The food we eat can have a dramatic affect on the world around us: on the environment, on animal welfare and on people’s ability to enjoy healthy, full lives. But the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of food production are not always clear. Pesticides and fertilizers can help farmers to grow and protect crops but they can have a negative impact on biodiversity, and can affect the health of both farmers and consumers. When food is processed and packaged, harmful bacteria are killed but so too are vitamins and minerals. Food packaging helps preserve the life of food, and makes it possible for consumers to transport food easily, yet every year millions of tonnes of food packaging ends up in landfills or is transported to poorer countries causing problems for the local people. So how can our food system be managed and steered in a positive direction?

How to establish control?

Our food system is currently regulated and controlled in many different ways. There are laws that control the production and sale of foods; voluntary agreements by producers and retailers; consumer pressure groups and the attitudes of shoppers themselves – all these shape the way food is produced, sold and consumed. For generations, these different forms of regulation and pressure have all pushed food producers into meeting the needs of society. In the 1800s, for example, food laws stopped producers from ‘adulterating’ food – i.e. mixing cheap, fake ingredients into products to fool the customer. Before these laws were put into place, tea sellers, for instance, would bulk out their tea with dried leaves from local trees, and spice sellers would mix into ground pepper generous helpings of floor sweepings.

In the 20th century, one of Europe’s main concerns was producing enough food to feed people. Food shortages during WWII, for instance, had a major affect within Europe on the rules governing food production and food consumption. Governments specified the foods farmers could grow and how much food people were allowed to consume.

21st Century

In the 21st century, society’s concerns are changing, and so are the rules. Legal controls over food safety are controlled by international and national bodies. The nutritional value of processed food was once left up to the producers and retailers. But as more and more people are suffering from food-related health conditions such as obesity and heart disease, organisations such as the United Nations are now investigating ways to improve the nutritional value of food through regulation.

Looking ahead, the world’s population is growing rapidly and we need to find ways to produce enough food to feed everyone. At the same time, we need to
achieve this without causing irreversible damage to the environment - after all, we depend on the environment for our food. Over the next few years, we can expect to see regulatory bodies and the food industry taking a greater interest in how to control the food system to limit its damage to the environment and public health.