

Shifting the food system

Frames to speed policy change

PROBLEM

When you ask people about food issues, they tend to think about the topic individually and focus on their responsibility and role in buying and eating their own food. This means it can be hard to generate support for system or policy level changes, which we know we need to improve the impact that food is having on our health and the planet, and therefore there is little cover or push for policy makers to implement them.

Framing – the way we present information – can help to shape and shift what people, including policy makers, think about food issues, and what they demand in terms of solutions.

Strategic framing works. To give only one example, in the US advocates saw support for same sex marriage increase significantly when they switched from a rights-based framing to one focused on the values of love and commitment.

WHAT WE DID

The research aimed to test out a few food system frames that can be used to increase support for policy and system level solutions.

We focused this work on framing the ‘case for change,’ affordability and meat – as these are issues that underpin the broader food system or cross into multiple other topics. To test the frames, we conducted 10 focus groups, with a total of 59 nationally and politically representative participants, and worked with YouGov to conduct an online poll of 5,299 people. In the polling, participants were split into groups, including a control group, and saw one of seven test frames – or no frame at all in the control group – and all participants answered the same questions. In the polling, we were looking to see if a frame resulted in a statistically significant shift, compared to the null control group, in participants’ attitudes about the problems/solutions with food, support for food policies and support for government responsibility in food issues. We say that

a frame ‘works’ when it leads to increased support for policy/system-level solutions, rather than the dominant individually-framed view of food.



We are grateful to FrameWorks UK for their help in defining the methods and helping us interpret the results.

WHAT WE FOUND

“...before I came into this conversation I kind of thought it was all about personal choice. But now I've realised how structural some of these issues are...I grew up in a very deprived area. And I realised, actually that all we had around us were chicken shops, and tiny supermarkets...And I think if we want to tackle this problem, we need to do it in a structural way. We have to look at those structures, and how can we dismantle and rework them?”

People are up for change. They are up for governments and businesses being brave and bold on food issues because they think it's the fair and the right thing to do. But it is important to address the challenge of affordability to get them into that mind space, and not shy away from discussions of power.

IDEAS AND LANGUAGE THAT WORK

Clearly frame affordability as a systems issue, and describe how the system can be ‘realigned’

“I think, while we can all be idealistic about what we want to do, I think it has to be realistic. It's what people can afford...it's tough time for a lot of people at the moment. So can't just say, oh, you've got to buy organic, this, that and the other.”

When affordability is clearly framed as a systems issue, and a problem that can be solved, support increases for other policies, such as the need to reduce meat consumption. Once you can address that concern that people have around affordability, it opens up the belief that other policies are possible and needed.

The affordability frame, shown below, was the most successful frame in the polling, significantly increasing support on multiple questions, including a tax on high fat/sugar/salt foods¹ and for government responsibility on food in general². It was also one of only two frames to increase support for a policy to reduce meat content in ready meals³. In the focus groups, participants consistently picked up and used the ‘realign’ language that is in this frame as a justification for policy approaches to food, showing that the frame had influenced their thinking.

It is not right that only people who have a lot of money can afford good food. Powerful food companies determine what food is available for us to buy and at what price. We know that it doesn't have to be this way – companies can provide high quality food at affordable prices. To make that happen we need to realign the system so that it works for everyone. Right now, big companies are using their power to create cheap, unhealthy food, and choosing to sell healthy food at higher prices. This is why unhealthy food, even when it has gone through more processing, is often less expensive than healthy food. Government needs to work on our behalf and use legislation and regulations to ensure food companies act in our best interests, not just in terms of their bottom line.

→ VALUE STATEMENT

→ FRAME ELEMENT

→ EXPLANATORY STATEMENT THAT REINFORCES THE FRAME

→ GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY STATEMENT THAT REINFORCES THE FRAME

EXPLAIN HOW ADDRESSING POWER AND INCREASING GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY ARE PART OF IMPROVING FOOD SYSTEMS

“So if they're [companies] working just for profit, it will always be cheaper to produce healthier food. But the government is the body that defines the balance between what power they have to be autonomous and do that.”

