White Rose Research Online

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York

Deposited via The University of Sheffield.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/206862/

Version: Published Version

Article:
Ali, M., Koh, L., Acquaye, A. et al. (2024) Sustainability assessment of peri-urban organic horticulture — a case study in the United Kingdom. The International Journal of Life Cycle Assessment, 29 (3). pp. 456-468. ISSN: 0948-3349

https://doi.org/10.1007/s11367-023-02260-z

Reuse
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/

Takedown
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
University of Sheffield
UNIVERSITY of York

The International Journal of Life Cycle Assessment
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11367-023-02260-z

LCA FOR AGRICULTURE

Sustainability assessment of peri-urban organic horticulture — A case study in the United Kingdom

Mustafa Ali[1,2] · Lenny Koh[1,2] · Adolf Acquaye[3] · Jonathan Leake[4] · Jacob Nickles[4] · Toby P. Evans[4] · Gareth Roberts[5] · Douglas Kemp[5]

Received: 24 May 2023 / Accepted: 29 November 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

Purpose There is a growing concern about the resilience and sustainability of horticultural production in the United Kingdom (UK) as a result of high energy costs and insufficient local labour, causing over-reliance on imports. In this study, we present an integrated environmental and economic assessment of organic peri-urban horticulture using primary data from a farm in Sheffield.

Methods This study includes a farm-to-gate hybrid life cycle assessment (LCA) using the ReCIPE (H) approach for the functional unit of 1-kg tomatoes produced in an unheated polytunnel without supplementary lighting, and 1 kg of field-grown courgettes. All analyses were conducted in SimaPro software using environmental data from the ecoinvent database. Results were compared with those from a systematic literature review of similar studies.

Results We found that the production of organic tomatoes and courgettes resulted in a global warming potential (GWP) of 0.61 kg CO_2-eq and 0.11 kg CO_2-eq respectively using a process-based LCA approach. Using a hybrid LCA approach, however, yielded a GWP of 3.53 kg CO_2-eq and 1.70 kg CO_2-eq for the production of organic tomatoes and courgettes respectively. An additional scenario included farmgate-to-warehouse transportation for both domestic and imported produce from Spain, but found that the GWP of tomatoes in the case study was 1.87 times higher than those from Spain. Economic analysis showed that the marginal increase in the prices of tomatoes and courgettes from the case study farm was 4.6 and 5.15 times less than the market prices.

Conclusion We conclude that the studied production system is both economically and environmentally sustainable as compared to the existing scenario. Other potential benefits of peri-urban organic horticulture include employment, mental health, community cohesion, which remain to be explored in a future qualitative study. The present study is novel as it appears to be the first application of hybrid LCA to UK horticulture. The findings are highly topical given the recent horticultural supply constraints in the UK.

Keywords Hybrid LCA · Food sustainability · Resilience · Affordability

Communicated by Thomas Jan Nemecek.

✉ Mustafa Ali
mustafa.ali@sheffield.ac.uk

[1] School of Management, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 1FL, UK

[2] Energy Institute, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 1FL, UK

[3] Rochester Institute of Technology, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

[4] Institute for Sustainable Food, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 1FL, UK

[5] Regather, Sheffield S11 8BU, UK

1 Introduction

1.1 UK horticultural production and imports

The utilised agricultural area of the UK is around 17.3 million hectares which accounts for more than 70% of the total land in the country (McCalmont et al. 2017). A larger proportion of total land is used for agriculture in the UK than in any country in the European Union (EU). Most of this utilised agricultural land is grassland, with crops, mainly cereals, being grown on only 4.7 million hectares (Richter and Semenov 2005). The land areas used to grow fresh produce for human consumption (horticulture), comprising fruit

Published online: 19 December 2023

and vegetable crops, excluding potatoes was 147,976 ha in 2021 of which 112,220 ha were used to grow field vegetables. This area yields about 2.54 million metric tons that meet 57.2% of UK consumption demand, with a retail value of £1.66 billion (DEFRA 2022a). It is important to note here that the yields of protected and field grown crops vary from each other. Here, protected horticulture refers to that which enables "some control of wind-velocity, moisture, temperature, mineral nutrients, light intensity and atmospheric composition" typically in glasshouses or polythene-covering polytunnels (Wittwer and Castilla 1995). Analysis of horticultural statistics (DEFRA 2022a) shows that, between the years 1985 and 2015, protected horticulture achieved an average yield of 267.13 metric tons ha^{-1}, with an average value of £965.34/metric ton, but only used a land area of 1491 ha. On the other hand, in the same period, field horticulture achieved average yields of 17.43 metric tons ha^{-1}, with an average value of £4911.95/metric ton, and used a land area of 148,335 ha. On a like-for-like basis, between the years 1985 and 2016, the average yield of lettuce in field farming has been 22.95 metric tons/hectare (t/ha) which is significantly ($t = 11.59$, $p < 0.05$) less than 33.53 t/ha achieved for lettuce in protected farming. Similarly, the value of lettuce from field farming (£638.38) has been significantly lower ($t = 4.90$, $p < 0.05$) than that produced from protected horticulture (£1241.90/metric ton) between the aforementioned years. Despite the advantages offered by protected farming, vegetables from this source form only a small proportion of the overall supply mix as shown in Fig. 1 below. The figure also shows that the share of UK vegetable consumption that is home-grown has declined in recent years, increasing reliance on imports, especially from the EU (DEFRA 2021). This makes UK food security vulnerable to existing and potential supply chain disruptions in Europe such as those demonstrated during the Ukraine war (Wang et al. 2022). Also, rising fuel and energy costs mean that the production and transport costs are also increasing for imported produce as exemplified in an increase of 8.2% in fresh vegetable consumer price index between the years 2015 and 2023 (ONS 2023). This issue has become a serious concern lately when bad weather in Spain forced UK supermarkets to ration vegetables (Gross 2023). This makes this study highly topical and relevant to the debate on UK's food system resilience.

Figure 1 also shows the changes in the index of productivity (metric ton/hectare) and value (£/hectare) for field and

