Our Food

Report on Activities 2011-2013

Tom Wakeford, University of Edinburgh

Summary

Our Food has demonstrated something that many commentators had doubted was possible. Working with members of the Co-op and other community groups, we have built a robust forum for dialogue and mutual learning with professional researchers, ourselves included, on the future of food and farming. We have brought people together into an informed dialogue, drawing on perspectives on the food system from the UK and abroad. A range of writers, artists and performers have contributed their imagination and skills to enhance our ability to transform what were previously arenas of conflict into sites of collaboration. We are now planning how we can scale up our activities to bring about a transformation on a wider geographical scale and across multiple sectors.
Introduction

In the UK and across the world, our food system remains in crisis. Research into food and farming should help to find solutions, but is obstructed by a lack of trust and understanding among proponents of competing world views. Controversies in the sector are not new, but became heightened over the UK Government’s proposal to introduce genetically modified (GM) foods fifteen years ago. The ensuing ‘food wars’ have been characterised by polarised debates about links between health and food, farming practices, sustainability and social justice. In public at least, protagonists have often reduced complex issues to polemics. Conceived in collaboration with Tom Macmillan - then at the Food Ethics Council (FEC) - Our Food aims to contribute to the development of new ways people with differing perspectives can talk together about the production and consumption of food. We have rooted this dialogue in the perspectives of everyday people and communities whose informed voices are seldom heard in the debates, by using workshops co-hosted with community organisations such as Route 26 and social enterprises such as the Co-operative.

Dr Charlie Clutterbuck, member of the Food Ethics Council. Charlie and the FEC are leading bridge-builders in moving out of the ‘food wars’. They were key collaborators in Our Food.

Our vision is of a research agenda that is based on collaboration between people who can bring a wide variety of experiences and expertise to conversations about future directions. Those who conduct academic, scientific or consumer research should not be the only voices in framing the questions and shaping areas of study surrounding food. Without shying away from deep disagreements and controversies, we aim to build enough common ground for a new collaborative model to emerge for agri-food research: researchers, producers and consumers of food working on an equal footing with each other.
Our partners

Core collaborators

Ruth Hayward, Nicole Kenton, William Mortada, Amy Mycock, Jasber Singh and Tom Wakeford are the team co-ordinating Our Food. We have diverse backgrounds spanning community engagement, dialogue, drama and various aspects of research and practice, including aspects of food, ecology, social justice and farming.

Dr Ruth Hayward facilitating a workshop at Deckham Community Centre, Gateshead.

Organisations

Angelou Centre, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, Centre for Agro-ecology and Food Security, Centre for Food Policy, The Co-operative (Food Division and membership from the Northern Region), Esmée Fairbairn Foundation (primary funder), Gateshead Council, Society for Participation, Engagement, Action and Knowledge Sharing (SPEAKS), Route 26 Community Project, Swingbridge Media, Yakshi and Anthra – Hyderabad Collective.

Researchers and artists

• Dr Eric Brunner, Epidemiology and Public Health, University College London.
• Dr Charles Clutterbuck, Environmental Practice @ Work and Food Ethics Council (FEC).
• Dr Flora Gathorne-Hardy and Miche Fabre Lewin, artists and culinary activists, Touchstone Collaborations.
• Chris JaM, poet, poet coach, project manager and DJ.
• Professor Carlo Leifert, Food, agriculture and business development, Newcastle
University.
- Professor Tim Lang, Centre for Food Policy, City University, London.
- N. Madhoo, food activist, researcher and participatory theatre practitioner, Yakshi, Andhra Pradesh, India.
- Dr Shawn McGuire, natural resources and international development, University of East Anglia.
- Professor David Pink, crop genetics and breeding, Harper Adams University and FEC.
- Dr Wendy Seel, farmer and plant scientist, Aberdeenshire.
- Professor Andy Stirling, Science & Technology Policy, Sussex University.
- Geoff Tansey, writer and researcher on food, agriculture and development, FEC.
- Dr Julia Wright and Dr Michel Pimbert, agro-ecology and food security, Coventry University.

**ACT I: Scene 1**
*Set in the North-East of England (From August 2011)*

Our Food issued an open invitation to everyone involved in food and agricultural research to join in a process of knowledge bridge-building. We invited a wide range of people from North-East community groups to meet and talk about the future of food and food production.

