



Bristol: The Sustainable Food City

Chris Sunderland briefly outlines some of the ways Bristol is responding to the challenge of providing an adequate and secure food supply across the city.



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It is not clear how cities will feed themselves in the future. Human history teaches us that agriculture processes are a crucial foundation of every human society and the collapse of civilisations often involves agricultural failure.¹ It is now becoming clear that our current economic systems, including our methods of industrialised agriculture with concomitant massive inputs of fertiliser and global transportation, are failing to take care of the planet on which they depend. In May 2013 the planet's atmosphere passed 400ppm in carbon dioxide for the first time in human history. The implications of this are now well-known.² If we are to stand any chance of avoiding a catastrophic climate scenario, which would undoubtedly involve die back on an enormous scale for the human population, human beings must wake up, spiritually and practically, and begin to take responsibility for their actions.

At a recent conference in Bristol, Patrick Holden of the Soil Association claimed that around half of the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide since the Industrial Revolution had come from changes in agricultural methods. This is not simply due to fossil fuel use by machines and fertiliser manufacture, but the important and hidden carbon implications implicit in soil management, whereby changes in techniques of working the soil can have massive global impacts relating to soil carbon storage.

All of this means that food is about to become all important on the world stage. The first serious impacts of climate change will be on the price of food, which are now rising across the globe. So how we feed ourselves in

the future has become a crucial political decision. Bristol, where I live, offers a useful case study.

In one sense Bristol is just like anywhere else – its food system needs serious reform. Our city is dominated by supermarkets, which take more than 75 per cent of the retail food trade. Local shops have gradually declined over the last 50 years and now survive only in the better heeled areas, with our most disadvantaged people often having no local shops whatever. Obesity is a growing problem among both children and adults as our people source junk food and live sedentary lives.

Bristol is also a slightly unusual place. It has just elected a Mayor, George Ferguson, an independent, whose stated aim is to make Bristol a test bed for new ideas and he has articulated a hope that Bristol will be the first sustainable food city in the UK.

Behind the Mayor's hopes in this regard lies a strong movement of city leaders called the Green Capital Momentum Group. This works with businesses to encourage green initiatives and is the focus of a bid for Bristol to become Europe's Green Capital for 2014, for which we have been shortlisted. This group also had the foresight to set up a small seed fund to finance emerging green ideas in the city. One fruit of this fund was the production of a scholarly report, by Joy Carey, entitled, 'Who Feeds Bristol?',³ which has set the food agenda for the city and is now being used to make representations for sustainable food interests to be incorporated in our Local Plan.

In addition, Bristol has a particularly strong grass-roots movement of environmentally concerned people. The

network embraced, for example, by Bristol Permaculture Group joins together hundreds of people, radically minded, many of whom have downshifted, working part time, consuming less, using less money and giving serious time to projects they believe in.

The city is also proud to have launched its own local currency, the Bristol Pound, designed to support local independent businesses. Just six months after its launch in September 2012 the scheme had 1000 members, more than 160,000 Bristol Pounds (value equivalent to sterling) in circulation and a mobile phone and online means of transaction as well as paper. Food businesses are especially prominent among its members. One of its primary objectives over the coming year is to develop a network of Bristol Pound businesses connecting primary food producers in the region with new and existing markets in the city. Already, in the hinterland of the city, there are growers and livestock farmers looking to sell into the city through veg box schemes and buying groups. Different models of community-supported agriculture are coming into being. One of these is Sims Hill Shared Harvest, a member owned cooperative working five acres of prime agricultural land within two miles of the city centre. This is a full-on community model of agriculture, far more than a veg box scheme, where members are essentially combining together to grow their own food, employing two part-time paid growers to manage the process with ten workshare members who volunteer half a day a week and are given veg in return while the rest pay a monthly subscription to finance the wages.

So, 'What has all this got to do with faith?' I hear some of our readers asking. For me, as someone working very much at the heart of all this, it has a great deal to do with faith. I sense that the challenges that we face today are spiritual at their heart. There are a whole range of fascinating projects arising in their city. It is like we are witnessing the rebirth of a culture. And the role of the person of faith seems to me more like a midwife than anything else. Jesus spoke of the kingdom coming as yeast in the dough, in an unseen and hidden way. That seems to be the way of today. There are things that a person of faith offers to this movement. Maybe they are courageous enough to set out on a path and draw others behind them. Maybe they are trustworthy enough to settle a potentially chaotic team. Maybe they have the imagination to offer new ways forward. Is this being yeast? I hope so.

The interesting thing to my mind is that the churches, as churches, in this city have found it hard to engage with the emerging environmental movement. I struggle with why this is, but there is little doubt that it is the case. Nevertheless, there is one area where churches are making a significant contribution and that is with the provision of food to the poorest. Churches and Christian organisations in the city have led the way in the area of providing emergency food. The Trussell Trust have provided the national model for this, but we now have a whole variety of models attempting responsible food provision, building on a strong history of engagement

with homeless and destitute people in the city, as for example, through our Crisis Centre in St Pauls. In addition, we have powerful food recycling models in Fareshare and Food Cycle, which are contributing substantially to the elimination of food waste.

I think the Christian community finds it easier to embrace food provision rather than the broader environmental concerns because we are clearer about our responsibilities in this area. For example, the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches that we cannot pass by the one in need. We must provide for the hungry. And yet there are questions to ask about this process because there are tensions to resolve.

The first tension is in the process of provision. Different models of food provision are wrapped around with caveats about references from other agencies, holistic life advice, financial advice, even apprenticeship training. Yet there may be problem here. I have personally worked as vicar in one of the most disadvantaged areas of the city for a decade or so and know that people present with multiple life issues. Some, for example, with a substance abuse problem, will be very pleased to seek help with food and will have outstanding bills, etc. to prove their case, but they know how to work these systems. This does not mean they are cynical manipulators. They are simply people caught in a certain way of life and needing help to survive. They will gladly accept a food parcel and go through any other advice, training, etc. that we put in place, and then spend their spare cash on their habit. I suspect that only a deeper attempt at transformation stands a chance here.

Secondly, the whole food provision scene tends to view food as free. That is a pity for the growers in the emerging community projects where people are paying for their food. If we are to grow a sustainable food system it will be on the basis of people valuing food not treating it as a waste product. Churches have always been good at giving charity, but they have been a whole lot less good at providing for social transformation, which I understand to lie behind the gospel mandate to seek first the kingdom of God. We need imaginary new approaches that provide low cost, but not nil cost, food staples to the most disadvantaged people, encourage cooking from scratch, home industry and join people into a meaningful community. Now that to my mind would be a worthwhile development at this stage.

So there we are, a brief overview of one city from a guy trying to play a part. In my heart there are tears – for a world that has seriously lost its way; for a Church that is failing to respond well; and for the many people of the future who will suffer from our foolishness. It seems to me that the narrow way that we are called to follow must entail a combination of prayer and action. We can all too easily feel overwhelmed by the big picture. The planetary problems are too vast for most of us to even face. It is time to focus on what we can do where we are and to follow those brave prophets who lived in a world that could not understand them, but who, in Brueggeman's words, opened up a space for the re-imagining of society.

NOTES

1. Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Survive* (London: Penguin, 2011).

2. See, for example, Mark Lynas, *Six Degrees: Our Future on a Hotter Planet* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008).

3. Available online at www.bristol.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/environmental_health/Who%20Feeds%20Bristol%20report.pdf