An appetite for change? Engaging the public in food policy and politics

Jonathan Beacham (University of Bristol) and Peter Jackson (University of Sheffield)

Abstract

The Independent Review of England's agri-food systems, commonly known as the National Food Strategy (NFS), was commissioned by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in 2019. The NFS report, published in two stages in 2020 and 2021, outlines a range of interventions and policy proposals to achieve better agri-food outcomes in terms of public health and environmental sustainability. This commentary focuses on the challenges associated with incorporating a diversity of voices within the NFS' evidence base. To achieve this, the NFS mobilised a series of public dialogue events to capture lay perspectives. Led by professional facilitators, these events sought to open a deliberative space to explore the workings of agri-food systems, leading to the publication of a public engagement report in late 2021. While diverse views were recorded, the report found 'a strong appetite for change' among the participants, eager to address the problems associated with current agri-food systems. In commenting on the dialogue process, we identify three distinct problematics which arise from the NFS' public engagement strategy. Firstly, we consider the array of subject positions at play in the report. Secondly, we discuss the 'epistemologies of engagement', reflecting on the different forms of knowledge that are enrolled through the process of public engagement. Thirdly, we consider the under-acknowledged politics that are at play in these kinds of public engagement exercises and the limits of 'co-production' as a methodological principle. We conclude by drawing out the wider (national and international) implications of this particular form of public engagement which aims to incorporate lay perspectives into policy development processes.

Introduction

In 2019, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) commissioned the businessman Henry Dimbleby to lead an Independent Review of England's agri-food systems, commonly referred to as the National Food Strategy (NFS). Hailed as the first attempt to provide a comprehensive review of England's food system since the Second World War, the Review aimed to provide a broad analysis of the strengths, flaws, and prospects for better outcomes across the entire system. Alongside an Advisory Group—whose members included representatives from agriculture, industry, government and NGOs, academics and other experts—the Independent Review undertook extensive research.[1] This included a review of published material, consultation with over 300 organisations, three 'town hall' events, workshops with over 400 young people and—the focus of this commentary—a series of 'public dialogues' in five locations across England. These intended to engage a cross-section of the public to deliberate on the priorities and outcomes of the strategy by providing evidence of public perspectives and opinions.[2]

We suggest that the production of the Independent Review represents a significant moment in the politics of consumption. By incorporating perspectives often neglected within policy-making processes, this has renewed questions about who gets to speak for and represent 'the consumer interest'. These debates can be traced back to the emergence of retailer-led food governance in the 1990s whereby (as Marsden et al. 2000 argue) the major retailers were able to persuade government that they could be relied on to represent the consumer interest in matters of food governance. These arguments clearly also have a longer history, as Trentmann (2005) insisted in his work on the making of the modern consumer (see also Trentmann 2007). For Trentmann, 'the consumer' is both a subject and an object, as well as 'an identity, audience or category of analysis' (2005: 2). More recently, Evans et al. (2017) have written about the multiple ways in which the rhetorical figure of 'the consumer' is constructed and mobilised to suit differing agendas (see also Barnett et al. (2011) on consumers as 'the elusive subjects of neoliberalism'). As a debate that we return to and expand upon shortly, we argue that the deployment of words like 'public', 'consumer' or 'citizen' involves far more than a simple choice of terminology.

Limited to England but with the hope that its findings might be taken up across the UK (and possibly beyond), the NFS sought to recruit a diverse and inclusive sample of the population within the public dialogues.[3] The recruitment strategy for the public dialogues was place-based, aiming to avoid a metropolitan bias and to encourage participation from a range of locations including smaller cities and surrounding rural areas. The dialogues took place in Bristol, Grimsby, Kendal, Lewisham and Norwich. Each meeting involved c.40 members of the public (c.200 participants in total). The meetings included multiple tasks and reflective activities, using professional facilitators from Hopkins Van Mil (HVM) and input from

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[1]   See Independent Review 2020 'Acknowledgements' and 'What we have Read'.

[2]   See 'Where we have been and who we have met' in the second part of the NFS report (Independent Review 2021: 10).

