

## Food footprint

*“More than ever it matters that we know and understand about our food, where it comes from, how it grows and who grows it. It matters because not only does it affect everyone on the planet, it affects the planet itself.” Michael Morpurgo*

Food is one of our most basic needs but it is very unfairly distributed among the world's people. Some countries have too much food resulting in problems of **obesity** and overweight, while other countries have food shortages with people suffering from hunger, malnutrition and **famine**.

People do not go hungry because of a global shortage of food. There is enough produced in the world to feed everyone; so much food in fact that in richer countries a lot of food ends up in the bin! Hunger and malnutrition are instead a result of a lack of land to grow food or a shortage of money to buy it.

### **So what is your food footprint?**

This is not just the amount of food you eat (and waste!). It is the land, space, water and energy involved in growing, producing and supplying the food from the field to your plate.

### **The food footprint: how it measures up**

- Some 24,000 people die every day from hunger or hunger related causes; three-quarters of the deaths are children under the age of five.
- Around 826 million people go each day without the food their bodies need for healthy development.
- In the UK, 40% of the food we eat is imported from abroad; 95% of fruit and half of all vegetables eaten in the UK are imported.
- Around one third of food in the UK ends up in the rubbish bin.
- Nearly a third of all goods transported on our roads are related to food and farming.
- The average UK adult travels about 135 miles per year by car to shop for food, usually to large supermarkets.

Much of the food we eat in developed countries like Britain, Western Europe and the USA, is imported. However, this trade in food has its problems.

In order for us to have the wide choice of foods we take for granted, much of our food is grown and supplied by farmers and producers in the developing world. This means that countries in the developed world have a large food footprint, extending beyond their own available land and using land that could be growing food to feed hungry people. And the fact that we throw so much of our food away makes our footprint even larger.

## Food miles

Importing food results in an increase in **food miles**. This is the distance food travels from where it is grown to where it is eaten; the distance between field and plate. Before imported food reaches us it has to travel great distances by air, sea, rail and road. This transportation involves pollution and in particular the release of carbon dioxide, the main gas responsible for global warming.

The growth of supermarkets has caused a drastic rise in food miles. A pint of milk or a crop of potatoes can be transported many miles to be packaged at a central depot and then sent many miles back to be sold near where they were produced in the first place.

Also, because of the way the food processing industry works, ingredients travel around the country from factory to factory, before they make their way to the shops. Then there's imported produce. The amount of food being flown into the UK doubled in the 1990s and is predicted to rise further each year.

Another reason for rising food miles are cheaper labour costs in other countries. For example, some British fish is now sent to China – where the cost of employing people is much lower – for processing, then sent back to the UK to be sold.

It's difficult to be sure how far our food has travelled before it reaches our plates. A food's country of origin may be on the label but it's generally impossible to tell how far the food has travelled and by what means. The means of transport - as well as the distance - is important. For example, a long journey by boat has less environmental impact than a shorter one by road.

Consumers are also directly responsible for increased food miles. We now travel further for our shopping and use the car more often to do it.

### **The real cost of cheap food**

Most people seems to want cheaper and cheaper food. Supermarkets constantly have price wars with their competitors to try and encourage people into their stores. But cheap food has hidden costs which affect people, the environment and the welfare of animals. For example, **pesticides** may kill pests but they can also seriously pollute water supplies under the ground and effect drinking water. This water has to be cleaned up before it can be used. That's expensive to do and should be paid for as part of the cost of 'cheap' food. But it isn't and so people have to pay higher prices for their water supplies - or drink polluted water.

Then there are factory farms. Apart from the cruelty to animals, the pollution from factory farms affects streams, rivers and even the sea and coral reefs.

Finally, there's the problem of subsidy. This is where governments, usually in rich developed countries, pay money to farmers to grow crops. This makes food falsely cheap. It can then be sold cheaply in other parts of the world which drives farmers in poorer countries out of business as they do not receive similar subsidies for their work.