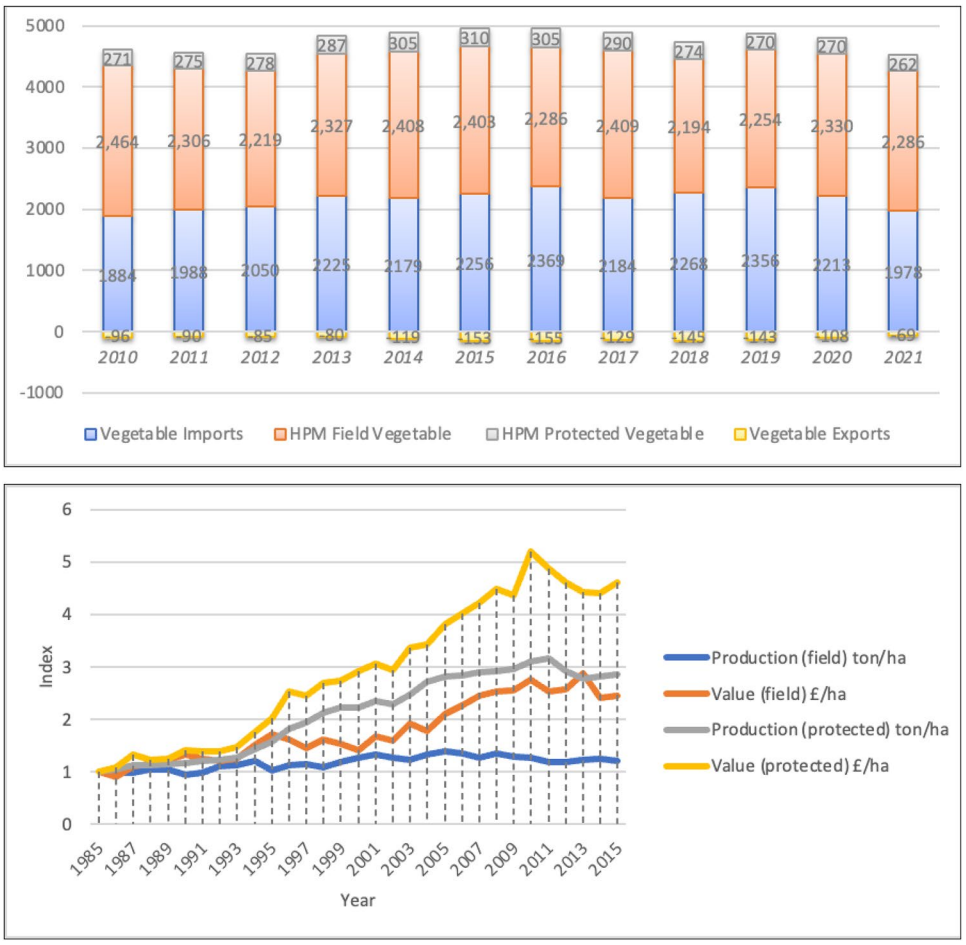


Fig. 1 (Above) UK vegetable supply by source (000 metric tons). HPM stands for Home-Produced Marketed (DEFRA 2022a). (Below) change in productivity and value of field grown and protected vegetables in the UK (DEFRA 2022a). Index is the proportional value relative to baseline year (1985)

protected vegetables grown in the UK. The index has been created by normalizing the values for all years with respect to the first year in the chart i.e. 1985. This corresponds to values of 14.83 metric ton/hectare and £278.56/hectare for field vegetables. For protected vegetables, these values were 126.23 metric ton/hectare and £91,962.33/hectare in 1985. While the productivity of the field vegetables has plateaued and remains close to 1, the productivity of protected vegetables increased by around three times between 1985 and 2015. Similarly, the market value of both field and protected vegetables has been increasing which is a reflection of the escalation of labour, input, transport and retail costs. However, the rate of increase in the value of protected vegetables increased fivefold as opposed to that for field vegetables which increased 2.5 times approximately in the evaluated period.

1.2 Environmental emissions of horticulture

Both conventional and protected horticultural systems can have significant environmental impacts. For instance, 32.8% of England's field vegetable production is conducted on Fenland peat soils, which comprise around half of grade 1 agricultural land in England (NFU 2020). Typical crops grown directly on Fenland peats include lettuce and celery (IUCN 2020). For UK overall, only 7% of peatlands are used for crop production but they also emit 32% of the total peatland GHG emissions (Evans et al. 2017). Similarly, environmental impacts are also caused by peat extraction as growing media/substrate for amateur gardening as well as professional use for crops such as mushrooms and blueberries. In high-input protected horticulture, crops are typically grown in glasshouses, in artificial rooting substrates, with supplementary heating and lighting, with highly controlled irrigation and liquid fertilization (fertigation). Studies have shown high-input protected horticulture to be more productive yet more environmentally intensive than open field horticulture (Maureira et al. 2022). As such, quite often, it becomes a question of trade-offs between choosing either of the two systems. However, with increasing costs of energy, the sustainability of high-input protected horticulture is increasingly questionable. Table 1 given below displays the emissions of courgettes and tomatoes grown in field and protected environments. The inclusion criteria for studies reported in Table 1 included those conducted in Europe (and Morocco due to UK imports) or the USA as listed in Web of Science, reporting LCA results expressed in units of kg CO_2-eq per unit area or weight with a cradle-to-farmgate system boundary only. This is because transport distance, packaging and processing types vary from one case to another. Similarly, monetary functional units are susceptible to change due to inflation. In some cases, such data was extracted from supplementary materials of the journal articles. Similarly, where only charts were made available for results, values were extracted where possible. Some studies reported different sub-configurations of production systems (e.g. heating methods), and in such cases, ranges for the yield and emission values have been presented. We have highlighted tomatoes and courgette in Table 1 as tomatoes are the highest value imported horticultural product in the UK, mainly originating from Spain and the Netherlands (DEFRA 2022a). Similarly, most courgettes sold in the UK are imported from Spain and Morocco. Both of these countries are water scarce, and existing water supplies are threatened further due to climate change (Hess and Sutcliffe 2018; Taheripour et al. 2020). Moreover, while there are significant environmental impacts associated with long transportation distances, use of energy for heating greenhouses may also play a significant role in the overall impacts (Theurl et al. 2014).

Table 1 shows that the yield and impacts from the production of tomato and courgette varied spatially from one country or region to another. For instance, the yields and impacts from non-organic tomato production were generally higher in Northern European countries (France, Netherlands, Sweden and Norway). This is because most of the production in the studies included from these countries involved heating. Such impacts were the lowest in Southern Europe (Spain and Italy) and periphery countries (Morocco). Other factors include the crop variety, kind of production (organic vs non-organic) and the variation in inputs (e.g. heated vs non-heated greenhouse). For instance, the yield of (non-organic) cherry tomatoes was generally lower but impact generally higher than that for other varieties. Finally, yield from field production was lower than that from protected horticulture. Additional variations exist with respect to the choice of the functional unit and the LCA methodology used. Some of the hidden differences pertain to the assumptions made while defining the system boundaries and calculating the useful life of the inputs (Notarnicola et al. 2017). To mitigate some of the issues inherent in process LCAs, studies increasingly use novel methods such as hybrid LCA. However, existing literature on hybrid LCA of crop production is still quite scarce. As explained in Section 2, we aim to fill these gaps by using hybrid LCA as well as process-based LCA to evaluate the environmental impacts of different crops.

1.3 The case for urban food growing

Vegetables are an important part of healthy diets; their affordability and availability are critical for food security. As explained above, vegetable supply in the UK relies mainly on imports from European countries, many of which are suffering from the impacts of climate change impacting the demand and availability of irrigation water supplies, and crops being increasingly exposed to extreme summer heat

Table 1 Yields and emissions of vegetables across field and protected horticulture (cradle-to-farmgate), colour coded for regional perspective