The frames that increased support for government responsibility in the food system all had three elements in common: discussions of power or companies, they ascribed government responsibility, and included a clear assertion that the system could work differently (realignment). Explaining who or what is responsible for problems with the food system, and combining this with a clear solution for how change can happen, helps shift mindsets from the individual to the systemic level and increase support for systemic change.

Focus group participants discussed the role that powerful companies play in influencing how food is priced and what people buy. Some continued to feel strongly about the role of ‘consumer power’ in shifting corporate behaviour, but others felt that it was naïve to expect corporations to act in ways which might reduce their profit in the short term. These participants emphasised a role for government to ‘make them’ act, through regulation (particularly of advertising and promotions on unhealthy food). Frames that prompted participants to think about how powerful companies profited from an unhealthy and unsustainable food system increased support for government intervention.

DESCRIBE THE PROBLEM AND SOLUTION IN ONE BREATH

“...it scares me, but it doesn't scare me up into action because it just sounds really discouraging.”

The frames that worked best all contained a strong narrative – explaining the problem, clearly stating the solution and defining the government's role in enacting that solution (responsibility). When frames described problems, but didn't clearly contain a solution or ascribe responsibility, participants were left feeling that the problems in the food system were “too big,” that they didn't know what to do about them, and often reverted back to individual level solutions (e.g. education).

LEAD WITH VALUES

Values such as fairness and wanting to protect our future generations, our legacy, cut across topics, and across age and political preference – and the frames that were most successful led with these values before defining the problem and solution. The fairness value features in the affordability frame above, and a legacy value sounds something like:

It is becoming clear that decisions are being made today about how our food systems works that will affect our way of life and our future generations far into the future. Government needs to work on our behalf and use legislation and regulations to ensure we have a stable, healthy food system for our children and grandchildren.

PUT INTO PRACTICE



TRY THIS

Our children deserve a healthy planet when they grow up. It is the government's responsibility to reign in the damage that powerful companies are causing to our environment.

Food can be healthy and affordable if government and companies take responsibility to realign the food system, so it works better for all of us. One way to do that is to tax ultra-processed foods and use the money raised to help people afford healthy food.

It is not right that only people who have a lot of money can afford better meat. Government needs to set legislation and regulation to ensure that meat is produced in cleaner and healthier ways, and that we serve less but better meat in our hospitals and schools.

Food companies determine what food is available for us to buy and have the power to shape how that food is produced. Government needs to work on our behalf and use legislation and regulations to ensure food companies act in our best interests, not just in terms of their bottom line.

ENDNOTES

- 1 64% compared to 52% in the control group. Participants were responding to the question: To what extent, if at all, would you support or oppose government taking action to...impose a tax on companies for producing foods which are high in sugar, salt and saturated fat, such as sweets, cakes, crisps and processed meat. (Strongly support – Tend to support – Neither support nor oppose – Tend to oppose – Strongly oppose – Don't know)
- 2 62% compared to 50% in the control group. Participants were responding to the question: To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with the following? It is the government's responsibility to set policies and regulations so it is easier for us to eat food that is better for us and the planet (Strongly agree – Agree – Neither agree nor disagree – Disagree – Strongly disagree – Don't know)
- 3 36% compared to 29% in the control group. Participants were responding to the question: To what extent, if at all, would you support or oppose government taking action to...Lower the amount of meat we eat by replacing it with plant-based meat alternatives in supermarket products such as ready-made lasagnas, burgers, and other manufactured foods. (Strongly support – Tend to support – Neither support nor oppose – Tend to oppose – Strongly oppose – Don't know)



AVOID THAT

We all need to play our part in fixing the damage the food system is causing to our environment.

Ultra-processed foods are damaging our health and we need to eat less of them, which is why we are calling for a tax on UPF.

For the sake of our health and the environment, we need to eat less meat overall and when we do eat meat, it should be produced to a higher standard.

The food environment drives what we eat and can only be fixed with policy solutions such as legislation and regulation.