

# FOOD ISSUES

Food and water are the most basic needs. In the industrialised countries, food is available in great variety, and when and where people want it. Today's food system best serves the richer industrialised countries – according to the United Nations, the richest fifth of humanity – the 20% of the world's people living in the highest income countries – consume 86% of all goods and services, while the poorest fifth consume only 1.3%.

(Source: United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 1998, New York, 1998).

Growth in food production and consumption is placing enormous burdens on the global environment and generating inequalities at all levels, such as energy and chemical use, intensified land use, waste generation, transportation of food over long distances, journeys made by consumers to buy the produce, freezing/chilling of foods, elaborate packaging, intensively grown produce and produce being available from all over the world at all times of the year.

The demand for semi/fully prepared ('ready-to-go') meals has grown over the years and the waste implications associated with this through elaborate packaging are immense. The demand for energy use has increased with the increased processing and freezing of food.

The world packaged food market was worth US\$1,322.4 billion in 2000, having grown in real terms by 3.4% since 1995. Western Europe is the world's largest packaged foods market, accounting for 27.5% of sales in 2000, followed by N America (24.3%) and Asia-Pacific (23.2%) – Global Food Market and Trends, 2000 – [www.euromonitor.com/pdf/GlobalFoodTrends.pdf](http://www.euromonitor.com/pdf/GlobalFoodTrends.pdf)

The recent growth in the demand for organic produce in the UK is an example of the power of the consumer to influence the type of produce available to them. It has been this public reaction to pesticide use and more importantly Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) that spurred food manufactures and retailers to offer and promote 'organic products'. The aftermath of the BSE and Foot and Mouth 'scares' will undoubtedly have similar effects on purchasing patterns.

Western Europe is currently the largest market for organic food in the world. Retail sales of organic food and beverages in Western Europe in 2000 amounted to US\$9.6 billion, compared with US\$8 billion in the US – Organic Foods in Western Europe – [www.euromonitor.com/pdf/OrganicsWE00.pdf](http://www.euromonitor.com/pdf/OrganicsWE00.pdf)

The increased demand in the UK for organic produce, however, now outstrips the ability to meet that demand from 'home' production, such that large quantities of organic produce, up to 70% according

to the government in 1999, are imported. Even assuming appropriate 'organic standards' of production are being enforced, the international transport and distribution causes major impacts. Furthermore, prices of organic foods are often much higher than the 'conventionally' grown alternatives and in the absence of significant scientific evidence confirming a greater health benefit from 'organics', many people are led to argue that this trade is neither necessary nor sustainable. It is equally argued elsewhere that 'conventional' methods of farming are not delivering the kind of food which UK consumers are demanding.

Jeffrey Barber of the International Coalition for Sustainable Production and Consumption defines sustainable food consumption as: "Access and use by all present and future generations of the food necessary for an active, healthy life, through means that are economically, socially and environmentally sustainable." <http://icspac.net/spacwatch/index.html>

## KEY ISSUES CONSIDERED:

### 1. EDUCATION AND HEALTH

#### F1. RECOMMENDATION

As a starting point, food teaching should be re-established within schools. This will include growing, shopping, cooking – making the pupils get a real sense of the food 'stages' – from seed to plate.

#### 1.1 MAKING THE LINK WITH THE YOUNG GENERATION

It is evident that the UK's food consumption patterns are currently unsustainable. Educating civil society is the primary option enabling the 'right' decisions in order to be sustainable consumers.

Because of the changes in consumption patterns to more convenience foods and ready made meals the knowledge of where food actually originates, how it is processed and the environmental links to its food production is slowly becoming lost. This is magnified to a great extent in cities where the young generations are in a very different world to those in the countryside. The understanding of how food arrives on our plate is important in the

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education of food, for example as one working group member stated, "Fish do not look like fish fingers". These issues are only touched upon in early development within the UK's National Curriculum and it is for this reason that the working groups believe that it should become extended.

## PRACTICAL ACTION

The recommendation could be extended into the proposed Department of Health's National School Fruit Scheme, which is currently being piloted. Under the scheme schools are given fresh fruit everyday for the children to encourage a healthy diet. The extension of the scheme would be for the children actually to grow fruit or vegetables in order to reconnect the link between seed, growth and product. This would then be widened to include elements of food preparation and cooking. Where facilities are limited simple starting projects involving easily grown crops (e.g. Mange-tout) could be considered.

