Ensuring Food and Nutrition Security for Everyone

Overview

Food insecurity (sometimes referred to as food poverty) describes the situation in which an individual or household has difficulties accessing sufficient, safe, culturally appropriate and nutritious food to meet dietary requirements and preferences for a healthy life. During Covid-19, 4.9 million adults in the UK (9%) were experiencing food insecurity. Although now partially alleviated, and despite the fact that supermarket shelves are now better stocked, food insecurity remains consistently higher than pre Covid-19 levels (Food Foundation, 2021). This is a crucial issue as we emerge from a significant population crisis and the UK navigates uncharted waters following Brexit. It is reported that the UK faces a future of food insecurity and rising prices (Lang and McKee, 2018). The pandemic highlighted the importance of resilient and sustainable supply chains.

Food insecurity affects physical and mental health, and social and emotional wellbeing. The link between food insecurity and poverty is clear although population groups, including the clinically vulnerable. There is increasing recognition that the causes of population crises are closely related to human encroachment on the natural environment, biodiversity loss, climate change and the structure of our food system (IPBES, 2020). The reliance in the UK on just-in-time global supply chains highlighted weaknesses during the pandemic (Power et al., 2020). In addition, rises in global food prices, shipping costs and Brexit documentation burden are contributing to higher commodity expense. A co-ordinated and multi-sectoral initiative is therefore required to achieve a reliable sustainable food system (British Retail Consortium, 2021). Recent studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between food insecurity and the risk of anxiety and stress, with clinically significant levels of mental distress within the population rising from 18.9% (2018-19) to 27.3% in April 2020 (Pierce et al., 2020; Pourmotabbed et al., 2020). Notwithstanding, individuals in more interconnected neighbourhoods (as measured by perceived cohesion) have lower likelihood of developing depression (Le et al., 2013). Building collective resilience, boosting and protecting social support can ameliorate feelings of isolation leading to improved public health outcomes (Norris et al., 2008).

Preliminary Findings

Data gathered through semi-structured interviews with participants, including the clinically vulnerable across England were analysed thematically. Findings highlight; 1) anxiety regarding food insecurity 2) role of community cohesion 3) opportunities for SMEs to expand direct routes to market reflecting retail displacement and 4) further research needed to help local authorities react to challenges in food supply vulnerability.

Proposed Intervention

The need for Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs): Policy options for maintaining UK food security include increasing UK productivity and diversifying the supply chain; i.e. promoting local retail patterns and encouraging community resilience (Lang and McKee, 2018). The proposed intervention would be innovative, re-energising food supply chains that re-connect producers and consumers and re-localise food provision. SFSCs are defined as food systems where the number of intermediaries is minimised and produce can be traced back to a named farmer (Kneafsey et al., 2013). This can be face-to-face (e.g. farm shops, farmers markets, pick your own) or proximate (e.g. consumer cooperatives and local shops).

The development of SFSCs contributes to preservation of biodiversity, natural resources, and cultural heritage (Renting et al., 2003). It also, in part, reflects the current transition in rural Europe concerning the crisis of conventional intensive and 'productivist' agriculture and the public consumer pressure for a larger variety of distinctive 'quality' food products (Giampietri et al., 2016). Short chains embody a more endogenous, territorial, ethical and ecological approach towards food products framed in tradition and transparency. A successful supply chain strategy is one that is competitive (lean and fast), partnered (working together collaboratively and transparently), responsive (to consumers) and sustainable (lack of complexity) (Kearney, 2017). While SFSCs combine elements of all four strategies, this intervention will identify where local suppliers can creatively facilitate accessibility to those considered vulnerable and to those consumers who wish to support local enterprise. The UN Committee on World Food Security reflects the need for co-ordinated and multi-sectoral initiatives farm to fork (CFS, 2021). Viewed through a sociological lens SFSCs have the ability to produce healthy and nutritious food, enhance biodiversity, adapt to climate change and aid the local economy (Charatsari et al., 2018). A roadmap to 2030 for UK businesses to move towards a low-carbon and environmentally sustainable future further endorses the debate and could provide a template for farmers coming together in cooperatives to reach

consumers who are increasingly interested in buying locally and from small-scale producers (Terra-carta, 2021). The proposed intervention embraces the Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO, 2008) four pillars approach to food security as identified by the dimensions of availability, stability of supply, access and utilisation. Although several factors influence food security, a focus on identifying the provision point; i.e. the place at which communities access food within their locality has not been addressed. Opportunities created by digital technology could provide an answer and a food app would be a solution (Michelini et al., 2018). Studies have highlighted the potential technology-based applications may hold in communicating detailed but clear individualised information (Lowe et al., 2015). Through utilising web or mobile applications, data provided can be tailored to the user (Kalnikaite et al., 2012) and can promote greater engagement through interactivity (Valdivieso-López et al., 2013). The potential of solutions is being enabled by the rapidly growing number of smart phone users. Such technology is estimated to be accessed by over a third of the world's population with penetration rates of 96% in Northern Europe (Statista, 2021). Government has acknowledged the challenge of ensuring food and nutrition security for everyone but as yet solutions have been sparse and untested. For the first time this intervention will develop a creative innovative technical solution that will explore a diverse approach to improving quality of life for those identified as vulnerable, seek to provide voice and expression to those who may feel unheard while simultaneously encourage local economic development and address a significant public health concern.