

TIM BENTON

UK Champion for Global Food Security and Professor of Population Ecology at University of Leeds, United Kingdom



Professor Tim Benton is Dean of Strategic Research Initiatives at the University of Leeds and Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Energy, Environment and Resources Department at the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House, UK. From 2011-2016 he was the “Champion” of the UK’s Global Food Security programme which was a multi-agency partnership of the UK’s public bodies (government departments, devolved governments and research councils) with an interest in the challenges around food. The key role of GFS was to undertake systemic analysis

and horizon scanning, in order to identify research priorities to mitigate the challenges of providing sufficient, sustainable and nutritious diets for all. He has published over 150 academic papers, many on the topics of agriculture and its sustainability. His particular interest is currently on food system resilience in the face of climate change.

Food systems and their fragility in a global world

Since the second world war, the direction of travel has been to develop a globalized trading system. This creates global markets for those countries with comparative advantages in production. With respect to food, this has been realised in a global concentration of “big ag” in a few breadbasket regions, that produce a large amount of the world’s calories cheaply. As a result, we are converging on diets dependent on the same food crops – and the easy flow of cheap calories is leading to a global epidemic of overweight, obesity and ill-health. Almost without exception, every country’s food system depends to a greater or less extent on the networks of global trade, which, over the last decades have become extremely extensive. Breakdown in trade- or the fear of shortfalls to demand – can rapidly escalate into food price spikes; leading to lack of access to food for the poor and, in the extreme, contribute to civil breakdown. In future, climatic and other environmental risks (e.g. soil degradation) are likely to increase, particularly through a growing impact of extreme weather, so the risk of production perturbations also increases. How will this systemic risk play out? Can we build resilience into the system and therefore adapt? What happens if there is a significant change in climate, such as a climatic tipping point, creating a step change in global production?