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Food as a commodity, human right or common good

Different framings of food may shape food policies and their impact. Despite acknowledging food systems' complexities, the European Commission's Farm to Fork Strategy still addresses food as a commodity instead of a human right or common good.

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A report from the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors (GCSA) to the European Commission recently 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”¹. This implies the need for deep reforms in food policy that touch upon every part of the food system. The GCSA’s advice was informed by an Evidence Review Report (ERR)² that was conducted independently to ensure academic rigour and prevent claims of political bias. Though intended to shape the Commission’s new Farm to Fork (F2F) Strategy³, the GCSA’s recommendations have been followed only partially, and the strategy remains largely caught up in a ‘food as commodity’ narrative. Building on the F2F case, we outline several framings of contemporary food systems to show how each of them can influence policy development.

Framings of contemporary food systems

‘Framing’ refers to the process of identifying and defining problems and the procedures for their solution⁴. While frames are often taken for granted, they are rarely neutral in their political effects, reflecting underlying values that shape the problems to be solved and potential policy responses^{5,6}. Without appropriate scrutiny, framing can involve subjectively based value judgments⁷, 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 (and we accept that thinking in terms of ‘food systems’ is itself a form of framing). Three such framings have been identified in the

ERR: food as commodity, human right and common good. Table 1 shows how these framings relate 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. This framing highlights food as a tradable good, based on its economic value as measured by its market price⁸. 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 (that is, its market price) to become dissociated from its value for feeding people. The commodity framing is often embedded in a linear narrative of economic growth and is closely connected to a productionist view of the food system, where state support 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 criteria⁹. This narrative provides the basis for different policy framings of the food system such as food sovereignty^{10,11}. 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. This framing relies on complex social arrangements involving natural resources and their joint administration, designed to meet the needs of the community whose members 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 the idea of food as a purely private good¹². 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, seeds and knowledge. 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 actions¹³.

Policy implications of food framing

In May 2020 the European Commission published its 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 a source of economic, environmental and social problems¹⁴, the F2F Strategy recognizes the need to transform food systems. The strategy’s positive messages around shorter supply chains, support for organic farming and the promotion of a circular bio-based economy deserve to be commended. The strategy 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-fertilizers, protein feed, bioenergy and bio-chemicals; and a reduction in the use of antimicrobials.

Yet, we argue, it fell short 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 the ‘food-as-commodity’ framing, embedded in an economic growth narrative. This was most clearly exemplified in its emphasis on non-binding codes of conduct 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 subject to voluntary guidelines and jointly elaborated codes of conduct, with some reference to the role of tax incentives and other fiscal measures. While there is some recognition of the ‘food environment’ (that is, the context in which consumers engage with the food system to make decisions on acquiring, preparing and consuming food), the strategy failed to acknowledge the extent to which individual choices are shaped by wider institutional forces and social inequalities.

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-emphasizes 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 criticized for presenting a falsely depoliticized picture of the food system, downplaying the importance of power asymmetries¹⁵. Power asymmetries are widely acknowledged to affect the food system, including the vested interests of oligopolistic food retailers, large landowners and some agri-food corporations¹⁶. Despite its intention of “showing the way” to more sustainable outcomes, the F2F Strategy makes little reference to power apart from an acknowledgement that food processors, food service operators and retailers “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). 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 that perpetuate deeply institutionalized ways of thinking about food⁶. 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 another ERR from 2019 that dealt with the science–policy interface under conditions of uncertainty and complexity⁴. 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 emphasized whilst others are downplayed or ignored. The framing of food-as-commodity, for example, may be so familiar as to be tacit — not consciously recognized as a means of admitting some possibilities into policy deliberations while excluding others. Scientific advice may be incongruent with this tacit knowledge that has been shaped by the socio-political environment in which policy-makers operate.

Conclusions

Framings of food may impact on the policy domain in different ways. The ‘translation’ of the GCSA’s scientific opinion into the European Commission’s Farm to Fork Strategy highlights the tensions between scientific evidence, expert opinion and political expediency. 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 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’. For example, the power dynamics 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. Practical implications of transitioning to a new framing of food systems should also be considered, as illustrated by a recent blog-post¹⁷ arguing that the food-as-commodity framing carries certain legal obligations that help ensure food safety and consumer rights.

Our analysis is supported by other experts active in this space, including the Committee on World Food Security, which prioritizes a right-to-food narrative in their call to consolidate conceptual thinking around food security¹⁸. Our argument contributes to a wider debate on the relationship between science and policy, where framing affects the way some problem definitions, knowledge claims and policy options are emphasized, whilst others are downplayed or excluded. It is the role of social scientists to make the

framing of policy options 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. Such reflection is key to the development of new insights based on a wider evidence base, as well as the identification of alternative ways of thinking, new transition pathways and potentially disruptive measures for reaching a more just and sustainable food system.

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Peter Jackson and Marta Guadalupe Rivera Ferre took joint responsibility for developing the argument and for writing and revising successive drafts. The other co-authors contributed equally in offering comments and revisions. Marianne Penker was responsible for drafting the Table.

Competing Interests:

The authors have no competing interests.

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Table 1: Framings of food and their policy implications

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>

Each framing is associated with typical narrative components, linked to possible policy interventions and to specific action points in the Farm to Fork (F2F) Strategy. Adapted from SAPEA (2020).