

Back to the Future: Returning to Local (Food Production that is ...) By David Gomez¹



Everyone is looking for a silver lining from the COVID19 global pandemic. There have been a few: families have spent more time together (though kids have spent more time on their Ipads and computers); people have marveled at the existence of blue skies (they have always been there we just haven't noticed because we have been too busy contributing to the smog); people are riding their bikes (well at least here in London and across Europe ...). In a recent webinar on air pollution Professor Frank Kelly of Kings College London pointed to a couple more: the need for rethinking public transportation policies, and, the return to local food production. In other words, countries with the capacities for producing their own food should do so. That rings true for many small developing countries including several within CARICOM, the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) and the Commonwealth.

The issue is a significant one. Small developing countries have found themselves importing more and more food products, including many high sugar, low caloric processed foods from larger more developed countries, even as their own economic sectors have become more disconnected from global and regional value chains. Sugar producing countries in the Caribbean for instance still export primarily unrefined brown sugar even as they import more refined white sugar and get this - molasses too for rum production. Yes I said it: Caribbean countries are importing molasses for rum production. Shameful? Perhaps. But I am more concerned about the fact that many of our small countries can scale back on the consumption of imported food products. This will require a couple of brave policy changes (though am not sure many of our politicians have the coconuts (all pun intended) to undertake such decisions. Let me clarify what I am suggesting here.

Firstly, small developing countries can and should put in place policies which heavily tax any imported food product that has above specified levels of sugar (added or not), as well as sodium. And I mean here anything that contributes to the many types of preventable public health diseases our countries are plagued with - yes, we already had plagues we refused to acknowledge: diabetes; hypertension; high-cholesterol; etc. Some of the things imported really can and should be grown locally, and with more effective small farming approaches technologies this is very possible. I know for a fact that it is possible to grow local onions, carrots, lettuce, and other vegetables, as well as some of the many canned foods we eat - beans, sweet corn, yams, yucca and many other ground foods.

Secondly, small developing countries need to, and should, agitate towards policies which ensure that local production outputs meet internationally

acceptable standards. Local does not need to mean sub-standard. It is unacceptable that our restaurants, hotels, and homes refuse local produce because of the perceived and real lack of 'quality' in what is found in the local marketplace. It really is a no brainer that hot pepper sauces made from locally grown carrots, onions and limes that meet international quality standards means that more of the money earned stays in the local economy. That's something to chew on (but be careful not to use the fiery hot or comatose level sauces, that is unless you eat the habanero fresh like I do).

And thirdly, our governments should put in place policies which encourage increased local production and better local value chain linkages. When some of the best hot sauces in the world got started in the 'jewel' they did so using local produce. Now they import from neighboring countries that are hostile towards our very existence while we send cows walking across the border (did anyone check if the cows got their papers sorted at passport office? - asking for a friend ...) On a serious note, SME support in many small countries have been a joke: utterly ineffective, lacking meaningful financial inputs or investments; and with even more ineffective export support and know how. Truth be told, the traveling citizen often does more promoting the local products than many of the national and regional export promotion agencies know how to, or are capable of (just to be sure, attending trade shows - every trade show - does not equate to successfully supporting SME export performance ...) It does not have to be like this, and if nothing else the ongoing global

pandemic has shown that consumption patterns must change and that reverting to local is still possible. There was a time, not too long ago (when I was a youngster) that most of what I ate came from fresh produce. My own little country used to produce rice (under a brand Big Falls). Now we are all too happy to buy "Uncle B..." many types of pre-prepared rice (though not for much longer as I understand that the brand is being retired in the face of the growing reckoning that racially insensitive 'marketing' is no longer acceptable.) For me, the silver lining of the recent lockdown, the crux of Professor Kelly's observation, has been that it's time for us to go back to the future... to return to local - food production that is... trust me - the cooking will taste better, and we may even get healthier.

¹ The author is a Managing Partner at Launchpad Consulting and an International development, trade and value chain specialist leading and delivering high quality results under development initiatives in Africa, the Caribbean and the South Pacific. His specialisms include development policy, international trade policy, export and SME value chain development, and trade support institution capacity building.