

ETHNIC AND ETHICAL

London Food Link, Sustain, London



Source: London Food Link

London Food Link aims to increase the amount of local, organic and fairtrade food consumed by London's diverse ethnic communities. Zeenat Anjari, London Food Link Project Officer, explains the thinking behind the project to bring sustainable food to multicultural communities.

Why was London Food Link set up?

More than 80 per cent of sales at the New Spitalfields Market in London are to ethnic food businesses, and it provides the largest choice of exotic fruit and vegetables of any market in Europe. So ethnic communities here no longer want for specific ingredients.

At the same time the UK market for food and drink from sustainable sources is expanding rapidly. In 2004/05, sales of organic food and drink grew by 30% on the previous year to approximately £1.6 billion and, in 2005, the Fairtrade market grew by 40%, with over 1500 different products now available.

We set up London Food Link to look at how these two different food markets – ethnic and sustainable – could intersect. For example, we know very little about how food for ethnic communities is grown and transported, and whether those who grew it received a fair price or wage.

The project works with both businesses and consumers. It was set up in consultation with dietitians, primary care trusts, growers who were looking for ways to market their produce, and consumers who complained about having to travel a long way to get fresh food.

What are some of the obstacles to wider participation in sustainable lifestyles of ethnic communities?

When we looked at the issues, we found that small businesses faced a lot of regulations. Small food manufacturing businesses are usually encouraged to increase sales by aspiring to supply supermarkets. Many have invested capital in getting British Retail Consortium (BRC) accreditation. They are worried that it will cost them more to get further accreditations and that there may be conflicts with the supermarket criteria.



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We also found that often **small businesses are not linked into networks that have up-to-date information on niche markets**. They are not heavily involved in the green and sustainability networks that are talking about these issues. Ethnic business people say consumers are not interested in issues like food miles.

One thing we'll be looking at is for ethnic lifestyles not to be seen as at odds with a sustainable lifestyle. **We can support diversity and sustainability and demonstrate to green NGOs that ethnic communities are not 'problematic'**. Some people feel that the green movement doesn't address faith issues, and that it needs to acknowledge that faith is a fundamental guide to life for many ethnic communities.

What other issues have you come across?

Most food sold in ethnic shops is shipped. Foods that are air-freighted here, such as Kenyan mango-touts, sell at a premium and are not marketed to ethnic communities. So for us the main issue in this instance is the quality of the food – especially its nutritional value – when it's been in transit for so long, rather than the carbon emissions to get it here.

Ethnic businesses are very involved in community issues. Buying food should be an extension of this community concern. Ethnic food businesses can't miss out on the market for local organic fairtrade food.

How do you hope to change this?

We try and persuade companies that there is a business case for sustainability. We are not asking people to stop what they are eating or doing, but to look at where their food is coming from and to ask if it is healthy and sustainable. Consumers need to ask whether they are being given a real choice. Last year we released the 'Greener Curry' report. The title reflects our desire to make sustainability mainstream in the same way that curry has become mainstream.

What projects will you be focusing on?

We'll be releasing another report in the autumn and doing lots of work with ethnic businesses and consumers.

With businesses, we'll be working towards establishing a certified organic halal supply chain for Britain and looking at a sustainable certification process for all types of overseas food. Over the next two years, London Food Link will help more restaurants and food manufacturers to source sustainable food as a fundamental of good business practice and we will research the barriers preventing others from doing this.

We want to create networks that connect business owners who profit from sustainable business practice with those who don't see the market potential. **We'll be publishing a directory of UK farmers who grow ethnic vegetables so that these can be sourced locally.** We'll also be encouraging the green sustainability movement to address faith issues and religious dietary laws.

And for consumers?

All this must be done in a way that is sensitive to a first generation, immigrant community's inherent instinct for resourcefulness, but also the subsequent generations' need for a cultural connection to 'back home'. Ethnic communities welcome the effort to make sustainability relevant to their culture – the way they live, work, pray and socialise.

We need to get the ethnic media to talk about these issues and how they relate to ethnic communities. For example, are ethnic communities adversely affected because they consume a large proportion of imported fruit and vegetables which may be deficient in nutrients by the time it is sold here? Some South Pennine farmers have diversified into growing vegetables favoured by Asian communities in Bradford and Leicester and this has led to nutritional benefits for consumers.

In the minds of some Londoners, farmers' markets are places where they can buy good quality, locally sourced food. How can we expand the benefits of these markets to reflect the range of consumers and businesses that make up London?



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We will be promoting research into the market for an 'ethnic ethical consumer' which will involve arranging for ethnic communities to visit the countryside so they get to connect with this landscape too. We'll also support people with agricultural and horticultural skills to cultivate land as part of a strategy to diversify farm income.

What do you think is the main ingredient that will link the ethnic communities into the green sustainability movement?

Acknowledging the importance and value of supply chains with mother countries.

Facts

- 1 in 3 Londoners is from an ethnic background
- London's BAME communities have enormous spending power, with an after-tax income of around £16 billion
- In 2004 the UK ethnic food market had a retail value of £1.29 billion – it grew by 44% between 1998 and 2002
- As ethnic populations increase at a faster rate than indigenous populations, the market for ethnic foods is expected to grow by 25% by the year 2010
- Almost 9 out of 10 members of ethnic communities consider their cuisine is an important part of their lives
- In 2006, there were an estimated 38,000 BAME owned food stores in the UK, employing nearly 200,000 people

Further Information

Here's a collection of links for more information on sustainable food:

General

- Sustain - www.sustainweb.org
- New Economics Foundation - www.nef.org
- Friends of the Earth - www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/real_food/
- Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences - www.ifees.org
- London 21 - www.london21.org

Supply Chain development

- London Food Link - www.londonfoodlink.org
- Soil Association - www.soilassociation.org
- UK Food Links - www.foodlinks-uk.org
- English Food and Farming Partnerships (for farmers looking to enter new markets) - www.effp.com

Market development

- South East Regional Food Group - www.sefgp.co.uk