre of thinking about food and farming is crucial. Failing to do so often means that decisions are short-term and focus on a single issue without greater thought for the wider consequences. We want to help ensure long-term decisions are made with sufficient thought for wider considerations across all relevant areas. These are focused around respect for well-being for people, animals and all life on the planet, respect for autonomy and freedom of action both for people and animals and a respect for justice as fairness in our food systems.

From tiny beginnings with less than a half-time paid staff member, the Council now has the equivalent of 2.2 full-time staff who work incredibly hard doing the

¹ This is a slightly revised version of the paper presented at the 2nd International Congress on Agricultural and Food Ethics, Izmir, Turkey, 24-25 October 2019, organised by the Turkish Agricultural and Food Ethics Association. I am grateful to Dan Crossley, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council, for his input into this paper.

work on behalf of the council members and are supported by them in that work. But we are still tiny. We have sought to be a catalyst and to nourish the discussions and thinking around food by bringing together people and providing ethical tools and safe spaces for honest and meaningful dialogue about the issues that face us. But we also challenge the status quo and accepted ways of thinking as it is these that have led us into the kind of challenges we face in our food systems today. We also want to inspire and promote ethical approaches that look at things in the round, drawing together those different ethical elements and considering solutions that tackle the root causes of the challenges we face.

Over the past 20 years or so we have produced many different reports, magazines looking at a range of issues in our food system and briefings for parliamentarians and others. We have provided a space for people to discuss challenging issues, for example, examining power in the food system. We also convened an inquiry into food and fairness, which focused on fairness in global food supply chains. We broke down the concept of fairness into 'fair shares', 'fair play', and 'fair say' in our report *Food Justice* ([FEC, 2010](#)). What has changed quite dramatically since we began is the realisation that human actions through fossil-fuelled industrialisation and the expansion of intensive farming systems have both led to a huge loss of biodiversity on the planet and man-made climate change, which is destabilising the environments in which we produce food everywhere.

While we are a British-based NGO and we focus on the UK, we do so within a global context. This is partly because we have to recognise that the past actions of Britain – through its colonial past, involvement in the slave trade, restructuring of the economies of many places around the world to meet its needs – have helped shaped the food system we have today. Moreover, Britain has a direct impact on people around the world today through its global sourcing of food to provide a large part of the food consumed in the country for current dietary patterns. It is estimated that 70% of the environmental impact of the food we eat in the UK happens outside our borders ([Ruiter et al, 2016](#)). The UK food system is indeed part of a global system, and the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss are global challenges that cannot be solved by an individual country.

Yet we in Britain must take responsibility for what we can do to address these today and to respect the rights of coming generations for healthy, fair and sustainable food systems. In October 2019, a friend of my younger daughter came to visit us with her 7 week-old baby. This child, all being well, will be 81 in the year 2100. He and all babies and young people are a very direct connection with the impact of climate change and biodiversity loss on the nature of the world when most of us here are gone. As the pioneering Welsh government legislation on the Well-being of Future Generations Act makes clear, it is our responsibility to consider the policies and practices we have today in the light of the impact upon those still to come. Indeed, such a concern can also be seen as one of the driving elements behind the United Nations' sustainable development goals, which are great in their aspirations but to date weak in their fulfilment. Around the world young people, inspired by Greta Thunberg, are calling adults to

account. They want immediate action to tackle climate change and safeguard their future. Transformation of our current food systems is a crucial ingredient in that.

One area that the Council has been exploring more recently is food citizenship. This is to help people address food system change by shifting the way we think about ourselves and how we talk about people so that we no longer think of people simply as consumers at the end of a long food chain, but as food citizens who take an active part in shaping the activities carried out in food and farming. When we see people purely as consumers we are diminishing their humanity, confining it to be about what they choose to spend their money on. We are reducing what it is to be human to being about the economic power that you hold and suggesting that the main (or only) way to influence change is by shifting where you put your spending. Now, of course, people do have different reasons for their food choices based on their values and we see a shift in people's concerns as expressed through the products they want to buy. These may be ones good for health, or the environment, or for animal welfare, or fairly traded, or the cheapest they can get because they are poor and do not have choice and autonomy that those with greater buying power have.

