

# Making A Meal of It

## Background information for teachers

### About food

We all need food to live. But food does more than keep us alive. It provides the energy we need to ensure that our bodies work efficiently, and provides the essential protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals which are needed for healthy development. Without food of sufficient quantity and quality people will become malnourished: 800 million people in the world today are malnourished, whilst two billion have a diet which is lacking essential vitamins and minerals.

Food also fulfils other important social functions. Family meals and sharing food with friends can be enjoyable aspects of life. However, social change means that family meals are now far less common in the UK than they were in the past, and some people think they will die out entirely in the next century. More ready-prepared meals and fast foods, women working outside the home, and changes in household structure (such as an increase in single-person households) mean that more food is eaten individually than ever before. Children can compare eating patterns in their own households and consider who tends to shop, prepare food, wash up, etc.

The places where we buy our food have changed dramatically in the UK in the last 50, or even 20, years. Shops specialising in only one type of product (bakers, grocers, greengrocers, etc) have largely been replaced by supermarkets and superstores where a huge variety of household products are available under one roof. Eighty five per cent of the money spent on food is now spent in supermarkets. Pupils can consider the effect this has had on their local environment: closure of small shops and change of building use; the need to travel to shop and to shop by car; the impact on poorer people who are unable to afford cars and are forced to shop at expensive local shops; the environmental impact of large superstores.

### The world in a supermarket bag

Food provides an important link with individuals and communities in other parts of the world. Children may initially be surprised that common 'British' foods such as bananas, tea, potatoes, and chocolate are produced in the Caribbean, India, Egypt, and Ghana.

The topic of food therefore provides an excellent learning opportunity for pupils, enabling them to explore the similarities and differences between their lives and those of people from producer countries. They can then go on to look at more complex development issues involved in the trade in foodstuffs. Why are countries that cannot adequately feed their own people exporting foodstuffs? Who benefits? What control do the buyers (the supermarket chains) exert over the producers?

Along with more traditional export crops, UK consumers can now buy items such as mango-tout from Guatemala, mangoes from South Africa, paw-paw from Ghana, tuna from Indonesia, fine beans from Kenya, and starfruit from Malaysia. Although providing more variety and choice, and enabling us to eat fresh fruit and vegetables all year round, the presence of these goods on our supermarket shelves does not necessarily benefit the people who produced them, who may not be able to afford an adequate or healthy diet themselves.

Why has there been such an expansion in export crops from the South in the last two decades? One reason is the need for countries to earn foreign currency to pay off large debts to the countries of the North, as well as to buy fuel, machinery, and other imported goods. Many governments in the South have therefore cut subsidies for the production of staple food crops such as rice and urged farmers to produce more products to be exported and eaten abroad. In Bangladesh, for instance, subsistence farmers who used to be able to grow rice and family foods have been turned off their land to make way for shrimp farms.

But shifting to exports can threaten a country's ability to feed itself. All too often such cash crops do not achieve an adequate price for the growers, as the trade in export foodstuffs is controlled by the wealthier countries of the North. Firstly, although the global trading system operates in a supposedly free market, exports from the South face a daunting array of tariff barriers (taxes) and non-tariff barriers (such as quotas) which make their products more expensive or limit the amount they are allowed to sell in the North. Secondly, small farmers in the South are unable to dictate their own terms on the world market and to challenge the power of the companies and supermarket chains which buy their products. Of the price we pay for a jar of coffee in the supermarket less than 10 per cent will go back to the grower or producer. Most of the profit will be made by the retailer and the middle-men who have processed, transported or packaged the product.

## **Food and the environment**

The increase in cash crop production in the South also has implications for the environment. The replacement of traditional small-scale mixed farming (where a variety of crops and livestock are produced together) with large-scale, intensive production of one particular cash crop (monoculture) requires the input of chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

The use of these chemicals is often unregulated and may be damaging to the health of agricultural workers, as well as damaging to the soil. Artificial fertilisers also tend to degrade the soil so that a greater application of expensive chemicals is then needed to produce an adequate crop.

In the North most of our food is already produced intensively on large, highly mechanised farms which have made a significant impact on the environment. Chemical pesticides and fertilisers run off farm land and can leach into rivers and waterways; the move to huge fields of cereal crops has destroyed hedgerows and so been damaging to wildlife; factory-style production of meat, eggs and dairy products is now the norm.

These methods ensure that foodstuffs are produced at a lower price for the consumer, enabling many people to eat a 'better' diet. Children may consider, however, the effect this has on food quality and animal welfare. There is now a growing interest in organic farming (farming without the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides) but at the moment organic foodstuffs are still expensive and not widely available.

## **A Fair Trade alternative**

There is also now a growing demand by consumers for fairly-traded products, including food products. More and more people want to know that the tea or coffee or honey or sugar which they buy has been produced without exploitation, and that the farmers who grew or processed the product in the South received a fair price for their work.

Through various Fair Trade initiatives, Oxfam has been campaigning since 1965 for a better deal for producers in the South. By paying reasonable prices, and buying through organisations which are organised for the benefit of the producers, it helps to tackle the problems of poverty and hunger. Oxfam also works with producers, helping them to improve their skills and develop their small-scale enterprises.

## **Eating for health**

The Health Education Authority recommends these guidelines for healthy eating.

- Enjoy your food.
- Eat a variety of different foods.
- Eat the right amount to be a healthy weight.
- Eat plenty of foods rich in starch (carbohydrates) and fibre.
- Eat plenty of fruit and vegetables.
- Don't eat too many foods that contain a lot of fat.
- Don't have sugary foods and drinks too often.

## Why are people hungry?

Global food supplies have more than doubled in the past 40 years, surpassing the rate of population growth. So why is it that 18 million people (mainly women and children) still die of starvation each year and one-third of the world's population are malnourished? Pupils may assume that people are hungry because there is a famine, there are too many people to feed, it does not rain in Africa, or the world cannot produce enough food, but in fact it is a question of the distribution of resources: people, whether in the UK or the countries of the South, are hungry because they lack the resources (money or land) to be able to feed themselves adequately.

It is becoming increasingly common to see people in the UK begging outside supermarkets which are packed with food they do not have the money to buy. At the same time, supermarkets and shops in the UK throw away more than £350 million worth of food a year, much of it perfectly edible.

During the Ethiopian famine of 1984 there was plenty of food available in the country – for those with money to pay for it.