



A license to produce? Farmer interpretations of the new food security agenda

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ABSTRACT

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Drawing on the findings of empirical research conducted in the South West of England, this paper explores how farmers make sense of re-emerging imperatives for 'food security' in UK policy and political discourse. The analysis presented is based on two types of empirical inquiry. First, an extensive survey of 1543 farmers, exploring the basic associations farmers make with the term 'food security'. Second, a novel methodological experiment in 'deliberative polling' undertaken with a group of 33 farmers in the area of Mid Devon, where farmers were polled on issues relating to food security discourse before and after a process of group discussion. Participants in the study are revealed as generally very alert to the emerging contours of the wider food security debate. Most aligned themselves with the normative goal of increasing the productive capacity of UK land resources, and asserted this concern in relation to wider issues of sustainable land use. However the study also reveals key discrepancies between policy appeals to food security and the values and priorities of farmers, not least through participant appeals to greater national self-determination in food supplies. This is viewed as a pretext upon which patterns of economically and socially viable local farming might be re-invigorated.

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1. Introduction

Agricultural uses of land are key contexts in which emerging agendas for food security will find their material expression, yet we know very little about how these agendas are being understood by farming publics. Embodying a range of quite different sentiments and meanings (Maxwell, 1996; Mooney and Hunt, 2009), the food security imperative is opening up fundamentally vexed debates about where priorities for agro-food systems lie (Lang et al., 2009). From the perspective of agricultural land use, policy discourses on global food security point to a future where the provision of nutritious, safe and affordable food for a rising world population will need to be realised against the backdrop of increasingly acute limits to production. Within critical discourse the implication for many is that agro-food systems will need to adapt in quite fundamental ways to avoid impending crisis, yet it is also the case that the new food security imperative is giving rise to more conventional, and narrowly conceived, productivist logics (Tomlinson, 2013). The concern is that agendas for food security may serve less a context in which systemic weaknesses in current arrangements for agriculture will be addressed and overcome, but instead aggravated and amplified (Lowe et al., 2009). That food security can be constructed as simultaneously a context for, and threat to,

sustainable approaches to farmland management, emphasises the need to explore how corresponding policy and political agendas are being mediated on the ground.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore how those responsible for managing agricultural land are responding to, and rationalizing, different sentiments associated with imperative as they begin to have practical and material influence. Our aim is not to develop a new conceptual framing of food security, although we acknowledge such efforts are taking place (see for example Horlings and Marsden, 2011), but rather, to examine how the emerging contours of this policy agenda are understood and interpreted against the lived realities of farming. We do so through the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected as part of a larger and ongoing programme of research on the future of the land economy in the South West of England. The paper reports specifically on two components of our recent work. First, we present some descriptive findings from an extensive postal survey of 1543 farm businesses across the South West region, detailing the way farmers interpret the term 'food security' and drawing out some basic patterns of response according to enterprise and farmer characteristics. These findings provide the context for a more in-depth analysis of farmer attitudes to some key premises of the food security debate based on a process of deliberative polling. This element of the research involved a group of 33 farmers, living and working in the area of mid-Devon, responding to different propositions associated with the idea of food security before and after a process of extended group discussion. By deploying these two

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techniques the paper is able to draw out some qualitative and quantitative conclusions about the way farmers are reacting to, and reasoning about, the new food security imperative, and furthermore, document whether and how views change as a result of deliberation.

We begin our analysis by establishing briefly the policy and political context to UK debates about food security and how UK agriculture features within these. The methodological context for exploring farmer understandings of food security through extensive survey and deliberative polling is then described. Key findings from this research process are examined and accounted for and their implications for food security agendas in the UK assessed. The paper highlights the essentially varied ways in which farmers make sense of food security discourse, and points to some discrepancies between policy appeals to food security and the values and priorities of those seeking to reconcile the idea of 'sustainable intensification' with a viable farming future.

2. Food security and agriculture in the UK

The key parameters of the food security imperative and how it has evolved within geo-political discourse have been well established. Global analysts suggest that without significant innovation and adaption in capacities to produce, distribute and exchange food, humanity faces a bleak and divided future in rising to emerging demographic trends and patterns of economic development. Our purpose in this section is to consider briefly this re-emerging policy and political discourse from a UK perspective, with a particular focus on the role of UK agriculture. In general terms food security has emerged as a key marker of UK food policy over recent years. A number of assessments of food security from a UK perspective have been undertaken (Defra, 2006, 2008, 2009a, 2010a), and it is notable that the publication of the two most recent of these assessments have run in tandem with wider pronouncements on UK food policy (Defra, 2009b, 2010b). Government in the UK follows a wider geo-political rubric in defining food security broadly: as "ensuring the availability of, and access to, affordable, safe and nutritious food, sufficient for an active lifestyle, for all, at all times" (Defra, 2009a: 6). In this section our concern is not to rehearse and exhaust the multifarious ways in which food security may be rendered meaningful in a UK context given this body of strategic policy work, but rather, to provide an analytical frame by which farmer interpretations can begin to be inspected from a UK perspective. With this in mind, we focus on two key areas of debate.