[3]   The Review was largely restricted to England rather than extending to the whole of the UK, though Dimbleby was keen to emphasise that 'the food systems of the UK are so tightly interwoven as to be indistinguishable in many ways' and that, throughout the review, the NFS team had shared their thinking with the food strategy teams in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Independent Review 2020: 8).

Sciencewise to maximise participation.[4] They took place in two stages with the initial phase meeting face-to-face and the second phase conducted online due to COVID-19 restrictions. The process culminated in an online 'Citizens' Summit' in April 2021 with 50 participants drawn from across the five locations. A small group of invited experts were on hand to provide guidance and clarification throughout the process. Both authors of this commentary participated in this role in the first (face-to-face) phase in two different locations, respectively, Grimsby (Jackson) and Kendal (Beacham).

The purpose of this commentary is to reflect on the lessons we have learnt through our participation in this process, as well as the challenges it raises in engaging the public in food policy and politics. Framed as more than 'consumers'—characterised by their purchasing habits—we suggest that these reflections have profound implications for tackling the 'wicked problems' at the heart of contemporary social and environmental challenges. We situate these reflections as necessarily partial within an ongoing process: despite multiple reports having now emerged from the NFS, at the time of writing this commentary (May 2022) the promised policy 'White Paper'—responding to the recommendations of the Independent Review—has not yet been published. Our commentary is therefore primarily focused on the public engagement report and its underlying strategy.

Our comments focus on three areas that we regard as problematic in the incorporation of a diversity of voices into the policy process. We do not raise these points to denigrate the findings of the NFS, nor to play down its more hopeful prospects for better agri-food systems. Indeed, our title ('an appetite for change') refers to the use of this phrase throughout the public engagement report.[5] The phrase is used over 30 times with multiple references in the Appendix (or 'quotation book') but also as a summary of participants' views where, it was reported that 'In every location, dialogue participants had a strong appetite for change to address the problems in the food system' (p.7).[6] Mobilising a constructively critical position, we focus on three distinct problematics. Firstly, we expand on the contestations between differing subject positions at play in the report. Secondly, we discuss the 'epistemologies of engagement', reflecting on the different forms of knowledge that are enrolled through the process of public engagement. Thirdly, we consider the under-acknowledged politics that are at play in these kinds of public engagement exercises and the limits of 'co-production' as a methodological principle. We conclude by drawing out the wider (national and international) implications of this form of public engagement which aims to incorporate lay perspectives into policy development.

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[4]   HVM describe their approach to public engagement in terms of creating 'safe, impartial and productive spaces' in which to explore and gain an understanding of people's views on issues that matter to them (http://www.hopkinsvanmil.co.uk/about-us). Funded by UKRI with support from BEIS, Sciencewise is 'an internationally recognised public engagement programme which enables policy makers to develop socially informed policy with a particular emphasis on science and technology' (https://sciencewise.org.uk/aboutsciencewise/).

[5]   The public dialogues report can be accessed at: https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/HVM-National-Food-Strategy-Public-Dialogue-report-Sep21.pdf. The phrase is also used in the title of Warren Belasco's celebrated account of the place of food in the US counterculture (Belasco, 2006).

[6]   Referencing the public's 'appetite for change' is itself, of course, an appeal to the (real or discursive) figure of 'the consumer', where—in this case—consumers are engaged by policy-makers to apply pressure on other food-system actors.

Consumer-citizens, public(s) and experts

Our first area of concern revolves around the range of subject positions evoked in outlining, justifying, and characterising this growing appetite for change. Throughout the public engagement report, we encounter a range of keywords used to capture different subject positions and draw the reader's attention to differing concerns. This is not as a coherent and totalised 'public' from which knowledge is gathered, but as actors who are variously 'citizens' and 'consumers', positioned alongside 'experts' as interlocutors that are in dialogue with one another. Whilst the report is reflective in recognising that these different subject positions overlap, intermingle, and resist being neatly bounded, we suggest that their selective deployment is indicative of their political significance. This dynamic in turn requires greater consideration and exploration than the report provides.

