The RELU Debates 2006

Should we be buying food from abroad?

We import huge quantities of food from overseas. Should we not rather be consuming locally produced fruit and vegetables? Transporting food can have a marked effect on greenhouse gas emissions, local employment and consumer choice. Is there a conflict between the increased choice of foods that we enjoy today and a sustainable agricultural system worldwide? What attitude should we take towards export food sectors in other countries, especially the developing countries?

Did you notice that your last Christmas dinner cost less than usual? According to the Soil Association, most of the meat and vegetables on your dinner plate were probably cheap imports. Your carrots are likely to have come from Morocco, the Brussels sprouts from the Netherlands, the potatoes from Egypt – even the crackers will have been made in China.

A BBC News report broadcast in October 2004 forecast that for the big food manufacturers "UK farming could become a bit of an irrelevance". One senior manager in a food processing multinational was quoted as saying that with beef from South America, pork from Denmark, wheat from Eastern Europe and fruit from the Mediterranean, British farming could end up being written out of the picture altogether.

On the other hand, food safety scares have made consumers more alert to the country of origin of their food. Given the choice, many prefer it to come from Britain, and farmers' markets, although they make up only a tiny percentage of overall sales, have grown exponentially. This trend is opening up opportunities for British farmers, but these may be "niche" opportunities: organics, rare breeds, fine cheeses etc. Must our self-sufficiency in food, currently around 70%, continue to fall?

The final debate in the RELU's Science Week series brought together Professor Gareth Edwards-Jones, Agriculture and Land Studies, University of Wales, Bangor; Professor Mike Winter, Professor of Rural Policy and Director of the Centre for Rural Research, Exeter University; and Ms Malini Mehra, Founder, Centre for Social Markets (UK/India). Ms Mehra also heads the SD Dialogues with emerging markets at Defra but participated in a personal capacity.

Professor Edwards-Jones is Principal Investigator in an RELU research project comparing the carbon budgets, social costs, consumer acceptance and health impacts of locally produced vegetables with those imported. Fieldwork with beans, peas, brassicas, lettuce, potatoes and onions is being done in Kenya, Spain and the UK.

"Food miles", the mileage travelled by an item of food before it reaches the consumer's plate, has come to be regarded as a good indicator of its impact on the environment. So does locally produced food score highly almost by definition? Not

necessarily, Edwards-Jones says. To assume that “local” is always best in the absence of hard evidence is a leap of faith. Very few of the advocates of local food genuinely have the minimisation of climate change or environmental damage as their primary objective. Rather they are using the climate change issue as support for their real viewpoints, which are varied and complex. Truly environmentally and socially aware citizens would seek to minimise the overall adverse impact of the food system, not just the food miles.

Five reasons are commonly put forward for “going local”. There is the belief that local supply chains are socially as well as economically beneficial. Then there is the anti-globalisation viewpoint, as illustrated by the “I hate McDonalds” posters and “No food shall be grown that we don’t own.” Who has not heard a father-in-law ask “Why do we import all that coal/slate/potato/lamb when we can produce it at home?” Edwards-Jones asks. More fashionable is the environmental argument, which wants to preserve the UK as a green and pleasant but nevertheless productive land. It is concerned about pollution emissions from aircraft and cargo vessel transporting food from far-flung countries as well as worries as to whether food produced overseas is always guaranteed safe to eat. Finally there is the straightforward protectionist attitude of “Grow local, buy local, and eat local”. Protagonists quote the Soil Association’s estimate that twelve farmers were going out of business every day because they could not compete with cut-price foreign goods. Buying locally sourced food, the Association is quoted as saying, could save Britain £2.1 billion in environmental and congestion costs.

However, the growing of any food item is unavoidably associated with some degree of environmental impact, the severity of which varies with local soil and weather conditions. For example, the extent of both soil erosion and nitrogen leaching will vary with soil type, as will the need to apply pesticides and irrigation water. Edwards-Jones suggests that we need to consider these factors when comparing the potential benefits of food grown in different places.

So local may not always be best, and early results of the RELU research indicate that a truly ethical choice of food sourcing has to take into account multiple criteria across the whole food chain including considerations of greenhouse gas emissions from transport and soil, soil erosion, pesticide hazard, employee health, employee income, and the effect on the landscape. As things stand this finding is too complicated to indicate the best course of action for politicians, industrialists or individual consumers. So what can we do for the best?

