



## BigPicnic policy brief 1: Food and heritage

### BIGPICNIC TOPIC



FOOD AND  
HERITAGE

### SDGs



United Nations Sustainable  
Development Goals

## Recommendations

**Overall: The cultural heritage dimension of food should be embedded in food policy.**

- Articulate the cultural heritage value of food across all food security policy priority areas.
- Use open, participatory approaches to further explore material and immaterial aspects connected to food and food heritage.
- Enhance cultural diversity in food use and food systems.
- Protect cultural traditions related to food and embed them in strategies for social cohesion.
- Support the acquisition of (traditional) food products and food processing skills as a means to enhance food sovereignty on familial, regional and national levels.

## Background

Food security is one of the greatest challenges facing society today, yet the term ‘food security’ means many different things to different people and in different contexts. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO): “food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”.<sup>1</sup> Thus many definitions of food security (including the BigPicnic’s initial definition) focus on three key elements – access, sovereignty and safety.

There is however a key parameter that is to a greater extent omitted from both the key definitions and the associated European and global policies that deal with food and sustainable developments – heritage. Heritage is about supporting culinary traditions and acknowledging that they help to shape personal and collective identities. There is a growing awareness and recognition of the vital importance of heritage as illustrated by ‘The Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage’ adopted by UNESCO<sup>2</sup>.

However, more evidence is required to emphasise the important relationship between heritage and food and embed this within discussions about the future of our food. Including this element in food security policy priority areas will provide impetus for increased attention, including research and funding.

## Findings

BigPicnic Partners clearly highlighted the importance of food as cultural heritage. Food is closely linked to individual and national identity, culture, tradition and memory. The project data provided a rich source of information on this subject which is explored below.

### Cultural diversity in food use and food systems

People are personally attached to the food they grew up with which, in some cases, may include lesser known food crops. Specific food systems are associated with an individual's own heritage, and growing or collecting their own food is part of their culture. BigPicnic's audiences addressed the importance of cultural diversity in both food use and in food systems more generally (including transport, production, processing, distribution and logistics). This was often done through a comparison of past and present approaches to food.

Food was linked to religious, political and ethical values. Traditional ways of eating include eating that belongs to certain situations and traditions (e.g. family tradition), and ways of eating that individuals have grown up with that are seasonal and familiar. Additionally, social class appears to play a key role in this theme as do ethical values.

### Traditional eating

Specific types of food are often associated with certain situations (events, celebrations) and traditions (familial, regional or national). The notion of seasonality and the value of home food, the link between territory and culture all have importance for communities.

### Context of eating

Food was demonstrated to have a specific value in the context of social interaction (the importance of sharing food and eating with others) and food habits are often defined by social norms (pressure provided by the society) and social image (what is trendy).

### Food stories/memories

Food appears to have strong associations with specific memories and stories that people keep and remember. These memories are emotionally charged and feature all the senses, which makes them very powerful.

### Migration

In the context of diaspora communities, access to ingredients from the home country and knowledge of traditional food preparation are deemed important. People living in foreign countries often have to adapt their food habits as a consequence of adapting their wider lifestyles and ways of living. However, food can also serve as a way to 'reconnect' with the home country.

<sup>1</sup>FAO (1996). *Rome Declaration on World Food Security*. World Food Summit, 13th-17th November 1996, Rome.

<sup>2</sup>UNESCO (2018). *Basic texts of the 2003 convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage*. UNESCO

## Quotes

“I'm worried that everything will start tasting the same. That all the special flavours you used to have will start tasting like white bread and cheese, because marketers think that everyone wants sugar in their food. Now you have all these varieties that get sweeter and sweeter. Apples are allowed to be sour, but apparently you can't sell those. Apples already taste too sweet for me, but now they are all becoming uniform. It's like a dog biting its own tail. It will come back I think, these are only trends, people are probably asking for the old varieties.”

### Participant in Leiden, The Netherlands

“My favourite food memory is, growing up as a child in Eastern Nigeria and going to the village during the rainy season and sitting with the family, roasting corn and African Pear...it's just, you know, the ambience, sitting with your family, the feeling...this is part of the things that remind about my childhood and one of my favourite food memories.”

### Participant in Meise, Belgium

As food is widely acknowledged for its importance in expressing identity it was not surprising to receive feedback that addressed links between food and migration. Audiences underlined the significance of having access to ingredients for the preparation of home country food and reflected on how easy or difficult it is to find them. This was combined with comments about the knowledge of preparing food in the way that it is eaten in the home country of the respondent. Nevertheless, people acknowledged that they have adapted their lifestyle due to migration.

## Conclusion

Efforts to address food security at the policy, organisational or individual level should acknowledge the essential role that heritage plays in people's relationship with food. In particular, this should take into account the importance of food in relation to memory and the expression of national identity and different religious, political and ethical values as well as traditional ways of eating.

The logo for Big Picnic features the word "Big" in a dark purple font and "Picnic" in a light green font. A small green leaf icon is positioned above the letter 'i' in "Picnic".

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