This new phase of our work began in 2016 in cooperation with the New Citizenship Project, in which one of our newer council members, Jon Alexander, is involved. We cooperated with them in a project called 'the Future of Food: Beyond the Consumer'. This was a 10-month enquiry that brought together representatives of six organisations from across the food system to explore and experiment with this new way of thinking. The project culminated in a report of June 2017 on 'Food citizenship: how thinking of ourselves differently can change the future of our food system' ([New Citizenship Project with FEC, 2017](#)). This sparked huge interest from individuals working across the UK food and farming system and so the question was how to build a movement that would help a food citizenship mindset grow. Since then the Food Ethics Council has taken on 4 key tasks to accelerate the transition from consumerism to citizenship being the dominant mindset in the food system. One is to *name* the food citizenship movement so pioneers know what they are part of. Another is to *connect* those pioneers to one another. A third is to *nourish* them with relationships, learning resources and support, and finally to *illuminate* the stories they have as important examples of the future that is taking place right now. This resulted in a report launched in October 2019 called 'Harnessing the power of food citizenship' ([FEC, 2019](#))

As it says in this report:

"The dominant narrative in the UK food and farming sector today is that as individuals we are merely consumers at the end of a food chain. Daily messages tell us that being a consumer is our only source of power to influence society as a whole and, specifically, our food system. Our role is to choose between products and services, not to participate in the systems that provide us with our food. We become demotivated and cut off from the food we eat."

Research shows that exposure to the word 'consumer' significantly decreases our sense of responsibility in shaping the world around us. It also decreases our trust in each other and our belief that we can be active participants in society. We have reduced concern for others. We tend to be more selfish and self-interested. As consumers, those of us with money feel disengaged while those of us without it feel disempowered. Our relationship with food is transactional...

Food citizenship challenges the assumption that we are nothing more than consumers. Its impact cannot be underestimated. What we care about and how we feel about our role in society significantly shifts when we are treated as citizens rather than consumers. As citizens, we care about animals being treated humanely, about the wellbeing of the environment, about the livelihoods of those who grow and make our food.

Common Cause Foundation found that most of us care *more* about things like 'helpfulness', 'equality' and 'protection of nature', than we do about 'wealth', 'public image' and 'success.' In fact, their research found that 74% of respondents place greater importance on compassionate values than selfish values."²

Clearly, how you spend your money and what you spend it on does have an impact and can be informed by ethical concerns but it is insufficient to address the systemic challenges our food systems face. These require action at the political and economic level, addressing the structures and frameworks within which the different actors in society act. This is what citizens, rather than consumers, influence. However, there are a number of challenges in thinking about the citizenship approach, which we are still discussing. As council member and philosopher Nigel Dower points out, a citizen in its most formal sense is merely a member of a political community (*civitas/polis*) with certain legal rights and duties – in respect to consuming (mainly buying and selling), food rights and duties as defined by food regulations in force. A citizen in this sense does not have any legal duties to engage in political or public deliberation (though in some countries there is a legal duty to vote).

Citizenship also carries with it the idea of moral rights and duties, but there is less agreement about what these are even in regard to people who are citizens in the legal sense. Hence the distinction sometimes drawn between a rights (e.g. 'liberal') conception of citizenship and a public duty (republican) conception of citizenship. A citizen has various rights, broadly liberty rights (traditional liberal 'freedom from restriction' rights), socio-economic rights (of the welfare state but also consumer rights) and political rights (rights to engage in political activity). What are important (between and within these categories) is contested (in some countries political rights and some liberty rights are denied altogether). Sometimes the rights approach is called the liberal conception of citizenship and this is contrasted to the republican conception in which engagement in '*res publica*' (public matters) is central and a citizen's duty includes engagement in public deliberation – on-going not just voting every now and then.

