



Telling people what to eat

A moral imperative or a step too far?

A report of the Business Forum meeting
on 10th June 2014

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About the Business Forum

Ethical questions around climate change, obesity and new technologies are becoming core concerns for food businesses. The Business Forum is a seminar series intended to help senior executives learn about these issues. Membership is by invitation only and numbers are strictly limited.

The Business Forum meets six times a year for an in-depth discussion over an early dinner at a London restaurant.

To read reports of previous meetings, visit foodethicscouncil.org/businessforum.

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Introduction

There is a growing realisation that 'Western diets' need to change. The rising problem of obesity in many parts of the world is well catalogued, with some suggesting that half the UK population will be obese by 2050 (if current trends continue). The strain will be felt not just on people's waists, but also on the planet, on people working in the food system and on farm animal welfare.

Attempts at nudging behaviours have had, at best, partial success. There has been a noticeable reluctance on the part of food companies and governments to 'tell people what to eat'.

The June 2014 meeting of the Business Forum looked at whether this needs to change – and whether stronger interventions are required, given the scale of the challenges facing humanity. Is it ethically acceptable for food businesses to try to influence people's diets or is it unacceptable for them not to?

We are grateful to our speakers Philip Lymbery, Chief Executive of Compassion in World Farming and co-author of *Farmageddon: The True Cost of Cheap Meat*; and Tom Sanders, Professor of Nutrition and Dietetics at Kings College London (also honorary Nutritional Director of HEART UK and a Scientific Governor and Trustee of the British Nutrition Foundation). The meeting was chaired by Dan Crossley, Executive Director of the Food Ethics Council.

The report was prepared by Cassie Ellis and Dan Crossley and outlines points raised during the meeting. The report does not necessarily represent the views of the Food Ethics Council, the Business Forum, or its members.

Key Points

- Nervousness seems to exist amongst governments and food businesses about telling people what to eat. A 'laissez-faire' approach has arguably been favoured in recent times. Hence, much of the onus is often put on citizens, in their role as consumers, to take responsibility for healthy, sustainable eating.
- However, almost 30% of the world's population is now obese or overweight and this number continues to rise. Is the reluctance to 'tell people what to eat', at least partly, responsible?
- Some are advocating for plant-centred eating and for 'less and better' meat consumption, given its major health and environmental impacts. Whilst there is still a lot more work to do, there appears to be an emerging consensus on what sustainable diets should look like.
- It was suggested that people are, in effect, already told what to eat – because of the powerful impact of marketing and promotions, which strongly steers people towards certain (often healthier) products. The 'what else?' culture in some foodservice and retail outlets was claimed to be one of a number of contributing factors.
- It was also claimed that the public are not always told exactly what they are eating. It was argued that greater honesty and transparency is needed over how food products have been made and how ingredients have been grown or reared.
- The question was raised as to how far the notion of 'informed choice' can go. If diet-related issues continue to grow, is it more likely that people will advocate a more interventionist approach?

Obesity: a growing problem

Obesity is imposing an increasingly heavy burden on the population of countries in the Global North and the Global South alike. Almost 30% of people globally are now either obese or overweight – 2.1 billion people in total – as reported by IHME and published in the Lancet Medical journal¹. This has included a rapid rise in obesity in the UK in the last 20 years among men and women. While there have been inroads made in improving life expectancy in the UK in recent years, the problems associated with being overweight or obese (e.g. Type 2 diabetes) remain.

It was suggested that the rise in obesity levels can be put down to a range of factors, including more sedentary lifestyles, people eating more frequently, the greater availability of food (24-7) and the promotion of certain types of food. It was claimed that much of the general public may not realise the longer-term personal health consequences of their food choices (let alone the environmental and social justice issues wrapped up in what and how they eat). The challenge was raised as to whether food is fast becoming 'the new tobacco'.

Tensions in telling people what to eat

The government's conviction – shared by past and present administrations – is that it is categorically not its role to be 'telling people what to eat'². This is matched by most food businesses, who appear to be reluctant to tell – or indeed to be perceived to be telling – their customers what they should eat.

