

PERSPECTIVE

Growing what matters: The urgency of seeding degrowth within contested transformations of UK food systems

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1. Introduction

Crisis, contest and power. Three interacting elements engulf food systems everywhere, including the UK. And in this turmoil, those who dominate the present are shaping the future. Degrowth must not only offer, and make common cause with, compelling counter-narratives, but actively seek to manifest change. And here, the seed of degrowth may well germinate, but will struggle to flourish unless existing power dynamics are fundamentally addressed. In the words of Pirgmaier and Steinberger (2019), it must ‘confront power’, ‘prioritise what matters’ and ‘act’. Here, a short perspective is offered, in humble complement to recent research activity on degrowth and food systems (Bodirsky et al., 2022). It gives a brief high-level critique of the UK’s food system efforts, by way of the National Food Strategy (NFS) report and argues for the urgency of degrowth to insert itself into the debate, or risk missing a clear opportunity to catalyse wider transformational social change.

Specifically, this brief analysis is centred on the NFS and supporting documents. Quotations were extracted through careful reading of the main report. Numerical representation was determined by using the publicly available supporting documents and data regarding who met with the NFS report team, the makeup of the advisory panel and FDSC. Alternative UK food systems organisations were identified through a mapping exercise that included assessing speaker lists at non-conventional farming/food conferences (e.g. Oxford Real Farming Conference), civil society coalitions for food system change (e.g. Eating Better alliance) and the publicly available networks of these organisations (e.g. Twitter).

Crisis

Globally, food systems are responsible for around a third of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (Crippa et al., 2021), are the leading cause of habitat and biodiversity loss (Kehoe et al., 2017), and contribute to stressing and surpassing several planetary boundaries (Campbell et al., 2017). Meanwhile, poor diets represent the single largest mortality risk (GBD 2017 Diet Collaborators, 2019) (COVID-19 notwithstanding), as well as cause other negative health and socio-economic outcomes, exacerbated by the current global food crisis. Countries, including the UK, must transform food systems to address these myriad challenges.

Contest

However, the direction, means and outcomes of this transformation are contested (Benton & Harwatt, 2022). In the UK, often simplified polarisations look at the reliance on techno-market fixes vs social change, intensive vs extensive production, globalised vs localised supply chains, public vs private interest, and individual vs systemic intervention. These debates occur within a high degree of policy volatility, typified by the long-time delayed and subsequent meagre offering (a 33-page shopping list with scant detail or ambition) of the government's food strategy white paper.

Power

This contest does not occur in a vacuum. Power and power relations are a core feature of food systems, but often (tellingly) absent from assessment and examination (IPES-Food, 2019). Indeed, any transformational social change toward degrowth must explicitly consider power (Avelino, 2021; Koch, 2022). Economic based power manifests in many ways: industry

lobbies shaping policy and fighting tax and regulation; the revolving door of government and private sector; corporate consolidation and monopoly; corporate capture of governance and public institutions; the malign influence on consumption habits and lifestyles; vested interests vs public interests; and media influence. A high-profile example of this is what some view as the undue influence on, or outright capture of, the recent UN Food Systems Summit by corporate interests (Canfield et al., 2021, Chandrasekaran et al., 2021, Clapp et al., 2021).

Power has even been identified as a key research challenge by the UKRI Transforming UK Food Systems Programme (the UK government's research and innovation body) which calls for 'An analysis of which actors are more influential than others to determine who is shaping actor behaviour across the system; the role of concentration in particular food system actor groups and whether and how this impacts power relationships in the UK food system' (Hasnain et al., 2020). And yet, the high-profile independent review of England's NFS in 2020/21, supposed precursor to the Westminster government's recent white paper food strategy, has been criticised by some for the absence of any kind of analysis and consideration of power (Feedback, 2021).

Drawing these threads together, we have the following: multiple connected and worsening crises, or 'polycrisis' (which degrowth advocates would diagnose as symptoms of a deeper malady); widely contested responses and diverging future visions; and unexamined and unscrutinised power relations. And in this perpetual state of crisis, with polarized, paralysed and uncertain response pathways, those who already have power, wield it in ways to block, co-opt or shape transformational change and craft dominant narratives in their interest.

2. Dominant food system narrative through the National Food Strategy

What then is the dominant narrative in UK food systems futures? Who constructs it, why and how is/will it be actualised? And crucially, where must degrowth insert itself? In the UK, food and food systems policy and political visions are present in both central government activity (Westminster) in the case of the recent white paper and NFS report (confusingly or perhaps revealingly commissioned by the UK government, but whose scope was limited to England), and devolved governments (e.g. Scotland's Good Food Nation Bill and Wales with its various

pieces of legislative and policy activity, including a Community Food Strategy). Within this mosaic of food systems policy and political activity, we focus on England's NFS. Although here I look primarily at state activity, I do not mean to imply that the state is the sole power wielder, rather, its activities act as a medium for the influence of powerful actors.

