

Shop Ethically

This briefing brings together three different issues. The first section looks at why we should buy local produce, especially food, and the advantages of organic production. The second looks at the Fairtrade method business. Finally we look at the wider issue of ethical investment and finance.

Buy local

Overview

Buying locally produced food ensures that food is fresher, provides local employment and generates less “food miles”. This refers to the distance food travels from farm to plate. A crop of potatoes, for example, can be transported many miles for packaging, and then returned for sale close to the farm they came from. As well as contributing to greenhouse gas emissions, this causes congestion: 25% of the lorries on our roads are transporting food. There is also a rise in international trade in food, with food imports and exports tripling over the past 20 years. The growth in airfreight is particularly damaging to the environment.

Farmers markets have been one of the most successful initiatives to promote local food. These are restricted to producers selling direct, usually from within a 30 mile radius. There are now 500 farmers markets in the UK. Vegebox schemes have also taken off. Many of these deliver a weekly box of seasonal vegetables, sometimes with other produce.

The growth of organic food has also been rapid, with a 30% increase in 2005 alone and organic food now available in all supermarkets. The term “organic” is legally defined, and organic food should display the symbol of one of the certification organisations. Organic farming severely restricts the use of artificial chemical fertilisers, pesticides and the routine use of drugs or antibiotics in animals. Alongside consumer health benefits, organic farming encourages wildlife and cuts down the greenhouse gas emissions from fertiliser use.

Growing some of your own food is another option, giving obvious health and environmental benefits, it can also contribute to social objectives. Community gardens and allotments, in particular, can provide a community focus, and help draw in socially excluded groups, like ethnic minorities, for example.

Yet while most of us have a greater choice of food than ever before, some areas have become “food deserts” with few shops and a limited and expensive choice, especially of fruit and vegetables. The phrase “food poverty” has been coined to define the inability to buy healthy, affordable food, and may be a real problem in rural areas with few shopping facilities.

Key players and initiatives

Big Barn: Good starting point to find local food outlets in your area. <http://www.bigbarn.co.uk/>

Country Markets: Originally set up by the Women’s Institutes, these provide an outlet for home producers and are an excellent source of home-made cakes and other goodies. <http://www.country-markets.co.uk>

Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens: National charity with 59 farms and c. 1000 community gardens. While the emphasis is on urban areas, there are some city farms in smaller towns, and the community focus is useful experience to draw on. Publications include a Community Garden Starter Pack. <http://www.farmgarden.org.uk>

Garden Organic: National organic membership charity, with strong focus on gardening. <http://www.gardenorganic.org.uk/>

Local authorities: Some local authorities have been proactive in establishing farmers markets or producing local food directories. Start by asking the economic development staff.

National Association of Farmers Markets: Certification scheme run by the national Farmers Retail & Markets Association. The website has details of markets. <http://www.farmersmarkets.net>

National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners: Not for profit organisation. Helpful on the local authority duty to provide allotments. <http://www.nsalg.org.uk/>

Regional Development Agencies: Set up by government to promote economic development. Sustainable development is one of their objectives, and funding may sometimes be available to support local food production projects. <http://www.englishsrda.com>

The Soil Association: National charity and the largest of the UK organic certification bodies. Also active in promotion of local food and "One Planet Agriculture". <http://www.soilassociation.org>

Sustain: National charity promoting better food and farming, with c. 100 members. It supports the Food Access Network on food poverty, as well as managing projects with hospitals and schools. <http://www.sustainweb.org>

Thrive: National charity that uses gardening to change the lives of disabled people. <http://www.thrive.org.uk>

Priorities for action

Individual

The priority is to buy local, seasonal food, perhaps from a vegbox scheme or farmers market. If possible, also buy organic. If you can, grow some of your own food.

Community

Make sure that your workplace or club buys as much locally produced food (e.g. for events) as possible. Community Supported Agriculture schemes vary widely, but can include bringing people together to work and enjoy communally owned land. See <http://www.cuco.org.uk/>. You can also promote local food through tastings and events (Local Food Feasts), perhaps jointly organised with local producers.