No.	Location	Vegetable (variety)	Substrate in protected	Organic	Heating	Yield in field	Yield in protected	Emission field (kg $CO_{2\text{-eq}}$)	Emission protected (kg $CO_{2\text{-eq}}$)	LCA method	Ref.
1	Albania	Tomato	-	No	No		95 t/ha		2660.4 per hectare	ReCiPe2016	Canaj et al. (2020)
2	Hungary	Tomato	Rockwool	No	Yes		48 kg/m^2		780–2000 per metric ton	CML 2001	Torrellas et al. (2012)
3	Sweden	Tomato	-	Yes	Yes		35 kg/m^2		366.39/metric ton	ReCiPe2016 H	Bosona and Gebresenbet (2018)
4	Norway	Tomato		No	Yes		126.6–129.7 kg/m^2		5.70–7.28 per kg	ReCiPe 2016 H	Naseer et al. (2022)
5	Netherlands	Tomato	Rockwool	No	Yes		56.5 kg/m^2		440–5000 per metric ton	CML 2001	Torrellas et al. (2012)
6	France	Tomato	Rockwool	No	Yes		450 t/ha		2.02 per kg	IPCC 20 years	Boulard et al. (2011)
7	Italy	Tomato (cherry)	-	No	No		96.3 metric ton/ha		1245.9/metric ton	CML 2001	Cellura et al. (2012)
8	Italy	Tomato (cherry)	Peat moss	No	No				17.55–23.3 per m^2		de Albuquerque Landi et al. (2022)
9	Leon, Spain	Tomato (cherry)	Coconut husk	Yes	No		11 kg/m^2		0.14 per kg	CML-IA	Urbano et al. (2022)
10	Spain	Tomato (cherry)	Perlite	No	-	6.23 kg/m^2	8.83 kg/m^2	216 per metric ton	617 per metric ton	ReCiPe	Romero-Gámez et al. (2017)
11	Spain	Tomato	Perlite	No	No		16.5 kg/m^2		250 per metric ton	CML 2001	Torrellas et al. (2012)
12	Almeria, Spain	Tomato (classic)	Perlite	No	No		16.5 kg/m^2		250 per metric ton	CML2001	Neira et al. (2018)
13	Catalonia, Spain	Tomato		No	No	127 metric ton/ha	166 metric ton/ha	152.6 per ton	155.5 per metric ton	CML2001	Martínez-Blanco et al. (2011)
14	Spain	Tomato		No	No		16.5 kg/m^2		.022-.024 per kg	ReCiPe H	Sanyé-Mengual et al. (2015)
15	Almeria, Spain	Tomato		No	Both		93–153 metric ton/ha		0.39–1.33 per kg		Neira et al. (2018)
16	Morocco	Tomato	Soil	No	No		208 t/ha		0.215 per kg	ReCiPe H	Payen et al. (2015)
17	California, USA	Tomato	Vermiculite: peat moss	No		123 metric ton/ha		0.027 per kg		IPCC-100 years	Winans et al. (2020)
18	Southern Italy	Courgette	-	No	No			0.77–0.78 per kg		ReCiPe 2016	Canaj et al. (2021)

Table 1 (continued)

No.	Location	Vegetable (variety)	Substrate in protected	Organic	Heating	Yield in field	Yield in protected	Emission field (kg $CO_{2\text{-eq}}$)	Emission protected (kg $CO_{2\text{-eq}}$)	LCA method	Ref.
19	Spain	Courgette						0.23 per kg		ReCiPe	Frankowska et al. (2019)
20	Austria	Courgette		Yes				0.1 per kg		IPCC (2007)	Lindenthal et al. (2009)

(Scheelbeek et al. 2020). This puts into question the resilience of vegetable supply for the UK households. Unless more efficient, secure and affordable means of local production are ensured, UK vegetable supply will remain vulnerable to the threats of climate change such as water shortages (Hess and Sutcliffe 2018).

The small area of land currently used for protected horticulture, and the high yields obtained compared to field-growing, indicates that a substantial amount of horticultural production could be conducted closer to urban centres where population demand for fresh produce is largest, and there is the greatest potential availability of labour to grow and harvest crops. One potential model for addressing these issues is to develop peri-urban low-input horticulture based on organic production methods outdoors and in unheated polytunnels, without supplementary lighting, or heating. This model has been successfully developed by Sheffield Organic Growers and Regather Farm which have repurposed three adjacent arable fields in the Moss Valley in Sheffield for organic horticultural production, certified by the Soil Association, growing vegetables and fruit outdoors and in polytunnels. The food is delivered to specialist independent retailers less than 5 km away in the city and delivered directly to consumers via vegetable box schemes. These production systems have the advantages of reduced capital investment and running costs compared to glasshouses with environmental controls (especially heating and lighting as indicated in Table 1). By bringing horticultural production close to urban populations that can supply labour to grow, harvest and sell produce directly to local consumers, the supply chain is kept short, transport-associated emissions may be reduced and environmental, social and health benefits may be obtained. In this study, we considered tomato production in unheated, unlit, polytunnels and courgette production in open-field cultivation (after germination and seedling establishment in an unheated, unlit polytunnel). Polytunnels are steel-framed tunnel structures covered with polyethylene sheets and used commonly by gardeners and farmers to grow vegetables. To reiterate, these crops are relevant as most of the tomatoes (~ 86%) and courgettes (~ 81%) consumed in the UK are imported (Frankowska et al. 2019) as shown in Fig. 2 below.

2 Methods

This study used life cycle assessment (LCA) to understand the environmental impact assessment of tomatoes in a polytunnel and courgettes in an open field at Regather Farm. Primary data for the life cycle inventory (LCI) was obtained from Regather Farm through a questionnaire survey. The polytunnel was assumed to have a life of 20 years for most construction materials except HDPE

