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“Challenges to the food supply in the UK: Collaboration, value and the labour force”

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The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the workings of Britain’s contemporary food supply into sharp relief. Three interrelated dimensions where the pandemic’s impacts amplify recent research into the dynamics and regulation of British and European food supply chains are: the role that the state has to play in supporting and enabling the supply through to the markets for food purchase for consumption; the collaboration needed to effect a resilient food supply; and, the key role of the labour force in ensuring this supply.

Competition law seeks to protect consumer welfare from unfair practices by firms. The main concerns are that monopolies or monopolistic practices such as collusion by firms result in market distortions raising the cost of products to the consumer. In March, the British Government waived the Competition Act allowing retailers to collaborate in order to protect consumers by ensuring security of food (and pharmaceutical) supplies. The Act allows for suspension for exceptional and compelling reasons of public policy. The British government had previously sidestepped collusion concerns when setting up the Food Industry Sustainability Strategy in the mid 2000s which led to collaborative actions by the food manufacturing industry to reduce carbon emissions, water use, waste and packaging. In these instances, conceptions of the public interest have emerged in practice, going beyond that of consumer welfare-price prerogative, namely feeding the public and environmental sustainability. A lesson to be considered more fully from the current events is how the public interest can be best served given the pressing imperatives of transition to a zero carbon future and a healthy population to ensure a sustainable and resilient future food supply.

Conversely, Government intervention to close food service businesses to help lessen the spread of COVID-19 had led to dislocation of dedicated supplies to these outlets, with severe disruption to domestic dairy and livestock producers. High price cuts of beef to restaurants were converted into cheaper minced beef portions, and milk poured away as the supply chains closed, with a costly time lag before some degree of transfer to other supply chains. The message is clear, the British State needs to have a better prepared emergency planning systems in place where food supply shocks occur, ones that works in tandem with the realities of supply chains’ access to the consumption markets.

The growth of corporate retailers’ power in the buyer-supplier relationship has led to regulatory interventions to try to ensure fairer trading practices in food supply chains. Britain has regulated to prohibit unfair trading practices between large grocery retailers and their suppliers. Subsequently, the European Union

legislated to cover business-to-business relations along the whole length of agricultural and food supply chains, with Britain now adopting similar proposals in its 2020 draft enabling Agriculture Bill. However, fairness for the labour force in the food supply chain has been absent from these considerations. The pandemic has elevated public and political recognition of the vital role of the labour force in the food supply as key workers for the economy. Yet the nature of work along food supply chains is low paid, and often precarious, being part-time and seasonal. The imminence of the harvest in the UK salad vegetable and fruit season has heightened the importance of these workers, at home and abroad (where the bulk of Britain's fruit and vegetable supply comes from). Domestically, Britain' relies on a temporary and largely immigrant labour force. The estimated need is 70-80,000 workers annually just for the fruit and vegetable harvesting and processing alone. Added to this are the immigrant workforces in the meat slaughterhouses and processing plants. Plans have been made to recruit workers from the domestic labour force who are furloughed from their normal occupations to fill these requirements. However, larger scale growers have flown over experienced returning workers, from as far as Romania, as they have the skill set to perform the tasks to meet the market requirements. It is these workers who are likely to train the new domestic recruits. The role of labour is in need of adequate recognition and reward, as well as improved working conditions, rights, and immigration policies allowing for adequate seasonal agricultural and horticultural workers.

There is an ongoing tension between collaboration and conflict in food supply chain relationships. In the wake of the pandemic, it is timely for policy-makers to promulgate a revised approach to fairness, sustainability and collaboration in our food supply. These values need to be added in terms of the public interest to the existing economic ones of share of added value and consumers' market welfare.