

Food for Thought about Sustainability and CSR

By Professor Ken Peattie, BRASS Director

The production and consumption of food in Britain is central to two crucial goals of government policy: the pursuit of sustainable development and the promotion of corporate social responsibility (CSR). From a sustainability perspective, the total food chain accounts for around 8 % of the UK economy, and 12.5 % of its employment. It consumes more energy than any other sector, and just over 20 % of UK greenhouse gas emissions have some link to food. It is also an industry that shapes the fabric of Britain in terms of our landscape and the rural communities and biodiversity within it. Food and food packaging is also a major contributor to both domestic and commercial waste.

Considering the social responsibility of food businesses, large food producers and retailers provide some of the best UK examples of specific CSR initiatives, and are often viewed as exemplar firms. Unfortunately, when these companies face criticism (as they have recently in relation to salt, sugar, the rearing of chickens, gang-masters, food labelling and the obesity crisis) they tend to justify their products and strategies as responding to consumer demands and meeting the relevant regulations. Such defensiveness is not true CSR which is “*operating a business in a manner that meets or exceeds the ethical, legal, commercial and public expectations that society has of business*”. CSR for the food industry is a special case because the health of ourselves, our communities and environment depend upon it. When things go wrong within our food systems, individuals can suffer, as witnessed by the 1.7 million cases of food poisoning last year, and agricultural communities can be devastated, as the 2001 Foot & Mouth epidemic demonstrated. The power balance in food is also a concern now that half of our groceries are supplied by either the UK’s, or the World’s, biggest retailer.

Food production and consumption represents the ultimate opportunity for joined-up policy-making to harmonise economic activity with the health, environment, community, public service and education agendas. Achieving this will require new initiatives, new knowledge and some old-fashioned resolve. The Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society (BRASS) is an interdisciplinary research centre based at Cardiff University and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. It researches into CSR and sustainability in the context of the relationships between businesses and their stakeholders with a specialism in the food industry. BRASS projects are exploring:

- How the balance of power and accountability has shifted in UK and European food towards private interests led by the major retailers;
- The opportunities for public food procurement policies based on the principles of sustainable development, to contribute to better meals in schools (and other institutions) and to improvements in our environment and communities;
- How technological change in food production and consumption is leaving the consumer increasingly unaware of what goes into the food on their table;
- The impact of changes in agricultural production on rural communities;

- The role of labelling and food marketing in promoting, and potentially combating, growing obesity rates, particularly amongst the young;
- The potential for sustainability orientated approaches such as organic farming and FairTrade to expand and provide new solutions.

BRASS is one of the organisations contributing to the second CSR in Food and Agribusiness conference in London on September 29-30, for details visit www.agra-net.com.