The purchasing pattern of consumers can have major implications both for the climate, for local economic development and the alleviation of poverty in developing nations, Edwards-Jones says. How do they weave that pattern? “People *need to think* they are making environmentally and socially benign purchasing decisions even though they do not have enough evidence to make these decisions rationally. All you can do is to act in the best way for you, but recognise that what is best for your conscience is not necessarily best for mine. So please do not come and preach to me about what you are doing,” Edwards-Jones says, “especially as what you are doing may not save the world”.

Speaking as an unreconstructed social scientist, Professor Winter agrees that local food is not just about saving the rain forests through reducing food miles, nor even about an "Eat the View" policy aimed at protecting local landscapes and biodiversity. It is also, perhaps primarily, about communities that inter-connect. "If the people undertaking some transaction know and respect each other," he says, "that transaction is more likely to be successful."

"The Government's Sustainable Farming and Food Strategy does not help a great deal in defining the social leg of agricultural sustainability," Winter says, but one of his research studies offers an important clue. Following the Foot and Mouth Disease calamity, he found the farmers coping best were those with "social capital", those linked into the community through economic and social ties. One strand of these ties was often through local retailing. Conversely, people want to feel rooted in their immediate community, and one psychologically effective means of doing this is to eat locally grown food. Given a mix of farmers facing turbulent times and an influx of new people coming to live in rural communities, we need to address the problem of social re-connection.

"Re-connection is a political and moral imperative," Winter says. "In facilitating connection, local food is part of an answer to social needs as well as to economic and environmental ones." Provided we take care to determine which are the appropriate agricultural products to grow locally, "Policies that promote and support local food initiatives are a plus for social and economic sustainability, for local environmental stability and probably for global environmental sustainability too."

It is precisely this wider approach to the food sourcing conundrum that the RELU is designed to illuminate. A case study in Anglesey, for example, will help determine both the environmental and social pros and cons of increasing the local production of vegetables.

Director of the Centre for Social Markets, Malini Mehra quantified some of the issues of food miles. Food travels 50% further than it did 20 years ago, she said. The soil association tracked 26 items in a basket of groceries and found they had travelled in total 241,000 miles, a one-way trip to the moon! "Flying in one calorie of lettuce from Los Angeles uses 127 calories of aviation fuel." Meanwhile "Lincolnshire potatoes travel to Bristol for washing, and fish from Aberdeen are smoked in Cornwall." Quoting a Defra study, she noted that food transport produced 19 million tonnes of CO_2 in 2002, and the environmental, social and economic cost of transporting food is estimated at £9 billion a year. It accounts for 25% of all HGV km in the UK and increases congestion, road accidents, infrastructure damage, air pollutants and noise.

Yes, it may be more environmentally efficient to buy tomatoes from Spain but apples are a crop ideally suited to our climate. "Why is it, then, that we import half a million tonnes a year, half from outside the EU, and over 60% of the UK's apple orchards have been lost?" And in 1997 the UK exported 270 million litres of milk but imported 126 million. "Is this logical, is this desirable?" Mehra asks. It may make economical sense, but people are increasingly basing their food purchasing decisions on a range of other considerations – including community development, ethics and the environment

In an increasingly global market we need to factor into our decisions the growth in agricultural exports from developing countries, including those traded between themselves. China's demands will soon make Brazil a bigger exporter of soya than the USA. Both China and India are moving from a vegetable diet to a meat-based diet, Mehra says, and are importing more grain than ever before. These are examples of how production and consumption systems are changing as middle-income countries transition economically, a seismic shift that is already producing pressures on natural resources. Energy prices have aleady soared. "What will happen when they go through the roof?" Mehra asks. "The food miles debate needs to factor in such considerations. We also need to pay greater attention to full-cost accounting. Fo example, the USA spends billions policing international shipping lanes – a fundamental food cost that is never referred to.

After reviewing some of the recommendations put forward by UK commentators, she analysed who was involved – and who was missing. The food sourcing drama affects a long list of actors including suppliers, planners, logisticians, farmers and fishers, governments, policy makers, traders, workers, manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers, caterers, consumers, scientists and pressure groups. But not all are equally involved. She honed in on the exclusion of particular groups from the debate – e.g. ethnic minority producers and consumers in the UK, and developing country producers – and urged strategies to encourage their engagement. This could contribute to a better-informed – if more complex – food miles debate, and result in more forward-looking action by consumers, producers, policymakers and others.
It is significant that RELU invited Mehra to speak at this debate and so make her trenchant views known to an audience of widely varying expertise and far-reaching authority.

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