### **Food as a basic human right**

Provision of nutritious food is a basic human right. Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that:

'You have the right to good quality health care and to clean water, nutritious food and a clean environment so that you can stay healthy. Rich countries should help poorer countries achieve this.'

For further information on the Convention on the Rights of the Child [click here](#)

### **Millennium Development Goals**

The eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were agreed at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000 and nearly 190 countries have signed up to them. The goals are international targets for reducing global poverty. They aim to lift around 500 million people out of poverty by the year 2015. If this happens, fewer women will die in childbirth, fewer people will die from treatable diseases, many more boys and girls will go to school and the lives of millions of people will improve dramatically.

#### **Goal number one on the list is – to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.**

**Target** – Between 1990 and 2015, halve the proportion of people whose income is less that \$1 a day.

**Target** – Between 1990 and 2015, halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.

For more information on the Millennium Development Goals [click here](#)

### **Case studies**

[Benefits of Fairtrade](#)

[Supermarkets and Kenya](#)

### **Putting your foot down: taking action to reduce your global footprint**

By learning about how and where our food is produced we can gain an understanding of **interdependence** – our links, through what we eat – with the people who produce our food and the environment. The decisions we make as consumers can have an impact on other people's lives.

**Here are some ways you can reduce your footprint:**

### **Buy food that is locally grown**

Eating foods that are grown locally means that you are eating foods that have not travelled far to reach you. This means reducing food miles and in particular avoiding foods that have been flown in from abroad. One of the best places to buy locally grown food is at a farmers market. These markets offer stalls at which farmers, growers or producers from the local area **sell their own produce, direct to the public.**

Find out more about farmers markets and the market closest to you. [Click here](#)

### **Eat seasonally**

Eating foods that are in season in the UK is an excellent way of reducing your footprint. Eating food that is grown in this country means that it hasn't travelled by plane to reach your plate. Seasonal food is also fresher and so tends to be tastier and healthier.

Find out more about eating seasonally. [Click here](#)

### **Buy Organic Food**

Buying organic food can also help reduce your footprint. Organic farming cuts down on **fossil fuels** that are used in non organic farming.

Find out more about organic food from the Soil Association. [Click here](#)

### **Buy Fairtrade products**

There will always be some foods that are popular and that cannot be grown locally. Tea, coffee, bananas and cocoa – for chocolate – are some examples of products we will always need to import from abroad. Often these crops are grown by farmers who receive very little for their work or their products. By buying Fairtrade products you will be helping farmers and their communities in developing countries receive a fair deal.

Find out more about Fairtrade. [Click here](#)

### **Join a campaign group**

As aware and active global citizens we can work to persuade councils, governments and international organisations to ensure our food is fairly traded, clearly labelled, environmentally sustainable, and not abusive of either people or animals. Here are some groups campaigning on food that you could become involved with:

[The Soil Association](#)

[Friends of the Earth](#)

[Fairtrade Foundation](#)

[there are plenty of others – need to be selective]

### **Learn more**

→ For more information about food download our Global Footprints leaflet on food [click here](#) (link to pdf download)

→ Links:

[Information on food miles](#)

[The real cost of cheap food](#)

[Food and Fairtrade](#)

[Food solutions](#)

[there are plenty of others – need to be selective]

### **Glossary**

**Famine:** a serious shortage of food which may result in extreme hunger, starvation and death

**Food miles:** the distance any particular food travels from where it is grown to where it is eaten.

**Fossil fuels:** Carbon-based sources of energy formed in the ground millions of years from the remains of dead plants and animals. Oil, natural gas, and coal are fossil fuels.

**Interdependence:** the way in which people, regions and countries are linked and the way in which each is affected by another's decisions and actions.

**Malnutrition:** Not having enough nourishing food with the adequate amounts of protein, vitamins, minerals, calories, etc. to support growth and development.

**Obesity:** a condition where people are more than 20 percent above what is considered to be a healthy weight for their age, height and bone structure. Obesity increases the risk of many health conditions, including diabetes, heart disease, and stroke.

**Pesticides:** Chemicals used to kill insects. They can be dangerous to humans when they breathe or touch the chemicals.