

FOOD IN COVID-19 TIMESⁱ: REFLECTIONS OF LOCKDOWN LIFE AND EATING

‘Social isolation measures are turning us all into Labradors,’ said a wit on the radio the other morning, ‘all we can think about is food and walks’. Well, yes: unless you are a key worker, life under lock-down in many countries dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic means you now have to stay at home, 24/7 with, in the UK currently, one walk or essential shopping trip a day. So it’s not surprising your thoughts turn to how you might best use the store cupboard or freezer, and what tasty thing you might concoct for the next meal to keep your household from going crazy, and provide some pleasure. Food, after all, is how we show we love people – even if that’s in a single person household! It nourishes our minds and souls as well as our bodies. No wonder that for many of us, food plays such a big part in our lock-down lives: a local network has told us about some potentially delicious item suddenly available, or a lovely neighbour has dropped off allotment or garden surplus, or we have (re)discovered baking skills using long-forgotten ingredients from the back of the cupboard or freezer – and we spend our time preparing and eating something nice to take our minds off the loss of normal life.

And yet, despite the growth of online ‘cooking from what you have’, tips on growing veg with or without a garden, soil, pots or even seedsⁱⁱ, there are many for whom these possibilities are as out of reach as the moon. Indeed, given the increasingly fragile state of our overall food economy, maybe all of us will have to acquire, prepare and eat food differently in the near and longer-term futureⁱⁱⁱ. It’s a fast-moving picture, and I’m drawing on reports and thinking from a number of organisations to which I provide some key links below – there are many more. I’m using UK examples but the main themes echo elsewhere too.

The reports of ‘panic buying’ dominated the news in the early spring days of the pandemic declaration. People were implicitly criticized for selfish bulk purchase and hoarding essentials, denying them to those who couldn’t shop for large quantities, or who were too slow or busy working to realise what was happening and be able to respond. But most people shop at major supermarkets which operate a ‘just-in-time’ service, basing restocking on normal purchasing patterns. So when they heard rumours, then confirmation, of being confined to home for weeks, those who could afford time and money bought what they thought they might need for their whole household to be able to eat, in the home, all day, for a long time. The supermarkets couldn’t keep pace at first. Economic data show the majority bought rationally, even if a small minority probably did hoard unnecessarily - but

many people, seeing empty shelves, might well have feared being left without and so did what seemed sensible and bought all they could^{iv}. Supplies have since improved, patchily, partly by shops introducing simple rationing and partly by some rapid restocking, but the mainstream food system isn't really geared for such shocks and its fragility was exposed, adding to our anxiety^v. One of the upsides, however, has been the way small producers and processors rapidly stepped into the breach. They transformed from supplying local markets into online delivery merchants, and now people are discovering fresh and ready-made produce from local suppliers that they hadn't known about or used, so keeping them in business and probably improving diets^{vi}.

But all is not rosy; for large numbers this is unaffordable luxury. Even before COVID-19, too many in the UK had to rely on food charity to survive - food banks, community cafés and fridges^{vii}. These, while stalwartly feeding thousands, rely on ordinary people's generosity and the retail or manufacturing sectors' unpredictable and sometimes inappropriate surpluses, along with an army of volunteers to bag and shift stock. They are not a substitute for households having enough money for food budgets and access to decent shops, and can mask or even support huge inequalities in food and good health. Food banks have proliferated and become entrenched in the UK as elsewhere because changes to social security have penalised people and/or left them without enough money to live on, however well they budget and shop, or because they work in low paid, insecure jobs^{viii}. COVID-19 has shown up the fragility of this system too: thousands suddenly lost their jobs or much of their income, despite heroic efforts by government to generate fiscal support in unprecedented ways^{ix}, and social security through Universal Credit (in the UK) has simply not kept pace^x. Many food banks and other charity outlets are swamped by demands they cannot possibly meet^{xi}, despite some diversion of food from hospitality and catering industries, as individual donations have fallen and many volunteers have to self-isolate. The outcome is unsurprising: a recent UK survey showed more than 3 million have gone hungry since lock-down, 7 million skip meals and 1.5 million go a whole day without eating^{xii}. This level of food insecurity is shocking, and is not being seriously addressed by governments, despite many calls for a national response. There are emergency food parcels being sent to clinically vulnerable people in isolation but at the moment their quality is nutritionally very poor^{xiii}, and the vouchers meant to be available for children who need free school meals, including in the holidays, are hard to get and use. Many people are working very hard as volunteers to help meet needs, but their efforts are not sustainable in the long term – and shouldn't be.

