

A17. Checkout sustainable development

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In many ways the retail sector of the UK economy is the key to securing sustainable development. According to Alan Knight (2004), Head of Social Responsibility at Kingfisher Plc and a member of the UK Sustainable Development Commission, the main concern of retailers is to '*actively promote consumption*', which is surely at odds with government policies which look to promote sustainable development and consumption as part of wider commitments to sustainability. Shopping is almost an everyday activity for both staff and students working in universities and as such provides a rich and often controversial arena for study. This case study uses the concept of contested environmental relationships to offer a range of perspectives on how the major UK food retailers are perceived to be addressing sustainable development. As such it provides a framework for student learning which encourages business students, both individually and collectively, to explore the structure and complexity of business and supply chain relationships and the ways these relationship can and do influence the movement towards sustainable development. It begins with a short outline of the structure and organisation of food retail provision, goes on to examine three different perspectives on the relationships between retailers and the environment which provide some examples to illustrate each perspective and then draws out a number of general issues and provides tutors with some directions to enable them to pursue these issues in their teaching.

Food Retailing in the UK

Food retailing is a major business activity in the UK and it is increasingly dominated by large corporations. Mintel (2005) reports that consumer spending on food, drink and tobacco accounted for almost 50% of all retail sales and further estimates that UK consumer spending on food and drink amounted to £93.5 billion (including VAT) in 2004, with 61.0% being spent on foodstuffs, 9.1% on non-alcoholic beverages, 13.2% on alcoholic drinks and 16.7% on tobacco. During recent decades food retailing within the UK has become increasingly concentrated. The sale of food by, and the

numbers of, small independent retailers have declined and a small number of major players have taken an increasing market share.

In 2006 the top four food retailers, namely Tesco, J.Sainsbury, ASDA and the Wm. Morrison Group, had a market share of 72% (Office of Fair Trading, 2006). This concentration has increased the power of the large retailers in their supply chains and associated channel relationships (Dawson 2004). This market dominance has brought the large retailers into daily direct contact with a large number, and often a wide cross section, of customers. The former gives the large retailers greater power over many aspects of their buying relationships with their suppliers, while the latter keeps them well attuned to consumer behaviour and allows them to develop sophisticated marketing and brand loyalty strategies. Moreover, these large food retailers are widely recognised as having a significant impact on the environment. If the UK Government's policy approach towards sustainable production and consumption is to work '*with the grain of markets*' (DTI/DEFRA, 2003) then the large retailers would appear to be instrumental in delivering more sustainable patterns of production and consumption.

Retailers' Environmental Agendas

The major UK food retailers began to address environmental issues explicitly in the mid 1990s, albeit in a relatively limited manner, but such issues are now being given a much higher profile and feature as a key element of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reporting. Many of the CSR reports can be accessed on the web and they provide some insights into the how the food retailers claim to be engaging with a variety of environmental issues. Some of the food retailers claim fully to integrate environmental issues into their corporate strategies. Justin King, Chief Executive Officer of J. Sainsbury, for example, stresses in his introduction to the company's 2006 CSR report (J. Sainsbury plc 2006) that 'Respect for our environment is integral to our commercial decision making' and that 'our commitment to all our stakeholders is always to use resources wisely and carefully'. The Tesco 2006 CSR Review (Tesco 2006) emphasises that 'The responsible management of our... environmental impact is an integral part of our business.'

More specifically, the major food retailers are looking to address a range of environmental issues, principally climate change, energy efficiency, the use of new technologies and waste management. The concept of sustainable

sourcing is also attracting growing attention and in some ways it looks to capture many of the specific environmental initiatives outlined above. Tesco, for example, emphasises that 'We want the products we sell and the ingredients that go into them to be produced sustainably.' The company claims to achieve this goal by applying its 'Nature's Choice' environmental standards to all the farms that supply it with produce; encouraging more customers to choose organic produce and sourcing more organic products within the UK; applying robust policies to cover animal welfare and fish sourcing; working with suppliers to improve efficiency in distribution and to reduce 'food miles'; and reducing packaging wherever possible. The first of these initiatives is an integrated farm management scheme, which embraces 7,600 farms in some 60 countries, designed to ensure that fruit, vegetables and salads are produced to high safety and environmental standards.