The prevailing feeling seems to be that people, in their role as consumers, should be given access to information in order to be able to make their own informed choices about the sustainability and healthiness of their food. However, arguably this places a heavy onus on consumers to take responsibility for healthy, sustainable eating; a position which, by and large they don't want. Hence, there is an underlying tension and a nervousness that exists around 'telling people what to eat'.

¹ <http://www.healthdata.org/news-release/nearly-one-third-world%E2%80%99s-population-obese-or-overweight-new-data-show>

² Food Ethics Council (2013) Beyond Business As Usual

Importance of how food is produced

It was suggested that it is not just the type of food that people choose that is important, but also the method of production and farming system.

It was argued that industrialised farming involves feeding human edible crops to livestock, thus creating competition for food between humans and animals (as well as competition with lots of other potential land uses). It was suggested that if the edible crops being used to feed industrially reared livestock globally were for human consumption, they could feed an additional 4 billion people. There are currently a little over 7 billion people on the planet and the argument was made that enough food is produced to feed 11-12 billion.

Yet there is increasing pressure and a new wave of intensification, taking animals off pasture land and feeding them human edible products instead. It was claimed that if this is not resisted, likely to take the countryside to a new tipping point, with potentially damaging implications for the farming sector.

Equally, it was argued that there can be efficiencies with more intensive systems and that indoor farming is not always bad. For example you can manage waste better when you have the scale of indoor farming. It was suggested that the terms 'industrialisation' and 'intensification' have been over-extended and that they are interpreted in different ways. Both indoor and outdoor farming have benefits as well as problems, and both need to be well managed.

What *should* people eat?

Putting aside the question of whether or not people should be told what to eat, the question was raised as to what people should eat.

Some have suggested that people should be encouraged to focus on plant-centred eating in the future, because of the environmental and health impacts associated with high meat consumption. There is an ethical case for eating less and higher welfare standard meat. It was suggested that people should be encouraged to eat 'less but better' meat, although this remains a contentious issue for some.

The Food Ethics Council has done a programme of work on this jointly with WWF-UK called the Livestock Dialogues.³

The amount of food people eat is clearly important too. A comparison was made with medication, whereby (with most medication), the amount a person can buy is limited and they are given a recommended (or prescribed) dosage. The analogy was not to advocate for a similar approach with food. Instead the point made was that in general people aren't limited by the amount of food they can buy, but perhaps plate (or bowl) sizes could be decreased as a way of encouraging smaller portions.

A telling sign: already told?

It was suggested that the public is, in some senses, already told what to eat, through a whole range of mechanisms – some subtle and some not.

Supermarkets are very good at food marketing and guiding choices – hence the name 'super-marketeers'. Marketing can be extremely powerful and persuasive.

It was argued that food retailers in particular are very good at guiding their customers on what to buy, whether that be through choice editing, positioning/shelf placement in store or what they choose to put on promotion. This is more 'nudge', rather than explicitly telling customers what they should buy.

More visible examples of influencing what people should buy include the UK's '5 a day' long-running campaign (or Australia's Go For 2 and 5 – i.e. 2 portions of fruit and 5 of vegetables per day). The UK Government's EatWell plate⁴ and WWF-UK's LiveWell plate⁵ (which incorporates environmental as well as nutritional elements) exist as guidance tools.

Important questions are prompted by this about the difference between communicating more direct healthy messages such as '5 a day' versus (some would argue) many food companies making it easier and cheaper for citizens to eat unhealthily.

It was argued that people need to be told what they are eating already through honest food labelling, so they can make informed choices – separate from

debates about whether or not they should be told what to eat in the future. The question was also raised as to how far the notion of 'informed choice' can go.

Ethics of marketing and promotion

If citizens buy (for example) a magazine in certain shops, often in stations, they are automatically offered a 100g bar of chocolate for a heavily discounted rate. Similarly for many 'meal deals', it is cheaper to buy a sandwich, a drink and a bag of crisps, than it is to buy just a sandwich and a drink. Unhealthier foods are sometimes 'on show' and it is argued that customers don't always realise what the impacts of these (often impulse) purchases are.

Similarly, in some restaurant and café outlets, customers are routinely asked if they would like a larger portion, additional cream on top of their coffee or a cake to have with their cup of tea. On the one hand, it is easy to appreciate why many food outlets do this as it brings in additional revenue. However, from a public health perspective, this 'what else?' culture may be contributing to enticing people to eat more of the 'wrong' kinds of foods than they should.