Fruit in Schools <http://www.doh.gov.uk/schoolfruitscheme/>

The concept of connecting the link from seed to food is clearly illustrated in the transcript below of the Young Ones (By permission of the BBC).

## Transcript of 'The Young Ones' – Neil being at one with nature

**Neil:** This self-sufficiency thing really is amazing. We sow the seed, right, nature grows the seed, and then, we eat the seed. And then, after that, we sow the seed, nature grows the seed, and then, we eat the seed. And then, after that again, we sow the seed, nature grows the seed. . .

**Rick:** Oh, shut up, Neil! Shut up! Shut up! It's pathetic. I mean, what about radical magazines? What about Kicker boots?! Can we grow them? No - we can't, can we? The beauty of your plan, Neil, seems to rest on everyone being really into seeds.

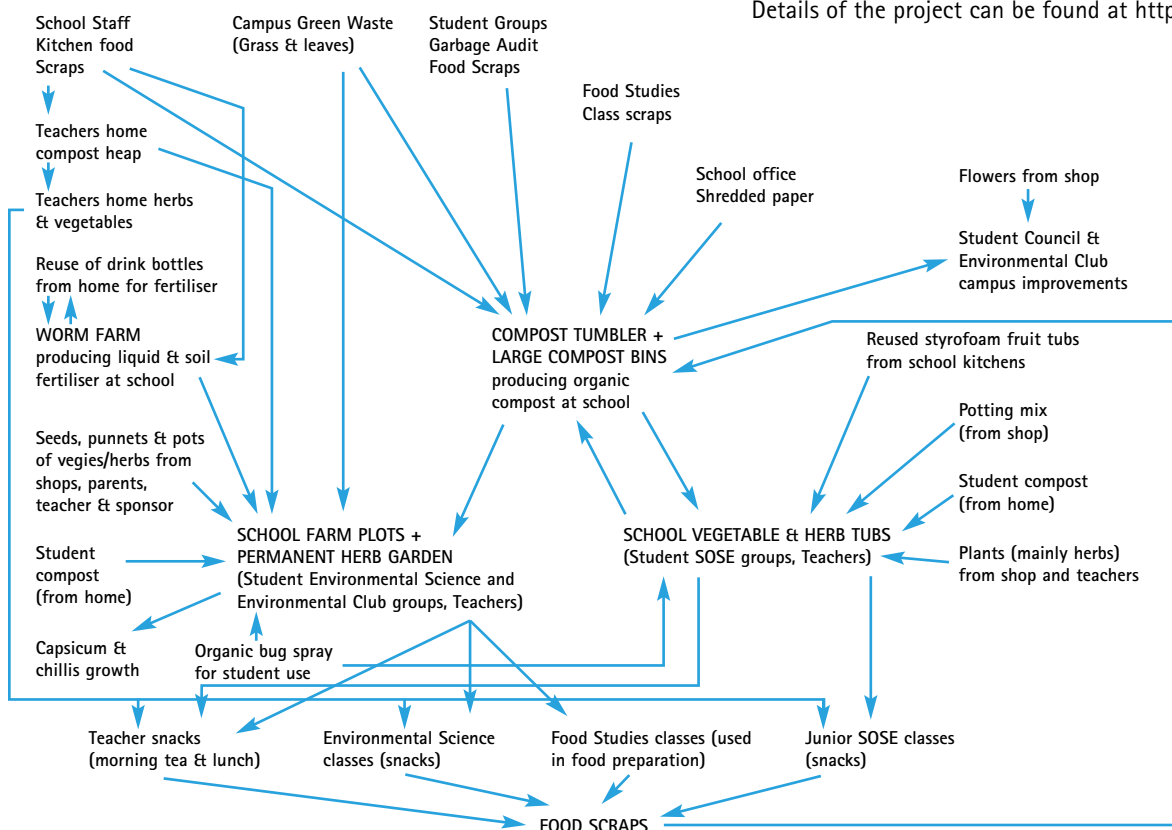
**Neil:** No-no-no, Rick. You don't understand the timeless wonder of the whole thing. We sow the seed! Nature grows the seed. We eat the seed. And then. . .

