Miles better?

The concept of 'fair miles' stacks up more favourably in the global sustainable supermarket than 'food miles' says the International Institute for Environment and Development.

In 2007, 'food miles' shot to the top of the list of consumer concerns in the UK. Buying goods that took the shortest route from farm to table was widely seen as a way of shrinking carbon footprints. Yet looking at the bigger picture, fresh produce, which necessarily involves airfreight between Africa and the UK, accounts for less than 0.1% of UK emissions. Further, per capita emissions from sub-Saharan Africa are minuscule compared to those in industrialized countries. Against this background are the million-plus African livelihoods supported by growing the produce.

Within the grocery supply chain the time is ripe for 'fair miles'—a working idea that puts development in the South on the environmental agenda and allows UK retailers a more balanced response on behalf of their millions of customers.

The food miles concept uses distance as a proxy for the environmental impact across food production and supply chains. As a single indicator, food miles are not a good measure of environmental impact. Nor do they address global concerns over sustainable development where balanced trade-offs among environmental, social and economic costs and benefits are needed. To realize this, the full impact of food consumers on carbon and energy would require transport data to be combined with totals from production, processing, retail and home preparation and weighed against alternative options. The full environmental cost would require a spectrum of additional elements such as deforestation, habitat destruction, water use, and other emissions to be calculated. In global supply chains, calculations become even more complex, as urban UK consumers' environmental impact is compared with rural African livelihoods.

The Kyoto Protocol recognizes the need for equity and economic growth for developing countries in the transition to a low-carbon future. 'Ecological space' is one proxy for equity and refers to a country's emissions: the bigger they are, the smaller the available ecological space to invest in new economic activities. In the UK, annual per capita carbon emissions rate is 9.2 tonnes, compared to 0.2t in Kenya and 0.1t in Uganda. Sub-Saharan African countries have considerable 'reserves' of ecological space, compared with the countries to which they export, which they should be able to use or invest in exporting fresh produce. Furthermore, the UK's carbon footprint is largely domestically generated.

The socio-economic benefits for Africa of this trade are substantial. More than one million rural livelihoods are supported in part by UK consumption of African exported fresh

produce. Over 100,000 rural people are employed in the exported fresh produce sector in sub-Saharan Africa to the UK.

At the start of 2007 UK fresh produce retailers were jostling to establish their environmental credentials by pledging on eco-initiatives. Tesco and Marks and Spencer announced that they would label airfreighted products and stock more locally-produced food.

Alliances between development NGOs and the UK's Department for International Development called for a more balanced view to be taken on these issues, for less tokenism and more informed debate. The term 'fair miles' was coined. The livelihoods of so many Africans should not be forgone for small environmental gains.

Recognition that the food miles concept had limitations were cemented when in March 2007, Tesco CEO Terry Leahy spoke of the need to balance 'fair miles' against 'air miles', admitting there would be 'hard choices'. "We could say, 'Let's scrap all imports by air.' Yet some of the poorest people on earth get their goods to market by aeroplane." Tesco has committed to boost trade with Kenya, dropping its 'by air' labelling scheme, and in June, Marks and Spencer reassured Kenyan agricultural suppliers that it would not cut imports of fresh produce. Meanwhile Co-operative Retail committed to reducing carbon, "but never at the expense of the world's poorest".

There is no need for legitimate interest in local food and 'food miles' to work against the interests of developing countries. What is clear is that consumers, policy makers and food chain businesses should base decisions on good information.

The food miles debate is being incorporated into a broader agenda on the 'carbon lifecycle' of a product, from seed to plate. From this, the Carbon Trust and the British Standards Institute will develop a new standard for measuring the carbon footprint of products. It is unclear where the boundaries will be set, but they are unlikely to include conservation considerations such as deforestation or habitat loss.

In Europe, UK supermarkets are important players and leaders for many technical innovations. It is hoped that retailers in other countries can follow suit and avoid basing their decisions on knee-jerk reactions, or on partial solutions. Rather, decisions will evolve from lessons learnt when considering the full breadth of environmental impacts of the food 'carbon lifecycle' and fully incorporate sustainable development issues.

There is no need for legitimate interest in local food and 'food miles' to work against the interests of developing countries. What is clear is that consumers, policy makers and food chain businesses should base decisions on good information. If environmental harm is to be weighed against developmental gains, it is essential to consider the full context in more detail. This means that the degree of harm should be put into the context of Africa's current use of ecological space, the degree of harm is quantified and compared to that of other food choices, and the degree of development gain is quantified, to show whether this trade really benefits the poor. ■

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