Summary of ‘The Agriculture Bill 2017-19: tensions, powers, interpretation’

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Linsley’s dissertation ‘The Agriculture Bill 2017-19: tensions, powers, interpretation’ aimed to understand how the Bill, particularly its ‘public money for public goods’ subsidy mechanism, ought to be interpreted and considered the implications for British agriculture and food systems post-Brexit. The research found that the Bill was likely to change land use to deliver environmental outcomes but that the policy was likely to fail to encourage sustainable food production or to address wider food systems challenges. Consequently, the study argued that the logic of a public goods subsidy is inappropriate for food which, though not a public good, has positive and negative effects on the environment, public health, society and the economy. Linsley concluded that the Bill’s failure to support sustainable agriculture risked increasing imports of food produced less sustainably and to lower standards while creating the impression of environmental progress in the UK. Since the research was conducted the Bill has been superseded by the Agriculture Bill 2019-20. This, in principle, goes some way to addressing the issues raised. However, the detail of the subsidy mechanism remains unknown and no concrete action has been taken to prevent the import of food produced below British standards.

Linsley’s study undertook a thematic analysis of policy actors’ submissions and reactions to the Bill. This identified the tensions surrounding the Bill, the outcomes sought by different actors, and the capacity of the Bill to achieve these outcomes. The findings demonstrated significant tensions regarding the nature of and eligibility for the proposed ‘public money for public goods’ scheme and its limited connections to food production or to wider food systems challenges. The outcomes of these tensions were found to have been significantly affected by the public goods framing of the Bill. The logic of public goods-based subsidy was coherent with the arguments of actors seeking environmental outcomes. However, in defining food as a private good and not deserving of subsidy, the public goods framework fragmented the arguments of farming and food systems actors as they did not agree on the facets of food production that ought to be recognised as public goods. Consequently, the tensions surrounding the Bill tended to be resolved in favour of environmental actors while the critical relationships between food production and sustainability were overlooked. Linsley’s findings also demonstrated that the Bill failed to take the opportunity to address the evidence supporting integrated agriculture and food policies that consider economic, environmental, health and social outcomes.