



UK Parliamentary Inquiry into the Global Food Crisis

**The All Party Parliamentary Group on Agriculture and Food for Development
The Associate Parliamentary Food and Health Forum
The Parliament and Scientific Committee**

Minutes of the Food Security inquiry meeting on Wednesday 21 May 2009

Inquiry team members present: Ian Gibson (Chair), Lord Soulsby and the Countess of Mar.

Witnesses: Jane Kennedy, Minister for Food and Farming, Defra; and Ivan Lewis, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, DfID.

Introduction

Ian Gibson welcomed the witnesses and guests to the fifth and final oral evidence session of the food security inquiry. He explained that the decision to hold an inquiry had been the result of a heated debate over dinner about food security issues which resulted in a determination on the part of the Parliamentarians present to learn more about the issues and see what they could do to help address these important issues. He invited the witnesses to make a brief statement before responding to questions.

Jane Kennedy, the Minister for Food and Farming, Defra

Part of my responsibilities as Minister for Food and Farming is to work closely with Hilary Benn on food security issues across Government.

Deteriorating economic conditions internationally will mean that even more than 9 billion are likely to be in need. At the moment the figure is 963m and this is likely to grow to 1 billion in 2009. Climate change, eco-system loss and market volatility will exacerbate the problem.

DfID and Defra have worked together for some time but Departmental changes at the last reshuffle have allowed us to give more emphasis to this problem. Mike Foster and I co-chaired the first Foresight Food and Farming Futures meeting on food security on 19 May and we look forward to their work in this area.

We have a high degree of food security in the UK, but we have seen the impact of high food prices on consumers here. British agriculture is also challenged by climate change. We are working with the agriculture sector and the food industry to tackle these issues.

The work of the International Agricultural Assessment chaired by Bob Watson, Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser, has shown that we need to increase production, while protecting the resource base, tackle post harvest losses, create conditions for small holder farmers to thrive and ensure policies are grounded on a firm scientific basis.

Ivan Lewis, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, DfID

It is important to say that although prices for many foods have come down over the last 12 months, largely as a result of the general collapse in commodity prices, the number of people going hungry has actually increased to nearly 1 billion. This is due to a number of reasons. Falling household incomes in poor countries – where many poor families spend over 50% of their

income on foods – has been caused by lower commodity prices. International prices are still high compared to 2000. Local prices in many developing countries remain higher than the international price, due to imports being hampered by lack of access to credit and foreign exchange. Developing country farmers also find it difficult to increase production in response to higher prices, unlike farmers in richer countries. We face massive short term challenges. At the same time, we need to address long term challenges, such as the increasing global population, an increasingly affluent population with associated dietary changes, urban expansion putting more pressure on agricultural land, climate change with increasing pressure on water and energy sources, with pressure to switch to low carbon economies.

The vast majority of hungry people are hungry because they are poor and we need to tackle the root causes of this poverty. Globally we continue to produce more than we consume, but simply increasing food production, or even getting prices back to pre-spike levels, will not end hunger. Even when food was at its cheapest in 2000, there were 800m people who could not get enough food to eat. This is the result of problems of distribution and affordability. It requires a global response on a number of fronts, including increasing expenditure on humanitarian aid. The UK's contributions to the World Food Programme last year was \$169m, more than twice what it had been in the previous year. International spending on social protection must also be increased. The UK has done this directly in Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh and indirectly through budgetary support. We need to see food production in poor countries rise. There has been a lack of investment in agriculture in many developing countries for many years. Despite its potential, Africa remains a net importer of food. We need a sustained commitment to aid and development. We have made clear commitments, most recently in the Budget, and we are doubling our spending on international agricultural research over the next five years. We are also calling on other countries – as at the G20 – to do the same. We are providing more money to the IMF and to the World Bank with an emphasis on helping those at greatest risk. We also need to reform the international system, pressing ahead with our ideas for a country-led global partnership on food, UN reform, getting Doha back on track, doing more to encourage the private sector growth, ending distorting subsidies and doing more to ensure that international biofuel production takes account of its impact on developing countries, including food security pressures.

