Session Three: Net Zero Food
Date: 20/03/25
Coach: Will Clare, Future Food Movement

Action items

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Overview

The Net Zero Food session, led by Will from Future Food Movement, tackled the intersection of achieving net zero emissions and promoting healthy sustainable diets. The session focused on practical strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions within the food sector while aligning these efforts with health and sustainability goals. Will shared insights on leveraging food system transformation as a powerful driver for climate action and explored how collaborative approaches and innovative farming practices can make a significant impact.

5 Key Learnings

1. **Diet Shifts as a Decarbonisation Lever**
    a. High-income countries must prioritise diet shifts to reduce emissions with plant-based and low-carbon food options being crucial.
    b. Emphasising balanced sustainable and healthy diets helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions while improving public health outcomes.
2. **Systemic Thinking and Collaboration**
    a. Effective net zero strategies require breaking down silos between teams and industries.
    b. Collaboration across supply chains including farmers and food manufacturers is crucial to foster innovation and manage climate risks.
3. **Managing Emissions Across the Food Chain**
    a. Emissions must be tackled from production to consumption including farming practices, logistics, processing and consumer choices.
    b. Encouraging regenerative farming and using technology to cut emissions are essential steps.
4. **Economic and Social Costs of Climate Action**
    a. Investing in net zero strategies has an upfront cost but offers long-term social, economic and environmental benefits.
    b. Businesses must integrate climate transition plans with commercial growth strategies to maximise returns on investment.
5. **Consumer Engagement and Transparency**
    a. To support sustainable choices, consumers need clear information about the carbon footprint and sustainability of products.
    b. Educating consumers on the benefits of low-carbon diets is crucial to building public support.

1. Real-World Examples of Climate Action in Food Production

- **Dairy Farming and Regenerative Agriculture:**
  Lucy Noad from a dairy farm shared how they practice carbon sequestration through regenerative agriculture, which also supports healthier products like non-ultra-processed yoghurts. This example highlights the link between sustainable farming practices and healthier consumer choices.

- **Key Takeaway:** Risk-sharing contracts and government subsidies make it feasible for farmers to take on sustainable practices.

- **Vertical Farming for Low-Carbon Production:**
  Gillon Dobie from GrowUp Farms discussed the challenges and successes of indoor vertical farming to reduce greenhouse gas emissions compared to conventional agriculture.
  - **Key Takeaway:** Innovative farming methods can dramatically reduce emissions, but adoption requires financial support and risk management.

2. Challenges and Barriers Identified

- **Financial Risk and Support:**
  Several speakers pointed out that transitioning to sustainable practices often requires significant financial investment and risk-taking. Farmers are more willing to make changes if they feel supported, either through contracts with buyers or government subsidies.
  - **Key Takeaway:** Creating economic structures that reward sustainable practices is crucial for long-term change.
- **Perceived Consumer Demand:**
  Some farmers noted that consumer demand for more transparent and sustainable products is growing, but many still lack clear information about what sustainable food means.
  - **Key Takeaway:** Educating consumers and communicating the benefits of low-carbon diets is essential.

3. Nuanced View on Carbon Offsetting

- **The Debate on Offsetting:**
  One of the key debates revolved around the validity of carbon offsetting versus direct emission reductions. While offsetting has faced criticism, Will argued that when done responsibly and with verified projects, it plays a crucial role in overall climate strategy.
  - **Key Takeaway:** Offsetting should not replace direct action but can complement it when managed correctly.

4. Strategies for Integrating Health and Sustainability

- **Linking Diet and Climate Goals:**
  Will emphasised that diet shifts are not just about climate mitigation but also about public health. E.g., reducing high-carbon foods (like red and processed meats) with plant-based diets can impact both emissions and health outcomes.
  - **Key Takeaway:** Framing sustainability as a health benefit can drive more public and business buy-in.
- **Economic Arguments for Sustainable Diets:**
  The masterclass highlighted how shifting to sustainable diets could save billions in healthcare costs and environmental damage. The concept of a **"cost-negative transition"** was discussed, where upfront investments eventually pay off through long-term economic and health benefits.
  - **Key Takeaway:** Presenting net zero as an investment rather than a cost can help win support from decision-makers.

5. Encouraging Incremental Change Instead of Perfection

- **Small Steps Matter:**
  Lucy Noad made an insightful point about not needing everyone to take drastic measures. Instead, if many people take smaller, more manageable steps, it can have a significant cumulative impact.
  - **Key Takeaway:** Encouraging small, consistent changes across the food sector can be more sustainable and impactful than relying on a few ambitious projects.

Key Questions from Guests and Will's Responses

Q: How can we encourage farmers to take risks in adopting sustainable practices?
A: Support mechanisms such as shared-risk contracts and government subsidies are essential. Creating partnerships with buyers and securing long-term commitments also mitigate financial risks.

Q: Can net zero be cost-neutral or even cost-negative in the long term?
A: Yes, but it requires strategic investment and collaboration. Once initial costs are managed, the long-term savings and societal benefits outweigh the expenses.

Q: Are carbon offsets truly valuable or are they a distraction from real reductions?
A: Carbon offsets can be beneficial if verified and managed correctly. However, they should not replace direct emission cuts but rather complement them

Summary of Will's Solutions

1. **Risk Sharing:** Encourage contracts where risks are distributed between farmers and buyers reducing individual financial burdens.
2. **Innovative Farming Techniques:** Support regenerative practices and sustainable land management to build resilient supply chains.
3. **Integrated Emission Management:** Engage the entire supply chain in tracking and reducing emissions rather than placing the burden on one party.
4. **Consumer Choice and Transparency:** Promote low-carbon food options and educate consumers on their benefits.
5. **Economic Viability:** Frame net zero as an investment with long-term financial returns rather than just a cost.

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Log in to access:

- Ask the Expert – Net Zero
- Learning Collab: Net Zero Agri Supply Chains
- How Net Zero can Drive Innovation in the Food System

Next Session:
Cohort Collab, 24th March 12 – 12:45. We will be joined by previous HSD Programme participants, Rachel Smith (Head of Innovation, Greencore) and Sue Couter (Campaigns, Healthy Sustainable Diets Group Communications)