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Brexit poses serious threats to the availability and affordability of food in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Brexit will have profound implications for health and health policy yet, while much attention has focused on health professionals, medicines, and health protection, the risk of food insecurity, and thus health, has received less attention. We identify five major threats to the availability and affordability of food supplies. These are a lack of regulatory alignment restricting ability to import foods from the EU and beyond, a shortage of agricultural labour in the UK, increased prices of imported foods due to tariffs, damage to supply chains, for example due to customs delays and loss of interoperability of transportation, and damage to agricultural production and food flows in Ireland.

Text

Introduction

It is fast becoming clear – irrespective of one’s voting preferences – that Brexit is likely to change fundamentally the UK food system and thus, a key determinant of health. A new report from the House of Commons Environment, Food & Rural Affairs Committee indicates that food prices, trade and jobs, and food flows across borders – especially in Ireland – look set to be altered and, at worst, disrupted,¹ with potentially important implications for health.²

Even though many who voted Leave were influenced by nostalgia, their memories seem at best partial. Until the mid 20th century, the UK was clearly among the leading global powers. The sun never set on the Union Jack and the Royal Navy ruled the seas, and trade disputes, such as the right to sell opium to China, could be settled by sending a gunboat.³ Today, some see Brexit as a chance to

refashion the Commonwealth into “Empire 2.0”,⁴ even sending one of the Royal Navy’s few remaining ships back to the South China Sea.⁵ They forget that until 1954 food was rationed and, during World War 2, the UK faced serious risk of two thirds of its food supply being cut off. Today, it still imports heavily, mostly from the EU. And the growth of foodbanks in the UK is a reminder of how precarious the situation is now for some of the most vulnerable in society.⁶

There are many reasons the UK should take its food security seriously once more, particularly that the food system has aligned over 50 years with the European Union. There are at least five reasons why Brexit may threaten this security.

Five threats

The first threat is to supplies of imported foods. The UK produces only about 60% of the food it consumes, by tonnage, and only 49% by value.⁷ 31% of UK food, by value, comes from EU member states. The smooth flow of these movements is possible because of decades of work by the EU. Food from the rest of the EU can cross the UK border by virtue of its conformity with the rules of the single market. Food from the rest of the world can be imported, much via Rotterdam, with considerable confidence in its safety because of the agreements reached by the European Food Safety Authority and its system of regular inspections in 130 countries.⁸ The UK has been unable to explain how either of these will work under its preferred approach to Brexit. Even now the British diet contains too few fruit and vegetables for optimal health but, with 90% of fruit and 45% of vegetables imported, mostly from the EU, this will inevitably be disrupted.

The second threat is to existing domestic food production, dependent on migrant labour. 27,000 full-time migrants work in agriculture and 70,000 more in food manufacturing, 33% of its total workforce. Another 75,000 work seasonally in horticulture, picking ‘British’ fruit and vegetables.⁹ These workers are unwilling to accept the fall in the value of sterling (and therefore remitted earnings), xenophobia, and potential loss of rights as EU citizens. Already in 2017 some growers were unable to complete the harvest and some are moving production abroad.¹⁰

The third threat is to food prices. Some politicians want a ‘hard’ Brexit, trading on World Trade Organisation (WTO) terms, while others want complicated special new trade deals which enable Britain to “have its cake and eat it”. Either is likely to impose food tariffs which retailers estimate will be an average 22%, thus raising consumer prices.¹¹ Others blithely think new deals can be done overnight, ignoring how they take years, let alone that EU membership already gives the UK access to 50 trade deals with the rest of the world. Some British ministers argue that these deals can be continued, but a recent analysis shows that, even if agreement could be reached, simply translating them into the post-Brexit context will be extremely difficult.¹² Those advocating WTO terms have been unable to show how these will address challenges posed by existing quota regimes, with an analysis of the seemingly simple case of lamb and mutton revealing extraordinary complexity.¹³

Fourth, there is a real threat to logistics. Of the millions of truck journeys transporting food across EU borders each year, only ones with suspect paperwork are ‘brought in’ for inspection, which average 2 minutes per truck. If checks increase in numbers and complexity, even to 4 minutes because of loss of EU paperwork, it has been estimated that traffic jams at Dover and Calais could reach 20 miles long within days. This assumes the trucks will be available. An estimated 75,000 British trucks transporting goods on EU roads will have to compete for a small number, perhaps 1,200 permits, as well as complying with many complex new procedures.¹⁴

Fifthly, there is a threat to food production on the island of Ireland. The agri-food sector on the Ireland of Ireland is highly integrated, with produce often crossing the border between Northern

Ireland (NI) and the Republic several times during processing. Intra-Ireland agri-food trade is the biggest goods trade in Ireland, worth £4.5bn in NI alone. The border is 300 miles long, with 275 crossings. During the Troubles, only 20 of them were open, but heavily fortified with military checkpoints. Reintroducing hard borders will inevitably disrupt this complex system and while some politicians have argued for advanced technological solutions, these are recognised by informed observers as fantasy currently.^{15 16} Although the UK government has committed to upholding the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement, some British politicians are now questioning this commitment.¹⁷ The EU has, rightly, said that arrangements within the UK are a matter for the UK alone so only two options seem possible. Either a 'red line' is imposed within Ireland (if NI is forced out of the single market by London), disrupting the existing arrangements, or one is created in the Irish Sea, *de facto* reuniting Ireland (but against the wishes of the Conservatives' Democratic Unionist Party partners in Northern Ireland). Sorting out this delicate matter keeps being put off.

Conclusions

Those who cling to memories of the past seem to forget that the UK once came close to starving. It survived, but only with a supreme national effort that united the nation.¹⁸ The situation now is obviously different, in many ways. Hostile submarines no longer threaten the UK's supply chains but, on the other hand, the nation is now divided to an extent not seen in decades. Most importantly, the complex modern supply chains that sustain regionalised and globalised food markets create new problems. Concerns about their ecological unsustainability¹⁹ raise important public health issues but, in the immediate future, the main concern must be their vulnerability to political and economic shocks such as Brexit. Importantly, recent events have shown that such fears are real. When Kentucky Fried Chicken changed its distribution contract to the logistics company DHL, a majority of its restaurants in the UK closed within a few days because supplies failed to appear.²⁰ At some point, the penny might drop that Brexit poses a serious threat to the availability and affordability of food and, ultimately, to the diet-related well-being of the British people.

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