'Less is more' – a fix for our broken food system that we can all buy into

While no conversation about food security can be summed up in three words, at least it moves us beyond the 'produce more' trap

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We eat too much meat, writes Amy Leech, 'less is more' is an everyday solution to food security we can all buy into. Photograph: Rawdon Wyatt/Alamy

The UN, World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organisation and European Commission have recently all cited tackling our unsustainable western diets and wastage in the food system as central to achieving food security. This new focus marks a welcome departure from the "produce more of the same" paradigm that has dominated the worldwide food security debate until now.

We are now rightly concentrating on fixing the problems with our current food system that, if not addressed, will prevent us from feeding the world's population well regardless of how much food we produce. The new food security mood music goes like this: less waste, less meat, more food.

There is no doubt it will catch on; the case stacks up whichever way you look at it. We'll be able to feed more people with less land, fewer precious resources and fewer emissions. We will even save money – €123 (£102) per person on average each year in the EU, if we reduce food waste by 40% in our homes and in retail.

Of course, no conversation about food security can be summed up in two or three words. "Less is more", like its "produce more" predecessor, is a reductionist worldview, albeit a less one-dimensional one. Notably, it rebalances the food-security debate to focus on demand and supply. This common-sense perspective will be central to our success.

Most importantly, "less is more" is an everyday solution we can all buy into and benefit from now – on farms, at home, in schools or on the high street, as people making choices every day. This is a refreshing break from the norm of deferring responsibility to another place, time or person.
Even the health benefits are palatable, an issue that too often goes missing in the food-security debate despite being central to it. We eat too much meat, and in doing so trade down to fast, factory-reared, processed meat while upping our chances of ill health. We know that a balanced diet is better for us; a world full of western diets will be anything but food-secure.

There are dangers, however, to looking at food security from one angle. The phrase "feeding the world" itself tempts us to come up with monoculture-like solutions, as if we all sit down to a table together and eat as one.

The "less is more" strapline, for its many strengths, fails to recognise that the need for change varies, depending on where we are in the world and how we live. We need to change supply – how we produce food and what we grow – as well as demand – what and how much we eat.

Is it wise therefore to focus on and simplify solutions to problems that are global and systematic? I think so. In fact, this is the only way to approach the problem.

Feeding the world is a puzzle with a million pieces; it makes us dizzy just thinking about it. We risk losing our way in this complexity, as the "produce more" dead end served to demonstrate.

When faced with big challenges, it is tempting to bury our heads in the sand, to keep calm and carry on.

In reality, the one thing we can be sure of when it comes to our food system is change. As Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, puts it (pdf): "The food systems we have inherited from the 20th century have failed ... a new paradigm, focused on wellbeing, resilience and sustainability must be designed to replace the productivist paradigm ... it will not be enough to refine the logic of our food systems – it must instead be reversed".

In short, let us not be held back by our own illusions of success – more of the same simply won’t do. This is daunting, no doubt, but change is afoot. "Less is more" is a simple but transformative solution to a complex problem. There will be more solutions, there have to be, but this is a step in the right direction that we can all take – as governments, businesses, producers, and people. Sounds good to me.

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