Only a minority of the major food retailers report on how they seek to engage their employees with the company's environmental goals. J. Sainsbury, for example, reports that energy management is part of a store manager's annual targets and that one of the aims of the company's 'Save It' campaign is to raise awareness of energy and climate change amongst employees in all stores. In a broader vein, Tesco stresses the importance of its employees understanding the principles guiding the way the company conducts business and it recognises the need for it to listen to and engage with employees as often and as effectively as it does with its customers. The company tracks staff views through its internal surveys and reports that more than 80% of its employees believe that 'Tesco acts in an environmentally friendly way'.

Consumer Association Perspectives

The '*Greening Supermarkets*' report, subtitled '*How supermarkets can help make green shopping easier*' published by the National Consumer Council (NCC) in September 2006 offers a much more restrained endorsement of the major food retailers sustainable development and environmental commitments. The report begins by recognising that food retailers 'Have a key role to play in helping us to do our bit for the environment' and while acknowledging and welcoming that 'Recent months have seen a number of the big stores pledge to cut waste and plastic bag use, stock more local and seasonal products and use more green energy' it argues that 'There is much more that supermarkets can do... to help their customers to be greener shoppers.'

A survey, conducted specifically for the National Consumer Council report in March 2006, of eight major food retailers – ASDA, Co-op, Marks and Spencer, Wm. Morrison, J. Sainsbury, Somerfield, Tesco and Waitrose – provided the empirical material for the report, which focussed on four major environmental themes, namely food transport, waste, sustainable sourcing and sustainable farming. The survey revealed considerable variations in the extent to which the retailers were explicitly helping customers to make green choices. A mixed picture emerged, for example, on sustainable sourcing and sustainable farming. On the one hand the survey revealed that it was difficult for the majority of supermarket customers to be confident in choosing sustainable fish and even those stores that had fresh fish counters provided limited information on sourcing. While some potentially at-risk species were found to be on sale some retailers were also introducing customers to new species such as hoki and pollock. Only two of the retailers surveyed provided customers with any information on their policy on pesticides and though the majority were stocking a range of organic products there were fewer price promotions on organic products than on their conventional counterparts.

By way of an overall summary the report draws attention to the fact that the food retailers surveyed were offering customers a low level of engagement with green issues. In looking to signpost 'The way forward' the report suggests that 'We are at a turning point,' in that 'Supermarkets are recognising that there is much more they can do to reduce their impact on the environment and to help their customers to be greener' and that this in turn can be 'An important step towards more sustainable behaviour.' At the same time the report clearly recognises that enabling changes in customer buying behaviour can be a daunting task not least because there is often a gap 'between people's attitudes and aspirations, which are often pro-environment, and their everyday behaviour.' The key to closing this gap is seen to lie in encouraging the food retailers to reduce the barriers of 'habit, cost, availability and confusion' and to positively offer incentives designed to encourage and facilitate customers in making green choices. The role of new graduates moving to careers in retailing and business management is also crucial, as they will need to understand the limitations of different approaches to sustainable development, and have the skills to foster new ways of working.

Pressure Group Perspectives

The large retailers' environmental credentials are fiercely contested by a number of pressure groups and a wide range of issues have attracted attention including carbon dioxide emissions and climate change, road traffic congestion, the promotion of intensive agriculture, packaging and waste, energy use and planning permissions. Here again the pressure group websites (e.g. Tescopoly 2007; Friends of the Earth 2005; Corporate Watch 2004) provide useful sources of information for courses and students' independent work. The role of the large food retailers in contributing to climate change has received considerable attention. The Corporate Watch website lists 'Causing Climate Change' as one of Sainsbury's 'Corporate Crimes' arguing that 'Like every other supermarket Sainsbury's transports its goods far farther than necessary because it can only deal in bulk and profits from economies of scale if it has only a few distribution depots.'

The relationships between the large retailers and farmers have also attracted a range of critical comments from pressure groups. The Tescopoly website, for example, claims that 'the supermarkets' hunt for cheap food has encouraged intensive agriculture at the expense of more sustainable methods, with devastating effects on the global environment.' Friends of the Earth (2005) has suggested that the major food retailers place very exacting specifications on their suppliers and have argued that 'Fruit and vegetables must meet very high appearance standards' and that 'such requirements force farmers to use environmentally damaging practices.' More generally the Tescopoly website argues that food retailers are contributing to deforestation and to loss in biodiversity.

