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THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF FOOD

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Building a Sustainable Food City: A Collective Approach[*][†]

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Abstract Brighton – a city on the south coast of the UK with a vibrant food scene but also home to some entrenched inequalities – presents an excellent local case from which to explore some of the wider issues considered in this *IDS Bulletin* on the political economy of food. This article explores some of the issues facing the city and local food systems from the perspective of Brighton and Hove Food Partnership, a leading organisation behind the city's food strategy, one of the first in the UK. Brighton's experience shows how local organisations can put food at the centre of wider social issues and forge action plans that work across sectors to address the underlying inequities in food systems together. This should be of relevance not only to other cities in the UK, but others wanting to work at the heart of the food system in local contexts elsewhere.

Keywords: food, food system, local action, systemic, multisectoral, cities, inequality.

1 Our city in broader context

Those of us living in the UK and working on global food insecurity and malnutrition have often had cause to think twice about our international focus in recent years. The kinds of key indicators that we consider as indicative of failed food, health, and broader political systems in other parts of the world are now heading in the wrong direction within our own national borders. Whilst we might not be surprised to see rates of child and adult obesity on the rise, it is equally surprising and depressing to see growing numbers of households forced into food poverty, child poverty, and even now a rise in child mortality (Office for National Statistics 2016), the likes of which we have not seen in the UK for over 100 years.

Writing about the global situation, global researchers spend a lot of time complaining about the invisibility of malnutrition (Gillespie *et al.* 2013) – an attribute that makes it hard for its sufferers to recognise their position and to act collectively to gain some foothold or power over the circumstances shaping their lives or those of their children. Similarly,

in Brighton, the home to IDS and the IDS–IPES-Food workshop, poverty and inequality are easily rendered invisible by the city's seeming affluence, high house prices and bustling, vibrant town centre and seaside. Social exclusion joins spatial exclusion in the way in which many of the city's poorer areas are hidden from city day trippers by the position of the city in the hills of the South Downs, whilst their food poverty is obscured by our booming café and restaurant scene.

But Brighton's problems of poverty, inequality, food insecurity, and unsustainability are severe. Brighton has the highest number of rough sleepers outside of London (Brighton and Hove Health and Wellbeing Board 2017) and in the last year, 20 homeless people died on the city's streets.[3] Food insecurity and malnutrition, including obesity, disproportionately and regressively affect Brighton's poorest (the poorest children are 12 times more likely to be obese than the wealthiest) (Brighton and Hove Food Partnership 2018b). The amount of food waste produced by the city and its broader 'food footprint' (land and resources used by the food system) are also far out of proportion to its population (*ibid*.). In short, the city highlights the case for urgent action at a local level, in addition to the global action discussed in the rest of this issue.

Global nutrition and food research has also focused frequently on the role of civil society actors and organisations in shaping food systems for the better. This has played a role in countries ranging from Brazil to India to Peru (Hall 2006; Khera 2013; Mejía-Acosta 2011; Pande 2008; Requejo 2014). The city of Brighton and Hove, similarly, has a dynamic voluntary sector, a range of civil society organisations, and local, enterprising small businesses committed to creating a just and sustainable food landscape for the city. Key in bringing these actors together in the past 15 years has been the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership – a small and committed organisation that brokers partnerships, strategies, and action plans to improve Brighton's food environment via action taken locally. Most innovatively, for an organisation working on food, the partnership has taken a systemic approach to tackling food issues and food poverty – bringing the links between wage poverty, housing, disability, sustainability, and food to the mainstream, within the city and beyond.

IPES–Food and IDS invited Emily O'Brien to present at the workshop and then commissioned the following case study to bring Brighton's experience to a broader and more global audience. We have departed from much of the *IDS Bulletin* here in that the following write-up is not framed in terms of academic theory or political economy. But it needs no such introduction – the experience of the partnership, its work, future plans, and some of the challenges it faces in its systemic approach, is drawn from its immersion in the local political reality. This case is therefore a must-read for those considering options for action in and on the food system in local and global contexts, in line with the political economy and systemic approaches adopted by others in this issue.

2 Introducing the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership

The Brighton and Hove Food Partnership is an independent non-profit organisation. We see ourselves as a hub for information, inspiration, and connection around food. We have the ambitious aim to achieve systemic change by bringing together partners from the public, private, and voluntary sectors to take varied action on different aspects of food, simultaneously at different levels.

In practice, this means pulling together a collective action plan, in which many partners each own or play a part in a series of actions, right across the food system, from food waste to health to sustainability, and taking in food poverty, the economy, and community food work. There is also a strong focus on embedding food into other policies and practice; for example, the city's public health and economic strategies, and planning guidance. We believe it is important to work at different levels, from directors in the local authority down to the smallest community or faith group, and including the individuals who live and work in the city. We are only as strong as our network of Champions.

