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Should we buy our fruit from Africa?

Organic versus air miles; supporting fairtrade or staying local? Getting our five a day is getting complicated, says Lucy Siegle

Lucy Siegle

The Observer, Sunday August 3 2008

Fruit and vegetables have long been a fertile green subject, as demonstrated by the classic ethical conundrum: 'Is it preferable to eat an air-freighted organic apple or a local, non-organic apple?' The answer is complex, thanks partly to the dual issues of a global food crisis and the credit crunch. In the UK we have famously underestimated the outsourcing of our food growing - more than 90 per cent of the fruit and almost 40 per cent of the vegetables we eat are now imported. This country has not been self-sufficient in terms of food for nearly two decades.

The traditional green response has been to champion local, seasonal fruit and veg. Yet DIFD (Department for International Development) aims to make more use of Africa as a giant bread basket (or fruit bowl), with a £2m fund 'to connect African suppliers with the UK supermarket shelf'. Given that our demand for pineapples rose by 24 per cent last year, there is a practical advantage. But the scheme also hints at the 'ethical' opportunity to help African farmers out of poverty. Seven out of 10 Africans depend on agriculture for their livelihoods; UK shoppers spend £1m a day on fruit and veg from Africa, and agriculture provides 30 per cent of Africa's GDP. But investment is badly needed; as ex-Nigerian president turned farmer Olusegun Obasanjo puts it: 'Unless somebody is growing cocaine, no farmer can recoup loans invested in agriculture with our high interest rates.'

World food security is at its lowest since records began in 1960. Measured by grain inventories, there is just enough grain in reserve to last for 50 days. Africa has a part to play to provide more food, but this needs to go to its own citizens, given that 30 per cent of the population is malnourished and more than 200m people are chronically hungry. Producing food for export is cited by many as a reverse Robin Hood.

Perhaps we rich consumers won't be too worried until global conditions affect the pineapple inventory - and climate scientists warn that food production in Africa will plummet due to water stress by 2020. For example, each Kenya green bean contains four litres of 'embedded water'.

It's not enough to impose a thoughtless 'agricultural revolution' on Africa: it will greedily soak up more water and produce huge emissions and pollution through fertilisers. Instead, any scheme must prove that African producers are being given the opportunity to focus on processed, value-added goods for export (this is where the value is, as demonstrated by equitrade.org). The international Slow Food movement (slowfood.org.uk) works with producers in Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Senegal and Sierra Leone to link food production to biodiversity conservation and keep the focus on strengthening local markets first. These are the schemes more likely to allow us to eat our way out of trouble.

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