The venues were places where they felt at ease and able to talk about their own relationships to, and issues with, food. Others with particular experiences of food and farming, to which they might not have been exposed, also joined these workshops. They included farmers and N.Madhoo from India (see above).
Deckham resident Marian Bailey, centre, has been involved in grassroots dialogues about food and farming with Tom Wakeford and colleagues for 13 years.

The discussions drew together a set of issues that participants wanted to raise with researchers. Drama director JonLuke Mckie, and four actors, dramatised and explored these issues in a performance at Newcastle’s Live Theatre on 22 February 2013.

The play highlighted how people’s desire for a healthy diet has been stifled for over a generation by a range of factors, including the narrow agendas of researchers, successive governments and the food industry. People were able to articulate their experiences and concerns during the workshops and play, generating a list of topics to discuss with researchers and scientists in Scene 2. You can view the film of the play here.
Our Food research processes and their contribution to the ‘Our Food’ play – devised and performed at the
Live Theatre, Newcastle in February 2013
Ruth Hayward

This is a personal account of some of the Our Food research processes in the North East. As well as being intrinsic
to the project in stimulating discussion and dialogue around food, these processes also produced material which the
director and actors then drew upon when devising the Newcastle production of the play ‘Our Food’.

We developed a short series of questions. The starting question was: Tell me a memory of yours relating to food, or
a funny story relating to food. I then asked these questions to people who attended a Christmas social at one of the
community allotments run by Middlesbrough Environment City. One of the fascinating things about interviewing
this group was the range of people there. Some of the people who had been most affected by their involvement in
the allotments were not the targeted groups but those who had got involved through their work, for example the
project photographer, who had changed his diet due to his contact with the project.

This first question really helped to engage with the interviewees about food, and provided lots of resource material
for the play. We shared the interviews with the director and the cast, who started thinking about their own memories
of food, and the memories that their characters might have. This ended up being the first scene of the play. The
memory scenes really helped the audience to engage with the characters and the their subsequent journeys linked to
food.

The final interview question we asked was: If you were government minister for food, what would you change, if
anything? Again, the director and cast used this question in developing their characters and scenes.

The Our Food project would like to recognise the contribution that Miche Fabre Lewin and Flora Gathorne Hardy of
Touchstone Collaborations made to this process. At the first network and sharing meeting between researchers,
artists and the Our Food team in September 2012, Flora of Touchstone collaborations was able to ask these two
questions suggested by Miche when interviewing the researchers present. These questions were informed by the
artistic processes that Touchstone collaborations have gone through in their work on food.

Participatory workshop
The participants who took part in this workshop identified issues around food and farming that they wrote on cards
and which were then displayed on the wall. The cards were then gathered into themes. Themes included: affordable
and quality, processed foods – issues and problems, waste, regulation, sustainability and cultural changes. This set
of cards was then shared with the director and actors on the first day of rehearsals. We talked though what people
had written and how it related to the actors’ own lives. It also provided material for character development.

Other strands
Material for helping with developing the play was also gained from the films shot by Swingbridge Media at
Deckham Community Centre. One film was of people preparing and discussing ready meals, and the other
preparing a meal from scratch. Audio recordings were also made of a similar exercise that took place with a group
of volunteers at Byker City Farm. Indian action researcher N. Madhoo and UK-based Jasber Singh also contributed
research to the process of devising the Newcastle and London productions (see below).
Actors Jane Wade, Jayne Humphreys, Steven Gregory and Tim Bennett, with director JonLuke McKie, rehearsing the Our Food Drama at the Live Theatre.

After the Live Theatre performance the actors - pictured above - discussed the issues raised with local community members whilst still playing the characters they had performed in the play.

**ACT I: Scene 2**

*Set in universities and research institutions across the UK (from February 2012)*

In just a few generations, our relationship with food has changed radically. Alongside the many companies and corporations involved in producing, processing, distributing and selling food, food researchers have played a crucial role in this change. Whether in the laboratory or on a policy committee, professional experts working in food-related sectors – such as farming, biology, human nutrition and economics – have implemented their own visions of the food system, creating the new knowledge and technologies that have greatly influenced what we grow, how we buy it and how we eat it.

Until recently, the idea of these experts – employed by research institutions and government agencies – being in conversation with a wider public was unimaginable to most people in these institutions.
By eating and talking together, Our Food has begun to build a constructive dialogue between communities, researchers and policymakers. A range of internationally respected researchers has taken part in Our Food workshops to investigate alternative futures, building a set of motivations and principles for the future of research into food.