Foundationally, the framing of the process as a *public* engagement strategy is itself significant. Rather than seeking to engage with actors prefigured as 'consumers', the report rallies against broader policy tendencies to mobilise an 'individual or consumer lens on the food system' (p.18). Though such an inclination is common far beyond the agri-food domain, individualistic and consumer-orientated accounts belie the aforementioned historical construction of these subject positions. Rather than defaulting to rational economic self-interest, the report conversely encourages participants to see food systems as part of the 'common good' (cf. Jackson et al., 2021). From this perspective, one's individual position in the marketplace ought not to be the primary concern. This is not to wholly deny the significance of the individual, with the report acknowledging that lived experiences provide an important starting point in encouraging lay actors to apply their own 'sociological imagination' to tendencies within food systems. In this sense, encouraging actors to think first and foremost *not* as consumers is significant in flattening out variations of experiences, diverging from the starting point of many policy perspectives. Instead, it is the subject position of the *citizen* which is at the centre of much of the discussion.

Whilst its intentions are laudable, the strategy is not wholly successful in breaking out of entrenched pre-existing framings. Embracing a pluralistic sentiment, actors are acknowledged as speaking 'from a range of perspectives through the dialogue: citizens, consumers, parents, grandparents, young adults, people on low incomes and people who are more affluent' (p.18). Yet at other points the ability of lay actors to speak as different kinds of subjects is limited. For example, the report considers the ways in which 'people could *play their part as consumers*, citizens and communities' (p.8, emphasis ours), with the 'impact that the food environment plays in their lives' mediated by factors such as 'affordability, accessibility, time, ease, […] preferences, health and pleasure' (p.4). That actors interpret the world through their lived experiences is clearly not itself objectionable, yet that much of this revolves around consumption-related activities and economic processes is telling. Indeed, we might question the extent to which framing them as citizens automatically enables them to take a 'bird's eye view' of food systems, relating their necessarily partial experience to the whole. Furthermore, in treating consumers and citizens as distinct subject positions within the report, we suggest that this risks overlooking the cleavage between the two. For example, Wheeler's (2012) discussion of FairTrade certification considers the hybrid 'citizen-consumer', in which one's responsibilities as a citizen are increasingly conflated with one's consumption

practices in the marketplace: in sum, neat distinctions between 'consumers' and 'citizens' appear conceptually fraught.

In relation to this challenge, we ask whether an appeal to 'the public' in a public engagement strategy is at least in part an attempt to navigate around these contestations of what kinds of subjects the strategy sought to engage with. This raises more fundamental questions: notably, what *is* a public? The report is again somewhat unclear on this front. Reflecting on our own experiences, we are concerned that the report generates a much more coherent presentation of a public knowledge than that which either of us experienced. Following Wynne (2007), we argue that it is problematic to think in terms of a singular public, when in fact a more productive framing revolves around a series of 'emergent publics' centred on different substantive issues (Chilvers and Kearnes, 2015).[7] For example, there is a divergent public that forms around a concern for the ecological consequences of the contemporary structuring of agri-food systems, compared with those whose primary emphasis is on the cost of food and access to it. This is not to suggest that these topics do not share any sort of common ground, but instead that reliance on a 'public' (in the singular) risks presenting lay perspectives as overly coherent and advanced in their understanding.

Given the centrality of these keywords within the report, our last spur relates to one subject position which receives surprisingly little consideration in the report: that of the 'expert'. Within the sessions that we participated in, we (and other 'experts') were invited to participate in breakout discussions, answer questions, and offer brief thematic presentations as participants circulated within the room. Throughout the report, these experts are presented as neutral figures, providing the participants with information so that they might arrive at their own conclusions. More critically, we suggest that the experts played a significant role in shaping how the participants thought about agri-food systems, or indeed how they were *meant to think*. In a particular section of the public dialogue events, experts were invited to present on how to think of agri-food 'as a system'. Here it was suggested that agri-food spans the worlds of production, distribution and consumption, and is therefore inherently complex, full of contingent feedback loops and other intricacies which are often overlooked in 'common sense' understandings. Whilst in many ways a laudable effort to encourage participants to transcend simplistic conceptualisations, we argue that regarding experts as neutral or providing minimal input to the process does not stand up to scrutiny: the involvement of experts actively shapes the emerging 'public dialogue'.