In many African countries there has been a debate about urbanisation and the potential for focussing on where investment can best support their potential for economic growth. In reality this needs to be assessed on a country by country basis.

Questions

Excess consumption in the West and population control

The Countess of Mar acknowledged the importance of issues such as climate change and poverty for food security, but said another aspect of the problem is that we in the West consume too much and she noted that nothing was said in the joint Defra/DfID submission about encouraging the UK population to eat less or about population control in developing countries. She asked if we should balance advice to developing countries with better efforts to tackle the problems at home. **Jane Kennedy** said the UK Government is seeking to promote healthy eating initiatives as a major part of its approach to tackling obesity. Defra also supports various programmes in this area, including the Grow Your Own, Eat Your Own campaign. However, policy in this area is led by the Department of Health. **Ivan Lewis** said that DfID is clear that it is not their job to give advice to other countries about the size of their population. However, the UK does want to ensure that proper policies are in place and people have clear choices. The UK supports reproductive health programmes and supports the development of health systems. The best work in this area is done on a peer to peer level. The biggest single barrier to progress in this area has been the position of the US administration. It is fantastic that President Obama has swept many of the previous ideological constraints away. The US representative at a recent meeting in Geneva was sympathetic to work in this area in a way that was new. Sarah Brown has also been campaigning effectively on child and maternal health, but each country has to make its own decisions on its population.

The Countess of Mar said that many African countries have big populations because families regard their children as their pensions. If we are to overcome these attitudes we need to educate their men as well as the women. **Ivan Lewis** agreed that deep rooted cultural attitudes are involved and suggested that change would require political leadership at a local and national level. Economic growth and rising productivity will also change perceptions of the ideal family size. We can be proud of the work the UK is doing in this area, but we need to work with other donors and host Governments.

Private sector investment in agriculture in developing countries

Ian Gibson noted that the Defra/DfID submission suggested that agriculture is predominantly a private sector activity. He asked what the UK is doing to help developing countries encourage inward investment given that 17 of the bottom 20 countries in the World Bank's ratings are in Sub-Saharan Africa. What role should Governments play in countries where private companies may be reluctant to invest? **Ivan Lewis** said that the African countries that have done well in recent years, such as Rwanda and Uganda, are those that have succeeded in encouraging private sector investment. The risk for private sector investors is significant – whether it relates to conflict, economic returns or because host Governments are hostile for ideological reasons. The UK will seek to be the voice that argues that to achieve the outcomes they want, host Governments need to encourage the private sector. DfID takes private companies to developing countries and hosts events here to stimulate private sector investment in Africa.

Smallholder farming and GM crops

Lord Soulsby agreed that there should not be a blanket approach to developing countries because each country needs to be assessed individually. He described his interest in the use of animals for motor power and noted that the types of livestock used vary enormously from country to country. He expressed interest in post harvest losses and suggested that food absorption problems beyond harvest loss were at even worse levels. He suggested that work on agricultural production and human health should go together. AIDS, for example, means that many young men are unable to look after their livestock and crops properly. The task is to bring able-bodied people to the production of food. In many parts of Africa, smallholder farmers are aiming only at family level food security. They need to be encouraged to produce more so that they can afford to invest in their livestock and equipment. **Ian Gibson** asked if either Minister could give examples of work in this area. **Jane Kennedy** suggested that where smallholder farmers reach the point that they can take their excess production to market and developing countries can export products, we in the West have a duty to ensure that protectionist barriers such as the CAP are reformed so that they do not have a negative impact on developing countries. We also need to examine our attitudes to genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Other countries are telling the EU that we are blocking the potential of GMOs to help developing countries tackle some of the problems they face. Our concern has been with food safety, but we should consider the wider impact of our procedures. UK food security is at risk from rising sea levels and we should help developing countries by supporting the development of GM crops that are resistant to flood and drought. As it is, it is difficult for us even to debate these issues in the UK and we need to dismantle some of the misunderstanding around GMOs. **Lord Soulsby** agreed with Jane Kennedy on GMOs and emphasised the need to convey to the European Union the message that they should not inhibit the use of GMOs elsewhere or seek to prevent other countries exporting GM products to us. **Ivan Lewis** cited the example of DfID's support for a chars livelihood programme in Bangladesh, which has involved the distribution of 50,000 cattle to households, which has made a real impact.

