

John McLaverty of Oxfam GB – Speaking at the Geographical Association conference, Derby 2010

Food may be something many take for granted. We're here to dig under the surface and begin to uncover a more controversial and complex topic. People's choices and judgements about the environmental impact of how food is sourced are important here. The idea of food miles and that 'local is good' led to the trend towards farmer's markets, urban vegetable plots, food labelling, school kitchen gardens and discussions about seasonality.

So those fresh beans from Kenya, they must be really bad, mustn't they ?

Fair Miles refers to fresh fruit and vegetables grown and packed in developing countries, which provide livelihoods and a route out of poverty for many. The countries where these foods are grown have tiny carbon footprints compared with the UK.

When we factor in Fair Miles, food choices become a lot more complex, nuanced and potentially controversial. Studying food has a strong spatial element, and these often involve political and historic developments. Food is a process of change. Food markets remain volatile, although this is an irritant for UK shoppers rather than the severe threat to well being that poses for the world's poorest people.

Consider this farmer:



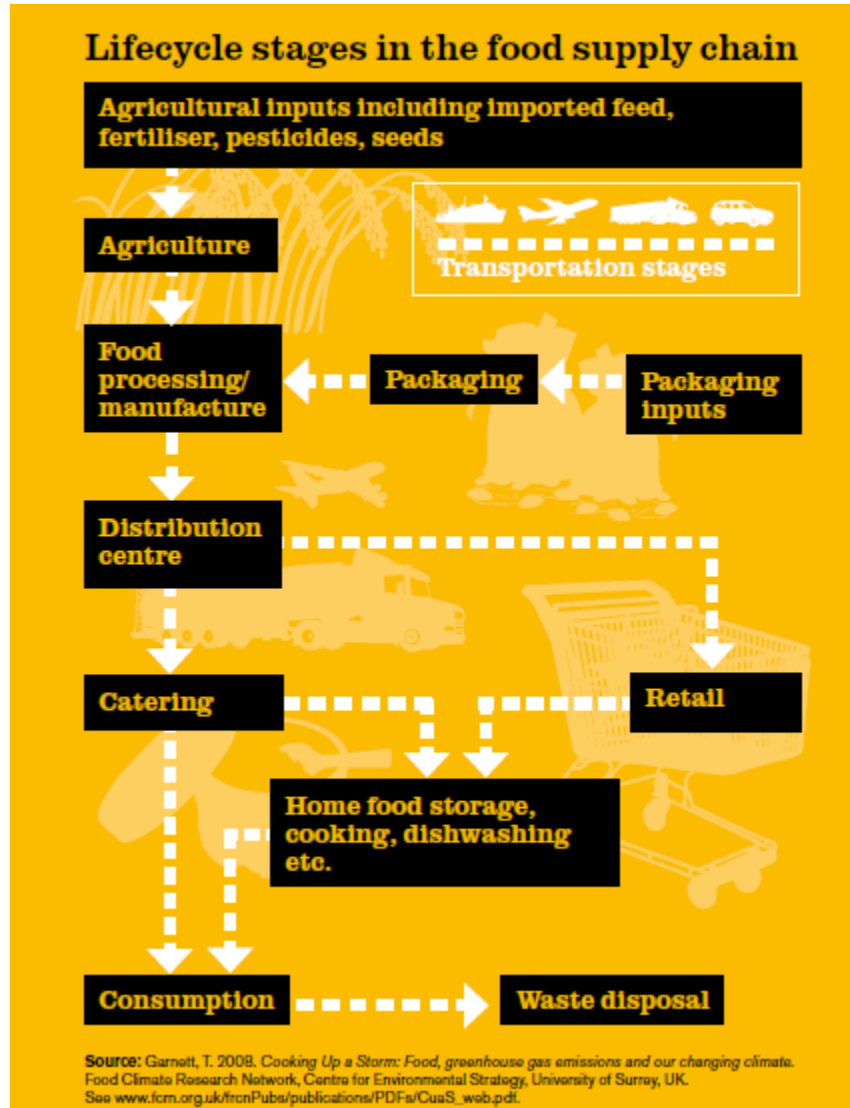
Image credit Abbie Trayler Smith/Oxfam

Is this farmer a smallholder, owning the food she produces, or is she a labourer on someone else's farm ? Or both ?

If she's a labourer she is almost certainly producing for the market – she may be paid in cash. How much does she engage with the local food market as either a buyer or a seller. If our farmer is a net buyer then rising food prices are bad news. If she's a net seller they provide an opportunity to increase her income and better provide for her family. There are between 1 and 1.5 million small-scale farmers, farm labourers and food packers in

Sub-Saharan Africa alone who produce food imported to the UK. Should you buy it or go to your local farmers' market instead.

The **Fair Miles report** looks at the idea of lifecycle stages, which looks at all aspects of the production and consumption of food.



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Using this more complete analysis of the energy requirements of food production, air transport can be seen to account for a relatively small percentage of the total carbon footprint of food.

A tomato shipped from Spain, for example will not require the energy intensive greenhouse cultivation required of one grown in the UK. Fertiliser use and soil degradation are also factors. Go further afield to sub-Saharan Africa, where farmers use lower levels of pesticide and oil-based fertilisers. The carbon footprint of transport will be offset by savings elsewhere in the chain. It's also important to remember that Kenya produces less than 3% of the carbon dioxide that the UK does. Targeting Kenyan farmers to reduce our emissions is not an equitable way of tackling climate change.

And finally, what about our meaty diet ? Farm animals are responsible for around 20% of total greenhouse gas emissions. It takes 7 kg of grain to produce 1 kg of beef.

Produce a response to these questions:

Explain why growing any food crop has an impact on the environment.

Why does 'far' not always equal 'bad' when it comes to food miles ?