Interventions: from education to tax?

If it is accepted that the problem of obesity in the UK is getting worse, then what 'intervention' or combination of interventions might be needed to reverse that trend?

One option mooted is to tax particular foods or ingredients, such as a tax on sugary drinks. Given that much of the food people eat is cheap, it was claimed that even a relatively high tax (for example 20%) may have little real impact on purchasing behaviour. However, further exploration is needed to establish the potential effectiveness of such measures.

It was suggested that food companies should continue to further reformulate products, perhaps including fortification where appropriate.

Education is generally acknowledged to be an important part of any 'solution'. At school, children could be better informed about what it is advisable to eat or not eat. The argument is that if children are educated, then they can educate their parents too. It has been suggested that the loss of cooking skills in many households is another important factor. It was agreed that education must be a key part of the long-term solution – particularly as people tend to not like to be dictated to about what they should eat.

³

http://www.wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/changing_the_way_we_live/food/the_livestock_dialogues.cfm

⁴ <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Goodfood/Pages/eatwell-plate.aspx>

⁵

http://www.wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/changing_the_way_we_live/food/livewell_2020/

Who should be influencing?

On the one hand, it was suggested that governments may not be willing to lead on positively influencing people's dietary choices and that therefore industry needs to. On the other hand the argument was made that while food companies may be able to drive the agenda quicker than government, they may have their own vested interests at heart. No one actor can or should have responsibility on its own for positively influencing diets. Crucially, that is not the same as suggesting that businesses and government should devolve themselves of responsibility.

Multi-stakeholder approaches were put forward as being one viable option for helping people shift towards healthy, sustainable diets. The exact mechanisms through which such shifts might happen merit further exploration.

Reflections

It is easy to see why there is a seeming reluctance on the part of government and business to tell people what to eat. However, the expectation that the general public will make fully informed rational choices about what they eat is surely unrealistic. A range of approaches need to be explored as a matter of urgency. As the incidence of diet-related conditions continues to rise, there are likely to be greater calls for a more interventionist approach from both government and food businesses.

Speaker biographies



Philip Lymbery is Chief Executive of leading international farm animal welfare organisation, Compassion in World Farming and a prominent commentator on the effects of industrial farming. Under his leadership, Compassion's prestigious awards include Observer Ethical Award for Campaigner of the Year and BBC Radio 4 Food and Farming Awards for Best Campaigner and Educator. He was Compassion's campaigns director throughout the 1990s, a period of extraordinary success, including EU-wide bans on veal crates and battery cages. Philip is author of 'Farmageddon: The true cost of cheap meat', published by Bloomsbury in 2014 and written with Sunday Times political editor, Isabel Oakeshott. The Evening Standard called it an "unusually punchy and fast-paced" enviro-shocker, providing what the Independent describes as an "unforgettable indictment of the new hyper-industrialised agriculture originating in the USA." Philip is on the Board of Brussels-based Eurogroup for Animals, and Sustain: the alliance for better food and farming. Philip lives in rural Hampshire with his wife and stepson, is a life-long countryside enthusiast, a former wildlife tour leader to the Seychelles, Costa Rica and the USA amongst others.



Tom Sanders was appointed Professor of Nutrition & Dietetics at King's College London in 1994 and currently is Head of the Diabetes and Nutritional Sciences Division, School of Medicine, King's College London. He worked for the UNICEF in Indonesia for two years prior to pursuing an academic career. He is the honorary Nutritional Director of HEART UK and a Scientific Governor and Trustee of the British Nutrition Foundation. His research career has focused on the health of effects of vegetarian diets and the effects of dietary fat in relation to cardiovascular health and diabetes. He has served on UK Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and on expert advisory panels for the World Health Organization/Food and Agricultural Organization. He is a regular contributor to television and radio and a commentator on issues concerned with food in the press. He has published over 300 scientific papers and written several books on food and health *The Vegetarian's Health Diet* Book with Colin Spencer, *The Food Revolution* with Peter Bazalgette, *You Don't Have to Diet* with Peter Bazalgette, and edited *Foods that Harm Foods that Heal* (Readers Digest).
