

sustainable development commission

SDC

*Vision for a Sustainable  
Food Chain*

Workshop Report

20 June 2007



## *Vision for a Sustainable Food Chain*

### Workshop

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### Key Findings

#### Summary

The Sustainable Development Commission is undertaking a review of government policies towards a sustainable food system, and the role of supermarkets in delivering this.

A strong theme from SDC's research to date is the lack of a coherent vision for a sustainable food system within government.

The purpose of the workshop was to move from 'problems' to 'solutions' by bringing together government departments and agencies, food chain interests and civil society organisations to start to develop thinking around the purpose, scope and process for a shared vision for a sustainable food chain.

The outcomes from the workshop will inform SDC's research and recommendations due to be published in Autumn 2007 and will contribute to Defra's sustainable food chain programme of work.

The workshop focused on three discussion areas:

- What should be the purpose and use for a vision?
- What should be its components and scope?
- What will be required to implement it?

#### Key Findings

- There is strong support for the UK Government to lead on developing a shared vision for a sustainable food chain that is ambitious and aspirational, in setting out long term targets.

- The fundamental purpose of developing a vision must be to accelerate progress towards sustainability by providing clear priorities for government, retailers (and other food chain businesses) and consumers within a clear, concise vision.
- Strong political leadership and ownership, that transcends short term political change, will be essential to its success. This is necessary to provide business with long term certainty for investment for sustainability. Lack of political leadership was seen as a barrier to progress.
- There was strong consensus that the vision must provide consistency and clarity, including a consistent narrative across government departments and clarity to current confusion over green 'trade offs' e.g. local sourcing and international development. Government has a clear role in providing the evidence base to identify sustainability 'hot spots' and priorities for action.
- The scope should be comprehensive and cover the whole of the UK food supply chain, including its global impacts. Ideally it should be UK wide and ensure co-ordination and agreement with devolved administrations.

## Scene-setting

The workshop comprised 25 participants from government, food chain and civil society interests – see Appendix 1 for full list of participants.

**Andrew Lee** (SDC Director) introduced the purpose of the event and outlined SDC's role. As part of its Watchdog function, the SDC is conducting a review of Government policy towards supermarkets and its impact on sustainable development. One of the key findings has been that the Government's lack of a vision for a sustainable food system has acted as a barrier to supermarkets. Defra has signalled it is willing to work with stakeholders to develop such a vision. The purpose of the seminar is to provide Government with some early input and parameters for this visioning process.

**Professor Tim Lang** (SDC Commissioner) outlined the SDC's supermarket review project. Its function is not to be an audit of whether and how supermarkets are or are not operating in sustainable ways, but a review of the role of Government in helping or hindering supermarkets deliver sustainable development. A core finding so far is that big retailers would actually welcome a clearer framework from Government. There is no agreed vision for what a sustainable food chain could or would look like. Events and awareness are moving so fast – which is to be welcomed – that the policy deficit needs to be addressed. There is, however, a conundrum. On one hand, Government tends to leave retailing matters to supermarkets, whom it judges to be exemplars of good business practice; yet, on the other hand, not even big and powerful retailers can actually resolve sustainability issues, such as how the food system can address climate change, on their own. There is need for a new, common framework within which market efficiencies can then operate. This seminar is therefore timely and will be most useful for the SDC and Defra which is also aware of this policy gap, and now working to fill it.

Workshop discussions took place around three tables, with plenary feedback sessions. The reports below summarise the main points of the discussions that took place.

## Session 1

### What should be the purpose and the use for a vision?

There was strong consensus among participants for government to lead on developing a shared vision for a sustainable food chain that is ambitious and aspirational, in setting out long term goals and direction of travel.

A long-term framework will be required to give industry the incentives and certainty for investment. However industry will also need to be able to trust that the framework will be robust enough to withstand ministerial or government changes. Currently trust that government will provide the right enabling framework is lacking.

#### *Accelerating progress*

The fundamental purpose of a vision for a sustainable food system should be to accelerate progress towards sustainability.

To achieve this, the vision will need to be inspirational, to stimulate transformation as widely and as quickly as is necessary. It should define sustainability for the sector (what does 'good' look like?). For example, the Environment Agency is taking a tiered four-step approach to retailers and the environment:

- 1) compliance
- 2) cost effectiveness/ good practice
- 3) current best practice
- 4) sustainable practice

#### *Common goals*

One of its purposes should be to bring on board a very competitive and diverse sector and to help align business and government around agreed common goals. Hence the vision must work for all parties and be a framework that provides guidance for all

sectors. Key to this within government is that a vision needs a consistent narrative across government departments so that it is a government vision not just Defra's.

#### *Clarity*

A vision should bring clarity – a number of different areas were cited, including clarity of direction, priorities, responsibilities and understanding around specific issues. In this respect there was broad agreement that it would need to go beyond bland generic statements.

#### *Managing trade-offs*

There was considerable agreement that a vision, and the process that supports it, must resolve and manage the 'trade-offs' that currently exist. Examples that were raised included confusion of different 'green' labelling schemes and uncertainties over relative benefits of e.g. organic, fair-trade, locally sourced. It was recognised that all have different strengths and weaknesses but it was important to raise the intellectual capacity of the debate and move away from what is perceived often to be PR or token gestures (whether from government or business).

It will be necessary to identify sustainability hotspots and priorities for action within the food system.

