

1. Define: subsidies, genetically modified food, locavorism, organics, uber alles, cosmopolitan, import, Green Revolution, no-till, biofuel
2. What are some reasons that people buy local food? Which of these reasons does the author of the article think is a bad one?
3. Would you rather that local food producers get your money or that producers in poor countries get your money? What would be some arguments for either decision?
4. If you had money to give of your own generosity, without expecting anything in return, would you give it to local food producers, to farmers in poor countries, or to someone else? Should generosity be part of your buying decisions?
5. Why do some people think we should try to save energy--what purpose are we saving it for?
6. Imagine that buying locally grown food really does save energy. Who would benefit from your decision to do so--who would use the energy instead of you? Who is hurt by your decision?
7. Besides transporting food, what are some other ways that energy is consumed in getting food to your plate? Why do fewer people take these other energy uses into account when thinking about energy efficiency?
8. How will use of energy and other resources involved affect the price of a food?
9. How do these prices influence people's decisions about what to buy? Can a person take into account energy and resource use in making a purchasing decision without even realizing it? If so, how?

Foreign Policy

Got Cheap Milk?

Why ditching your fancy, organic, locavore lifestyle is good for the world's poor.

BY CHARLES KENNY | SEPTEMBER 12, 2011

As the U.S. government starts planning budget reductions that will slash everything from defense spending to health care to bridge repair, potential cuts worth around 0.00025 percent of the value of the deficit reduction agreed on in the recent \$2 trillion deal appear to have garnered outsized attention: support to farmers' markets. Those \$5 million of subsidies are likely to disappear as part of cuts in the 2012 farm bill, and that is provoking much concern. The Farmers Market Coalition says the program is "a unique success story in America's agricultural policy." Perhaps it is no surprise: With supermarket chains from Whole Foods to Safeway trumpeting their healthy produce from farmers just down the road, buying local and eating non-genetically modified organic food is surely the best thing for you and the planet. And that's something government should get behind, right?

Actually, no -- these First-World food fetishes are positively terrible for the world's poorest people. If you want to do the right thing, give up on locavorism and organics über alles and become a globally conscious grocery buyer. This should be the age of the "cosmovore" -- cosmopolitan consumers of the world's food.

Let's start with genetic modification (GM) -- where genes from one organism are spliced into those of another by scientists in a lab. Poland's agriculture minister, Marek Sawicki, recently called for an EU-wide ban on the growth or import of GM produce. But why new crops labeled GM should be more of a risk than new crops bred in the "traditional" manner -- which often involves bombarding seeds with radiation to promote mutations -- is a little unclear. It shouldn't come as a surprise that when the European Commission Research Directorate-General released a survey in 2001 of 81 studies on GM, human health, and environmental impact, not one of the studies found any evidence of harm. The World Health Organization recently confirmed that "no effects on human health have been shown" from eating GM foods.

Worries remain, though, in no small part due to the lack of major, rigorous analyses and the unwillingness of seed producers to share data. Of course, many GM crops have failed to deliver as advertised, and even in the best of cases they are certainly no panacea.

But there have also been successes -- involving significant, positive impacts on environmental and financial outcomes. For example, economists Graham Brookes and Peter Barfoot of Britain's PG Economics estimated that countries that adopted GM insect-resistant cotton saw a 13.3 percent increase in the value of their 2005 cotton crop, as well as a 95 percent reduction in the use of insecticides. There is every reason to do more research and testing on both the threats and potential benefits of GM, but there's no reason to demonize it.

What about "local"? Perhaps locally grown produce tastes better to some people. And perhaps it is psychologically better to have close contact with the people who grow your food. But that doesn't make it good for the environment. For example, it is twice as energy efficient for people in Britain to eat dairy products from New Zealand than from domestic producers. It is four times more energy efficient for them to eat lamb shipped from the other side of the world than it is to eat British lamb. That's because transporting the final product accounts for only a small part of the energy consumed in the production and delivery of food. It's far better to eat foods from places where production itself is more efficient. For example, New Zealand cattle eat clover from the fields while British livestock tend to rely on feed -- which itself is often imported.

And why shouldn't developing countries strive to be the world's breadbasket? Again, there may be transport costs in flying fresh produce from southern Africa to Europe or the United States, but you save all of the heating, lighting, and construction costs associated with hothouse produce grown in the gloom of a European or North American winter. It is good news that Gambia managed to increase its fruit and vegetable exports to the European Union by 25 percent over the past 10 years -- to 123,000 tons. We shouldn't be kicking the legs out from under such efforts in a misguided attempt to build an Arcadia under glass.

And the environmental benefits of organic in terms of lower energy costs and less pollution? Norman Borlaug, father of the Green Revolution, estimated that we would need 5 billion to 6 billion additional cows to produce enough natural fertilizer to sustain our current crop production -- which, of course, would increase the demand for forage crops and thus the need for agricultural land. Meanwhile, weed-killing herbicides allow for no-till farming. When you don't plough, you don't erode topsoil nearly as much -- so it doesn't end up being washed into rivers, leaving behind a dust bowl.

Whether organic is as efficient as conventional farming -- in terms of land yield, energy, or labor productivity -- depends on the place and the crop. But even organic sympathizers report that the average land yield in the industrial world is about 8 percent lower on organic farms than on conventional ones. And it only takes a trip to the local supermarket to understand there's a considerable price premium to be paid. Organic milk costs as much as

twice the regular kind, for example. The practices of industrial-scale U.S. producers like Stonyfield Farm, which dries organic milk from those energy-efficient New Zealand producers into powder in order to ship it to its plant in Londonderry, New Hampshire, where it's turned into yogurt, keep organic dairy prices climbing even higher.

That lower agricultural efficiency really matters. Because what we definitely know is that, compared with the unsubstantiated health risks of GM or the illusive health benefits of organic crops, there are undoubtedly health risks to not having enough -- or enough variety -- to eat. There are still as many as 1 billion people worldwide who are malnourished; and many are living on around a dollar a day. The best way to help poor people eat well is to make healthy food cost less. But the more agricultural land we divert into lower-efficiency organic production, the higher the price of all food will climb. On test farms, organic production has been shown to be at least as efficient as conventional farming -- and considerably more productive than the average efficiency seen on farms in the developing world. But until that's widely replicated outside agricultural research stations, organic is no friend to the world's poorest consumers.

And all this misguided, parochial Luddism is having a real effect on the ability of producers in low-income countries to climb out of poverty in an environmentally sustainable manner. Most of the world's poorest people are farmers. Many live in water-stressed environments on fragile land. Herbicides and GM crops may be an important part of the story when it comes to raising their productivity. But 15 years after GM crops were first planted commercially, Kenya, South Africa, and Burkina Faso are the only sub-Saharan African countries that have authorized the planting of any GM crops. That's partly because European aid agencies have funded consultants to design regulatory systems based on the restrictive model adopted in Europe. And European NGOs have also threatened African governments that their agricultural exports to Europe would suffer from significantly reduced demand if they were planted even in the vicinity of GM crops.

So how should you eat as a responsible global citizen? Consume less meat and oppose Western farm-subsidy programs -- especially if they focus on livestock. Campaign against U.S. biofuel programs, which divert corn into grossly inefficient energy production. Embrace further testing and analysis of GM crops. Encourage public funding of research and intellectual property laws that ensure that poor farmers are not priced out of the potential benefits of GM seeds. Spend only on organic food that is as energy- and land-efficient as conventional production. And be a smart consumer: Local produce grown out of season and meat raised on imported feed isn't friendly to you, the environment, or the developing world.