² FEC, 2019, p 8

This moral conception underlies the legal conception but is broader than the latter. Membership of a moral community with rights and duties within it is central to claims that within a political community everyone living within a political community has rights (e.g. to live a life of dignity) and duties, whether formally citizens or not. It underlies the idea of global citizenship with all humans as members of a global community with human rights (both ethically and legally in terms of international Human Rights law). It underlies the idea of 'ecological citizenship'.

We are just embarking on this work to help change the mindset of how we think of ourselves in relation to our food. As you can see there are a range of ways of thinking about this and we are engaged on that journey to help people do so. Our food citizenship work is a first step in the journey and we would love to build on this with input and involvement from others who are interested. Personally, I think one of the central challenges in our mindsets is to think of ourselves first as global citizens of this precious unique planet which is the home to the whole of the human race. We should think of ourselves as people who live in a diverse range of communities and cultures grouped into various national entities which are interdependent upon each other but which also contribute greatly to each other through sharing the cultures and diversity in a respectful way. What is global is now local and what is local is global. Looking forward to the life of new-born child and looking back to our grandparents suggests we all have a much longer term perspective than we usually think about, at least 200 years. Without this global sense of citizenship and longer-term perspective it will be impossible to address the larger challenges beyond the reach of national boundaries for the solutions. Food seems to me an essential way of helping us to understand this and also to be prepared for that sharing of knowledge and skills that will be necessary to adapt to the enormous challenges we face through climate change this century.

Three areas stand out that have to be reconciled as critical conflicts in our food system. One is that the current system is not providing good nutrition for the world as, José Graziano de Silva, the former Director General of UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) pointed out, speaking at the plenary session of Committee on World Food Security on 17 October 2017. Professor Tim Benton, former UK Champion for Global Food Security, who is now at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, better known in the UK as Chatham House, points out that while we've seen a drop in food prices and a great increase in productivity of the basic foodstuffs around the world this is also matched by an increasing level of obesity, overweight and non-communicable diseases associated with this such as diabetes and coronary heart disease ([Benton, 2019](#)). On top of this, there is huge waste throughout the food system, as food is insufficiently valued. Second, current farming practices have led to the huge loss of biodiversity and a massive increase in meat and livestock consumption. And finally there is the challenge of rewarding people fairly for producing food and delivering it through our food systems to our mouths and dealing with the output after we have consumed it.

The challenges these pose for a rich country like the UK may be different from those in other countries or where consumption patterns are different but these

systems all connect and we in the Food Ethics Council in the UK are trying to focus on areas that we can do something about. In our continuing and future work, we will be looking at how we can help develop more ethical business models for livestock. This recognises the need to reduce the consumption of meat and livestock products as part of the way to tackle the climate emergency as a key leverage point. It will build on our original 'Livestock Dialogues' series that we ran with WWF-UK that started a decade ago, which helped catalyse the launch of an alliance in the UK called 'Eating Better' that has now grown to over 60 organisations that promote 'less and better' meat eating.

The Council will also, alongside others, be looking at the links between food and poverty. In this last decade in Britain there has been a growing level of household food insecurity, shown at its most dire, in people in work having to go to food banks for urgent food aid, in what is the sixth richest country in the world. We want to reverse the entrenchment of this emergency food aid provision. Again this builds on much work we have done for a number of years exploring food and poverty in the UK, including research for the UK government. The inequalities have been highlighted even further during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The third area we will also be focusing on is the power dynamics in the food system. Here our initial focus is on food and farming research because where the Government tends to focus its research money on and our subsidies will underpin what kind of farming is happening and is developed into the future.