This would also help provide clarity for consumers, though it was agreed this wasn't to 'tell' consumers what choices to make, but recognising that consumers want information and advice on choices. Important to their trust in information is trust in the quality of leadership. The risk of oversimplification was raised as a concern.

There was a discussion as to whether 'trade-offs' could always be resolved. Where difficult it was suggested that those in the food chain e.g. supermarket buyers were aware of trade offs and able to justify the decisions that they made.

#### *Pragmatism*

It was also noted that any vision needs to be achievable and grounded in business

pragmatism, while at the same time forward looking and inspirational.

#### *How will it be used?*

A number of uses were proposed:

*Benchmarking:* for companies to benchmark their own progress against priority areas and also for other stakeholders to benchmark retailers' progress.

*Framework for guidance:* e.g. for UK Government in European and WTO negotiations and to encourage good practice into other national SD strategies.

*Working with Devolved Administrations:* to help build a unified UK approach and to build on existing policies in devolved administrations.

## **Session 2**

### **What should be the components and scope of a Vision?**

Agreement on three elements were suggested as necessary for a Vision: its scale, its boundary conditions and its timeframe. It was necessary to distinguish between a vision and the goals, strategy and/or implementation plans that would be needed to deliver it.

#### *Scope:*

There was broad agreement that a vision should take UK food consumption as its starting point and include impacts of the whole of the food supply chain, in the UK and globally. This should include the hospitality sector as well as the retail sector.

#### *Geographical scope:*

Ideally its scope should be UK-wide. This will require co-ordination and agreement with devolved administrations as certain areas of food and agriculture policy are devolved responsibilities. It was suggested that DAs could agree one vision but adopt different strategies and delivery plans. In practice business needs consensus across

the UK. A vision could be applied locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

#### *Timeframe:*

There was general consensus that this should be a long term vision looking 10-15 years ahead but with shorter targets for identified priorities and to allow for reviews e.g. every 5 years. This would send clear messages and incentives for business investment.

#### *Breadth of vision:*

This should be broad and include economic, social and environmental aspects and be inter-sectorial. A range of issues were identified for inclusion and for consideration of impact and priority setting, including

- trade justice and development
- natural resources
- logistics
- Sustainable Consumption and Production
- agriculture
- carbon/GHGs/energy
- water
- contribution to rural communities
- biodiversity
- land use
- landscape
- waste
- GM and biotechnology
- labour conditions
- health and nutrition
- animal welfare
- ecotoxicity

### **Session 3**

#### **What will be required to implement a Vision?**

##### *Government leadership and ownership:*

Government should drive forward the vision. Strong political leadership and ownership, that transcends short term political change, will be essential for success and necessary to provide business with long term certainty for investment. Lack of political leadership and ownership was seen as a barrier to progress.

##### *Institutional mechanism:*

Whether there was an appropriate institutional mechanism was discussed. A number of approaches were discussed including:

- a 'Tsar' – this could play a catalytic and inspirational role but there are questions about whether this role would have the power to make a big difference.
- Champions – these could broaden 'ownership', follow through and institutional capacity but can suffer lack of institutional leverage.
- Partnership approach - although questions were raised about how successful the Food Industry Sustainability Strategy partnership approach had been.
- The Catalyst for Change model - this is a general approach linking government, business, people.
- 'Balanced score card'<sup>1</sup> approach – this aims to get from vision to action quickly; the Scottish Executive has used this approach across the whole of government very effectively.
- Specific focus on civil society initiatives e.g. Forum for the Future, IGD initiatives

##### *Building on existing frameworks:*

A vision should build on existing domestic and global strategies and ensure that policy frameworks add up.

##### *Building evidence base:*

Government has a role in delivering the evidence base to underpin the vision. Currently there are gaps in knowledge and uncertainties about impacts of current activity.

##### *Role of food chain players:*

The intention would be for all players to know their sustainability impact and to manage these against priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a management tool used to measure an organisation's activities in terms of its vision and strategies.

*Challenges to success:*

Internal Defra conflict between sustainability and sector promotion e.g. red meat – how do we get there without creating a political storm?

Bring consumers/public along - need to create space for debate in public.

Too many initiatives – not enough delivery.

**Next Steps**

The SDC intends to publish its review of Government policy towards supermarkets in Autumn 2007.

Recommendations will be based around the five principles of sustainable development enshrined in *Securing the Future* - including Good Governance and the need for Government to lead on developing a vision for a food system based on sustainable development principles. Defra have indicated they are willing to take forward the challenge for a vision for a sustainable food system.

## Participants

Chair: Andrew Lee, Sustainable Development Commission

Karen Dell, Food Standards Agency  
Sue Dibb, Sustainable Development Commission

John Dyson, British Hospitality Association  
Sara Eppel, Sustainable Development Commission

Martin Fodor, Environment Agency  
Lesley Forsdike, Department for Trade and Industry

Chris Foster, Manchester Business School

Richard Griffiths, Defra

Vicki Hird, Friends of the Earth

Neil Howard, Welsh Assembly Government

Bronwen Jones, Defra

Alan Knight, SDC Commissioner

Tim Lang, SDC Commissioner

Colin Macleod, Defra

Andrew Opie, British Retail Consortium

Dominic Pattinson, Defra

James Petts, Natural England

Shivani Reddy, Sustainable Development Commission Scotland

Helen Rimmer, Sustainable Development Commission

Alison Spalding, Food Standards Agency

Sally Uren, Forum for the Future

Bill Vorley, International Institute for Environment and Development

Lucy Yates, National Consumer Council

Callton Young, Food and Drink Federation