



## World Export Development Forum (WEDF), 8 – 11 October 2008

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### SESSION SUMMARY: Thursday, 9 October 2008

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#### BREAKOUT SERIES 2

#### **Buying Local: Miles Better?**

##### SPEAKERS:

Markus Arbenz, Director, Bio-Suisse, Switzerland

Simon Bolwig, Project Researcher Trade and Development Research Unit, Danish Institute for International Studies

Alexander Kasterine, Senior Market Development Adviser, ITC

MODERATOR: Asad Naqvi, Programme Officer, United Nations Environment Programme

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Session participants highlighted growing uncertainties over whether environmental concerns should prompt consumers to buy local food rather than products transported from far away.

Discussions focused on the controversy surrounding efforts to reduce 'food miles' -- or the distance travelled by agricultural goods on the way from producer to consumer. Some argue that cutting food miles can have a significant effect on reducing carbon dioxide emissions, and they target air freight in particular. As a result, these campaigners urge consumers to buy food that is local and in season.

Counter-arguments, which are increasingly coming to the fore, include fears that such efforts will cut off vital trade opportunities, damaging livelihoods of developing-country producers. There are also questions over the merits of the environmental case, especially given that production methods used by many farmers in developing countries are less energy intensive than their counterparts in the developed world.

The three panellists were divided. Markus Arbenz said the focus of his organization, Bio-Suisse, is on encouraging consumers to buy locally. Bio-Suisse promotes organic production and operates a labelling scheme in Switzerland. The group's labels favour domestically produced organic products and are not awarded to goods that are air freighted, he said. It does not market imported milk or meat, because these are available in Switzerland, he added.

However, Simon Bolwig, a Danish researcher who has worked on the issue of food miles, questioned the environmental case made by 'buy local' lobbies. "Roses imported from Kenya



have a smaller carbon footprint than those produced in the Netherlands,” he said. It is also a moral issue and a question of fairness to those in the developing world, he added.

Regarding impact on developing-country farmers, Alexander Kasterine of the ITC pointed to the advantages for African countries of reaching prosperous markets. “The fruit and vegetable sector in Africa is one of the success stories,” he said. Countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, South Africa and Zambia benefit from access to technology as well as European markets. For individuals, the earnings from produce flown to Europe can make a real difference in household spending.

African producers view the focus on food miles as “just another way of using the environment” to block developing-country exports, he added.

A number of forum participants were sceptical of the campaign against food miles. Philip Leakey, a Kenyan entrepreneur, pointed out that most air-freighted fruit and vegetables are carried in the holds of passenger planes that would be travelling regardless. “Would we rather have the hold flying empty?” he asked.

Others called for strategies to help developing countries to go beyond the debate over food miles and take advantage of opportunities in the developed world. These include marketing products more effectively and increased lobbying on the food mile issue. However, because developing countries often lack resources and expertise in marketing and lobbying, they should be provided with help to build capacity in these areas, the participants said.

With regard to the environmental impact of trade, there was widespread agreement on looking at the overall picture rather than focusing only on transportation. For example, the more comprehensive ‘life-cycle analysis’ of a product puts the travel element into perspective, argued Bolwig.