Local benefit from investment in agriculture in developing countries

The Countess of Mar expressed concern that some big operators are making money from food production in developing countries but that this wealth was not trickling down to the local population. She asked what could be done to address this issue. **Ivan Lewis** said it would depend on the host Government's economic policies and their efforts to ensure that local people have the knowledge and skills to benefit from investment. In many countries the focus is on smallholder farmers, but in Uganda the Government is encouraging farmers to become small businesses selling their excess food. Agriculture has the potential to be a potential source of

economic growth in Africa, but it requires investment and a determination to tackle some of the attitudinal challenges. Africa does not present itself as a victim and we should not see it in those terms. We are one of the world leaders in investment in Africa, but the UK has to work with progressive Governments and in some areas – where there are fragile states – this is difficult. **Jane Kennedy** said that consumers can play a part by supporting fair-trade. Defra is encouraging people to consider the source of their food. Even steps to encourage children to learn about their food and how to cook will help by raising awareness that all food comes at a price.

DfID White Paper

Ian Gibson asked if the issues of food security and agricultural productivity would feature in the forthcoming DfID White Paper. **Ivan Lewis** said that DfID faces massive challenges, including climate change, international trade, fragile states and the reform of international institutions all of which need to be addressed, but food security will certainly feature in the White Paper as one of the challenges that needs to be tackled. It has been raised repeatedly at regional events.

Western agriculture and investment in agricultural research

Ian Gibson asked if agriculture in the West is sinking. **Ivan Lewis** acknowledged that the international community had taken its eye off the ball with regard to investment in agriculture over the last 20 years, but this is recognised now to have been a mistake. DfID cannot do everything: it has to pick and choose where it will take a lead, but it does have a great deal of influence. Food security and agricultural productivity will feature in the White Paper, but their importance should not be assessed simply in monetary terms. **Ian Gibson** suggested that issues of finance will inevitably arise and he asked the Ministers to comment on their Department's investment in agricultural research. **Ian** added that responses to questions suggested that Defra's investment in agricultural research has fallen from £82m in 2001 to £63m now. **Jane Kennedy** said that Defra's overall research budget is increasing, although you could argue that priorities within that could be re-examined. Defra is investing significantly in projects which are considering how UK agriculture should be developed and supported. Her figures suggest that the annual research budget is currently £70m and she offered to write to the inquiry team to clarify the position. Defra certainly appreciates that we cannot have food security in the UK without food security in the rest of the world. **Ivan Lewis** said that DfID is doubling its spending on international agricultural research over the next five years. The UK has committed more than £900m to food shortage crises, including £400m for research. **Ian Gibson** asked if CGIAR (the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) funding is increasing. There was some doubt about this. **Ivan Lewis** said the Government is certainly increasing funding for research looking at food price spikes and overall investment in agricultural research and development is being increased. £70m is being spent on research and capacity building being led by UK organisations, including £29m in developing countries, £39m for "research into use" projects and £8.5m to support capacity building in African research institutions.