We were one of the first cities in the country to have a food strategy and action plan (in 2006, refreshed 2012 and 2018[4]). Our action plan for a healthy, sustainable, and fair food system was developed collaboratively (for detail, see below) with key partners including the city council; public health; NHS Trusts; universities; local businesses; and organisations in the community, voluntary, and faith sectors. The food culture in our city is an important factor with a thriving restaurant scene and 75 community gardening projects. The city's 18 food banks, whilst an indicator of our food poverty, represent an incredible response from the community to this problem. There are also many lunch clubs and other places where people can share a meal. We estimate that in our city of approximately 280,000 people, half a million shared meals are served each year. This cross-sector partnership approach to a breadth of food issues has been heralded as a leading example across the UK, inspiring other similar approaches as a founding member of the UK's Sustainable Food Cities network, which now includes over 50 other locations.

We were also one of the first cities in the country to have a collective food poverty action plan (2015–18), which brought partners together to agree a collective approach and commit to 78 actions on everything from welfare benefits to cookery, 93 per cent of which progressed. Again, we have influenced other areas, with the Greater London Authority and subsequently the national Food Power programme, a network of food poverty alliances, subsequently offering funding and support to areas to take a similar approach.

Apparently, this is all highly effective. We were the first city in the UK to gain a Silver Sustainable Food Cities award and we are now applying for Gold. However, this level of complex partnership working and collective action planning is never easy. Our new 2018–23 action plan has eight overarching aims covering the whole food system, and

contains 200 individual actions with nearly 100 partner organisations involved in delivery, including 26 separate city council departments. It came out of a year's consultation including a commitment to include 'less heard' voices such as those of migrants and rough sleepers via facilitated focus groups. It is not easy to assemble (for an inside view, see my blog which likens the process to 'knitting spaghetti'[5]) and once it is written, it is hard to keep a handle on progress. The yearly or so requests for updates from partners is itself becoming a job, let alone the challenge of trying to prove our wider impact as outlined below.

And because food is always complex, sometimes there can be tension and contradictions. Our ultimate vision is 'healthy, sustainable, and fair food for all', but what do you do when these three do not coincide? For example, we know that good food, sustainably and ethically produced, costs more. The era of cheap food is, from the perspective of environmental sustainability, disastrous. And yet for many in our city, a move from cheap food without a raise in income will impact heavily on their ability to afford a healthy diet. We undertake regular research on food poverty and household food-insecurity levels and so we know that around one in five people in our city anticipate difficulty paying for basic living costs in a typical year, rising to around one in three if they have a health issue or disability (Brighton and Hove Food Partnership 2018a).

We are a high-cost but often low-income city. In deprived areas, life expectancy is up to ten years less than in affluent wards (Brighton and Hove Food Partnership 2012). Fourteen areas of Brighton and Hove are in the bottom 1 per cent for income deprivation nationally (Brighton and Hove Food Partnership 2015), yet its very affluence means that it is an expensive place to live for people on a tight budget, with housing costs amongst the highest in the country and without the higher level of Local Housing Allowance support (housing benefit) that applies in London. We have a high proportion of people renting energy-inefficient housing stock, and a high proportion of households where people live alone, all factors contributing to a lack of money in many people's pockets when it comes to budgeting for food.

So, for our strategy and action plan, we look for the crossover areas. Becoming a 'Veg City', that is, where everyone in the city can access and eat more vegetables, is an aspiration that cuts across health, sustainability, and food poverty agendas. It is also a more positive way to frame messages that to the public can seem negative ('eat less meat', 'eat less sugar'). But vegetables need to be affordable. A farmers' market is a wonderful thing but if a particular market, because of price or location, is inaccessible to all but the most affluent, then it does not deliver our 'fairness' agenda – we believe that good food should be for everyone, so work with retailers in disadvantaged areas is a less obvious 'solution' but just as important.

Another crossover area that we prioritise is 'shared meals'. Eating together – for example, at lunch clubs – along with other forms of food sharing,

can be a vital way to combat both food poverty as well as social isolation, alongside boosting healthy eating and tackling inequality. And again, it has a positive focus which engages and inspires partners and residents.

In terms of our role, we focus on bringing partners together – we call it 'putting unlikely people in a room together', although that 'room' is just as likely to be a warehouse or a community project. However, we also bring leadership, aiming to encourage, inspire, and sometimes 'chivvy along'. A lot of our time goes on facilitation, consultation, and conversations. For us, it is also important that, as well as our more strategic work, we also run practical food projects, teaching people to cook, to eat a healthy diet, to grow their own food, and to waste less food. We hold a lot of the city's knowledge around food, and our newsletters, website, and directory are the 'go-to' places to find out about food events and activity. We run two demonstration gardens in local parks, a community orchard, and have recently opened a high-profile community teaching kitchen[6] in a busy location near to Brighton train station. Our activities also include:

- **Support to individuals:** for example, teaching cookery; supporting people to volunteer on food projects.

- **Support to community food groups:** including shared meals, food-growing projects, food banks, and community cafes – with training, small grants, and volunteer signposting.

- **Training for professionals:** for example, for early years, care homes, and city council staff.

- **Communications and campaigns:** e-news/social media (5,000-plus residents), Sugar Smart City Campaign/Love Food Hate Waste.

- **Policy influencing and strategic delivery:** influencing policy and strategy to include food. Sitting on citywide partnership boards. Co-ordinating the Good Food Procurement Group, bringing together the city's largest caterers. Undertaking research, for example on healthy ageing and food.

