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Purchasing Local for Sustainable Development

— and improved hospitality
experiences

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Learning goals

This chapter will help readers to understand and critically reflect on the benefits and challenges of purchasing locally on the three dimensions of sustainability. After reading this chapter, readers will have the ability to:

- 1 Understand the term local, its ambiguity and its connection to sustainability;
- 2 Understand the social, economic and environmental benefits of local purchase;
- 3 Be aware of the importance of local purchasing to enhance sustainability, yet, be able to reflect that buying local does not automatically mean being sustainable;
- 4 Know different movements and trends supporting a more sustainable hospitality industry by purchasing local goods.

Introduction

You might have heard the famous slogan “think global, act local” already. The thought behind this slogan is simple: the idea is that you should nurture a ‘care for all’ mentality and think of all humans and of the Earth itself (Cavagnaro and Curiel, 2012), while the actions that you take need to be local because these local steps can be of benefit to all of us. If you research that matter or the issue of sustainability further, you will find more slogans that are related to and inspired by the original slogan, such as “think global, buy local” or “think global, eat local” (Flint, 2004). So, apparently people believe that by eating and buying local they

can not only generate significant benefits for their local surrounding and the direct stakeholders, but also contribute to a more sustainable society or world. This chapter is going to analyse these ideas further and show that – while the general idea is true – the matter is a bit more complicated than these statements seem to imply. In general, buying and consuming local can indeed be a significant contributor on all three sustainability dimensions. However, these benefits are seldom immediate and should therefore be sought after by design.

Sustainable purchasing is defined as creating sustainable value. Creating sustainable value is defined as assessing sustainability on the “return that is created with a resource” (Manzhynski *et al.*, 2015: 638) or with several resources. As a way to assess the sustainability impact of human activities, the concept of value creation breaks with traditional assessments practices that largely focus on the burden created, such as measuring environmental damage. In general, in recent years it has been argued that resources should be considered as rare and that not using a resource or using less of it should be considered as the most sustainable strategy (Cavagnaro and Curiel, 2012). In other words, and combining both perspectives, resources should be used so that burdens are minimized and value creation is maximized on the economic, social and environmental dimension of sustainability. Considering this point, local purchasing is linked to four of the most significant burdens that the hospitality industry often brings with it: CO₂ emissions either due to transport or other energy use, waste, economic leakage and social impacts at a destination of guests and tourists from outside the community. The relationship between these four potential burdens is discussed in the following section on sustainability challenges. But first, let us have a look at the general idea of why local purchasing is considered to be more sustainable.

To elaborate on the benefits of local purchasing on the economic, environmental and social dimension of sustainability in more detail, this chapter uses the example of local food. Local food is chosen as an example because of two main reasons. First, food is an essential component of hospitality, and therefore sustainable food procurement may play a significant role in the transition of the hospitality industry to a more sustainable stance. Second, as most hospitality settings offer food to their guests, the triple bottom line benefits of offering local food may be reaped by a high number of hospitality businesses. Yet which exactly are these benefits?

Let us consider first the impact of local food purchasing on the economic dimension of sustainability. The amount of money spent by tourists on food, and thus potentially on local food, is quite considerable. It has, for example, been found that tourists spend up to one third of their budget on food and food-related products (Hall and Sharples, 2003; Skuras and Dimara, 2005; Telfer and Wall, 2000). This means that tourists bring money from outside to a region; that this money is spent in the region and that it can therewith support the local economy. Moreover, tourists’ spending gives a particular boost to the local economy due to the so-called tourism multiplier effect. The multiplier effect is defined as the

rise in final income emerging from any new injection of expenditure (Page and Connell, 2014). It relies on the assumption that the money spent by the tourists can be spent again. To exemplify: if a tourist pays for their stay at the hotel, the hotel then uses the money to pay their staff (who then have an income that they can potentially spend on something else) and their suppliers. Considering that hospitality is labour intensive and supposing that jobs are sourced locally, it is easy to see how hospitality may support a broad section of the community economically (Minta, 2015; Shuman, 1998, Hjalager and Johansen, 2013). On a similar line, if the food supplier is local, another member of the community (in this case even one who is usually not involved in the tourism sector) will receive financial benefits from the hotel operations. Hence, a particular advantage of the tourism multiplier effect is that it benefits parties that may otherwise have no relationship with the hospitality industry. These parties may be local food suppliers, as in the example, but also suppliers of services, such as cleaning, and people employed in primary industries such as farmers and fisheries (Hjalager and Johansen, 2013).

An additional economic benefit of local food is the (perceived) added value of a food product if it is local. Local food is often considered to be fresher and healthier than other food products. Tourists are also often quite keen on experiencing the authentic destination (Yeoman, 2006). Hence, by offering local food the perceived value of the whole tourism experience increases and therefore a guest might be willing to spend more on it and may appreciate it more.

Alongside economic benefits, the integration of local food products in the hospitality and tourism offer also brings several social benefits to the community (Hall and Gössling, 2013; Long, 2004). An important benefit is that locals become more visible to the guests of the hospitality providers and therefore it may become easier for tourists to relate to locals. Local food offered in hospitality businesses can foster the dialogue and the connection between locals and tourists. Local dishes, recipes, beverages and eating habits represent the local culture. Therefore, while local people might derive pride and feel recognised when tourists are interested in the local culture, tourists are attracted by the authenticity of the offer and come to appreciate the hospitableness of the locals who are willing to share their culture with them (Hall and Gössling, 2013; Minta, 2015).

For the hospitality industry, integrating local food and recipes into their products means also taking advantage of a unique opportunity to provide special experiences to their guests. Upholding the local cuisine may become a means for hospitality providers to differentiate themselves from competitors located in other regions. Simultaneously, they support and benefit the local community by preserving local food traditions or preparation methods (Everett and Aitchison, 2008; Long, 2004). While this might seem like a small step, it might be of real importance and value to locals, particularly when recipes and traditional ways of food preparation are part of a family heritage and have personal significance. Just imagine if your favourite apple pie, prepared according to the recipe of your grandmother is suddenly sold at local cafes (Abate, 2008).