Soil scientists

The Countess of Mar said that we need healthy land if we are to have successful food production and she expressed concern about the dearth of soil scientists in the UK, noting that they used to be used as an important source of support for developing countries. She suggested we no longer have enough soil scientists for our own needs and asked what the Government is doing to improve this situation. As an example, she cited the concern about the impact of GMOs on the quality of our soil and said that plant and soil scientists are necessary to produce the evidence on this. **Jane Kennedy** said the evidence of the impact of GMOs on soil quality was mixed. Certain new GM cereals and wheat can be more pest resistant and they require fewer pesticides, but we need more evidence. She said she was not aware that there is a shortage of soil scientists, but undertook to look at this.

Animal disease controls and international cooperation

Lord Soulsby said there is much interest in animal health and welfare in the UK and we know how concerned people become when outbreaks of serious disease occur, such as Foot and Mouth (FMD). He suggested the UK should remain constantly vigilant and continue to develop new techniques so that we are well prepared. He noted that the US is very concerned about

these issues and they have been trying to improve surveillance in eastern Europe. He asked what Defra is doing to extend support to other countries on the periphery of the EU and in Africa, which are potential sources of disease. **Jane Kennedy** said there are many formal and informal networks and she was not sure of all the structures, but our vets certainly do liaise closely with international colleagues. She noted that some diseases are more difficult to control than others – Bluetongue, for example, is spread by insects – but we can share our expertise as a world leader with others. **The Countess of Mar** suggested that there had been cases in the past where the UK had been reluctant to take advice from experts from other countries. Many of the best experts in Bluetongue are South African, but the UK had not sought their advice and the UK had refused the offer of advice on FMD from an American expert, Fred Brown. **Jane Kennedy** said Defra had learnt some very important lessons as a result of the FMD outbreak in the UK and she would be very surprised if it now declined to accept the advice of international experts. Her understanding is that officials would always ensure that Ministers had the best advice available in order to make decisions. She offered to check from whom Defra sought advice on the Bluetongue vaccine.

Government officials with experience of agricultural research

Ian Gibson asked how many agricultural experts are employed in DfID and was advised that there are 50 livelihood specialists, 20 of whom are deployed overseas. **Ian Gibson** asked how DfID decides which countries these specialists should be deployed to. **Ivan Lewis** said DfID will try to help where support is requested, so it tends to be a demand-led process. **Ian** asked if the Minister thought there were too few or too many agricultural research specialists in DfID. **Ivan Lewis** suggested this was an impossible question to answer because it would depend on the genuine level of need at any one time. He offered to send **Ian** information on where the specialists advisers are currently deployed. **Ian** asked how our research specialists serving overseas actually make contact with local farmers in developing countries. He was given the example of five advisers working in South Asia who had been responsible for working with the ultra poor (those living on less than 50c a day). Working with resources of £200m and through 5 livelihood programmes they had been able to help lift several million people out of poverty.

Promoting examples of best practice in developing countries

The Countess of Mar referred to some examples of excellent projects which are improving agricultural productivity in Kenya, such as the “push and pull” project, which involves the use of three crops in a field to boost production by deterring pests; and the growing of three types of sweet potatoes side by side to boost the food security. She asked how much support these projects were receiving from the UK. **Ivan Lewis** said he did not have that level of detailed information with him, but he agreed that they are precisely the type of projects that our technical experts will be working on with host Governments and NGOs. **The Countess of Mar** said she had been advised that the Kenyan Government could not access the resources to promote these projects. **Ivan Lewis** invited her to write to him about the projects so he could reach a considered view about how useful it would be to promote these projects as examples of best practice with a wider application.

Lord Soulsby asked if the Ministers would be speaking about the issues discussed at this meeting at a Commonwealth conference in the autumn and suggested it would be very useful if they could. The Ministers thanked him for the suggestion and said they would be delighted to consider any such invitation.

Ian Gibson asked if, when he leaves, Gordon Conway will be replaced by a senior scientist of the same calibre. **Ivan Lewis** undertook to write to **Ian Gibson** about this.

Ian Gibson thanked the Ministers for their evidence and brought the meeting to a close.