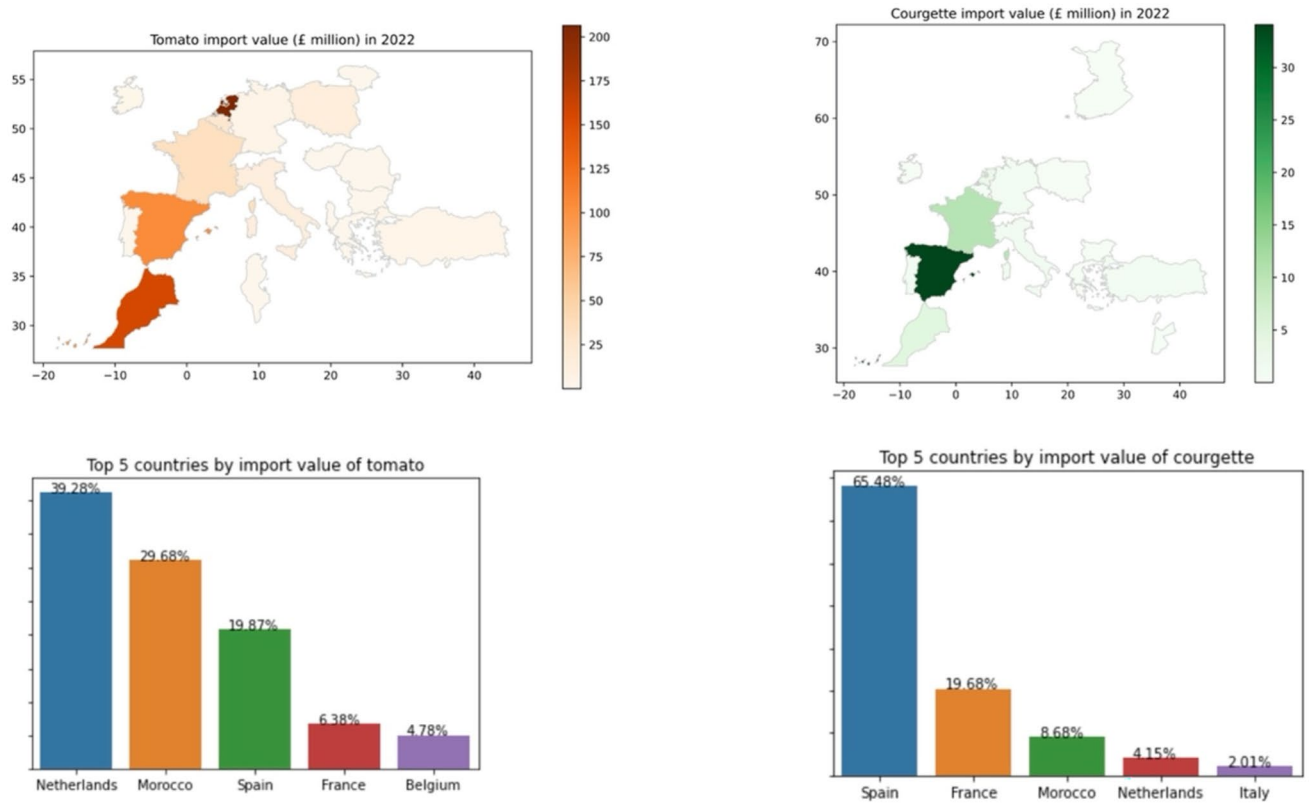


Fig. 2 Map and bar graph displaying main countries of import for tomato and courgette. Data extracted from (HM Revenue & Customs 2023)

sheet which was assumed to have a life of 5 years. The functional unit was 1 kg of crop (tomato or courgette), and the system boundary included all activities up to the farmgate. Manufacturing and transportation of raw materials was not included in the study due to the unavailability of such data. However, information about the structure and components of the polytunnels was collected among other inputs. For courgette, the LCI included consideration of the time in the polytunnel for germination and early establishment before planting outdoors. All analysis was carried out in SimaPro software using the ecoinvent database 3.8. The ReCIPE Hierarchical (H) approach was used for the analysis with results explained in the form of 18 standard indicators (midpoint). The midpoint level relates strongly to environmental flows and has inherently low uncertainty associated with it and therefore was used for the environmental impact assessment in this research. The hierarchical approach was used as it is the most commonly used approach found in the authors' literature review (Table 1). The ReCIPE method was used to have the results in a greater number of categories as compared to those obtained from, say, IPCC or CML. Additionally, a large number of studies have used this methodology in the past which makes it easier to compare the results. This can also be seen in Table 1 where a majority of the studies report results using the ReCIPE methodology.

Additionally, a hybrid LCA approach was also used in this study which integrates the process LCA technique and environmental input–output (EIO) LCA model. The hybrid LCA methodology integrates the bottom-up, process LCA technique and the top-down, environmental input–output (EIO) LCA model. This provides a robust, systematically complete system boundary which accounts for the entire supply chain and avoids double counting (Ibn-Mohammed et al. 2016). Some studies suggest that hybrid LCAs may run the risk of overestimation (Yang et al. 2017) although this has been disputed by subsequent studies (Pomponi and Lenzen 2018). Overall, hybrid LCA is a useful technique which can, at least, be used to understand the scale of the potential impacts.

This model has previously been used in studies such as those evaluating wind power and biofuel in the UK (Acquaye et al. 2012; Wiedmann et al. 2011). However, to date a hybrid LCA technique does not appear to have been used to assess environmental impacts of organic crop production in the UK. The LCIA results correspond to the values in the year 2020 and all costs have been accounted for by taking into consideration the average lifetime values of

the inputs. However, the economic results present the values both before and after the impact of the COVID pandemic i.e. for years 2018 as well as 2021/2022.

3 Results

3.1 Environmental impact assessment

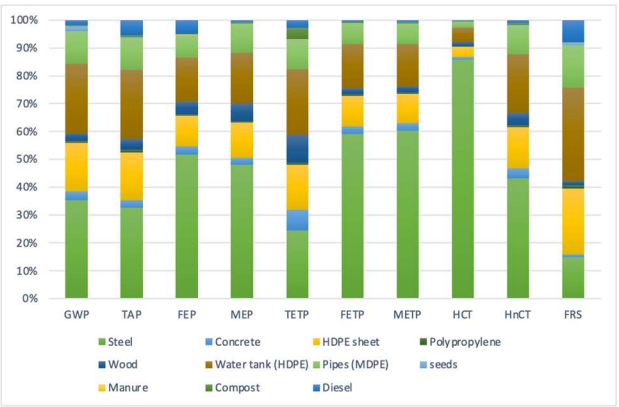
The average yields for tomato and courgette at the Regather peri-urban farm in Sheffield were 1.72 kg/m^2 and 2.0 kg/m^2 respectively. The results of the process-based LCA are shown in Fig. 3 below in the form of eight different LCIA categories. These results are also provided in the forms of Tables A4 and A5 in the Supplementary file. These categories are Global Warming Potential (GWP), Terrestrial Acidification Potential (TAP), Freshwater Eutrophication Potential (FEP), Marine Eutrophication Potential (MEP), Terrestrial Ecotoxicity Potential (TETP), Freshwater Ecotoxicity Potential (FETP) Marine Ecotoxicity Potential (METP), Human Carcinogenic Toxicity (HCT), Human non-Carcinogenic Toxicity (HnCT) and Fossil Resource Scarcity (FRS). These categories were chosen as they are comparable with those reported using other methods e.g. CML (Cavalett et al. 2013). Table A6 in the Supplementary file presents the results for cumulative energy demand (CED) which is different from the indicators reported by the ReCIPE method but reported for greater detail.

The elementary flows for tomato production consisted of those involving the building/housing of the polytunnel. This included steel, concrete for the structure of the polytunnel, HDPE for polytunnel covering and wood used in doors and window frames. Additional ancillary flows pertained to inputs used to facilitate the production and included HDPE used in water tank, diesel used to pump water to the tank and MDPE pipes used to transfer water from the tank to the polytunnel. Direct inputs for growing the tomatoes included seeds, manure, compost and groundwater. Since impacts related to water use have been incorporated in the additional ancillary flows, it has not been reported as an input in the tables below.

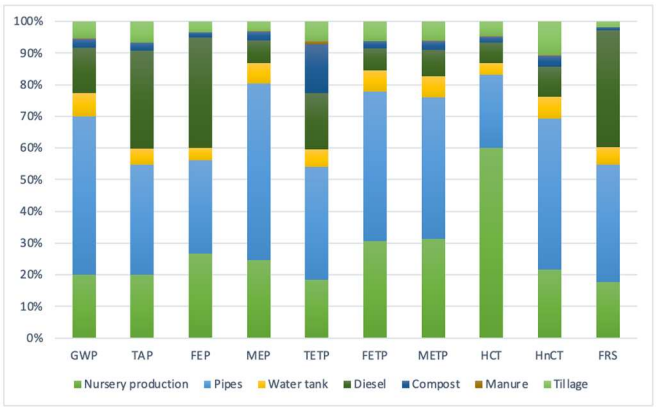
The elementary flows for nursery production of courgette plants were the same as those for tomato production albeit in considerably reduced quantities (see Supplementary file). Additional inputs included HDPE used in water tank, diesel used to pump water to the tank and MDPE pipes used to transfer water from the tank to the field. Direct inputs for growing the courgettes included ground tillage, planting of courgette plants and the use of manure and compost.