The UK government's commissioned NFS for England was a multi-year project lead by Henry Dimbleby (restaurateur and former Bain consultant, who incidentally, worked on some of the NFS report), non-exec director at DEFRA (UK department responsible for environment, farming and rural affairs). Its purpose was to review 'how the UK's food sector operates currently, and to set out options for adjusting Government policies to better achieve the objectives for' a future food strategy (see Terms of Reference in the report for full details) (National Food Strategy, 2021). The outputs and recommendations from this report were due to feed into the government's recent food strategy white paper and other forthcoming white papers. The NFS's actual influence on national policy will not be known for some time, but it remains the first and most significant government commissioned review into 'food' in 75 years.

The NFS is wide-ranging in scope. Its 14 recommendations, when taken individually, are generally sensible and sound. Few would argue with an expansion of free and healthy school meals, mandatory reporting for large food companies or a realignment of public food provisioning toward health and sustainability. The problem is, these are *necessary but insufficient*, tweakings of the system rather than the radical transformational change needed. The underlying context which the NFS was produced, starting with some report extracts, offers a few clues why.

It isn't just capitalism that creates inequality. In fact, ever since humans began to farm, keep livestock, and pass on their assets to future generations, inequality has been a defining feature of human societies – regardless of their political structure... (p. 58)

BBC presenter Andrew Marr was asked about his student flirtation with Marxism, which earned him the nickname 'Red Andy'. He explained that in later

life he had come to appreciate the power of the free market – albeit with reservations. (p. 58)

The free market performs a million daily miracles to present us with an abundant choice of safe and reasonably-priced food, creating millions of jobs and providing us with an ease of consumption unimaginable to our grandparents' generation. (p. 276)

Eighteen of the largest food and drink companies rely on product portfolios of which 85% are so unhealthy as to be considered unsuitable for marketing to children under WHO guidelines. This isn't a corporate conspiracy, dreamed up by an evil genius bent on making us ill. It is the economics of supply and demand. (p. 41)

...For sound commercial reasons, then, companies invest more money into researching, developing and marketing unhealthy foods. This investment is intended not just to help capture a bigger slice of the market, but to grow the market itself. (p. 48)

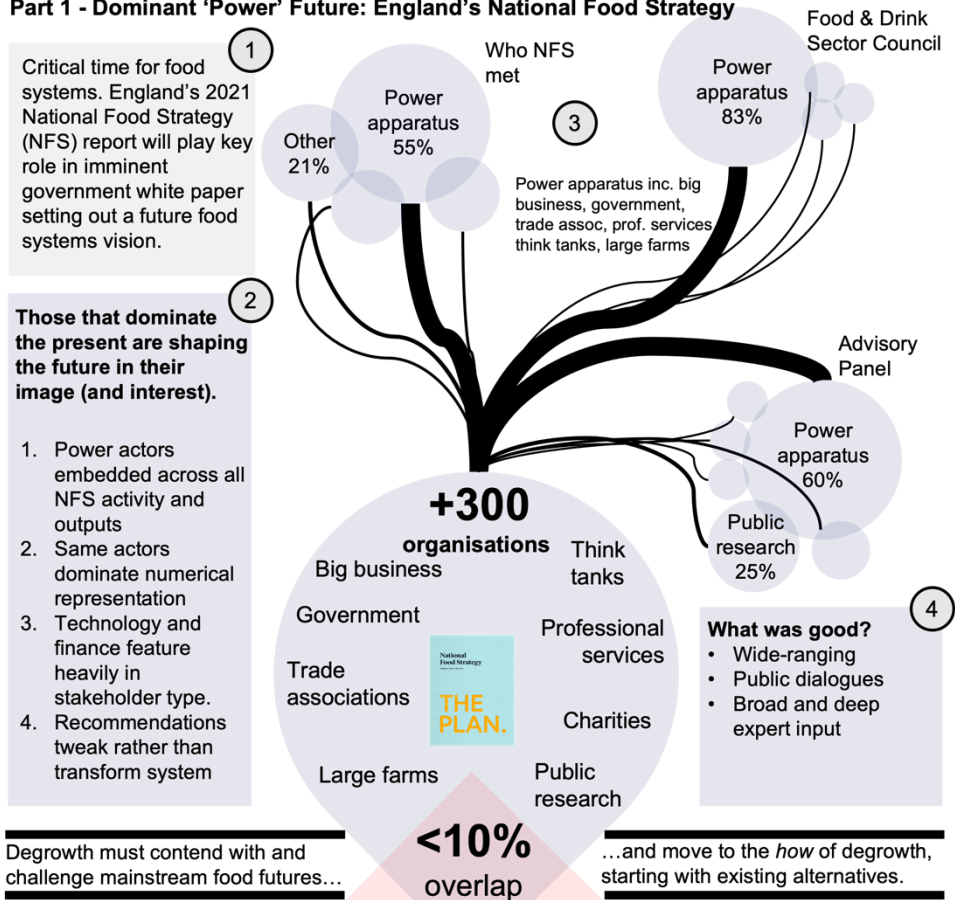
It's not just the consumer who is trapped in this cycle: food companies are too...But what are company bosses supposed to do? If they stop making and selling unhealthy foods, someone else will. They will lose their competitive edge, and their shareholders will have a conniption. (pp. 49-50)

