



“People say ‘I want to do my bit to stop climate change. So, should I only buy local and boycott produce from abroad, especially things flown in - or should I support poor farmers to improve their income, to take care of their families, to work and trade their way out of poverty?’”

Former U.K. development secretary Hilary Benn



AN ETHICAL DILEMMA

All too often ethical options are presented to us as no-brainers: who wouldn't want to save the environment, feed the poor or support their local community? But the decisions we make, especially those which appeal to our ethical compass, are often less straightforward than they first appear.

The stimulus sheet presents one such dilemma – the buy local or support fair trade dilemma. This is a classic zero-sum ethical dilemma: choosing one automatically negates the other. Buying fair trade jam may help producers in the Third World, but what about local jam producers? If charity begins at home, shouldn't your loyalty (and with it your wallet) lie with them? Not to mention your worries about climate change – surely the fair trade jam, made with South African strawberries, has a much larger carbon footprint than the locally-sourced alternative?

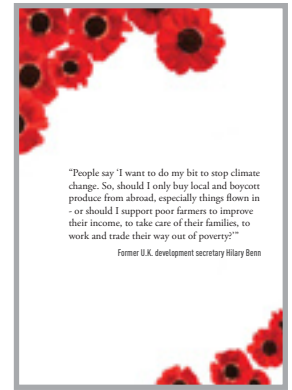
All valid questions – and, as is often the case when presented with a toss-up between moral imperatives, there are no clear answers. Each option has its own merits:

Buying Local:

- By buying local you are directly contributing towards your local economy
- Locally-produced items generally employ local people, sponsor events within the area and are more likely to utilise local services
- Having a spread of local businesses encourages diversity within the community and gives towns their charm and character
- Reciprocity: if you run your own business, local clients are more likely to purchase your products or services if you in turn purchase theirs!
- Local products are generally far more environmentally sustainable, with smaller carbon footprints (the goods have to travel a far shorter distance, as do the shoppers themselves). In the US, the average grocery store product travels nearly 2,000 km from the farm to your refrigerator – buying local can cut this down significantly
- Locally-produced goods are likely to be fresher and healthier, with less pesticides, preservatives and additives than mass-produced supermarket alternatives.

Fair Trade:

- Fair trade ensures that Third World producers receive a living wage for their work, and that they are granted safe, healthy working conditions. Fair trade producers often come from the world's poorest countries, so the importance of being guaranteed a living wage and fair working conditions cannot be understated
- Fair trade guarantees that no child labour was used in the production of the item: by buying fair trade, you are indirectly discouraging the use of child labour in Third World countries
- The fair trade system benefits over 800,000 farmers in 48 countries. It encourages farmers to organise themselves into cooperatives and work together on a number of projects, thus fostering a sense of community
- Fair trade products carry a price premium (known as the Fair Trade Premium) which is invested in sustainable economic, social and environmental projects within the producers' communities. By buying fair trade products you are also contributing towards the building of schools, clinics, and better farming techniques within the producers' communities.



The two options are quite similar in a number of ways; they both share similar values, both place great value on environmental sustainability, and both ensure that the producer, rather than middlemen, get their fair share of the profits. Both place a great deal of emphasis on community-building – the product’s provenance is a large part of its identity.

Steve Brooks, the acting head of Oxfam Cymru, has been quoted as saying:

“if everyone in the United Kingdom switched one 100W light bulb to a low energy equivalent, CO² emissions would be reduced in one year by 4.7 times the amount saved by boycotting fresh fruit and vegetables from sub-Saharan Africa.”

If this is true then the choice would tip in favour of buying fair trade goods – but in the absence of serious research into the matter, such claims must be taken with a pinch of salt.

Ultimately, there is no definitive answer to this dilemma: what you choose will very often depend upon your ethical priorities. Some people will feel that buying local is an act of patriotism, while others will argue that we ought to first help those who have the least, and should therefore buy fair trade. To some, ecology and our earth’s future will take precedence over any other moral preoccupation; others believe that the rights of those already living ought to take precedence over concerns about our stewardship of the earth.

The dilemma presented here is a positive one – whether you choose to buy local or fair trade, your choice will have a positive impact on the producers. In such case, what is perhaps even more important than the choice itself is your ability to defend it. Make sure that you know *why* you would rather buy local than fair trade, or vice-versa: the clearer you are about why you make the choices you do, the easier it is to defend those choices when questioned about them.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Sustainable Table, an American non-profit initiative that promotes local sustainable food, has a good [page](#) on its website in favour of buying local. The [Fairtrade website](#) provides plenty of information counterbalancing this.

<http://www.sustainabletable.org/issues/whybuylocal/>

<http://www.fairtrade.net/>

Have a look at [this article](#) on the Grassroots International site. It argues that the entire ‘Buy Local vs Fair Trade’ debate risks creating unnecessary tension between two movements which are, at their core, relatively similar.

<http://www.grassrootsonline.org/news/articles/local-and-fair-trade-crossroads>