The waste associated with packaging has also attracted pressure group attention. Friends of the Earth (2005), for example, argues that food packaging makes up some 16% of all household waste and that the policies pursued by the large food retailers make it difficult to reduce such packaging. More particularly the pressure group argues that it is the large food retailers' specifications that determine the amount of packaging used on food products. Particular concerns have been expressed about the use of plastic wrapping, which is most difficult to recycle. It is claimed that plastic production uses eight per cent of the world's oil and that the large retailers should be cutting down on the amount of plastic used in packaging. More generally the Tescopoly website claims that the large

food retailers distribute some 15 billion plastic bags which will eventually be dumped in landfill sites.

Discussion

The three perspectives outlined above certainly suggest some variation in the ways in which the large food retailers' engagement with sustainability issues is perceived, and provide learning agendas in their own right. However, the aim behind any student exercise is more reflection than reconciliation and a number of issues in this domain can be identified as having particular merit for student discussion. These concern: the respective role of retailers *vis-à-vis* consumers in driving consumption patterns; the construction and dissemination of sustainable consumption agendas and the power and values associated with this construction; the role of consumer action and consumer education, and the conceptualisation of critical pressure group perspectives. These issues can be used to provide a basis for seminar discussions, further investigative enquiry and individual project-based research (see Appendix 1 for example activity and resources).

A number of authors emphasise the role of individual consumers in driving consumption patterns and thus in impacting upon the environment. Jackson (2005), for example, argues that 'consumer behaviour is the key to the impact that society has on the environment' while Schaefer and Crane (2005) suggest that 'much of the existing literature linking consumption with environmental problems has been based on traditional psychological and marketing conceptions of consumption as individual choice.' At the operational level this perspective is echoed in Tesco's 2006 CSR review by Dickenson (2006), the Co-ordinator of the Carbon Disclosure Project who suggested that

The great democracy of commerce is played out at the cash till every day. Consumer purchasing decisions-aggregated together-every hour of every day, direct the world economy, for better or for worse.

One of the key findings of the National Consumer Council's '*Greening Supermarkets*' report is that retailers should look to engage more fully with consumers in order to help them understand the environmental threats associated with their buying behaviour and to make more environmentally-informed purchasing decisions. While this approach recognises the role

that the retailer plays in driving consumption it also reflects what Schaefer and Crane (2005) describe as the 'choice and information processing' model of consumption. According to this model more sustainable patterns of consumption will be achieved if retailers engage more fully with consumers to enable them to learn more about the impact of their purchasing decisions, for example, on climate change and on the use of pesticides and the disposal of waste materials, which will lead to consumers, including students, increasingly demanding environmentally benign goods and services.

However, doubts have been expressed about how consumers, react to such information. On the one hand, as long as many food retailers maintain differential pricing policies, which effectively penalise customers who might wish to make environmentally-benign purchasing decisions, then for many customers decision-making may be almost exclusively price determined. On the other hand and perhaps even more fundamentally Hobson (2002), for example, suggests that such an approach carries 'little cultural meaning' and that it may in fact 'alienate individuals from the project of sustainable consumption.' Students could be encouraged to put their own consumption patterns under the microscope. This could involve them in keeping a shopping diary over a two-week period and recording not only their purchases but also the factors that influenced their purchasing decisions. Such diaries provide valuable material for individual and group reflection on consumption and on personal realities and rhetorics.

A number of authors stress the role that large retailers have in driving production and in stimulating consumer demand. Dawson (2004), for example, suggests that retailing

Has moved from being an agent for the passive display and sales of manufactured output to take on an active role in determining what is consumed and what is manufactured.

Wrigley and Lowe (2002) argue that 'the geographies of production are being actively shaped by multi-national retail capital.' Durieu (2003) empathises the retailers' pivotal role in emphasizing that 'they can greatly influence changes in production processes and consumption patterns and are well positioned to exert pressure on producers in favour of more sustainable consumer choices' and specifically in the context of food retailing, Crewe (2001), has argued that 'the majority of British consumers

have neither the political clout nor the financial means to mobilise against the dictates of big retail capital.' The role of retailers *vis-à-vis* consumers in driving consumption patterns is certainly contested and provides fertile ground for student discussions, which they can relate to their own everyday shopping experiences.

A focus on the major food retailers in driving the patterns of consumption draws attention to the sustainable consumption agendas they have constructed and disseminated. In many ways the large food retailers have constructed a sustainable consumption agenda, which is driven by largely, though not necessarily exclusively, their own commercial interests. Thus the accent is on efficiency gains across a wide range of economic, social and environmental areas rather than on maintaining the viability of natural ecosystems and reducing demands on finite natural resources. Many of the environmental initiatives described earlier, for example, not only reduce waste, damaging gaseous emissions and energy and resource consumption but they also cut costs. This approach echoes Hobson's (2002) more general argument, albeit at a smaller scale, that rich and powerful groups will construct sustainable consumption agendas that do not threaten consumption, *per se*, but seek to link them 'to forms of knowledge – science, technology and efficiency – that embody the locus of power' held by the retailers. Students need to reflect on this.

