

A food crisis is coming our way

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The National Audit Office has issued a report this morning that says:

[The UK] food supply chain faces a wide range of risks that can cause disruption. These include 'acute risks' – events requiring an emergency response – such as extreme weather, cyber-attacks, energy disruptions and animal, plant or human disease outbreaks.

It also faces longer-term 'chronic risks' such as climate change, which can gradually erode resilience over time. Risks can be interrelated and may trigger or exacerbate other risks. For example, climate change is increasing the likelihood of extreme weather events.

Disruption to food supply can lead to food price inflation, less consumer choice, and vulnerable people struggling to access food, which can worsen issues such as food poverty and the health effects of poor diet. It can also increase operating costs and disrupt operations for businesses, and lead to significant costs for the government.

The government's National Risk Register highlights several risks that, while considered low in likelihood, could cause catastrophic disruption (the highest impact category) if they occurred, and result in food shortages because of a failure of the food supply chain. Examples of these risks include a national power outage, pandemic, nuclear accident, or large-scale chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attack.

And their suggestion is:

To date, Defra has largely relied on the private sector to manage disruptions to food supply. This has been possible because of the resilience in the UK food system, which can source from all over the world, and commercial incentives on businesses to invest against risks and respond during a crisis.

However, the sector's ability to withstand catastrophic events that cause severe disruption has not been tested, and Defra's actions in recent years have not been sufficient to ensure the supply chain is resilient to such events.

Let me put this another way. As I have been saying here for some time, the chance that we will face a food crisis is very high. Trump's war is disrupting worldwide fertiliser supplies, including now those from Canada to the USA, and drought and disruptive trade policies are creating the risk that food supplies could be severely disrupted in the next year or so. Add to this the consequences of El Niño, and the short-term outlook is poor.

Put into the mix the long-term threats arising from climate change, with the probability of major changes in weather patterns that could disrupt a great deal of established agricultural practice at a rate that few countries will be able to adapt to, and that risk is very high indeed.

All of this requires deep, in-depth strategic planning on the part of the government because there is no one else who can undertake such work. The only problem is, as the report notes, the UK government's Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra), which would be responsible for this, has to date outsourced all its thinking on this issue to the food industry and has appeared to be unwilling to undertake strategic planning of its own.

So very neoliberal, you might say, and justifiably so.

The climate crisis that we are facing has been created by neoliberalism and its indifference to the planet and our climate. A great deal of the food choices we are facing are, therefore, the consequence of human action. Let us not pretend otherwise.

In that case, the one thing that we can be sure of is that the people we should be asking to manage this quite literally life-threatening crisis are not those who created it, which is what our government's standard response is. The food industry is the problem and not the solution.

As a consequence, it is for the government to take action. It has to think for itself. It will have to make decisions. It will have to impose them on an industry that will fight back. And it will have to do all of this because we, our food supply, and our chances of life, matter more than any threat to the short-term profitability of the industrial complex that is the food industry, which is already poisoning us through its supply of ultra-processed products.

The point has been reached when neoliberalism cannot even pretend to supply answers to any of the reasonable questions people might have about our survival.

The problem is that it is not at all clear that our government has recognised this fact. If they don't, we might all be going hungry, or something very much worse.