

Briefing 445

Food security and the UK

Summary

The decline in the self-sufficiency of our food supplies does not mean that food security has worsened. Rather it relates to agriculture's ability to meet consumer demands. Wide sourcing and open markets have produced remarkable resilience in our food supplies in recent decades.

This briefing is taken from *'Food Security and the UK: An Evidence and Analysis Paper'* published by Defra in December 2006. The full paper can be downloaded from <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/reports/foodsecurity/foodsecurity.doc>

Introduction

Food security is often raised in discussions about the shift to a more open, and less subsidy-dependent, agriculture. There are two main triggers to these discussions:

- In the UK, the self-sufficiency ratio of domestic production to consumption has been in decline over the last decade. Moreover the reforms of the CAP, together with the prospect of trade liberalisation in agricultural products, are expected to reduce domestic agricultural production in the UK and Europe.
- There is a growing sense of the potential for disruption to domestic food supply because of climate change, international energy concerns, geopolitical tensions and international terrorism

Other factors have contributed to a sense of unease: the power of globally-sourcing supermarkets; a sharp decline in farm incomes; public health concerns with food safety; environmental issues; the potential for short-term interruptions to fuel supply, and longer-term concerns over energy security.

What is "food security"?

Food security for a developed economy like the UK is multi-faceted and complex and various definitions exist. The common themes are: availability of food; access of consumers to affordable, nutritional and safe food; resilience of the food system to significant disruptions, and public confidence in that system.

The history of self sufficiency

Food imports have been a crucial element of Britain's food supply since the industrial revolution. They were severely disrupted during the two world wars. Maintaining food supply then involved securing the flow of imports, as well as boosting home production. The post-war drive for greater self-sufficiency across Europe was a response to wartime and post-war shortages. In the 1970s the incentives provided by the CAP boosted the UK's self-sufficiency. Since the 1980s the return of globalisation and other economic trends have weakened self-sufficiency arguments, especially at national level, while self-

sufficiency has also declined. Nevertheless the table below shows that current levels of UK self-sufficiency are in fact pretty normal by historical standards.

Approximate British self-sufficiency over different periods

pre – 1750	around 100% (in temperate produce)
1750 – 1830s	around 90-100% except for poor harvests
1870s	around 60%
1914	around 40%
1930s	30 - 40%
1950s	40 - 50%
1980s	60 – 70%
2000s	60%

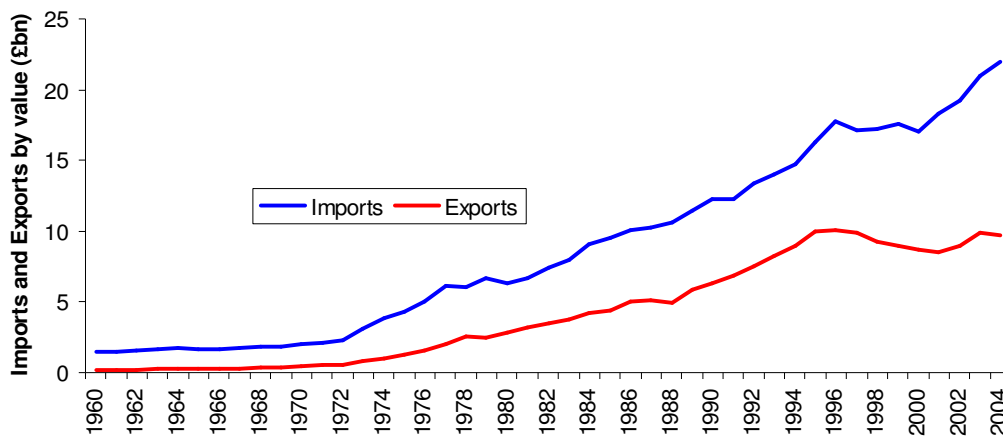
The more recent decline in self sufficiency, illustrated in the graph below, reflects a lack of export growth after 1994 and a tailing off and reduction in agricultural output. Long-term factors driving these trends include:

- o changing tastes towards more exotic and varied produce;
- o fewer trade restrictions;
- o cheaper transport and communications;
- o wider sourcing by supermarkets.