The two focal workshops were held at Harper Adams University in Shropshire and St Ethelburga’s Centre for Reconciliation and Peace in London. A specialist group of actors and theatre devisers led by Erin Walcon provided a catalyst for the second researchers’ workshop, allowing the researchers to re-imagine the conversation using an approach called dialogic performance. Some film footage of the dialogic performance at St Ethelburga’s can be viewed here. Our approach has been widely appreciated as being useful contribution to developing methodologies to improve dialogue in areas of scientific controversy. We are currently writing up our analysis of this novel approach for publication.
Amy Mycock, one of the Our Food core team, develops a dialogic performance with researchers.

Several of the researchers from these workshops travelled to the North-East to meet those people concerned about the future of food who had come together in Scene 1. Both researchers and community groups reached broad agreement on the motivations and principles that should underlie the future of research into food and farming. A film describing the process up to this point, co-production with participants by our collaborators Swingbridge Media, is available on our website – ourfood.org.uk.

Dr Julia Wright from the Centre for Agro-ecology and Food Security comparing perspectives on food with poet ChriS JaM.
Professor Andy Stirling, Sussex University, explaining his perspective on the role of democracy in debates on food with other workshop participants.

Professor Tim Lang, Centre for Food Policy, City University, London, comments on the performance.

Researchers at the yurt used for peace-building by the St Ethelburga’s Centre, London, February 2013.
For this, the final scene in Act I, we developed a third professional theatre performance. This began to introduce new participants into the dialogue from a range of national and international organisations that are concerned with food and farming.

Patricia Cumper MBE worked with Dr Jasber Singh and four actors on a play that particularly focuses on the international dimensions of healthy food, farming, sustainability and social justice, including the food experiences of British people of diverse ethno-cultural heritages.
Patricia Cumper MBE, during final rehearsals for the St James Theatre performance of Our Food, 19 April 2013.

You can view some footage of the London play [here](#). The cast was Rose-Marie Christian, ChriS JaM, Susan Lawson-Reynolds, Archie Maddocks and Marcus Powell. Three Gateshead residents travelled to London to see the performance and take part in the discussion that followed: Marian Bailey, Angela Currie and Maureen Hall. Researchers and artists involved in the day were Caroline Ward, Nicole Kenton, Miche Fabre Lewin, Dr Flora Gathorne-Hardy, Amy Mycock, Professor David Pink, Dr Jasber Singh, Dr Tom Wakeford, Dr Julia Wright and Dr Erinma Ochu. Stage manager was Izzie Sullivan.

Our Food, performed by Rose-Marie Christian, ChriS JaM, Susan Lawson-Reynolds, Archie Maddocks and Marcus Powell.
**Act II**

*Taking place in the North East of England (July 2013 onwards), but also nationally and internationally.*

As planned, we have held a competition for some pilot drama-research projects on food and farming, which has been guided and judged by people living in the North East from a range of backgrounds. The competition received widespread publicity, including a *Guardian* article [here](#). Details of the four plays initially commissioned under this process are being uploaded onto our website, with the results being performed as a play during September/October 2013.

During Act I our conversations led to a un-forced consensus around **seven principles of working** that everyone felt were essential for Act II and all future research on food and farming:

Dr Tom Wakeford reads out the draft principles of working to workshop participants.
SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF WORKING FOR RESEARCH INTO FOOD AND FARMING

1. We care about people and the environment – this is our prime motivation.

2. We shouldn't let talk of the free market dominate our discussions.

3. Different views should be respected by others as potentially valid.

4. We can disagree and we all need to learn from our disagreements.

5. We need to particularly make space for voices that have been excluded*.

6. As we discuss these issues we should seek to inform, but resist blaming each other.

7. We need to take an international perspective so we can see the bigger picture.

* These missing voices in debates UK food and farming research and policy-making include those people who have average and below average incomes – especially women, young people, people with long-term conditions and black and minority ethnic communities, and especially those who fit into several of these categories.
September update

We are currently completing the editing of a final film about the project, which will be distributed widely in the food and farming sector in the UK and overseas. A preview is provided here.

We have met again with the head of the Co-operative’s Food Division, Cathryn Higgs, to discuss how we take forward a strong working relationship with their Northern Region and Food Division. We are also discussing with the Food Ethics Council synergies between their and our future work in this area.

A further report, including expenditure and details of the four funded research-dramas will available soon.

TW 17/9/13.