The changing relationship of the UK with its European and international partners over the next few years will be one of the most challenging times for what happens to food and farming in the UK since the UK joined the European Union in 1993. It is clear in the discussions going on at the moment that the kind of concerns we have, whether on health, well-being, labour relations, appropriate standards and so much more, are not simply technical or economic challenges but fundamentally ethical choices about the kind of food system and world we want and the values expressed through that. As Dee Woods one of our newest council members said in the introduction to our new Food Citizenship report

"Food citizenship is much more than having the privilege to choose good food. It is about having individual and collective agency within a society where capitalism, social inequities, and a complex food web intersect. It demands of us a responsibility to be truly humanitarian, to be protectors of nature and to stand for real democracy and human rights. Our food citizenship places us as rights bearers at the heart of the right to food, to hold our government accountable to its duty to ensure all people are able to access culturally appropriate, healthy, sustainable and just food."³

Henry Dimbleby, who is the Independent Lead in developing the National Food Strategy for England, has embraced the citizen approach, saying:

³ FEC 2019, p 5

“Any vision of a better food system has to be built upon an understanding of what citizens value. It cannot be generated in a vacuum. Citizens will also bring fresh ideas, insights, and energy to the process. In developing a National Food Strategy, we will involve people from all over the country in a national conversation about how we should transform our food system.”⁴

The Food Ethics Council’s Business Forum, which has now run 75 events over the past twelve years, is a community of business leaders addressing the big questions in food and farming. Over the years, it has explored almost every topic you can think of, from the role of advertising to fish welfare, from lab-grown meat to household food insecurity. The Council enables food and farming business leaders to discuss challenging issues in a safe space under the Chatham House rule, which means the participants in those discussions are not identified and neither is who said what. However, we do publish (non-attributed) reports from those meetings so that the substance of what is discussed is available to inform debate more widely.

We have also been working to further strengthen and to promote the use of the Food Sustainability Index, a tool developed by the Barilla Centre for Food & Nutrition Foundation and the Economist Intelligence Unit to assess how different countries are performing on food sustainability. It is not perfect, but it is a good attempt at an ‘in the round’ assessment, bringing together lots of different aspects including food waste and loss, sustainable agriculture and health & nutrition. We have shone a spotlight on the UK’s performance, which is disappointing (24th out of the 67 countries included), to put pressure on the UK government and to explore lessons we can learn from other countries leading the way (e.g. France). Turkey sits at 58th. ([FEC, 2018](#))

We have also been experimenting with new ways of engaging people around particular policy issues, especially those that are controversial, through some ‘food policy on trial’ events. In these we invite four experts to provide different perspectives, usually for and against various policy ideas, that have some currency today and relate to different ethical challenges. A jury of food council members hears their evidence and questions them in front of an audience drawn from business, government and non-governmental organisations, journalists and any interested members of the public who wish to come, who also are able to ask the expert panel questions. The council members then withdraw for a period of short deliberation about the proposal and produce an initial reflection on the policy proposal in question. Once the council members have left, those in the audience are invited to state their views on what should happen with this policy proposal. This is not communicated to the members of the council until after they finished the brief deliberations. These deliberations are summarised in a report (‘jury’s verdict’) that is published after the event. The first one was about whether or not there should be a meat tax -and I was a member of the jury for that - and the second one concerned plain packaging on foods. We share the audio recordings on our website afterwards, so that anyone can listen back and come up with their own verdicts.

⁴ FEC 2019 p 5

These are just some of things the Council's brilliant staff are engaged with on behalf of the Council. We think there are a number of factors which have helped us make some progress (albeit recognising there is a long way to go). These include:

- Our independence
- Using an ethical lens / ethical analysis
- Tackling the root causes
- Bringing people together in a safe space
- Respecting each others' views
- Not shying away from the most contentious issues, persevering and recognising that some change can take a long time to happen
- Being open-minded and learning from who is doing things well

Arguably ethics has never been more important in food and farming. The challenges we face are huge and urgent. However, there are positive signs emerging – from civil society organisations, some progressive businesses and even some national governments - that we must build on.

We do not claim to have all, or even most of, the answers, to the ethical challenges we face in negotiating our way to creating a fair food system for all. The Council is also keen to listen and learn from how people are engaging with ethics in Turkey and in other countries.

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