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SECTION: SPOTLIGHT

A maze of maize: navigating diversity and plurality at a food systems research symposium

Members of the UK Food Systems Centre for Doctoral Training reflect on the trials and triumphs of co-designing an academic symposium that captures their diverse research interests, challenges their core assumptions, and promotes open dialogue about equitable and sustainable food systems. Like navigating through a maze of maize cultivars and wild relatives, addressing issues in food systems involves weaving through interconnected, though sometimes competing, narratives and imaginations.

Introduction

'Hold in your belly'¹

Food systems sit at the critical intersection of human, animal, environmental and societal health and wellbeing, and competing visions about its transformation are manifold. In response to the urgent need to address the polycrises of the UK food system, the UK Food Systems Centre for Doctoral Training (UKFS-CDT) aims to 'develop the next generation of food system change makers for a healthy and sustainable food future' ([UKFS-CDT 2024](#)). With 56 doctoral researchers across three cohorts, the £5m training programme is convened by a consortium partnership of nine academic institutions, led by the Natural Resources Institute, University of Greenwich². At its core, the UKFS-CDT recognises that food systems issues transcend disciplinary bounds, and thus need researchers trained in interdisciplinary thinking.

As PhD researchers of the UKFS-CDT, we are collectively grappling with food systems issues from - and across - legion perspectives and disciplines: from crop genetics to soil politics; food environments to more-than-human welfare; ready meal formulation to labour struggles. While we may differ in the epistemic underpinnings of our work, we converge in our overarching purpose: to make food more fair, healthy, ethical, and sustainable. Consequently, the UKFS-CDT has become as much about our relationships to one another as our research.

¹ Quotation sub-headings are taken from 'Hold in Your Belly' by Hot Poet, Liv Torc - an original poem written and performed live at the symposium in response to the day. [Hot Poets](#) brings poetry and science together to tell the stories that matter to a faster green transition. Contacts: <http://www.hotpoets.org> / liv@hotpoets.org

A key reflection from these interactions was the need for more open dialogue on food and the diverse ways we problematise and actualise its transformation, across our cohort and beyond. In Plato's *Symposium*, the banquet table symbolises a space for philosophical exchange on a central theme. Similarly, the topic of food itself invites many perspectives and interpretations. Yet achieving this romanticised vision of egalitarian discourse is far more difficult in practice. In reality, food systems dialogue has been disproportionately captured by a few - often very powerful - voices with a narrow set of interests. This so-called 'multi-stakeholder' approach (consisting primarily of nation states and multinational corporations) has received criticisms for prioritising private profit over public good, excluding many at the frontlines of food: small-scale producers, rural workers, and those most at risk of food insecurity and malnutrition ([Canfield et al. 2021](#)).

When provided with the opportunity to co-design the Academy Symposium for the UKFS-CDT, we sought to respond to this perceived inequity: to foster a space that not only reflected the diversity of our cohort, but also the plurality of ways that food systems are experienced, problematised, and acted upon. With this article, we wish to share our experience of co-designing this symposium: the process of delivery; the two key themes that shaped the sessions; the food we chose to provide; and reflections, limitations, and the next steps we believe are necessary for more inclusive food systems transformation.

The process

'Hold all of it in, let it mix and marinade'

The student-led co-design of the symposium with the UKFS-CDT team extended beyond the obvious technicalities of event planning: it was built upon our relationships and shared journeys as part of a mission-driven doctoral programme. Through this fellowship, our group voice and the idea of the 'hive mind' emerged ([Seeley 2024](#)) – a way to unite our individual ways of thinking and to collectively move towards a common goal and shared values. This approach culminated in the title of our 2024 symposium: *'Imagining and narrating food systems transformation'*.

To decide upon the symposium's themes and speakers, we opted for a collaborative process of discussion and voting among the PhD students. Through this process, two themes emerged for our symposium: *'alternative food systems transformation narratives'* and *'unheard voices in the food system'*. Ensuring everyone could have their say, and subsequently that the themes and speakers were inclusive of diverse food systems issues, were at the forefront of discussion.

While the interdisciplinary nature of our programme allows us to challenge narrow food systems framings, this process exposed some of the tensions inherent in this way of working. Reaching consensus among a collective of over 50 multi-disciplinary researchers took time, reflection, and facilitation training. Not everyone participated—some due to time constraints, others possibly feeling unable to shape the outcome—underscoring both the challenge and importance of fostering open dialogue and active engagement, which demands ongoing commitment to equity.

Inviting diverse and representative speakers was another challenge. Unfortunately, many invitees, including the youth activists who had planned to join us, were unable to take time off. Budgeting constraints limited our ability to adequately compensate those unable to take unpaid leave. This highlights structural challenges that contribute to underrepresentation at food systems events, and hinder key lived experience insights and engagement in decision-making processes.