## Case Study

One example of such a project is at Villanova College, Coorparoo in Australia, "School organic food growing and nutrient recycling project", illustrates how students, teachers and grounds staff of an urban school work together to carry out (in a sustainable way) a most basic human activity - food production. The figure below shows how all the key elements of the programme are connected, thus capturing all aspects of the ecology of the fruit/vegetable, for example the cycle of seed, growing, eating and waste composting.

Details of the project can be found at <http://www.vnc.qld.edu.au/>

## School Organic Food Growing and Nutrient Recycling Project taken from Villanova College



## 1.2 OBESITY

Although recent research shows that health foods are on the increase – fresh fruit and vegetable sales increased by 2.5% at a constant price from 1999 to 2000 (Keynote research – [www.keynote.co.uk](http://www.keynote.co.uk)), we are a country that is slowly getting fatter and fatter and therefore more unhealthy.

Closely linked to the ever-increasing gap in the knowledge of seed to plate is the relationship with increasing obesity. In 1980, eight per cent of women in England were classified as obese, compared to six per cent of men. By 1998, the prevalence of obesity had nearly trebled from a 1980 survey to 21 per cent of women and 17 per cent of men with little sign that this is slowing down. Currently, over half of women and about two thirds of men are either overweight or obese (Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General HC 220 session 2000-2001: 15 February 2001).

The alarming growth in obesity, particularly in children, can be related to fewer people regularly eating family meals and the shift towards fast food. Although family meals are a bane to a large percentage of children, especially teenagers, it does provide the chance to encourage the family to eat a healthier diet. In missing family meals most resort to a diet of junk foods and possibly takeaway fast foods.

Eric Schlosser, author of 'Fast Food Nations', who describes the analogy of fast food and the British Empire at the turn of the last century, offers some light at the end of the tunnel. He states that, "On a map it looks extraordinary, it looks huge and powerful and vast, and yet I think the economic underpinnings right now are actually quite weak and quite fragile". With a decrease in sales in Europe, Asia and Latin America it is believed that the fast food industry will have to undergo a fundamental shift to compete in the healthier food market.

## 2. CONSUMPTION AT THE NEAREST POINT TO PRODUCTION AND ENCOURAGING SEASONALITY OF FRESH FOOD

### F2. RECOMMENDATION

Local government is urged to look at the sustainability of food consumption within its community, emphasising local production wherever possible.

"Localisation, as opposed to globalisation, is likely to become something of a mantra for the food industry. It is a motherhood and apple pie issue. Whatever the realities of food distribution, no one, not even the big supermarkets, can say they oppose it . . ."  
Clive Aslet, Clocking Up Food Miles, Financial Times – February 23, 2002

The concept to promote consumption at the nearest point to production will undoubtedly cause a certain level of controversy, specifically with reference to imports from developing countries. However, there are a number of marked benefits, environmentally and socially. Farmers markets are seen as a goal to this strategy although communication to civil society remains key to its success.

### Environmental Considerations

The concept of Food Miles has increased pressure to produce more goods for local consumption. The 'true' costs of food produced and imported into the UK can be described in terms of the pollution created by cheap fuel costs, through air and road transport or food deficit countries moving away from production for local consumption to production for export.

In 1996 Britain exported 49 million kg of butter – and imported 47 million kg. Source: James Bruges, *The Little Earth Book*, ASP, 2000

A move to more locally produced foods should see a reduction in packaging from producer to retailer, therefore decreasing the amount of waste going to landfill or incineration. Although this assumption will depend on a number of factors such as packaging methods for example bulk packaging or single unit.

A more localised production and consumption system may also bring about more differentiation between regions of the world. There would be fewer monocultures and the number of different crop species grown would increase. This would lead to more diversity for human consumption and biodiversity in terms of plants and animals as well as other plants that are dependent on a specific ecosystem supporting their growth.

Increasing the seasonality and consumption from local production has the ability to reduce the need for preservatives and energy consumption in cooling, storing and transport. There is, however, a need for further research before such conclusions can be drawn considering the energy demands in the lifestyle of a farmer in the developing countries are less compared to that of the UK. The question "Is it less environmentally damaging to produce the food overseas and transport it to UK than to grow it in a heated greenhouse here?" needs also to be answered. One such solution would be to carry out a full life cycle analysis on each product in association with an Integrated Product Policy (discussed later). The import argument will only hold true as long as there is no equity in the quality of life for workers in the developing world. Improving the quality of life in developing countries is an objective of sustainable development and is consequently crucial for

environmental protection and social improvement.