The first debate concerns the foundational issue of food availability and supply: the different political and policy rationales that have emerged for expanding the productive capacity of UK agriculture. It has been suggested by government that "one of the most important contributions that the UK can make to global, and our own, food security is having a thriving and productive agriculture sector in the UK" (Defra, 2008: 28) and in this respect, it is significant that official policy discourses have overwhelmingly tended to define UK agriculture's role in terms of its potential contribution to the world food basket: that is, exploiting natural advantages in domestic food production to meet rising demand elsewhere. The policy and political narrative is one of liberal market rationales being aligned to a deeper moral undertaking: at one and the same time a way of delivering on international obligations, such as the Millennium Development goals, and realizing new opportunities within the global market. As an influential report by the House of Commons Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA, 2009) concluded: "[w]e have considered the options and believe that the UK has a moral duty to make the most of its position in the globe and its natural advantages for producing certain types of food"(61).

It is notable that a corresponding narrative on the need for greater national self-determination in food supplies is given little credence within UK food policy. Government has suggested that "[w]e want UK agriculture to produce as much food as possible" (Defra, 2010c: 12) but it has long sought to promulgate the view that, as part of the process of 'reconnecting' farmers to the market, the security of UK food supplies lay in the fate of globalised and liberalized trading regimes (Defra, 2002; PCFF, 2002). For instance, it was precisely in the context of assessing risks and uncertainties associated with encouraging a "more open, less subsidy dependent" UK agriculture that government embarked on its formative evidence and analysis paper on food security (Defra, 2006: ii). The paper suggested that, while increasing the productive capacities and efficiencies of UK agriculture will undoubtedly play a significant role in helping to realise domestic food demand, the problem of UK food security has little to do with a drive for self-sufficiency. It explicitly stressed that "as a rich country, open to trade, the UK is well placed to access sufficient foodstuffs through a well-functioning world market" (Defra, 2006: iii). The problem of securing adequate food supplies was described as first and foremost rooted in poverty and subsistence agriculture and therefore "hugely more relevant for developing countries" (Defra, 2006: 23). This view has prevailed in subsequent policy reviews. Government's influential *Food Matters* report (PMSU, 2008), an "across the board" analysis of approaches to food policy, suggested that access to open markets provides the means by which continuity of food supply into UK food chains is ensured over the long term, and further that, "attempting to pursue national food security in isolation from the global context is unlikely to be practicable, sustainable or financially rational" (PMSU, 2008: x). The report asserted that not only would drives towards self-sufficiency reduce export earnings, and make domestic diets less varied, but it would expose that system to new vulnerabilities, for example, to disease outbreaks or harvest failures.

Nonetheless, we suggest the issue of improving the stability and resilience of national food supplies, particularly in the context of absorbing unanticipated 'shocks' in commodity markets, has emerged as a significant background concern, and this has provided fertile ground for opening up debates not only about the political and social importance of affordable food, but on potential vulnerabilities of a UK food system built on global interdependencies (Ambler-Edwards et al., 2009; Bridge and Johnson, 2009; EFRA, 2009; HM Government/Defra, 2009). In the face of market volatilities, some have pointed to potential weaknesses in the capacity of the UK food system to continue feeding its population in perpetuity. It has been suggested for instance that:

"farming organizations have taken the opportunity to lobby the government for more support for food producers and the nation's food production capacity for both domestic and international markets" (Barling et al., 2008:2, our emphasis)

This point is also made by Potter (2009: 253), who cites the response of the National Farmers Union in a House of Commons Select Committee "of the need 'to exploit spare capacity in farming' in order to deliver on more ambitious self-sufficiency goals". As Potter suggests, this rendering of the food security debate has also asserted influence at an EU level in the context of the emerging mandates of CAP reform; one "seized on by farming interests and some (EU) member states to justify continuation of production aids and a policy approach that some believe could return the CAP to its mercantilist roots" (Potter, 2009: 253).

A second and related key area of debate concerns whether and how this presumed need to expand production can be reconciled with wider limits to sustainability. It is widely suggested, for instance, that food production goals will need to be realised against

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