Figure 3 shows that for most of the categories, tomato production in the polytunnel had greater impacts than those for courgette production in the open field. The primary reason behind this is traced back to the impacts of steel and HDPE used in the polytunnel construction. This can be seen clearly in Tables A4 and A5 in the Supplementary file which shows the relative contribution of different inputs to the impact categories. It can be seen that in the case of courgette production, most of the impacts originated from the operation phase which was mainly due to embodied impacts in the use of MDPE pipes for watering. Similarly, as shown in Table A6 in the Supplementary file, the overall CED for courgette production was less than that for tomato production which was primarily due to a greater magnitude of inputs such as HDPE sheets and MDPE pipes.

Taking GWP as an example, 95.99% of the impacts came from the infrastructure and ancillary equipment used in growing tomatoes. Of the remaining 4.10%, most of the impacts came from the use of diesel to pump water. Thus, having a more sustainable housing can reduce the overall impacts associated with organic tomato production. This



Relative contribution of inputs to impacts from tomato production



Relative contribution of inputs to impacts from courgette production

Fig. 3 Relative contribution of inputs to impacts from tomato and courgette production

Table 2 Endpoint indicators for tomato and courgette production per functional unit

Impact category	Unit	Tomato		Courgette	
		Per kg	Per hectare	Per kg	Per hectare
Human health	DALY	1.59E−06	2.75E−02	4.71E−07	9.42E−03
Ecosystems	species·year	4.01E−09	6.92E−05	1.83E−09	3.66E−05
Resources	USD2013	1.15E−01	1.99E+03	4.37E−02	8.74E+02

could include, for instance, the use of recycled and/or refurbished materials for the polytunnel. Similarly, instead of MDPE, pipes made of a more sustainable material could reduce the impacts significantly.

For courgette production, most of the GWP (49.98%) emanated from the use of MDPE pipes, with nursery production and diesel use contributing as the second (19.96%) and the third (14.31%) largest sources of this impact respectively. Once again, the use of more sustainable pipe material and the use of solar PV as an energy source could potentially reduce the long-term impacts.

LCIA using endpoint indicators was also carried out, and the results are shown in Table 2 using units per the functional unit (i.e. 1 kg of product) as well as on a per hectare basis. This has been done for ease of comparison with other studies. Using the World Health Organisation's 'Disability-Adjusted Life Year' (DALY) index, the impact on human health can be calculated for tomato and courgette production as 1.59×10^{-6} DALYs and 4.71×10^{-7} DALYs respectively. In comparison, a process-based LCA study conducted in Australia showed DALYs of 2.91×10^{-3} per kg of tomato in a low-tech (seasonal and unheated) greenhouse and transportation to the market (Page et al. 2012). This higher value is potentially due to the impact of fertilisers and other chemicals in the production of conventional (not organic) tomatoes. A study in Canada on organic tomatoes in greenhouse (with climate control) shows the results to be in the range of 1.21×10^{-6} to 3.79×10^{-6} DALY per kg of tomatoes produced (Maham et al. 2020). This is higher than the results in our study if the same functional unit (i.e. kg or metric ton) is used for comparison which, in other words, indicates human health disbenefit avoidance (or DALY avoidance) in the present study. Similarly, the field production of courgettes in Italy was estimated to result in human health impacts of 1.29×10^{-6} to 1.49×10^{-6} DALYs per kg (Canaj et al. 2021). The impacts on ecosystems and resources have been calculated as 6.92E−05 species-year and USD 1.99E+03 respectively for tomato and 3.66E−05 species-year and USD 8.74E+02 respectively for courgette on a per hectare basis. In other studies, for instance, these impacts were 5.33 E−04 species-year/ha and USD1.94E+03/ha for tomato production in Spain based on the use of inorganic fertilisers (Antón et al. 2014). Similarly, a study in Lushnja District, Albania, found these impacts to be 9.60 E−05 species-year/ha and USD2.23E+02/ha for tomato production (Canaj et al. 2020).

As discussed above, the impacts from process-based LCA are not as complete as that from a hybrid LCA which is a combination of both process based and input-output-based LCAs. The results of the hybrid LCA are given in Table 3 which also presents the consolidated results for process-based LCA by combining the impacts for both building and operations. It must be noted here that only one impact category (i.e. GWP) has been presented due to the absence of other indicators in environmental satellite accounts in the input–output tables (Carson 1995). In addition, two transport scenarios have also been presented comparing transport by light vehicle from the farm to the Coop and import from Spain (road and sea). Details

Table 3 Comparison of process and hybrid LCA results for GWP (kg CO_2-eq)

Crop type	Production		Transport		Total	Reference
	Process-based LCA	Hybrid LCA	From Regather farm to Regather Coop, Sheffield	From Almeria, Spain, to Sheffield, UK	Process based LCA + transport	
Organic cherry tomato (Regather)	6.10E−01	3.53E00	9.24E−03		6.19E−01	This study
Organic courgette (Regather)	1.10E−01	1.70E00	9.24E−03		1.19E−01	This study
Organic cherry tomato (Spain)	1.39E−01			1.91E−01	3.30E−01	Urbano et al. (2022) and this study
Organic courgette (Assumed to be sourced from Spain)	1.00E−01			1.91E−01	2.91E−01	Lindenthal et al. (2009) and this study

regarding transportation modes and distances assumed for the analysis are presented in the Appendix.

The inclusion of upstream impacts in the hybrid LCA for the exemplar organic produce at Regather Farm increases the GWP by more than an order of magnitude compared to the process-based LCA. These differences can be attributed to the fact that the hybrid LCA combines the impacts from both upstream and downstream economic activities. This expansion of system boundary, as pointed out by some studies, serves to reduce truncation errors (Salemdeeb et al. 2018). Overall, the findings from this study can be benchmarked against the typical GWP of conventional glasshouse cultivation of tomato in the UK, or imported from the EU, and for courgettes also either grown in the UK, or imported. Since over 80% of tomatoes and courgettes consumed in the UK are imported (Frankowska et al. 2019), the GWP values of the imported produce is arguably the most critical comparison with respect to progressing towards reducing net emissions.

3.2 Economic impact assessment

The average tomato and courgette demand in Sheffield were estimated using the values for the Yorkshire and Humber region reported in the UK's family food survey (DEFRA 2018). Figure 4 below shows the time series values of weekly expenditure for purchasing 1 kg of tomato and courgette from the year 2001 to 2021 on a per capita basis, as per the latest available data. It must be noted that data for courgettes was unavailable unless combined with that of fresh marrow, aubergine, pumpkin and other vegetables (henceforth called the courgette group). As such, the time series indicates the direction of change in prices more than the magnitude thereof for courgettes. The values were calculated based on data for fresh and tinned/frozen items consumed in both household consumption and eating out.

Figure 4 shows that while the cost of the courgette group remained relatively stable, that for tomatoes rose sharply between the years 2001 and 2021, representing an increase of 10.56% after adjusting for inflation. This rise was driven by an increase in cost of tomatoes (26.03%) while weekly household consumption (kg) increased by 14% (DEFRA 2018). Adjusted for inflation, the weekly household expenditure (£s) on the courgette group fell by 25.17% between the years 2001 and 2021 while consumption (kg) rose by 114.42%. However, the overall cost (£/kg) of the courgette group increased by 60.46% during this period, after adjusting for inflation. The average household cost of tomatoes and courgette group during this period come out as £1.88 kg^{-1} and £2.43 kg^{-1} respectively. However, these costs correspond to mainstream varieties and include imports.