Buy Fairtrade

Overview

Sustainable development means an improved quality of life for people worldwide. However, it is sometimes hard to see how we can influence conditions in developing countries, even though international trade clearly links the UK and some of the poorest places in the world. Buying Fairtrade is the simplest way to make a difference in our everyday lives. This is not charity: it is simply paying a fair price that enables an adequate standard of living.

The Fairtrade mark is an independent consumer label, which guarantees that producers in the developing world are paid a minimum price covering the costs of sustainable production, as well as a premium to be invested in social or economic development projects. Certification standards are set internationally; the Fairtrade Foundation manages this in the UK. There are now 2500+ certified products. These are mainly food but the choice is now widening to include cotton, for example, with growing interest in Fairtrade clothing and fashion.

Fairtrade projects, like Fairtrade villages or setting up a Fairtrade café, are a practical way in which people can make the link between global and local. They also bring people together, helping to contribute to social capital, and raise community profile.

Key players and initiatives

Fairtrade businesses: These range from national businesses like Cafédirect to small local Fairtrade cafes, often set up as social enterprises. They are usually very supportive, and may be able to provide free samples or help with events. Chambers of Commerce can be helpful in getting Fairtrade town status.

Fairtrade Foundation: National charity which runs the Fairtrade certification scheme in the UK, as well as promotional initiatives. Fairtrade Fortnight takes place in early March, with events throughout the UK. The

Fairtrade Foundation also supports the Fairtrade Towns initiative, with 250+ Fairtrade villages, towns and cities. Lots of materials, speakers, ideas available. <http://www.fairtrade.org.uk/>

Trade Justice Movement: Coalition bringing together the main development charities, such as Oxfam and Christian Aid, in a joint campaign. Good starting point to find out more about the underlying issues behind Fairtrade, and what development organisations are doing. <http://www.tjm.org.uk/>

Traidcraft : National charity and trading company. <http://www.traidcraft.co.uk>

Priorities for action

Individuals

Start buying Fairtrade products – and try a new Fairtrade product from time to time. If you don't like the taste of one, try something else: there's a very wide choice.

Community

Encourage your workplace, club or church to start buying Fairtrade. It's good to start with a tasting, so people can see the variety available. Organise an event for Fairtrade Fortnight: this can be as simple as a coffee morning or giving out Fairtrade chocolate samples at the supermarket. Produce a Fairtrade directory, showing where Fairtrade goods can be bought locally. Work towards Fairtrade Town status. This will take a year or two: see the Fairtrade Foundation website.

Invest wisely

Overview

The way we invest our money has perhaps more influence in creating a sustainable world than anything else we can do. For example, the occupational pension funds, which most of us contribute to, control an estimated £800 billion of the UK stock market. There is now a wide range of ethical investment products (ISAs, unit trusts etc) on the market, with different social and environmental criteria. While ethical financial products can provide poor returns, like any other investment, many have performed very well over the past decade or so. Ethical financial advisers will assess what criteria are important to each individual, before making recommendations. You may choose to omit companies investing in what you see as negative (e.g. poor working conditions, tobacco production) or be proactive in choosing companies working in areas you want to support (e.g. renewable energy).

This is an area of particular concern to charities, which do not want to invest in areas incompatible with their mission, and also need to make sure they meet charity law requirements.

Credit unions can be important in ensuring that financial services meet local needs, especially of those excluded from mainstream financial services. They sometimes help to finance environmental investments, such as the purchase of real nappies.

Key players and initiatives

Ethical Investment Research Services (EIRIS): Not for profit organisation carrying out research into the social and environmental performance of companies. Free downloadable publications include guides to ethical mortgages, pensions, and banking, as well as information for charities, and how to find an ethical financial adviser. <http://www.eiris.org/>

Priorities for action

Individual

Check out how your pension or any other savings are invested. It is probably worth talking to an ethical financial adviser, who will go through which criteria are important to you.

Community

Groups and charities with large reserves should review their investment policy, as well as work with staff to look at how any organisational or group pension is invested.