BOOKS: FEEDING BRITAIN | REVIEWED BY GARY YOUNG

Feeding Britain

Our Food Problems and How to Fix Them

by Tim Lang

The book is an excellent reference with a clear message and key take away for policy makers. His explanation of multi criteria framework thinking needs to be introduced into food policy says Gary Young

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A much needed appraisal of the current state of the UK food system, this book takes stock of the politics of food and the range of issues affecting the common good and future resilience. The writing is a useful guide to the multiplicity of issues for both students, professionals, decision makers and legislators in planning.

The author acknowledges in the preface that he waited until 2020 to publish when a direction was clear on Brexit, in order to provide emphasis and urgency for a review of the food system. Coronavirus makes the subject of this book even more relevant bringing resilience and health policy into even starker relief. Explaining how the UK government has reverted to a position of denial towards the inadequacy of the food system after a brief review following the financial crash of 2008, he urges policymakers to realize that we cannot go on eating and feeding as we are without undermining our own interests.

Feeding Britain explains how the UK's systemic issue with low levels of food self-sufficiency was created by geopolitical decisions in the19th century backed by an imperialist policy to supply imported food for the nation at lowest cost balanced with aggressive exporting. In the early 20th century only a third of UK food was produced from home, needing urgent reforms in response to the 20th century world crises.

Despite the mid-century reforms prompted by the 1936 "Beveridge moment" the present UK food self-sufficiency is still only a half, which is mainly meat and dairy, with fruit and vegetables lagging well behind. The public are lulled into a false sense of security when fields in the countryside are tidy and UK food supply is marketed as a success with 30,000 item of food available in supermarkets. The Government position on food supply remains passive and market led, suggesting a burst of agri-technology and more exports will pay for our massive imports.

However the countryside is neither productive nor natural, fields are vast and monocultural, with soil, wildlife and ecology depleted by chemicals. There are serious issues: food product diversity is encouraged not biodiversity, austerity is creating food banks which indicates a fragility that food is not affordable to all, the obesity health crisis is out of control. National food policy has turned a complacent blind eye which is unsustainable. Tim Lang states "If soil is the basis of civilization and the most complex systems on earth, Britain has been undermining its civilization with one third of soils degraded".

The book demonstrates that current policy is a strategic folly which is not in the public interest. He makes a plea on behalf of common good to demand that the available evidence is published, emphasising the critical need for the evidence base to be further developed to set a new course for food policy, which needs to begin now.

The book collates the data sources available and suggests
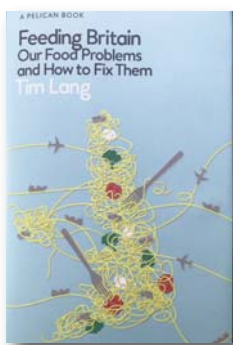
CHAPTER 2

Why UK Food Security Matters

that responsibility for further data collection, reform and decision making should be with Regional Food Bodies to develop multi-level food policies. "Each town and city could conduct food audits and citizens consultations and plan how their region could improve land use and food systems for their areas? The involvement of local citizens is a key ingredient for building a more resilient food system."

The author argues for a massive increase in fruit and vegetable production to meet health requirements and also from resources and emissions point of view reduce meat consumption which is consuming resources at least four times what a plant based diet would use.

Recognising that too few people currently think cities could feed themselves, he claims a "great food transformation " is no longer pie in the sky, it is inevitable. It is surely better to begin managed change than wait for a crisis. Consumption change has to be population wide to affect and guide production. The UK however, must not slide post Brexit into autarky (extreme nationalism as self-sufficiency), This has to be avoided and Tim Lang implores the UK to become a non-parasitic decent nation contributing to global targets of carbon emissions, water use, biodiversity, enhance skills, fair wages and reducing inequality.

The idea that more food could be grown in cities, on land, vertically with hi tech and on roofs can be supported simply because people want to do it. Democratic understanding and social movements are beginning to address some issues, cutting waste, local food identities, transition towns, building community cohesion through food, new skills and pleasures in food.

The book is an excellent reference. Whilst it can overwhelm in detail there is a clear message and key take away for policy makers in the explanation of multi criteria framework thinking which crucially needs to be introduced into food policy: providing a clarity about the co-existence of many criteria by which to judge progress. This approach is particularly important for an uncertain future where urbanisation and consideration of climate change require food insecurity and declining home production to be permanently debated, reviewed and high on the national agenda. They barely feature until we are in crisis mode... ■