Further research is required before definite conclusions can be reached.

## Socioeconomic

The working group considered the apparent misconception that developing countries rely on exports for their livelihood. If the UK reduces imports from the developing countries this reduces their dependence on an export-orientated cash crop production for volatile world markets created by traders predominantly in the developed countries leaving them 'free' to grow food crops for home consumption. While consumption at the nearest point of production might reduce consumer choice and food availability in the UK, it can offer increased consumer choice and food availability in the developing countries by encouraging their own domestic food supply.

**UK Self sufficiency: DEFRA report, Agriculture in the United Kingdom, shows that the UK Self sufficiency in food as a percentage of all food is 62.5% and for indigenous type food 74.7% (2001). In 1981, however this figure was significantly higher: 71.3% for all food and 82.7% for indigenous food type.**

The association between producer and consumer has more or less been cut and as we have discussed this has subsequently left the consumer with little knowledge of where a product originates and the process by which it arrived in our supermarkets. What has now resulted by the separation is that the economic growth from food produce no longer assures an equivalent growth in the social economy; the primary reason for this is that the capital is not being reinvested in the community.

## 2.1 FARMERS' MARKETS

### F3. RECOMMENDATION

The UK Government should give greater support to farmers' markets. Although at present these markets only represent a small percentage of food consumed in the UK they are providing a good source of 'quality' foods for the surrounding inhabitants, education on food production and most importantly a good source of income for many cash stricken farmers.

Support from the UK government is needed because unfortunately the harsh reality of a local farmers' market system in the UK is that

it is only likely to find support amongst a small number of consumers from predominantly high disposable incomes. Many consumers may consider this a step backwards i.e. to a more primitive way of life rather than a change in lifestyle or 'shopping behaviour'.

Supermarkets are undoubtedly convenient to almost every consumer, everything is under one roof and one payment for all purchases makes it highly efficient. It is understandable that we have adopted this 'culture' as the UK works the longest hours in Europe and leisure activities are increasing. If local production and consumption is to expand then consumers need to be educated to understand the benefits. Unfortunately in the UK society as a whole are unwilling to pay higher prices for a greater quality of food. Nevertheless this may be about to change due principally to the publicity that emerged from recent health scares including the media coverage of 'Foot-and-Mouth'. The consumer reaction will be that it pays to pay more – both in health and taste.

### Practical Action

A catalogue of case studies from throughout the UK should be set up to show the risks and benefits of a switch to more local production of seasonal foods and how progress can be encouraged.

The behavioural changes that have been discussed both in purchasing decisions and production methods will mean a number of people are uncertain to what direction 'we' are all heading in. A catalogue of case studies should be distributed from central government to local government, via the Internet.

The case studies should be published in a standard format using templates into which information can be easily transferred and thus updated continuously in future. It would therefore provide a 'living' source of current information for all users.

The annual turnover for farmers markets in the UK for 2000 was £65 million (Observer Food Supplement, April 2001).

To read about the benefits of Farmers' Markets please visit: <http://www.farmersmarkets.net/started/benefits/default.htm>

## 2.3 COMMUNICATING LOCAL PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

### F4. RECOMMENDATION

A communication strategy should be established by the UK Government to increase the awareness of local production for local consumption.

The heart of a strategy to increase local production and consumption would be a major public education campaign. Stimulated initially by government funding, this action would focus on local authorities actively promoting local consumption through farmers markets and providing facilities and infrastructure in order for them to be set up. A local emphasis of the programme would have the greatest effect on the behaviour of the local community.

Local Authorities may be able to encourage local supermarkets, although unfortunately sourcing decisions by supermarkets are unlikely to change from the current domination by cheap imports to higher priced local produce. One of the problems for supermarkets is ensuring uniform quality from local sourcing. Supermarkets themselves could take action for the benefit of all by 'franchising' in-store local meat and vegetable counters supplied by local farmers. In the final analysis it will probably be consumer pressure, as with GMOs, which drives the change.

If we are to encourage the development of farmers markets it will grow to a point where supermarkets are feeling threatened, this in turn may drive the supermarket chains to procure more local production for local consumption.

Consumer action via purchasing power will increase the need for eco-labels, including the concept of food miles or the development of a more practical 'Country of Origin' label.