We are in danger of missing a prime opportunity for green growth [in reference to alternative proteins]. (p. 126)

Here we get a picture of the general worldview that situates the NFS. One in which critical scrutiny of capitalism, free markets and private interest is limited to externalities, never extending to the underlying system.

Degrowth & UK Food System Futures

Part 1 - Dominant 'Power' Future: England's National Food Strategy



Part 2 - Another Future: Assessing Degrowth and Alternative Food Systems

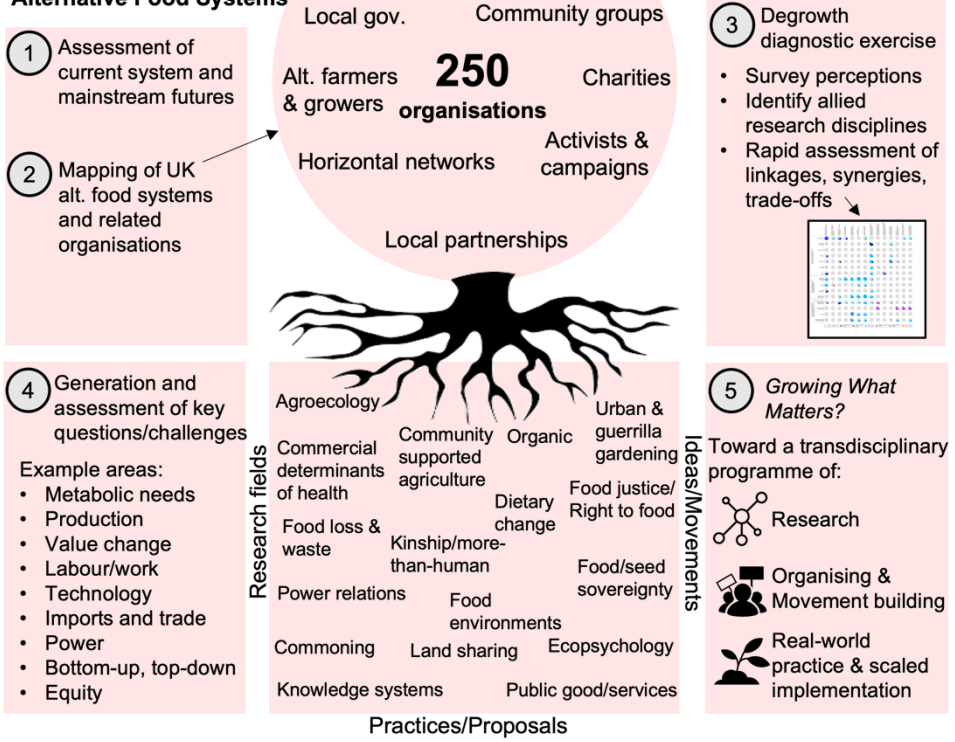


Figure 1: Assessing the NFS dominant UK food system future and the space for degrowth and alternatives

Looking beyond the report's language, Figure 1 part 1 (top-half) gives an assessment of who had input into the report. The NFS met over 300 organisations and groups and was supported by an advisory panel and the food and drinks sector council (FDSC). We cannot know what was said or debated, nor can we know the influence (if any) that was exerted. However, we can look at stakeholder representation both numerically and by sector, to gain some insight.

Big business, central government, trade associations, professional services, think tanks and large farms—collectively grouped here as *power apparatus*—dominated representation in stakeholder meetings (55% of approximately 300), the advisory panel (60%), and FDSC (83%). Other groups, such as charities and research had some representation, while others (e.g. small-scale or alternative food producers, CSOs, activists/campaigners) had little to none (see Figure 1). Further, when assessed by category, technology and finance, taken together, were the largest stakeholder type met by the NFS team.

As with everything, there was also a degree of nuance, perhaps best captured by the following, '...Diversity of method is a virtue in itself' (p. 99). Further, aspects of the approach ought to be rightly recognised. For one, the public dialogues are a welcome attempt to widen participatory input and the range of academics and experts consulted is laudable.

