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UK food system resilience tested by Covid-19

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1 UK food system resilience tested by Covid-19

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3
4 The UK food system is undoubtedly being stress-tested by COVID-19. Some commentators have
5 suggested that the food system is somehow dysfunctional, non-resilient, or delocalised to a perilous
6 extent¹. Others have extrapolated further, conflating current product scarcities with supply chain
7 risks from globalisation². However, these observations may well overlook the benefits of
8 contemporary supply chains – indeed, they are usually vague about what the alternatives might look
9 like, or how that might cope better in response to shocks.

10
11 What this COVID-19 crisis does show us is that the food system in the UK has remarkable adaptive
12 capacity. At the time of writing, there is no demonstrable supply-side shock, apart from accessibility
13 constraints for vulnerable groups, food banks, and school meals, which are the sphere of
14 coordinated social care. Production, processing, transport and retailing are all key elements in
15 integrated supply chains; policy is, correctly, for these to remain operational. Similarly, relative to
16 the last global food price spike in 2008, international food commodity trade has not been
17 significantly disrupted by restrictive trade policies³.

18
19 Some effects of Covid-19 may become manifest if labour shortages, already exacerbated by Brexit,
20 worsen as a result of stricter movement restrictions on some 70,000 seasonal workers, usually
21 required annually on British farms and often coming from abroad. A longer-term supply shock is not
22 inevitable provided we avoid any escalation of global trade restrictions, which may provoke market
23 speculation, and given non-catastrophic rates of illness. If anything, supermarkets have responded to
24 a demand spike by in some cases taking up excess labour from other mothballed sectors⁴. .

25
26 On closer inspection, the initial challenges arise from a highly unpredictable demand-side shock, the
27 frequency of which can be debated. Since supermarkets assure us that the supply side looks healthy,
28 and indeed that they are rationalising to offer fewer fast-moving product lines, a more mundane
29 discussion might address fine-tuning the just-in-time logistics, apparently preventing retailers' ability
30 to fill shelves fast enough.

31
32 An interesting conversation would also focus the rationality of consumer behaviour in the face
33 of uncertainty. With seemingly mixed messages from the UK government, and alarmed by insights
34 from other countries, consumers initially prepared by purchasing for the worst case scenario. More
35 clarity about lock-down and continued messaging about supply sustainability has allowed consumers
36 to plan more calmly, while supermarkets can gauge whether any rationing of some products will be
37 necessary.

38
39 If demand for some products continues to exceed supply, consumers will likely adjust product
40 choice, food preparation and diets. We are arguably in a transition phase, but one observation for
41 the UK government and its behavioural insights advisors is that drip-feeding our way to the current
42 restrictions did not help consumers comply with rational expectations.

43
44 So what else do we learn about the current resilience of the UK's food system? We already knew
45 that the vexed question of retail concentration can cut both ways. While imperfect competition is
46 often thought to be prejudicial to consumers and other supply chain actors, empirical evidence on
47 the effects of market power is ambiguous, and points to a variety of market-specific factors that
48 often limit the assumed profiteering and collusive behaviour of the dominant retailers^{5, 6}.

49
50 In fact, the current episode reveals that supermarket power can be useful in buffering shocks. Access
51 to infrastructure and logistics and, in some cases, healthy profit margins actually enable retailers to

52 bear higher costs in order to maintain food supply in times of crisis. This has been observed before,
53 for example in 2017 when lettuce was airfreighted to the UK from the U.S. at comparatively high
54 costs, thereby offsetting parts of the weather-induced European supply shortage.

55
56 Temporary cooperation between competitors can also enhance resilience at the expense of profits
57 and is still subject to government regulation. Antitrust laws in the UK and in Germany are currently
58 being relaxed so that supermarkets can stockpile and coordinate supply to consumers in a more
59 effective way. To prevent excessive profiteering, the Competition and Markets Authority has
60 officially warned UK retailers not to “exploit consumer fears” by overpricing products⁷.

61
62 When it comes to globalised supply chains we have to remember that the benefit of diverse product
63 lines come at the cost of potential vulnerability to regionally specific supply shocks, and that
64 transnational regulation of market power is often less transparent than that exercised in nation
65 states. However, supermarkets can and do currently exercise choice over sourcing products
66 whenever abuse is proven⁸.

67
68 Consumers can also exercise choice with information, which may become harder to source and
69 verify if supply chains are decentralised. While localising our food systems may be desirable to
70 minimise some external costs, it is unclear whether shorter supply chains align realistically with
71 consumer preferences, and whether they truly mitigate vulnerability or potentially bring non-
72 resilience and abuse of market power closer to home.

73
74 We may not like some of the attributes of our current dominant food system, and there is scope for
75 developing national food policies aligning nutrition with other social and environmental goals.
76 However, in the case of these ancillary objectives, it is important to clearly delineate the social
77 responsibilities of retailers, governments and consumers. Alongside the importance of clear
78 messaging, the current crisis is revealing significant adaptive capacity – at least in the UK.

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81

82 **References**

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³<https://public.tableau.com/profile/laborde6680#!/vizhome/ExportRestrictionsTracker/FoodExportRestrictionsTracker>

⁴ Supermarkets Tesco, Asda, Aldi and Lidl go on hiring spree, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-51976075>

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⁸ <https://oxfamapps.org/behindthebarcodes/>