Epistemologies of engagement

Our second area of concern is what we call the 'epistemologies of engagement' whereby, we argue, different forms of knowledge are enrolled through different processes and methods of engagement. For example, questions of typicality require statistical evidence based on robust representative samples, while case studies and other forms of qualitative research rely on logical rather than statistical inference (cf. Mitchell, 1983). These issues were particularly apparent in the move from face-to-face to virtual engagement between the two phases of the public dialogues because of COVID-related restrictions on social interaction. The shift

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[7] These issues are discussed at greater length in a forthcoming review of public engagement strategies (Defra, 2022).

from face-to-face to virtual interaction involved a change in the *technologies* of engagement but also revealed how different modes of engagement give rise to different forms of knowledge. As professional facilitators, HVM maintained engagement with participants between Phases 1 and 2 (pre- and post-lockdown), using the Recollective platform to encourage members to stay in touch and to participate in online discussion forums. They were largely successful and retained over 70% of participants in each location between the two phases.

Responding to the technological challenges of moving online, HVM ensured that all participants had access to a laptop, tablet or mobile phone, holding 'tech try-out' sessions to help those who were unfamiliar with the online tools being used (such as Zoom and Mentimeter) and checking for any camera, audio or broadband issues. Arguably, however, HVM were less attuned to the nuanced differences between online and face-to-face interaction. These include participants' confidence in voicing an opinion, differences of positionality (by age, gender etc.), the use of visual as well as verbal cues, the process of turn-taking, and the influence of body language and eye contact: all of which demonstrate how the nature of evidence varies according to the method of engagement. For example, in the face-to-face exchanges in the first phase of the public dialogues, one man expressed a rather strident view on the (in)ability of working-class mothers to feed their families properly because of an alleged lack of cooking skills or budgetary know-how. Judging from their demeanour and other visual cues, some women in the group seemed uncomfortable with these views but the fleeting nature of the discussion did not allow counter views to be expressed, leading to an apparent consensus on the issue. A different method of engagement, with more time for reflection and debate, might have led to different conclusions about the rather sketchy and contested evidence on which these views relied.[8]

While online delivery in the second phase (after the onset of COVID restrictions) raised questions about the potential exclusion of those who were unfamiliar with the use of digital technologies, the use of digital platforms can also have the converse effect, empowering those who are reluctant to 'speak out' in face-to-face settings. Indeed, some participants reported that they preferred working online for a variety of reasons including more flexibility over childcare arrangements and greater confidence in contributing to break-out conversations. Direct comparison between the evidence collected in each phase of the dialogues was exacerbated by shifts in the social context between phases: for example, the pandemic highlighted the fragility of food supply chains with temporary shortages of key ingredients in retail stores, leading to reports of 'panic buying' in some quarters and a rise in the use of online grocery shopping (Benker, 2021). The pandemic also led to higher numbers of people being reliant on emergency food aid and to changes in people's everyday lives ranging from total 'lockdown' to changes in the operating conditions for restaurants and other venues.

Facing these difficulties, the facilitators were meticulous in presenting the different kinds of stimulus material provided to participants across the different phases in their report—particularly in the lengthy presentation of a series of 'indicative quotations' from the

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[8]   The participant's opinions were, in fact, reminiscent of the views expressed by celebrity chef Jamie Oliver in his TV series *Jamie's Ministry of Food* which had a very mixed reception. See, for example, Hollows & Jones (2010).

dialogues (Appendices 3-5). Yet we suggest that the reporting of the dialogues also raises a series of more subtle epistemological and methodological considerations which are somewhat glossed over in the report. For example, it could be argued that the report gives a false sense of consensus around contentious issues, tending to deny their political nature. The report's authors counter this potential criticism by insisting that 'Dialogue is not about consensus' (p.19), highlighting several areas of disagreement (e.g. on the pace of change and on the need for a reduction in meat and dairy consumption).[9] But references to '*our* environment' (emphasis added) could be seen to provide a false sense of shared concern for a common good.[10] Equally, a degree of national consensus is also apparent in claims that 'Participants in all locations were in agreement that trade deals struck following the UK leaving the European Union should under no circumstances jeopardise UK food standards' (p.53). This has been a major bone of contention in post-Brexit debate and the extent of agreement on this topic is surely exaggerated.[11] Significantly, too, all of the dialogue extracts are presented as individual quotations, save for a handful of examples that include the facilitators' prompts. There is no verbatim reporting of the dialogue *among participants* to give a sense of the cut and thrust of debate or disagreement on any specific topic.

