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IN OUR OPINION, the belief that food grown and produced locally is superior in myriad ways to food produced in distant regions - ignores the many benefits that the globalised food supply chain have brought to human populations.

On the face of it, sub-Saharan African subsistence farmers should be the model for the so-called locavore movement. They can't afford synthetic inputs, genetically modified seeds or modern irrigation technologies; they have no choice but to grow a diverse array of crops to reduce the risk of crop failures; and because of poor transportation, most of their production is consumed locally.

Far from being the sustainable utopia described by legions of food bloggers, however, these farmers' daily reality is one in which average cereal crop yields are, at best, one fifth those of advanced economies, average incomes are around US\$1 a day and the probability of being malnourished is about one in three.

Truth be told, whatever the time or location, subsistence farming has only ever delivered poor nutrition and food insecurity. Food provisioning only began to improve with urbanisation (and its ever more complex division of labour) and long-distance trade.

In time, better production, transportation and preservation technologies meant that distance became increasingly irrelevant compared to economies of scale in food production and processing, productivity differences between locations, and different harvest periods at different latitudes, which provided fresher alternatives out of season and drastically reduced the energy costs and spoilage inherent to storage. These developments paved the way for large monocultures that delivered an increasingly abundant, diversified, affordable and nutritious food supply.

From the outset, the development of the globalised food supply chain met with opposition. Past initiatives reminiscent of today's locavore movement were used to protect less efficient local producers from increased foreign competition; to boost regional economic activity or as a form of protection against price inflation during economic recession; to increase local food security when war broke out or threatened to do so; for environmental and social considerations; and simply to counter a dislike of allegedly redundant transportation and parasitical intermediaries. However, nobody would have bothered transporting foodstuffs over long distances if they hadn't proved to be superior to local products, so



past local-food initiatives always delivered higher prices and less variety. Hence, they only ever 'succeeded' through trade restrictions and local production subsidies.

When given the choice, however, consumers never showed any inclination to buy inferior local products - a good thing, too, as the more people spent on overpriced local goods, the less money they had to spend on other local and distant products. Creating the kind of jobs found in sub-Saharan Africa is easy, but prosperity and a higher standard of living require economic specialisation and international trade.

Another benefit of the globalised food supply chain is that economic efficiency and sound environmental practices go hand in hand. Many life-cycle analysts have documented the fact that the energy requirements of long-distance transportation are insignificant compared to those associated with preparing the ground and planting seeds; mining, manufacturing and spraying fertilisers and pesticides; irrigating fields; harvesting, drying and preserving crops; and powering the necessary machinery.

Better, then, to use distant natural heat or richer pastureland than less favourable local conditions that require energy-guzzling heated greenhouses, massive amounts of irrigation water and larger volumes of animal feed. Large-scale monocultures also deliver a lot more food on a lot less land than inefficient local production. The smaller the total area in active human use, the more environmentally friendly the landscape.

But the locavores' most preposterous claim is that their prescription increases food security. Yet, no local food system can ever be completely protected from insects, disease, drought, floods and other natural catastrophes. From time to time, things will go wrong wherever farmers are located.

As French economist Nicolas Baudeau observed nearly 250 years ago, agricultural trade liberalisation ensured that the surplus of regions with good harvests can be channelled to those with below average ones. Locavorism, by contrast, puts all of one's agricultural eggs in one regional basket. With food security, as with other risks, there's safety in numbers - in this case multiple and geographically dispersed suppliers.

Far from being a step forward, locavorism can only deliver the world from which our ancestors gladly escaped. Embracing it would not only mean lower standards of living and shorter life expectancy, but also increased environmental damage and social turmoil.