Although our work is rooted in one geographical area and is for local benefit, we do share our successes so that they can be replicated in other areas, and hence our work has a wider impact. We do so through case studies, our website, and in more recent years through conferences, webinars, email groups, and one-to-one and group mentoring facilitated by national networks.

Our approach, summarised in our latest (2018–23) action plan, is illustrated in Figure 1. It is, by necessity, a complex one. This is because food is complicated and strategic work on food systems is even more so. We limit some of that complexity by focusing on one geographical area – the city of Brighton and Hove – and the areas surrounding it. However, even at that micro-level, to invent a system of joined-up

Figure 1 **Brighton and Hove Food Partnership vision**

Source Brighton and Hove Food Partnership (2018b), reproduced with permission.

integrated working in a world which is not set up to enable those connections is a constant challenge.

Additionally, despite its centrality to all our lives, we find that food is often simply overlooked. Part of that is due to fragmentation. Food tends to be divided up at both national government and local authority level, with health services in one department, nutrition and obesity in another, and agriculture in a very distant corner – possibly, but not always, alongside environment – and social issues, including poverty, entirely separate. But there also seems to be something deeper, where food is simply forgotten. Once you start looking, it is astonishing how many policies have a food-shaped hole in them. Part of our work is to put food at the centre simply so that it becomes visible again, restoring food and food systems to a level of visibility proportional to its impact.

A knock-on effect is that by focusing on food, which is tangible and which everyone can relate to, this can help to bring attention to wider issues. We talk about food being a 'lens' or of putting on our 'food goggles', as illustrated by the infographic in Figure 2, from our food poverty action plan.

Again, this reach is not without challenges. Where do we draw the line? Should a food organisation be worrying about housing costs? Advice services? Welfare benefits? Another challenge is that although we believe in our model of change, it is hard to evidence effectiveness. Whilst we are able to evaluate very effectively the impact of the services that we run, such as our community cookery sessions, and our support to community food organisations and networks, this approach does not translate easily to the complexity of a citywide action plan. We believe very strongly that by many different partners taking even quite small

Figure 2 An example of 'food goggles' – food poverty and its prevention

actions on many different fronts simultaneously we can gradually bring about systemic change. We know at a gut level (no pun intended) that this works. It is no surprise that when we undertook an internal exercise to develop our organisational values, 'We believe in the power of food' was one of them. But how do we show that systemic change?

One reason why it is very hard to measure the success (or not) of a citywide approach is because food is dispersed and cuts across so many silos. Taking a whole system approach means thinking about change simultaneously in the private, voluntary, and public sectors, and for individual residents. It involves supermarkets and other retailers. It means government departments, health services, 26 separate local authority departments – concerned with planning, welfare benefits, nutrition and public health, agriculture, the environment, outdoor events, social care, transport, environmental health, and the economy – who rarely, if ever, think of themselves as being connected. And then there are restaurants, some of them local, some of them part of large national and international chains. And distribution chains and transport authorities. How do you begin to assess overall the impact of such a complex approach?

Additionally, even where there is evidence of impact, there are issues with attribution. In general, due to the high levels of complexity, we can only talk about contribution rather than attribution. For example, childhood obesity figures in Brighton and Hove have consistently outperformed comparative national figures, holding steady when others have seen increases. But how much of a role does our collective approach to food play in those figures? There are so many other factors to be considered including physical activity, or the culture of the city, or maybe it is all down to something random we have not thought of?

Therefore, over the last few years, we have been working more closely with academic colleagues, especially at the University of Sussex, to develop an outcomes framework, by which we aspire to measure the impact of a citywide approach to food by focusing on key areas, including some of the mechanisms developed locally, combined with nationally collected data on the economy, health, and the environment.[7]

We are at an early stage, but we are already seeing some results which we can point to. For example, for the last five years, a question incorporated into a city council annual survey (the 'City Tracker') shows levels of household food and fuel insecurity holding steady – which we see as a success, given the challenging external environment in which cities such as ourselves are operating. We have also identified some more aspirational ways to measure impact and look forward to continuing to deepen our links with the research community to make these a reality.

Notes

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† This *IDS Bulletin* represents a collaboration between IDS and IPES-Food. Both organisations are committed to holistic, sustainable, democratic approaches to improving food systems, and to applying excellent research and political economy approaches in working towards these goals. We hope this *IDS Bulletin* represents the breadth of debate at the 2018 workshop we co-sponsored, on 'Political Economies of Sustainable Food Systems: Critical Approaches, Agendas and Challenges', and that it contributes to the sharing of knowledge in the name of sustainable and equitable food systems.

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3 www.theargus.co.uk/news/16972509.at-least-20-homeless-people-died-on-brightons-streets-in-a-year/.

4 https://bhfood.org.uk/food-strategy.

5 https://bhfood.org.uk/cooking-up-a-food-strategy-for-brighton-and-hove/.

6 See https://bhfood.org.uk/cookery-school/.

7 For further information, see https://bhfood.org.uk/research-outcomes-and-impact/.

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