### 3. THE FULL COSTS OF FOOD PRODUCTION AND DISPOSAL

#### F4. RECOMMENDATION

**Food costs should cover the full cost of the production, transportation and disposal and should be equitably allocated, such that the price accurately reflects all the inputs and impacts.**

Food costs should cover full cost of the production, transportation and disposal and should be fairly allocated to eliminate 'market failures' by ensuring that the price of products accurately reflects their full cost, including environmental impacts.

If 'full cost accounting' is introduced for food transport, for example this would increase the cost of food which is produced far from the point of sale and this may influence the move to local production.

Food is getting cheaper and cheaper, which means we are spending more of our earnings elsewhere, chiefly within leisure activities. In

1999 the average person was spending 8% less of their income on food compared with 1970. Full cost accounting, paying for the environmental, social and disposal costs of a product, in the food industry would provide a shared responsibility across the whole supply chain (incl. consumers) which essentially would focus attention on environmental issues such as energy, water use, waste disposal and social equity.

The application of whole life costing to food products so that the real costs of the various stages of food production and processing are transparent was discussed in the workshop with a majority of agreement. The high environmental costs are not necessarily associated with growing the raw materials but may be more associated with processing – for example, ten litres of orange juice needs a litre of diesel fuel for processing and transport. By applying full cost accounting to a product the consumers can then decide whether they are prepared to pay the additional cost to have a highly processed food item compared with having it fresh or more simply prepared.

**"There is a need to make the market economy work for what is environmentally best." Work group delegate**

As seen with organic foods, society is increasing its awareness, although the demand for goods that are environmentally friendly or 'sustainable' is not great enough for retailers to increase stock and promote these products. If consumers perceive the alternatives to current products as being too expensive and do not buy them, retailers will not supply them.

#### Practical Action

The Government should develop and implement policies that act to support market led instruments designed to influence purchasing decisions in favour of sustainable consumption through supply chains.

Policy Options:

- industry codes of practice,
- eco-labelling,
- independent certification and
- other mechanisms.

In order to promote more sustainable consumption patterns it is essential to provide information on brands and products, with much greater transparency.

Market led instruments will be more efficient if accompanied by a consumer communication and education strategy, for example labelling the product in such a way that it allows informed choice

with increased consumer awareness of food production. The strategy that is employed needs to be clear and effective, otherwise consumers will be in 'information overload' with the potential to increase confusion through a lack of understanding.

However, concerns that will be expressed, predominantly in developing countries, over a potentially damaging effect to their trade will need to be tackled before committing to a strategy. Any UK policy will have to be in line with regulations of the World Trade Organisation and the Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement. If a mandatory food eco-label strategy is endorsed then a policy framework needs to be precise and fair in the certification of products. Technical assistance, that could include possible partnerships with developing countries, is needed in a number of areas, including testing, auditing, life cycle analysis, certification and participation in international technical committees.

## The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) eco-label

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) was created by the WWF and consumer goods giant Unilever to help reverse the decline in the world's ever dwindling fish stocks. The MSC awards its eco-label to well-managed fisheries that have been assessed against the MSC Standard. This environmental Standard is based on the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing and was developed over two years with input from environmentalists, industry representatives, fisheries experts and other interested parties across the world. Independent certifiers measure the fisheries examining: the status of the stock; the effect of the fishery on the marine ecosystem and the fishery management systems. Once a fishery has been certified as well-managed and sustainable, companies in the supply chain can participate in a Chain of Custody certification guaranteeing certified seafood has not been mixed with uncertified products. The eco label is then applied to product.

### Benefits:

The MSC creates a real market incentive for healthy fisheries: fishers can be recognised and awarded for managing their fisheries in a responsible way and consumers are able to purchase seafood that they have not contributed to the problem of overfishing. The MSC eco-label gives consumers' information about the environmental impact on what they purchase, which in turn enables people to make better informed choices. The consumer is empowered to reward fisheries for their good practice: excellent news for consumers, fishers and for the future of seafood.

### The Future:

The MSC has the only international eco-labelling scheme for sustainable fisheries and is being increasingly recognised as a valuable tool to help bring about responsible fishing and to reward good practice in the marine environment. The growing use of the MSC eco-label reflects an important change in social attitudes to the environment through the positive influence on consumers' purchasing decisions. Not only is it essential for seafood, but for all that we consume.