

Written evidence submitted by Dr Anne Touboulic, University of Nottingham, and Dr Lucy McCarthy, University of Bristol (FS0032)

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Who we are

Dr Anne Touboulic is an Associate Professor at the University of Nottingham (UK) and a member of the Future Food Beacon, an interdisciplinary centre for food research. Anne has an interdisciplinary background in the social sciences and her research is inherently boundary-spanning. Her research has largely focused on investigating different facets of the sustainable development agenda and its implications for organisational practices, specifically to support the transition towards more sustainable food production and consumption systems.

Dr Lucy McCarthy is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Bristol, School of Management. She is a member of the Food Justice Network and ARCIO, the Action Research and Critical Inquiry in Organisations. Her background is in community and rural development, particularly around challenges of historically marginalised areas.

The Government food strategy (2022) sets out plans for a resilient English food system, with “a prosperous agri-food and seafood sector that ensures a secure food supply [...] and contributes to the levelling up agenda through good quality jobs around the country”. In this submission we will focus on the need for **good quality jobs** in the sector and on the importance of **knowledge of food to help consumers** obtain better food security.

Key recommendations

- The Committee should press the Government to improve the working conditions of the agricultural labour force, and to provide more support to farmers employing workers on seasonal work visas.
- The Committee should encourage the Government to support farmers to transition to sustainable agricultural practices, and do more to support farmers financially while they navigate these changes.
- The Committee should press the Government to review teacher training with a view to ensuring teachers are better equipped to educate children about food and cooking.
- The Committee should implore the Government to better support the farming community through the development of sustainable jobs – through farming itself but also through community supply chains like Neighbourfood and social eating spaces.

Labour in the agri-food sector

Labour within the agri-food sector is often hidden, undervalued and under appreciated by the wider public and the government. Our research with farmers has revealed how, in several farming contexts, the conditions of agricultural labour falls considerably below accepted social standards and legal protections relative to other forms of employment¹. Farmers do not receive secure wages, their labourers are not protected by usual employment protections, and working conditions remain unsafe. Farmers in our research have stressed that the level of uncertainty that surrounds their work – environmental and climate change, work-related anxieties and lack of empowerment – threatens their work within the agri-food sector. The influence and hold of multinational corporations within the sector are vast and intimidating, especially for small-scale farmers and those transitioning towards sustainable agricultural practices.

¹ Touboulic, A., Glover, J., and McCarthy, L. (2020) Human experiences of transitioning to sustainable agricultural practices. Nottingham: *ISRF final report*.

Within the new food strategy, the government has promised easing of Seasonal Worker Visas to help with labour shortages but this does not provide protections for those workers, nor does it provide additional support for farmers employing those workers. The Guardian, just this week², has highlighted the concerns of many, including researchers at the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab, on the potential for new farm workers to experience slave labour-like conditions, debt bondage, and abuse. Farmers remain an undervalued and yet key part of the supply chain.

Our research³ into the portrayal of dairy farming across three consumer-focused programmes showed that:

- 1) Farm labour is constructed as a labour of love, masking the true cost of farm labour. The tedious, hard work is reframed as an idyllic way of life, the need to work 24/7 sold as part of the beauty of the farming lifestyle.
- 2) Workers are apportioned less importance than technological advancement, and manufacturing is viewed as the core of what feeds people (rather than the farmers who produce the primary products used in manufacturing).
- 3) Speed and efficiency have more value than human labour.

There is clear need for the value of farming to be acknowledged and promoted to a wider audience. The Government must address the value of farm labour, and provide more support for farmers. Furthermore, the Government should be actively pursuing ways to support farmers to transition towards sustainable agricultural practices, whether this is a no-till agricultural system, hybrid farming of both animals and crops, or organic, the Government must do more to support farmers financially while they navigate these changes.

Knowledge of food production

Coupled with the undervaluing of farmers, farm workers and other labour within the food supply chain, is the lack of knowledge of the general consumer about where their food comes from. Food cost and nutritional quality influence consumer choices but so too do attitudes around food – stereotypes of 'middle class' consumers' purchasing habits hamper attempts to encourage all people to eat locally and seasonally. Dominant narratives on food production, across the media, research and policy, reproduce and exacerbate imbalanced power dynamics in food systems whereby large corporations drive the agenda at the expense of local communities and nature. These narratives perpetuate an inaccurate public idea of ever-growing food production, which at best under-values and at worst ignores natural, human and animal labour processes. That allows large corporations to continue manufacturing 'cheap' food, with hidden costs to the environment (not least increasing food waste), labour practices, and public health (obesity, rising rates of diabetes).

Of key importance here is the need for food education. It is impossible to eat well if people are relying on calorie-dense foods that do not satisfy appetites. But it is equally impossible to turn raw vegetables and fruits, meat and dairy into dinners if people do not possess the skills and knowledge to transform them. Cooking skills and food knowledge are lacking amongst the general population, and this is reflected in food choices. This knowledge becomes even more essential during a cost-of-living crisis when being able to adapt and be inventive with produce is necessary to keep costs down (and make the most of fuel). We welcome the Government's recognition that more must be done in schools, however we caution the optimism of 'school food visions' with the reality of everyday experiences⁴. We also question the lack of support around

² Dugan, E. (2022) Review of UK seasonal worker visas to increase risk of slavery, experts warn. *The Guardian*, 29 September 2022. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/sep/29/review-of-uk-seasonal-worker-visas-to-increase-risk-of-slavery-experts-warn>

³ McCarthy, L., Touboulic, A., and Glover, J. (2021) Who's Milking It? Scripted Stories of Food Labour. *Work, Employment and Society*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017021997357>

⁴ Earl, L. (2018) *Schools and Food Education in the 21st Century*. Abingdon: Routledge.

teacher training in food and eating. While the new food strategy outlines funding for a 'school cooking revolution', there is no acknowledgement that children will be taught what teachers know about food and there is currently no training provided for primary teachers specifically on food, health and eating. Primary teachers are not taught how to cook either. This must be rectified if we are truly going to start a school food revolution. Knowing about food, and how to cook it, is an essential life skill that can provide a multitude of experiences.

Localised supply chains

One way to improve connections between farmers and communities, and indeed, to help consumers increase their appreciation towards farmers, is through localised supply chains. Thrown into focus during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, local supply chains proved to be hugely important for many communities struggling to get food and supplies during lockdowns. The vast global just-in-time supply chains could not withstand the disruptions of Covid, leaving supermarket shelves empty and necessitating consumers to look elsewhere for supplies – whether that was local food stores, online delivery systems, local food producers, or social eating providers. One example of such a model is Neighbourfood, an online shopping site where consumers can put in a weekly order from various local producers (bakers, farmers, dairies, fruit growers, beekeepers and the like). The orders are then available for collection or delivery on a specific evening each week. This system allows producers to only make or supply as much as is ordered and offers consumers an opportunity to meet the people growing, cooking and making their food.

A second part of localised supply chains connects to local labour. During the pandemic, without seasonal, migrant workers to pick fruits and vegetables, local people were called upon to contribute to the harvest⁵. (This occurred not only in the UK but also France and other European countries). Farms can provide work opportunities for people, if their labour is properly remunerated, and contribute to the local economy, community stability and keep younger people in rural communities. The Government must better support the farming community through the development of sustainable jobs – through farming itself but also through community supply chains like Neighbourfood and social eating spaces.

⁵ McCarthy, L., Touboulic, A., and Matthews, L. (2020) Global trading: the good, the bad and the essential. *Future Food blog* 27 April 2020. Online: <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/futurefood/2020/04/27/global-trading-the-good-the-bad-and-the-essential/>