



Why is Food allowed to Travel across Continents?

Why not popularise local products and local markets?

Devinder Sharma writes on the dangers of food shipped across continents – grown in one, processed and repacked elsewhere and shipped back to the country from where it all started.

“Supermarkets excel in globetrotting for food products, taking advantage of cheap processing costs and massive fuel subsidies and remaining unmindful of the carbon footprint they generate,” he says.

Some decades back, I had written on how Pepsi was shipping its used PET bottles, used for packing soft drinks, to Chennai, in India, for recycling. These bottles would then, again, be shipped back to the US for use. Pepsi took this detour for recycling PET bottles simply because recycling of plastic waste is not easily allowed in the US (it has very stringent norms), for health and environmental reasons, and obviously adds to the cost.

Later, in 1994, I remember reading an excellent report *Food Miles*, produced by Sustain. It told us about the dangers of food shipped across continents – grown in one, processed and repacked

elsewhere and shipped back to the country from where it all started. There were several glaring examples provided, which should have woken up the policy-makers and, of course, the economists (who talk of everything but make little sense). Food, on an average, travels 3,000 miles before it reaches your plate. This very fact was such a startling revelation that it should have made consumers to rethink; but, somehow, it did not. The report has been updated and republished and you can have a copy from <http://www.sustainweb.org/publications/?id=191>.

Yesterday, Zac Goldsmith forwarded a tweet that reminded me of the hidden cost of the global food transport system. The Sunday Times had, several years back, reported how British prawns were being shipped to China for hand-shelling and then shipped back to the UK for consumers. Supermarkets are excelling in globetrotting for food products, taking advantage of cheap processing costs (and massive fuel subsidies) and remaining unmindful of the carbon footprint they generate, in the process.

Take this example. The Trade Craft coffee that supermarket chain Sainsbury sells in its stores is grown in Bukoba, Tanzania. The coffee beans then travel 656 km to Dar-es-Salaam, from where it is shipped to Vijayawada, in Andhra Pradesh. Vijayawada is about 3,250 miles from Dar-es-Salaam. In Vijayawada, the beans are packed. They are then shipped to Southampton, in UK, which is about 5,000 miles away. From Southampton, the coffee goes to Leeds, from where it is redistributed to Sainsbury stores worldwide. I am sure, with the approval granted for FDI in retail in India, Sainsbury will find it convenient to ship the packed coffee from Leeds to New Delhi. (You can read the news report here: <http://www.airportwatch.org.uk/?p=1116>)

Isn't it time, therefore, to do a serious rethink of our international trade policies? I have been saying for long that the World Trade Organization (WTO) and climate negotiations actually work at cross-purposes. While WTO pushes for more of such trade, it doesn't pay any heed to the carbon footprint such trade generates and the impact it has on global warming. Neither do climate negotiators call for restricting such unwanted trade, as a precursor of climate control standards.



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I have never understood the logic of allowing apples to be imported all the way from New Zealand and Chile into India when there are no takers for apples from Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir. Similarly, what is the logic behind allowing Washington apples to be exported to India, while Chinese apples travel all the way to the US, controlling roughly 45 percent of the US market? Food globetrotting is happening because aviation fuel is dirt cheap. Many have said that aviation fuel actually works out cheaper than Coke!

Creating and popularising local markets is perhaps the only viable alternative to the madness of making food travel across the globe. Consumers have a very important role to play here. Try to avoid being lured by products that claim to have brought you the same processed goods from far away that otherwise is grown in your neighbourhood. Keep a close watch on this. Why go for a processed orange drink from Chile or the US when you have enough of the fresh and tasty juice in your local market? Make sensible choices, and you would have played your small but effective part in limiting the global carbon footprint.



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