However, the report's overall language, limited scope of recommendations and dominant stakeholder representation, combine to give the impression that the NFS amounts to a list of acceptable (to the powerful) reform measures, rather than a radical transformational future food system strategy. The end result is a narrowing of the analytical and narrative field that gives pre-eminence to a future system that is moulded in the image of powerful commercial and private interest, and serviced by governmental, institutional and associated professional apparatus. All this is largely at the expense of the people who grow and produce our food, and the collective health and wellbeing of our societies and the planet as a whole. Which, to be clear, was always a likely outcome, irrespective of its stated aims. And worryingly, the general response to the UK government's white paper is that it considers the NFS *too* ambitious or progressive. This was all but confirmed by the recent (March 2023) resignation of Dimbleby from his advisory role with the UK government.

3. Assessing alternative food systems as an entry point for degrowth

This is the dominant landscape in which degrowth finds itself. But within this, there are alternative and radical future UK food systems visions, operating, to a greater or lesser degree, at the margins. And it is here that degrowth must try to take root, building ‘coalitions of interest’ (IPES-Food, 2019), and ‘attempt to structure conditions for the possibility of thinking about and performing degrowth’ (Smith et al., 2021). A generative emergence of degrowth from a fertile environment of allied extant social movements, research domains and real-world lived practice and experience – building degrowth ‘from where we stand’ (Smith et al., 2021): in essence, the *what* (e.g. applicability to specific sectors and countries/regions) and *how* (e.g. identifying the social and political mechanisms of transformational change) of degrowth (Hanaček et al., 2020; Lenzen et al., 2022; Weiss & Cattaneo, 2017). And what might this look like in the context of UK food systems?

Figure 1 part 2 (bottom-half) illustrates one initial way to think about this. It starts (1) with an assessment of the current system and proposed mainstream futures (e.g. critical examination of NFS and related activity under a degrowth lens, of which a limited high-level overview was given here). This is followed by (2) a mapping of who and what the alternatives are. Here, a non-exhaustive mapping found around 250 organisations operating in alternative UK food systems and related areas, of which, revealingly, less than 10% overlapped with NFS stakeholders. With some understanding of the groups, movements and practices that in principle are at least somewhat opposed to the dominant ‘power’ future, a diagnostic type exercise (3) can be conducted to understand the extent to which degrowth may find, and indeed can mutually create, the conditions necessary for wider acceptance and uptake. In practical terms, this may constitute the following: surveying the perceptions of these organisations; identifying allied research efforts (e.g. agroecology, commercial determinants of health, IPES-Food); and performing rapid assessments of linkages, trade-offs and synergies (there are many tools to do this, Singh et al., 2018 offer one approach).

From this high-level diagnostic, a deeper set of sector/system specific research and practice challenges can be co-produced (4). For example, how do metabolic needs under degrowth affect the feasibility of different food system proposals? Is conviviality and localism

subservient to overall consumption/impact in the case of emerging technology (e.g. precision fermentation)? How does increased self-sufficiency effect imports? These questions, challenges and practical considerations will be posed, developed and acted upon by a diverse array of thinkers and doers, some of which in isolation. How do we nurture horizontal networks of knowledge and value exchange and make sure that disparate efforts are connected and known to one another, all while having a common (although differentiated) set of goals and ambition? There is no easy way, but one option could be the development of a transdisciplinary programme of work (5) to develop accessible and relevant research, along with practical on-the-ground relationships, action and implementation for a what we may call a *Growing What Matters* food system future.

4. Conclusion and Implications

The UK food system is gripped by crises, contested futures and unexamined power relations. All of which enables the conditions for powerful actors to exert their influence to narrow the field of permissible future visions and shape efforts in their interest. This dominant narrative, here illustrated by England's NFS report, is one of piecemeal tweaking, absent of fundamental structural and systemic change that would existentially challenge the status quo. Degrowth must identify and engage with movements, organisations, research and proposals that *do* seek radical transformational food system change, all while recognising and resolving any tension or incompatibility. Here, one simplified high-level approach for initiating this was outlined, and consisted of the following: the assessment of current and mainstream food system futures; a mapping of the alternatives; a degrowth diagnostic exercise of these alternatives; a deeper deliberative and co-produced research and practice agenda; and the development of a transdisciplinary programme of research, organising and movement building, and real-world practice and implementation. The implication for degrowth scholarship is to help frame and motivate discussion around the importance of degrowth and (UK) food systems. Specifically serving as a call for research on the strategy of degrowth in practice, the extent to which food systems are fertile ground for action and if so, what does this look like and how may it manifest?

Conflict of interest

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