



Local or Organic - Which Should We Buy?

By Verónica Fajardo, CSC

Recently I realized that consumers have great power. We can effect social change simply by the choices we make. But sometimes the better choice is far from obvious. Take food, for example. If we are trying to live ecologically, should we buy local or organic?

Of course, the ideal option is food that is locally produced and organic. But when that's not available, which should we choose? Unfortunately, there is no easy answer. Still, it's important to be a knowledgeable buyer - know the advantages of both and make an informed decision.

Organic food is, hands down, the safest - eliminating additives, pesticides, and other potentially toxic chemicals. And studies indicate that organically farmed soil sequesters roughly 28 percent more CO₂. Conventional farming chemicals are usually petroleum-based and need to be transported great distances from factory to farm, further increasing the carbon footprint of conventional farming.

On the other hand, organic food isn't perfect. In fact, much certified organic food is grown by large scale agribusiness and has many of the problems associated with industrial agriculture, including long-distance transport.

Buying locally grown/produced food from small scale farms benefits both the environment and the local economy by reducing the CO₂ emitted through transportation and building relationships. As *Green America* writer Tracy Hernandez Rysavy notes, "The local food





Photo credit: Peter Blanchard

movement isn't just about food miles - it's about the importance of asking questions about where your food comes from, and really connecting with your food and how it impacts your community."

Whether you buy from local growers or small scale organic farms, the price may be higher than that of conventionally grown foods since smaller farms do not receive the government subsidies that agribusiness does. Large corporate farms often do not pay fair wages to workers and force them

to work under inhumane conditions. The product is inexpensive because the real price is not paid by the consumer, but by the workers.

So, back to my original question.... Which should we buy? While this is an individual or household decision, it is important to note that lots of food grown locally while not "certified" as organic, is not far from being organic. This is why it's important to know our farmers so they can share their farming practices. If the product is close to being organic, the conflict between "organic" and "local" virtually disappears. The Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture maintains that income from Community



Photo credit: Greg Walters

Supported Agriculture and farmers' markets helps farmers grow and diversify. With encouragement, that income might even move them further down the path to organic.

Buying local is part of a new business model that builds local economies and strengthens local communities. In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI criticizes the global economy's lack of attention to human connections. The Pope favors emerging models in which people and their communities are key players in sustaining economic progress.

Buying locally grown food builds connections by establishing relationships to Earth and to one another. We can all look forward to the day when buying local to foster community resilience will inevitably mean buying organic. As discerning ecological consumers, we can all help that change come about.

Resources

Faith, Economy, Ecology, Transformation:
<https://faitheconomyecology.wordpress.com/>

Going Local: Life after Globalization
By Aline Marie Steuer, CSC
<http://www.holycrossjustice.org/>

Cultivating Sustainable Communities: Practical Ways to
Build Local Economies
By Amy Cavender, CSC
<http://www.holycrossjustice.org/>

Green American - Sept/Oct 2010
Organic or Local?
By Tracy Fernandez Rysavy
<http://www.greenamerica.org/>

Off the Pedestal: Creating a New Vision of Economic
Growth
By James Gustave Speth
<http://e360.yale.edu/>

Encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*
By Pope Benedict XVI
<http://www.vatican.va/>



A publication of the [Holy Cross International Justice Office](#).