On the day, guests were invited - primarily PhD students, academics, and UKFS-CDT Academy partners - to leave their metaphorical 'hats' at the door and come as they are. Moving into the sessions, short presentations were followed by roundtable discussions to encourage more active engagement than a traditional Q&A. The space featured thoughtful touches to comfort guests, including a positivity tree, time for reflection, and a quiet room. The symposium's design and delivery reflected our commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration and relationship-building in research and outreach.

The discussion

'Through history and hegemony'

A key question we explored at the symposium was: how do we create knowledge for futures of collective flourishing? We designed the first session to delve into alternative ways of knowing and understanding food systems issues. Presenters put forth arguments for how food systems are entrenched in market-centric logics of efficiency and colonial forms of control: exposing these paradigms to be shaping the problems we see and the solutions we propose.

The first presentation highlighted the value of critical historical perspectives in examining how the sciences contribute to our contemporary understanding of agriculture ([Tomking 2022](#)). Drawing on historical documents on soil mapping in inter-war East Africa, the presentation illustrated how context shapes different understandings and representations of soils. These insights help trace the origin stories of contemporary ideas about soil health, and other elements of the food system, contributing to efforts to better harmonise food production with the integrity of non-human life.

In the second presentation, we were invited to examine the real-world tensions of food systems frameworks which could be viewed as reductionist. The UK's Eatwell Guide was offered as an example of how *nutritionism* - a focus on nutrient components rather than whole food items - and fatphobia is embedded in dietary guidelines ([Scrinis 2013](#); [Aphramor 2005](#)). These logics treat food as commodity, prioritising measurable components like calories and weight-loss, while ignoring its socio-cultural, ecological, and relational dimensions. The presentation argued that the stories we tell about food—what is good, bad; natural, unnatural—reflect neoliberal and binary thinking ([Aphramor 2024](#)). Food is not just sustenance, but also a cultural artefact, a medium of connection, and a reflection of values - things that are often omitted from one-size-fits-all dietary guidelines.

A strong thread through both presentations was that dominant narratives about food systems transformation - often stemming from Western institutions and large gatherings like the UN Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and COPs - have historically excluded Global South, marginalised, and

Indigenous perspectives and experiences. While not a monolith, the relational and place-based knowledge of Indigenous communities and scholars offer vital insights into living differently ([Sillitoe 2004](#); [Grey and Patel 2015](#)). Though critically unrepresented at this symposium, we - students of a CDT rooted in the Western academic tradition - can learn from Indigenous wisdom if we tread carefully and avoid historic processes of knowledge extraction and dilution ([Kimmerer 2013](#)).

Building on the presentations, our discussions probed dominant ways of 'knowing' food, the power dynamics they uphold and how they may confine us to business-as-usual. Many acknowledged that, as researchers, we must recognise the value-laden nature of different transformation pathways. As the presentations highlighted, storytelling remains a powerful tool we can harness to create knowledge that fosters care, well-being, and collective flourishing.

'The conditions of 'humanness'

Building from the first session's exploration of diverse food knowledge, the second session encouraged reflection on our diversity as interdisciplinary researchers. We began with a meditative session reflecting on our positionalities and identities, and how they align or contrast with our interests and research. By breaking the idea of the researcher as 'neutral' or an 'expert', we expose the messy humanness and relations we are made of. We opted to focus on how gender, class, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and other intersecting identities are inextricable parts of our being, mediating our experience of the food system.

In the first presentation, we were asked to see food through the lens of immigration in the UK, underlining the critical importance of participatory research and valuing lived experiences ([Singh et al. 2023](#)). This included examining the meaning of a 'Right To Food' in light of the material implications of a 'no recourse to public funds' status. Discussion explored hierarchies within our fields and with research participants, including the ethical considerations of being an 'outsider' to a research context. Personal insights highlighted the values overlooked to secure funding that favours commercial interests, starting difficult conversations around how institutional demands also create 'unheard voices' within food system research and decision-making processes.

The second presentation tapped into corporate power and control, in contrast to the unheard voices of a Global Majority. The entry point to this conversation, the effects of food giants marketing and selling of infant milk formula in the low-income countries, shone light on corporate lobbying and the shortcomings of the UN's 'multi-stakeholder' approach ([Rundall 2015](#); [Slater et al. 2024](#)). Although the presentation and resulting conversation raised important ethical concerns around the role of corporations in our food system, there is a risk that the subsequent conversation did not pay sufficient attention to discursive power - including how our advocacy work meaningfully engages with those decolonial, gendered lenses discussed during the first session. In this case, how do we ensure advocating against such dangerous corporate lobbying and marketing practices does not contribute to portraying women in the Global South as ahistorical and passive subjects of intervention.

