

OUR NOTE
for the
NATIONAL
PREPAREDNESS COMMISSION



The National Preparedness Commission

Professor Tim Lang has been tasked by the [National Preparedness Commission](#) to report on UK resilience to food shocks. To that end, he is interviewing many people, including us. He has asked all his interviewees for a 'Note' to be submitted with his report to the Commission. We're sending him this document for this purpose as well as publishing it on our website.

Critical messages

- The 21st century challenges we're facing are radically different from any that humanity has experienced in all our recorded history. **We therefore require radically different ways of thinking in order to grapple with them.**^{1,2}
 - The factors to take into account include population and demographic pressures, resource depletion, bio-diversity loss, pollution, ice melt and rising sea levels, wildfires, emerging pathogens,³ mass migrations, new technologies, increasingly volatile geopolitics and, affecting all of the above and more, the accelerating pace of climate breakdown.^{4,5}
 - The up-coming generations look set to learn what a new carrying capacity is for humans on this Earth — and the possibly brutal means by which they are going to be forced to get there.
 - That being so, it is vital for the National Preparedness Commission to engage with younger generations with an honesty and openness about what choices there are for their future.



- The design, implementation and testing of robust UK preparedness plans for food shortages and scarcities is therefore urgent because of the factors listed above. Other necessary considerations are:
 - Food supply preparedness is not simply a food sector issue. Rather, it involves a suite of fiscal, economic, legal, regulatory and risk measures. Hence government action is required.
 - Core to a food preparedness strategy must be the sheer scale of produce needed to feed a population,⁶ and the current and future fitness of the huge range of operations required to supply it all.⁷ Both these issues should be at the heart of every socio-political decision taken about every aspect of life in the UK, not just within the domain called 'food security'.



- With regard to food shortages, the only strategic option is to have buffer/reserve stocks.⁸ Our scenarios work suggests a UK food buffer stock system is not just desirable, it's feasible too.^{9,10}
 - A model such as the one devised by our scenario participants would change the cultural and economic dynamics around nutrient-dense supplies, thereby generating a radical food system 'transformation',¹¹ through (a) the building of the social scaffolding necessary for collective resilience,^{12,13} whilst (b) also maintaining the agility, adaptability and flexibility of the sizeable elements of the commercial sector that do contribute to both human and planetary health.¹⁴
 - The current state of the UK food supply system is already leaving millions of households without access to the sufficient supplies of safe, nutritious food they need for a healthy, active life.¹⁵ A well-fed population is an important preparation for the exigencies ahead.¹⁶
 - Neither local government organisations (including Local Resilience Forums) or anchor institutions, nor the third sector have the resources or the capability to provide the service provision to ensure communities have access to a safe, sufficient and healthy diet.¹⁷

Endnotes

- ¹ This is why we developed our food security scenarios exercise, simply called **The Game**. It has given us an arguably unique understanding of the scarily wide range of potential disruptions to UK food supplies. UK lack of preparedness means some could be devastating. For what we can do to in preparation for the perils ahead, see this recent report of **The Game** at the Warwick Crop Centre in June 2023: [UK food security into the Anthropocene](#). October 2023.
- ² It's crucial, too, to have far more scientifically literate socio-political decision-makers and influencers, a matter Julia King, Baroness Brown raised in her [Life Scientific interview](#) with Jim Al-Khalili (at 23'15"). About the exodus of expertise from Defra, see [this UK in a Changing Europe 2021 interview](#) with the former Permanent Secretary, Claire Moriarty.
- ³ Regarding crop pathogens, see page 9 in [Global risks to UK food supplies](#), 2019.
- ⁴ Professor Bill McGuire stated in this Radio 4 [Rethink Climate podcast, Pledges and progress](#): *Most world leaders just don't get climate breakdown. They don't know how bad it is going to be. It's going to reach into the global economy and society and tear its heart out."*
- ⁵ It is possible that Professor McGuire has over-stated the impact of climate breakdown. This is as maybe; we hope he is wrong, though fear he is right. And this is what leads us to echo the words of Luke Kemp et al in [Climate endgame: Exploring catastrophic climate change scenarios](#). PNAS Vol 119, No 34. Aug 2022: *Facing a future of accelerating climate change while blind to the worst case scenarios is naive risk management at best, and fatally foolish at worst.*
- ⁶ Few grasp the scale of produce needed to feed everyone in a comparatively small city such as Birmingham, let alone for the UK or global population. For a means to better grasp this issue, see Annex B (page 14) of our [Response to the City Council's Food System Strategy Consultation Draft](#).
- ⁷ The latest version of our [Food Landscape Map](#) (June 2023) indicates the wide range of operational functions involved, as does this [PMCC framework](#) we drew up in 2015 as part of our earlier work on food and the economy; this latter document categorised organisations as **producers**, **multipliers**, **controllers** and **consumers**.
- ⁸ Decreasing consumption of safe, healthy food via, for example, rationing is a short-term resort. Increasing production takes time, years for some produce. After Storm Eunice, Baroness Brown stated on Channel 4 News: [What we've dealt with as a crisis needs to be routine](#); having a distributed, rotating buffer/reserve stock system follows her counsel.
- ⁹ See our report: [One Scenario: Buffer contingency food stocks](#). November 2020.
- ¹⁰ We haven't had the resources to build on this significant work. We recommend the National Preparedness Commission does so in collaboration with the likes of the Institute for Fiscal Studies to assess, for example, the proposed Food Resilience Levy and new Excise Duties. We would be happy to advise!
- ¹¹ A term coined by Ban Ki Moon in 2016 in this UN press release: [Agriculture and food system transformation needed on pathway to zero hunger](#).
- ¹² 'social scaffolding' and 'collective resilience' are terms used by Stephen Reicher and Linda Bauld in their seminal paper: [From the 'fragile rationalist' to 'collective resilience': what human psychology has taught us about the COVID-19 pandemic and what the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us about human psychology](#). J R Coll Physicians Edinb 2021; 51 (S1): S12-9.
- ¹³ Reicher & Bauld's term **collective resilience** is, in our opinion, a better term to use than the phrase 'civil food resilience' that Professor Lang has used, because it suggests more agency by people and communities, rather than things being done to them.
- ¹⁴ As to which companies to exclude, see Cooper, Parle and Middleton: [VAT: A precise means to identify drug-food companies](#), Journal of Public Health, Vol 45, Issue 2, June 2023 and also Annex Two of our report: [One Scenario: Buffer contingency food stocks](#). November 2020.
- ¹⁵ As shown in the the [Food Foundation's Food Insecurity Tracker](#): See also the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report: [The geography of destitution](#) published in October 2023, in which they report 3.8m people experienced destitution in 2022, including about one million children.
- ¹⁶ Part of preparedness should therefore be regular reports on the health of the population. The UK remarkably doesn't collect any data on nutritional deficiencies, not even in children and pregnant women. [This 2021 BAPEN article](#) reported about 30% of hospital patients are malnourished on admission. [The Guardian in June 2023 reported](#) worrying levels of malnutrition of children in asylum hotels.
- ¹⁷ It is particularly perilous to depend on these social infrastructures without there being substantial investment in them (see footnote 13). As for the state of the third sector, see this recent [NCVO survey](#) which reported the alarming extent of the crisis facing the charitable sector this winter.