Short-term factors include:

- o BSE-inflicted ban on UK beef exports and the Over Thirty Month Scheme which diverted home production away from consumption;
- o Foot and Mouth Disease in 2001, which reduced pigmeat exports;
- o The appreciating £ between 1995 and 2000 made imports cheaper and exports more expensive;
- o CAP reforms of 1993 and 1999 have ended the expansionist trend of the 1970s and 1980s.

Taken together, these factors do not suggest that underlying food security has materially worsened. They relate more to UK agriculture’s ability to meet consumer demands, i.e. it’s “market share”, both at home and abroad.



Food security and the role of markets

Food security is essentially about identifying, assessing and managing risks associated with food supply. Many risks associated with food supply are likely to be adequately dealt with by markets. Food security

might be enhanced by removing barriers that prevent markets working freely. However all risks may not be adequately managed by markets and these need to be identified and targeted.

Self-sufficiency and food security

Self-sufficiency figures fail to reflect many dimensions of food security:

- Consumer demands for increased variety and more exotic foods tend to reduce UK self sufficiency.
- Diverse supply enhances security and the UK sources food from a wide variety of stable countries.
- Domestic agriculture itself depends upon a variety of imported inputs such as fertiliser, fuel and machinery.
- Self-sufficiency fails to insulate a country against disruptions to its domestic supply chain. Harvest failure animal disease, or natural disasters within our borders will mean that imports become critical to maintaining a stable food supply.

It is difficult however to envisage a scenario in which domestic agriculture does not play a substantial role. If food self-sufficiency fell radically, the risks of dependence on imports could need managing.

The domestic supply chain

A narrow focus on agricultural self-sufficiency ignores the relevance of the whole food chain, and how the food chain itself might enhance or weaken food security. The modern retailer-driven food supply chain has provided consumers with sustained physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. Modern supply chains have vulnerabilities, but are not necessarily more risky than alternative, or historic, supply chain systems.

Many of the risks involved in the food chain are in firms' interests to guard against since they affect their business or reputation. Contingency planning by Government, and the need to work closely with the food industry, remain important to overcome any infrastructure, information and co-ordination failures.

Threats and disruptions: recent experience and potential scenarios

The unpredictability of potential risks to food supply suggest that maintaining food security involves a variety of approaches and cannot be reduced to a choice between domestic and imported production. The UK food chain has been remarkably resilient in recovering from a range of crises in recent decades. *Flexibility* – in domestic agriculture, international markets, and the domestic food industry - will always be crucial in dealing with threats. Judicious intervention can facilitate the resolution of crises, but intervention can also create perverse outcomes.

Conclusions

Food security cannot be the object of a single policy, but needs to be underpinned by a range of cross-cutting policies. These would include:

- promoting and developing business and contingency planning with industry players; improving co-ordination and information flows across industry; contingency governance arrangements; and early warnings preparedness for private sector;
- strengthening energy security;
- strengthening the multilateral trading system, Single European Market and international relations generally;
- identifying and strengthening resilience and capacity of strategic infrastructure e.g. ports;
- tackling domestic poverty issues – also a question of localised access to healthy food;

- developing and enforcing food safety regulations;
- promoting a flexible, skilled and market-oriented agriculture, across the EU which is domestically, able to flex production in extreme circumstances;
- promotion of global food security through international R&D.

The conscious or unconscious identification of food security with self-sufficiency has often obscured the real issues. The self-sufficiency ratio is better construed as a broad indicator of UK agriculture's ability to meet consumer demands at home and abroad - its competitiveness.

Alan Spedding, 03 January 2007, reviewed Friday, 20 June 2008

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RuSource is a voluntary project partly supported by donations and sponsorship.

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