Finally, there are some technical issues surrounding the reporting of the public dialogues that raise significant epistemological issues. For example, despite some discussion of how the authors use the words 'few', 'many', 'several' and 'some' (p.18), the report still occasionally lapses into semi-quantitative language with references to 'A great number…' and 'many equally…' (p.76). There are some dubious claims to typicality (e.g. 'The discussion in Norwich is typical', p.34) and problematic comments on environmental sustainability being the participants' 'highest priority' (p.64) when the methods used do not lend themselves to robust statements about typicality or the prioritisation of different views. To be clear, however, we do not regard these as major blemishes in the reporting of the NFS research. Rather, we draw attention to them as concerns that arise in even the most rigorous accounting of public engagement processes where it is easy to gloss over potentially important epistemological issues.

The limits of co-production

Amidst a range of pragmatic and philosophical concerns, our final problematic relates to a fundamental dimension of the public engagement strategy: the methodological principle of co-production. As a research approach, co-production is increasingly ubiquitous, finding significant traction in policy making processes around the world (Nesti, 2017). The central tenet of co-production is that breaking down a distinction between policymakers and those affected by shifts in policy (as 'users') democratises and broadens agendas to better account for lay concerns (Turnhout et al., 2020). In the case of agri-food, this includes almost every conceivable actor, and yet policy making tends to prioritise the voices of a relatively narrow

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[9]   The report highlights disagreement over those who favour incremental vs dramatic change (p.64), later described as evolutionary vs revolutionary (p.65), also distinguishing between the need for individual and systemic change (p.66).

[10]   This may be a quirk of the English language but the use of 'our' in this phrase ('*our* environment') represents a subtle marker of shared inheritance or common ownership, as opposed to the less possessive and more neutral sense of '*the* environment'.

[11]   See, for example, the Food Research Collaboration report (Lang et al., 2018).

range of experts and other influential actors. As with our earlier discussion of the different subject positions at play in the public dialogue report, co-production practically entails bringing lay perspectives into sustained 'interaction on a level playing field with specialists', gathering 'a range of views, informed by the evidence' (NFS public dialogue report, pp.16-17). In doing so, co-production rejects the suggestion that there is a singular form of knowledge that is 'correct' in instrumentally resolving complex, value-laden problems.

Whilst we have questioned the supposed neutrality of experts within the public engagement strategy, our concern here is somewhat different, asking whether co-production can deliver on its intentions. Given that we await the policy White Paper which will 'translate' lessons from the NFS into legislation, our perspective here is somewhat speculative, and we do not wish to predetermine possible outcomes. Yet the lack of critical reflection on co-production within the public engagement strategy raises several concerns. Though it is difficult to critique the progressive sentiment underpinning co-production, we feel it overly presumptive that 'gathering a range of views' on a 'level playing field' might automatically contribute to better, or indeed fairer, policy agendas. Conversely, we suggest that there are palpable limits to what co-production can achieve.

This is to acknowledge that, in turn, there is a rich and complex politics to co-production which is scarcely touched upon within the public engagement report. Determined efforts on the part of HVM facilitators to enable this level playing field notwithstanding, we find common ground with Turnhout et al.'s critique that an 'ethic of mutuality, reciprocity, and equality' (Turnhout et al., 2020: 16) cannot dismantle unequal power relations and structures. Whether from academia, government or the private sector—all of which were involved in formulating the NFS report and recommendations—such experts largely

> [H]ave more time and resources available, often initiate these processes, define the scope for participation, have more knowledge and skills, and are, for all these reasons that resonate with socio-cultural biases, better able to articulate a contribution that is considered relevant and important. (Turnhout et al., 2020: 16)

It is for these reasons that co-produced knowledge from lay perspectives forever risks being side-lined, denigrated, or resigned to supplementary appendices. Powerful voices who know the 'rules of the game' can shape 'processes to serve their interests', further burgeoned by the 'strong authority that is attributed to' their position (Turnhout et al., 2020: 16). Whilst these are challenges that are far from unique to the NFS, we suggest that there needs to be much more explicit consideration of the power relations at play in these processes. These power differentials had other consequences, even if they are more mundane and unavoidable in nature. For example, in our role as experts, we were able to organise our travel and work schedule around attending our respective sessions on a Saturday, whilst others had to volunteer their time off work to participate.