Government statistics show that the average weekly wholesale prices for home-grown cherry tomatoes and courgettes stand at £5.93 kg^{-1} and £4.24/kg respectively in 2022, compared to £3.63/kg and £3.15/kg in 2018 (DEFRA 2022b). In comparison, the average price of 1 kg of cherry tomatoes and courgettes offered by Regather for the year 2018 were £4.0 and £1.80 respectively and rose marginally to £4.50 and £2.0 respectively for the year 2022. For 2018, while these crops were not grown directly at Regather, it still serves to indicate a slower increase in prices of tomatoes and courgettes offered by Regather. Furthermore, it is important to note here that the vegetables offered by Regather are organic which are usually priced higher than conventional production. Data from the Organic Certification organization in the UK (November 2022) shows that currently the median prices are £6.68 (wholesale) and £10.46 (retail) for 1 kg of organic cherry tomatoes and £2.17 (wholesale) and £4.28 (retail) for 1 kg of organic courgettes (Soil Association

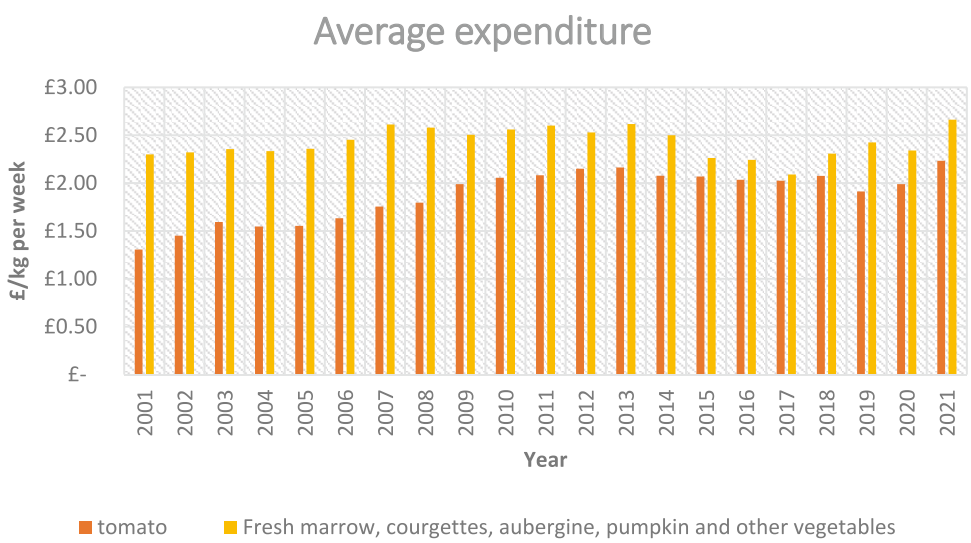


Fig. 4 Average weekly expenditure per household on tomatoes and courgettes (not adjusted for inflation) (DEFRA 2018)

2022). Clearly, Regather has been producing and selling courgettes at prices lower than the national averages, thus making them more affordable for the local community.

4 Discussion

In this article, we aimed to understand the potential of peri-urban farms in meeting the nutritional needs for urban populations in the UK in a way that is both environmentally and economically sustainable (Benis and Ferrão 2017). We used a case study of peri-urban horticulture in the UK to explore if it can ensure agricultural production which is both cleaner and relatively affordable. The results show that the farm has relatively better environmental and economic impacts as compared to existing scenarios as outlined in Table 2 and Section 3.2. Specifically, this includes overall impacts from courgette production and the selling price of both tomatoes and courgettes. The environmental impacts from tomato production were, however, higher from Regather as compared to those from Spain even after including the scenario involving transportation. However, most of these impacts from the polytunnel can be reduced through the use of recycled or alternate materials. As such, it is similar to the examples of the Michigan Urban Farming Initiative (MUFI) (https://www.miufi.org/projects) and the Evergreen Cooperative Initiative (ECI) (Howard et al. 2010; Vaseau-Sleiman 2018), which not only look to bring food production within the city, but also add value by incorporating socio-economic interventions. Overall, retailing organic produce at lower-than-market value through delivered box schemes enables both greater uptake of their products by lower-income households and reduced emissions through their bicycle facilitated delivery service.

This study demonstrates the positive impacts of cleaner production represented by unheated, unlit polytunnel horticulture, and complements previous studies that argue in its favour (Schmutz et al. 2010). Previous studies show that field-grown organic horticulture would require 30% of the global urban land area to meet actual urban vegetable consumption (Martellozzo et al. 2014). Similarly, a 100% shift to organic food production in the UK would actually lead to increased GHG emissions from increased overseas land use (Smith et al. 2019). However, as shown in Fig. 1b and Table 1, unheated, unlit polytunnels remove this constraint by allowing for greater productivity, at least seasonally. This paper aimed at evaluating whether local peri-urban horticulture has the potential to offer vegetables which are 'cleaner' and more affordable than imports. Such systems also have additional benefits of protecting workers and crops from inclement weather. Finally, a large-scale adoption of low-input polytunnel horticulture could replace much of the field-growing in the Fens which, as discussed in Section 1, have significant environmental impacts and are unsustainable due to peat wastage. In the case of conventional intensive horticulture (as in Fens), the goals of resilience and sustainability are often at odds with each other. For instance, a rise in food demand would place a stress on the environment and on the other hand conservation of habitats and natural resources may adversely affect food production (Cui et al. 2016). In order to balance these competing interests, a holistic policy should be created that is able to achieve both goals simultaneously in a mutually inclusive manner. Apart from shifting some of the supply-side burden to peri-urban farming, demand-side policies focusing on consumer behaviour also need to be considered (Schanes et al. 2018). To put things in context, every year UK generates 15 million metric tons of food waste resulting in a significant environmental footprint (Downing et al. 2015). Around 70% of this food waste is avoidable, and in an era of rising food inflation in UK, food waste prevention and reuse (e.g. by composting) can help alleviate some of the concerns regarding food system resilience. On average, preventing food waste can result in savings of £780 per household each year (Palmer 2022). Recent food waste prevention initiatives have included food sharing through online information sharing. Restaurants and households now distribute leftovers at low or reduced costs through the use of mobile apps (Vo-Thanh et al. 2021). A rising amount of such food is also going to the food banks. For food waste disposal, composting, incineration, and anaerobic digestion are some of the popular recycling methods used in the UK. Hybrid LCA studies have discovered composting to be the most environment friendly of these options in the scenario of a decarbonised UK national grid (Salemdeeb et al. 2018). Another way of ensuring urban food system resilience and sustainability simultaneously is through a change in consumer habits. Transition from a meat-rich diet to a plant-based diet can reduce individual environmental footprints (Chai et al. 2019). The UK has seen a rise in trends towards vegetarian and vegan diets in recent years (Sexton et al. 2022). Since fewer resources are needed to produce vegetables than animal-based foods, this trend can lead to lower cost, healthy and sustainable diets.