The Slow Lunch

*‘Knowing you can’t fix everything,
knowing that it’s ok
to stop for a long lunch,
break bread’*

During the early planning stages of the symposium, food artist and CDT researcher Cherry Truluck asked a simple question – what are we going to eat? Although academic symposiums aren’t famous for producing memorable meals, it seemed incongruous to ask guests to engage wholeheartedly in food systems thinking, without letting them engage wholeheartedly in food itself. Truluck, whose artistic practice has focused on creating communal, convivial and edible experiences, proposed a lunch event that aligned with her own research on agricultural temporalities. The Slow Lunch was developed with a group of fellow researchers who collaboratively stocked a ‘pantry’ (from which guests were invited to serve themselves) with products that told stories of long and slow engagement between people and food. The menu was an experimental adventure through layers of time: from [a cheese](#) matured for 2 years, [a ferment](#) made from last year’s Christmas turkey and [a nettle soup](#) that wove together ancestral recipes [from a family farm in Ireland](#) with cultural echoes of Persian cuisine, to [a chutney](#) that connected black market bananas in Soviet East Germany to a contemporary daily fitness routine.

In an introduction to the meal, for which we allowed 2 hours, Truluck shared a quote by Nigerian philosopher Bayo Akomolafe: ‘the times are urgent... let us slow down’, inviting guests to see this not simply as a quick opportunity to refuel. Instead, we were encouraged to consider the value of slowing down as a key part of the symposium, as a time for close attention and care. To embed this further, the Slow Lunch had been created with support from the [Conscious Food Systems Alliance](#) (CoFSA), a community of practice ‘convened by UNDP... to support people from across food and agriculture systems to cultivate the inner capacities that activate systemic change and regeneration.’ Truluck used CoFSA’s ‘Principles of Mindful Eating’ to teach an AI text generator to develop mindful narratives for each dish on the menu. The scripts were shared as audio pieces on SoundCloud, allowing guests to engage more deeply with their food and its connection to the day’s discussions.

In the planning of the event, we faced institutional-level hurdles of existing catering and food safety regulations, agreements with local food markets falling through, the risk of dining al fresco in the British autumn, and sheer time overload devoted to gathering food items and preparing dishes. We reflected that within so many food system transformation discussions lay the irony that whilst we talk about changing the food system, we often struggle to feed ourselves well. However, these challenges also reinforce our purpose, to interrogate the status-quo in the food system while reflecting upon our own role within it.

The next steps

‘Fill your boots with new horizons of hope’

Recognising diverse ways of knowing food requires creating space for discussion. It also necessitates sitting with discomfort. We did not walk away from the symposium in complete agreement. For

example, there were debates about the importance of nutritional guidelines like the Eatwell Guide and pushback against some scrutiny of dominant food system logics. Yet we found this discomfort to be an important lesson in interdisciplinarity: embracing the complexity of collaborations with those who may not share our worldviews.

Through co-design, we sought to model an inclusive and participatory approach – one where power is redistributed, perspectives are expanded, and transformation is collectively imagined. As students, the process taught us that achieving any meaningful dialogue demands a commitment to navigating differences and creating structures that allow for all voices to be heard. While we cannot hold space for everything, we can acknowledge our personal and collective limitations. One such limitation was our ability to know whose voices may remain ‘unheard’—especially being majoritarily ‘heard’ voices as a group of researchers funded by the UK government.

To not merely create a proverbial seat at the table, but to also ensure the table itself reflects the plurality of challenges and opportunities facing food systems, we see several next steps. As fully-funded PhD researchers, we have the opportunity to create spaces for dialogue and experimentation: we must continue to use this position for the democratisation of food systems discussions. This includes being mindful of who we engage with and how, to allow space for more representative experiences and visions of transformation. One material way to enable this is providing financial aid for inclusion. For students and staff planning similar events, grants should be sought to ensure fair compensation of speakers. Moreover, technology can create a more inclusive, hybrid environment, which could enable a wider pool of paid speakers to attend. While our decision of an in-person symposium reflected the emphasis on roundtable discussion, we would be remiss to not highlight this did limit potential speakers.

Like navigating through a maze of maize cultivars and wild relatives, addressing issues in food systems involves weaving through interconnected, though sometimes competing, narratives and imaginations. Through a collective effort of co-design, the UKFS-CDT students and management team used the symposium platform to build a more intentional community and elevate diverse stories and lived experiences in academic discussion on food systems. We are excited to expand this work and invite other PhD students to join us in addressing these critical challenges together.

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