Meanwhile, the food system itself faces immense problems: in the UK half our food is imported and it's not clear what will happen as COVID-19 spreads globally; there are widespread labour shortages for harvesting^{xiv} and retail; food prices are rising and there are gluts and storage gaps^{xv}. It's not been fit for purpose for some time, although there were tentative signs of improvement^{xvi}. COVID-19 could challenge that, but many groups are working hard to sustain and collate examples of good practices which can build a more resilient food system. A resilient system is one which can enable everyone to eat healthily and well, while supporting decent, fair livelihoods, and protecting nature and society in the face of shocks^{xvii}. As families, societies, nations, we need to build on the good things we've experienced in these demanding times. We've seen that connection, care and community matter; that smaller, diverse, local systems respond better to shocks; that local creativity thrives when given economic and planning support; that being in the natural world, getting your hands dirty to grow food, and making time to cook, are life-enhancing. Governments are focused on rebuilding the economy, but many of us want a different economy and society after this global pandemic, and a resilient food system, where all are treated with dignity, is part of that new story.

So, find out what is going on, get involved, write to your MP or local councillors, talk to others, volunteer if you can, support those who do if you can't. There are many online resources which offer positive steps we can take as individuals and groups so we can all play our part in building a new way of growing, rearing, distributing, selling, preparing and enjoying food^{xviii}.

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ⁱ I am not covering the advent of or responses to COVID-19, the recent coronavirus which has generated a global pandemic of disease and death. For a recent time-line summary of the UK policy response, see: <https://bylinetimes.com/2020/04/11/a-national-scandal-a-timeline-of-the-uk-governments-woeful-response-to-the-coronavirus-crisis/>

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- ⁱⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/apr/13/no-soil-seeds-or-space-no-problem-a-beginners-guide-to-growing-vegetables>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/buying-and-supplying/10-foods-affected-by-the-coronavirus-pandemic/604337.article>
- ^{iv} <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2020/apr/03/off-our-trolleys-what-stockpiling-in-the-coronavirus-crisis-reveals-about-us>
- ^v <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-rationing-based-on-health-equity-and-decency-now-needed-food-system-expert-133805>
- ^{vi} https://www.sustainweb.org/coronavirus/securing_our_food_supply/ ; <https://www.foodethicscouncil.org/app/uploads/2020/04/Food-Talks-31st-March-2020-Summary-report.pdf>
- ^{vii} <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/comment/new-data-shows-households-were-struggling-even-before-coronavirus/>; <https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/> ; <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/independent-food-banks-map>
- ^{viii} Loopstra et al, 2018, <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/SPERI-Brief-32-Family-hunger-in-times-of-austerity.pdf> ; <https://www.church-poverty.org.uk/stories/speaking-truth-to-power/> <https://policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/the-rise-of-food-charity-in-europe>
- ^{ix} <https://www.forbes.com/sites/advisoruk/2020/04/08/coronavirus-covid-19-what-support-measures-are-in-place-in-the-uk/>;
- ^x <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-52129128>;
- ^{xi} <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/04/09/nhs-support-us-health-crisis-benefits-system-must-also-people-face-economic-crisis-together/>; <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/01/uk-food-banks-face-record-demand-in-coronavirus-crisis> similar story in the US: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/apr/02/us-food-banks-coronavirus-demand-unemployment>
- ^{xii} <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/new-food-foundation-survey-three-million-britons-are-going-hungry-just-three-weeks-into-lockdown/>
- ^{xiii} https://www.sustainweb.org/blogs/apr20_one_million_pensioners_need_meals_on_wheels/
- ^{xiv} <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/eu-recommends-keeping-borders-open-as-agri-labour-conundrum-looms-large/> ; <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/coronavirus-farms-uk-brexit>
- ^{xv} Tim Lang, 2020, *Feeding Britain*, Pelican <https://www.penguin.co.uk/authors/133977/tim-lang.html>
- ^{xvi} <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/future-land> ; <http://www.nourishscotland.org/campaigns/good-food-nation-bill/>
- ^{xvii} https://www.foodethicscouncil.org/app/uploads/2020/04/Food-Talks-28th-April-2020-Summary-report_FINAL.pdf
- ^{xviii} <http://www.nourishscotland.org/projects/dignity/> ; <https://www.foodethicscouncil.org/keyissues/> ; <https://www.sustainweb.org/coronavirus/> ; <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/rsa-blogs/2020/04/counting-on-recovery>