5 Conclusions

This study aimed to assess the economic and environmental impacts of an example peri-urban organic horticulture model farm in the UK through primary data collection. The results show that the overall impacts are fairly less negative as compared to alternative scenarios as indicated in Table 2 and Section 3.2. This study goes beyond the conventional LCA practices by adopting a hybrid-LCA approach to account also for upstream environmental impacts. To the best knowledge of the authors, it is the first study using

this approach in an agricultural context in the UK. This study concludes that given rising costs of energy and other resource inputs associated with conventional agriculture, the organic vegetable production system using unheated polytunnels without supplementary lighting at the case-study farm represents a clean and affordable source of seasonal vegetable supply for the local community. Importantly, this system is not able to deliver out-of-season courgettes and tomatoes, but the Regather farm does supply produce all-year round using seasonal field and polytunnel-produced crops. Future research can assess the feasibility of such farms at national scale to buttress UK's food security while meeting climate change goals simultaneously. The LCA employed in this paper focused on a cradle-to-gate system boundary, and future studies can consider a wider perspective to include post-farmgate impacts. LCA of other peri-urban farms can help develop an index for benchmarking and comparison purposes. Future studies can also compare the results of this study with those of conventional farms in the UK as well as imports.

One of the limitations of this paper include the fact that the cost of setting up and running expenses and labour of the peri-urban farm were not considered in the analysis. Similarly, the farm currently produces organic products which retail at prices lower than national averages. However, a vast majority of consumers purchase conventional food products as costs may discourage healthy eating concerns. Another limitation is that the food grown in polytunnels and field-based horticulture is seasonal and prone to weather impacts. Despite these limitations, this study represents a useful contribution in the current debate on UK food system sustainability and resilience. We hope that the use of hybrid LCA in this study will encourage further adoption and use of this technique for more holistic assessments.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1007/s11367-023-02260-z.

Funding This research was funded by the BBSRC H3 research project, Healthy Soil, Healthy Food, Healthy People under the 'Transforming UK Food System for Healthy People and a Healthy Environment SPF Programme' delivered by UKRI.

Data availability All data and calculations can be made available to the interested audience upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

References

Acquaye AA, Sherwen T, Genovese A, Kuylenstierna J, Koh SL, McQueen-Mason S (2012) Biofuels and their potential to aid the UK towards achieving emissions reduction policy targets. Renew Sust Energ Rev 16(7):5414–5422

Antón A, Torrellas M, Núñez M, Sevigné E, Amores MJ, Muñoz P, Montero JI (2014) Improvement of agricultural life cycle assessment studies through spatial differentiation and new impact categories: case study on greenhouse tomato production. Env Sci Tech 48(16):9454–9462

Benis K, Ferrão P (2017) Potential mitigation of the environmental impacts of food systems through urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA)–a life cycle assessment approach. J Clean Prod 140:784–795

Bosona T, Gebresenbet G (2018) Life cycle analysis of organic tomato production and supply in Sweden. J Clean Prod 196:635–643

Boulard T, Raeppel C, Brun R, Lecompte F, Hayer F, Carmassi G, Gaillard G (2011) Environmental impact of greenhouse tomato production in France. Agron Sustain Dev 31:757–777

Canaj K, Mehmeti A, Cantore V, Todorović M (2020) LCA of tomato greenhouse production using spatially differentiated life cycle impact assessment indicators: an Albanian case study. Environ Sci Pollut Res Int 27:6960–6970

Canaj K, Parente A, D'Imperio M, Boari F, Buono V, Toriello M, Mehmeti A, Montesano FF (2021) Can precise irrigation support the sustainability of protected cultivation? A life-cycle assessment and life-cycle cost analysis. Water 14(1):6

Carson CS (1995) Integrated economic and environmental satellite accounts: a presentation of new work by the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA) on an accounting framework that covers the interactions of the economy and the environment. Nonrenewable Resour 4:12–33

Cavalett O, Chagas MF, Seabra JE, Bonomi A (2013) Comparative LCA of ethanol versus gasoline in Brazil using different LCIA methods. Int J LCA 18:647–658

Cellura M, Longo S, Mistretta M (2012) Life cycle assessment (LCA) of protected crops: an Italian case study. J Clean Prod 28:56–62

Chai BC, van der Voort JR, Grofelnik K, Eliasdottir HG, Klöss I, Perez-Cueto FJ (2019) Which diet has the least environmental impact on our planet? A systematic review of vegan, vegetarian and omnivorous diets. Sustainability 11(15):4110

Cui S, Shi Y, Malik A, Lenzen M, Gao B, Huang W (2016) A hybrid method for quantifying China's nitrogen footprint during urbanisation from 1990 to 2009. Environ Int 97:137–145

de Albuquerque Landi F, Fabiani C, Pisello AL, Petrozzi A, Milone D, Cotana F (2022) Environmental assessment of an innovative high-performance experimental agriculture field. Sustainability 14(17):10462

DEFRA (2018) Family food datasets. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/family-food-datasets. Accessed 6 Sept 2020

DEFRA (2021) United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021: Theme 2: UK food supply sources. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2021/united-kingdom-food-security-report-2021-theme-2-uk-food-supply-sources. Accessed 6 Sept 2021

DEFRA (2022a) Latest horticulture statistics. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/latest-horticulture-statistics. Accessed 5 Nov 2022

DEFRA (2022b) Statistical data set - wholesale fruit and vegetable prices. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/wholesale-fruit-and-vegetable-prices-weekly-average. Accessed 12 Oct 2022

Downing E, Priestley S, Carr W (2015) Food waste. Briefing Paper No: CBP07045 UK 2. http://www.organics-recycling.org.uk/uploads/article3082/HoC%20Research%20Paper%20Food%20Waste%20-%20Sept%202015.pdf. Accessed 12 Oct 2022

Evans C, Artz R, Moxley J, Smyth M-A, Taylor E, Archer E, Burden A, Williamson J, Donnelly D, Thomson A (2017) Implementation of an emissions inventory for UK peatlands. Access 2017

Frankowska A, Jeswani HK, Azapagic A (2019) Environmental impacts of vegetables consumption in the UK. ScTEn 682:80–105

Gross J (2023) 3 tomatoes at a time: Why U.K. supermarkets are limiting vegetables. New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/01/business/uk-fruits-vegetables-shortage.html. Accessed 5 Aug 2023

Hess T, Sutcliffe C (2018) The exposure of a fresh fruit and vegetable supply chain to global water-related risks. Water International 43(6):746–761

HM Revenue & Customs (2023) OTS custom table. https://www.uktradeinfo.com/trade-data/ots-custom-table/. Accessed Date 2023

Howard T, Kuri L, Lee IP (2010) The evergreen cooperative initiative of Cleveland, Ohio. White paper prepared for The Neighborhood Funders Group Annual Conference in Minneapolis, MN. http://staging.community-wealth.org/sites/clone.community-wealth.org/files/downloads/paper-howard-et-al.pdf. Accessed 5 Aug 2023

Ibn-Mohammed T, Koh S, Reaney I, Acquaye A, Wang D, Taylor S, Genovese A (2016) Integrated hybrid life cycle assessment and supply chain environmental profile evaluations of lead-based (lead zirconate titanate) versus lead-free (potassium sodium niobate) piezoelectric ceramics. Energy Environ Sci 9(11):3495–3520

IUCN (2020) Wet agriculture - a tool in the climate action toolbox. https://www.iucn-uk-peatlandprogramme.org/news/wet-agriculture-tool-climate-action-toolbox