Taking stock of this discussion, our overarching concern is that the NFS problematically risks *promising too much* to those that it engages with through co-production. In glossing over— or from a more critical perspective arguably denying—the politics of these interactions, those who choose to engage in good faith risk being deceived. On this front, co-production might invert on its promises: rather than democratising policy-making processes, it merely

masquerades as such, ensuring that existing power structures remain entrenched. So, despite the reported 'appetite for change', there is no guarantee that things will change. The first author is here reminded of the strength of feeling against what participants saw as the corporatisation of agri-food, which is reflected in the report. Speaking to participants informally over lunch, they were surprised to hear that many senior corporate figures held advisory positions either within the NFS or as part of the Food and Drink Sector Council, which is linked to the NFS. After all, weren't they part of the very problems they were identifying? This is not to suggest that they were misled, but simply that these participants did not have an extensive understanding of *how* such a strategy proceeds or *who* is involved: all part of the intricate 'know how' of policy-making processes.

Conclusion

The use of public dialogues in the development of the NFS raises a wide range of questions that transcend its specific national context or focus on food. These include: the process of engagement (its purpose and methodology); how subjects are framed (as citizens, consumers, the public, or a different hybrid position); questions of individual responsibility (often cast in terms of 'consumer choice') versus their wider (collective, institutional, shared and distributed) responsibility; discussion over the way dissenting voices are reported versus the tendency for public dialogues to generate an apparent consensus; as well as whether public engagement exercises increase and expand democracy, giving voice to those who may often go unheard, or whether they are prone to co-optation or deployed as a cynical, manipulative or sham form of public consultation. Whilst these questions extend beyond the scope and scale of our discussion here, our focus on three key problematics suggests that this is a fertile field for further exploration which appears likely to grow in significance.

We should conclude by emphasising that the public dialogues were, in many respects, a commendable and successful attempt to incorporate lay perspectives in policy-making processes. They were conducted in a highly professional manner and reported with integrity and good faith. Nonetheless, the concerns we have raised suggest that even the most exemplary forms of public engagement raise questions that are of wider (national and international) relevance in addressing the complexities of policies surrounding 'wicked problems' such as dysfunctional agri-food systems, climate change, social care and so on. As Doherty et al. (2020) suggest, such 'complex challenges need the active participation of citizens', giving them 'agency in the processes underpinning design and implementations of solutions and related policies' (Doherty et al., 2020: 3). The authors go on to argue that not only does this allow for greater recognition of lived experiences in policy—in terms of what does or does not work at specific scales—but that it can have a beneficial secondary effect of encouraging citizens to become more active participants in lobbying for desirable changes to occur. Our analysis of the NFS suggests that bringing a diverse range of participants into dialogue with academic experts and institutional authorities can make an important contribution to the process of policy formation, but that it is not without its problems or limitations.

Whilst the long-term impacts of the NFS and its public engagement strategies cannot yet be known, we suggest that the conceptual, political and methodological framing of these activities raises profound questions. To what extent do public engagement exercises produce

an exaggerated sense of consensus, disempowering those whose views depart from the reported norm? To what extent do expert voices, active in the engagement process, shape or distort public dialogue, even while acknowledging that unmediated access to public opinion is never possible in practice? Following Mouffe (2013), we might also ask whether public engagement provides an agonistic space for the development of 'deliberative democracy'? This is a particularly pertinent question in light of a double logic where the public sphere has shrunk down to one's activities as a consumer in the marketplace; and at the same time where power is increasingly concentrated and corporatised in contemporary agri-food systems (cf. Clapp, 2021).

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