

Trade: Business as usual or change - and if so, how soon and how much?

How will the need to cut carbon emissions by 80% by 2050 affect the way we trade? How resilient are different trade models in the light of climate change and fossil fuel depletion and their impacts on farming? Representatives from large and small-scale businesses explore how current trade models may need to adapt to future challenges and discuss whether more localised, community led models are feasible in a global economy.

Chair – Chantelle Ludski, Founder and CEO of Fresh! Naturally Organic

Speakers:

Orna Ni-Chionna, Chair, Soil Association

Patrick O’Flaherty, Co-founder, RDA Organic

Guy Watson, Founder of Riverford

Adam York, Founder Member of Unicorn Cooperative and Producer

Key arguments:

A holistic approach is needed towards making trade models more sustainable. Focusing on cause celebre problems like plastic bags to the detriment of the bigger picture will not work.

The complexity of environmental issues means consumers are not always well enough informed to demand wide-ranging solutions, and are persuaded instead by media driven, single dimension issues such as plastic bags. Consumer choice can not always, therefore, be relied upon to influence the most sustainable, holistic strategies.

International trade models can work as part of a holistic approach also supporting local and national trade. If international trade or organic is discouraged, a vacuum for GM and agrochemical business is opened up.

Multiple retailers will argue their model offers consumer choice and convenience, reducing journeys by offering everything in one place. The consumer is king. Therefore, to effect change, it is up to traders to change the mind of the consumer.

Supermarkets have the power to change consumer demand and ‘choice edit’ on their behalf. They drive consumer demand by what they choose to stock. Therefore, can they be incentivised or regulated to make more sustainable choices? Can the multiple retailer model be relied upon to make sustainable choices over those maximising profit?

Supermarkets offer the biggest route to market for the organic industry, so should not be criticised automatically. The organic industry should instead engage with the multiples and try to encourage them to act more ethically.

Consumer education about the environmental cost of transport and the need for organic, seasonal food will be the biggest driver of change. There is still a gap even amongst organic consumers between what they say and what they do.

Excess consumerism must be overcome to protect the planet.

The biggest energy impact of the food system and trade (in whatever model) occurs in the final delivery – getting it from the shop/market/farm to the consumer. Solutions are needed to reduce the impact of this 'final mile'.

Will 'peak oil' force change such as the return of smaller, local shops, or will large-scale models invest in new technology, such as electric lorries, to maintain the same models? However, new technology must not be relied upon as a panacea.

Small scale models like CSAs and farmshops must remain aware of their own environmental impact – in areas with little transport infrastructure, many food miles are added through consumers' individual journeys to the shops.

Integrity must be built into trade models to build trust, with a focus on human relationships between buyers and suppliers. Connection with the supplier is part of the enjoyment of food.

An empowered, informed public that understands the benefits of organic food production will ultimately drive change, and the organic movement has the information to help make that happen.