Lindenthal T, Markut T, Hörtenhuber S, Rudolph G (2009) CO2-eq-emissions of organic and conventional foodstuffs in Austria. Organic Eprints. https://orgprints.org/id/eprint/16509/. Accessed 5 Aug 2023

Maham SG, Rahimi A, Subramanian S, Smith DL (2020) The environmental impacts of organic greenhouse tomato production based on the nitrogen-fixing plant (Azolla). J Clean Prod 245:118679

Martellozzo, F.e., Landry, J., Plouffe, D., Seufert, V., Rowhani, P., Ramankutty, N. (2014) Urban agriculture: a global analysis of the space constraint to meet urban vegetable demand. Environ Res Lett 9(6):064025

Martínez-Blanco J, Muñoz P, Antón A, Rieradevall J (2011) Assessment of tomato Mediterranean production in open-field and standard multi-tunnel greenhouse, with compost or mineral fertilizers, from an agricultural and environmental standpoint. J Clean Prod 19(9–10):985–997

Maureira F, Rajagopalan K, Stöckle CO (2022) Evaluating tomato production in open-field and high-tech greenhouse systems. J Clean Prod 337:130459

McCalmont JP, Hastings A, McNamara NP, Richter GM, Robson P, Donnison IS, Clifton-Brown J (2017) Environmental costs and benefits of growing Miscanthus for bioenergy in the UK. Gcb Bioenergy 9(3):489–507

Naseer M, Persson T, Hjelkrem A-GR, Ruoff P, Verheul MJ (2022) Life cycle assessment of tomato production for different production strategies in Norway. J J Clean Prod 372:133659

Neira DP, Montiel MS, Cabeza MD, Reigada A (2018) Energy use and carbon footprint of the tomato production in heated multi-tunnel greenhouses in Almeria within an exporting agri-food system context. ScTEn 628:1627–1636

NFU (2020) Delivering for Britain - Food and Farming in the Fens. https://www.nfuonline.com/archive?treeid=117727. Access 2020

Notarnicola B, Sala S, Anton A, McLaren SJ, Saouter E, Sonesson U (2017) The role of life cycle assessment in supporting sustainable agri-food systems: a review of the challenges. J Clean Prod 140:399–409

ONS (2023) CPI INDEX 01.1.7.1 Fresh or chilled vegetables other than potatoes and other tubers 2015=100. https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/timeseries/l79m/mm23. Accessed 5 Aug 2023

Page G, Ridoutt B, Bellotti B (2012) Carbon and water footprint tradeoffs in fresh tomato production. J Clean Prod 32:219–226

Palmer I (2022) Cost conscious consumers are adjusting household behaviours but untapped cost savings lie in food waste. WRAP. https://wrap.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/cost-conscious-consumers-are-adjusting-household-behaviours-untapped. Accessed 5 Aug 2023

Payen S, Basset-Mens C, Perret S (2015) LCA of local and imported tomato: an energy and water trade-off. J Clean Prod 87:139–148

Pomponi F, Lenzen M (2018) Hybrid life cycle assessment (LCA) will likely yield more accurate results than process-based LCA. J Clean Prod 176:210–215

Richter G, Semenov M (2005) Modelling impacts of climate change on wheat yields in England and Wales: assessing drought risks. Agric Syst 84(1):77–97

Romero-Gámez M, Antón A, Leyva R, Suárez-Rey EM (2017) Inclusion of uncertainty in the LCA comparison of different cherry tomato production scenarios. Int J LCA 22:798–811

Salemdeeb R, Bin Daina M, Reynolds C, Al-Tabbaa A (2018) An environmental evaluation of food waste downstream management options: a hybrid LCA approach. Int J Recycl Org 7:217–229

Sanyé-Mengual E, Oliver-Solà J, Montero JI, Rieradevall J (2015) An environmental and economic life cycle assessment of rooftop greenhouse (RTG) implementation in Barcelona, Spain Assessing new forms of urban agriculture from the greenhouse structure to the final product level. Int J LCA 20(3):350–366

Schanes K, Dobernig K, Gözet B (2018) Food waste matters-a systematic review of household food waste practices and their policy implications. J Clean Prod 182:978–991

Scheelbeek PF, Moss C, Kastner T, Alae-Carew C, Jarmul S, Green R, Taylor A, Haines A, Dangour AD (2020) United Kingdom's fruit and vegetable supply is increasingly dependent on imports from climate-vulnerable producing countries. Nature Food 1(11):705–712

Schmutz U, Sumption P, Lennartsson M (2010) Economics of UK organic protected cropping. I International Conference on Organic Greenhouse Horticulture 915:39–46

Sexton AE, Garnett T, Lorimer J (2022) Vegan food geographies and the rise of Big Veganism. Prog Hum Geogr 46(2):605–628

Smith LG, Kirk GJ, Jones PJ, Williams AG (2019) The greenhouse gas impacts of converting food production in England and Wales to organic methods. Nat Commun 10(1):4641

Soil Association (2022) Horticultural Produce Price Data. https://www.soilassociation.org/farmers-growers/market-information/price-data/horticultural-produce-price-data/. Accessed 12 Oct 2023

Taheripour F, Tyner WE, Haqiqi I, Sajedinia E (2020) Water scarcity in Morocco. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/642681580455542456/pdf/Water-Scarcity-in-Morocco-Analysis-of-Key-Water-Challenges.pdf. Accessed 5 Aug 2023

Theurl MC, Haberl H, Erb K-H, Lindenthal T (2014) Contrasted greenhouse gas emissions from local versus long-range tomato production. Agron Sustain Dev 34(3):593–602

Torrellas M, Antón A, Ruijs M, Victoria NG, Stanghellini C, Montero JI (2012) Environmental and economic assessment of protected crops in four European scenarios. J Clean Prod 28:45–55

Urbano B, Barquero M, González-Andrés F (2022) The environmental impact of fresh tomatoes consumed in cities: a comparative LCA of long-distance transportation and local production. Sci Hortic 301:111126

Vaseau-Sleiman K (2018) Urban farming in Detroit. https://glass.hfcc.edu/2018/05-23/urban-farming-detroit. Accessed 12 Oct 2023

Vo-Thanh T, Zaman M, Hasan R, Rather RA, Lombardi R, Secundo G (2021) How a mobile app can become a catalyst for sustainable social business: the case of too good to go. Technol Forecast Soc Change 171:120962

Wang Y, Bouri E, Fareed Z, Dai Y (2022) Geopolitical risk and the systemic risk in the commodity markets under the war in Ukraine. Financ Res Lett 49:103066

Wiedmann T, Suh S, Feng K, Lenzen M, Acquaye A, Scott K, Barrett J (2011) Application of hybrid life cycle approaches to emerging energy technologies – the case of wind power in the UK. Environ Sci Technol 45(13):5900–5907. https://doi.org/10.1021/es2007287

Winans K, Brodt S, Kendall A (2020) Life cycle assessment of California processing tomato: an evaluation of the effects of evolving practices and technologies over a 10-year (2005–2015) timeframe. Int J LCA 25:538–547

Wittwer SH, Castilla N (1995) Protected cultivation of horticultural crops worldwide. HortTechnology 5(1):6–24

Yang Y, Heijungs R, Brandão M (2017) Hybrid life cycle assessment (LCA) does not necessarily yield more accurate results than process-based LCA. J Clean Prod 150:237–242

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.