The sustainability agenda and the rhetoric of supermarkets' green policy and strategy can also be challenged in terms of what the economists' term legacy assets and sunk costs. If supermarkets are serious in wanting to become 'green', it would require substantial reconfiguration of their value systems and of how they work. This is linked with wider issues such as land use, the growth of the suburbs, planning policy and the development of large out-of-town stores and retail parks. These issues have partially driven retail strategy and how the supermarkets have located stores and developed their logistics provision of quick response. The nature of the spatial patterns of the supermarkets and their links to their delivery systems means significant transport movements and its attendant carbon footprint. Porter and Kramer (2006) offer us an interesting model to deconstruct the activities of supermarkets towards a green agenda. It here where we see the legacy assets and the sunk costs argument become, in the short term at least, a significant stumbling block to sustainability.

At the same time students need to recognise that the large food retailers' construction of sustainable consumption agendas, which emphasise efficiency, are not outside the sustainable development and sustainable consumption and production goals, which look to promote better 'human health and well being' as well as 'care towards our natural resources', set out by the UK Government. This, in turn, begs questions about the complexity and the ambiguity in defining sustainable development, about the level of genuine political commitment to sustainable development that has the earth's long-term environmental viability at its heart and about the nature of the relationship between the state and retail capital and the locus of power within this relationship. Here Fernando's (2003) assertion that 'Capitalism has shown remarkable creativity and power to undermine the goals of sustainable development by appropriating the language and practices of sustainable development' resonates loudly as does Harris and O'Brien's (1993) argument that 'the question still remains as to whether, under capitalism, retailers can ever achieve a meaningful reconciliation between profit and a substantial commitment to Green issues.'

The pressure group perspectives on the large food retailers' relationships with the environment can be analysed/interpreted at two levels. On the one hand, criticisms of the environmental damage these retailers are accused of causing can be seen as part of a series of campaigns to try to arrest the decline of, and offer a viable future for, small scale local farmers, food producers and retailers and for more natural methods of food production and thus reducing damaging environmental impacts, while at the same time forcing the large food retailers to behave in what their critics believe would be a more responsible environmental manner. On the other hand, some of the critical perspectives against the large food retailers can also be seen a part of deeper and more fundamental project whose roots are in political economy and environmentalism. The former looks to challenge the hegemony of global capitalism and many of the assumptions underpinning contemporary capitalist society while the latter is rooted in the belief that the dominant consumer culture within such societies is irretrievably damaging the earth's finite resource base.

To some students these issues may seem intensely political but it is important to recognise that sustainable development is intensely political in that it challenges not only existing political and economic systems but also the balance of power within and between societies. Here it is important for teaching staff to grasp the nettle and help final year undergraduate and

postgraduate students to engage fully with the complexity of sustainable development as it is being played out each day within familiar retail environments. In engaging with sustainable development in this way students will be drawn into other disciplines and exposure to other ways of thinking will further enrich their understanding of the complexities involved in moving towards sustainable consumption and sustainable development.

Conclusion

The UK's large food retailers are increasingly keen to emphasise their positive relationships with the environment as part of their broader commitment to sustainable development and to their evolving corporate social responsibility agendas. Nevertheless, business imperatives and efficiency gains, rather than the recognition that current patterns of consumption are environmentally not sustainable, seem to be the fundamental driver behind many of their initiatives. If the food retailers take up the National Consumer Council's call to engage more energetically with environmental issues with their customers then this may increase environmental awareness but there are doubts that it will make a sizeable contribution in moving towards sustainable production and consumption. The exploration of these issues through the framework of contested environmental relationships provides fertile territory for students and tutors to engage with sustainable development as it is being played out in the everyday world of their shopping.

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Appendix 1

Student Tasks

Classroom Seminar:

Investigate the claims the four major food UK retailers make about their environmental credentials and investigate and discuss the inherent paradoxes that an environmental strategy for the business would entail.

Student Presentation:

Suggest, in outline, a possible strategy for a major UK supermarket retailer that would allow the company to make justifiable claims about its commitment to key elements of the prevailing environmental agenda.

Student Resources:

BBC (2007) *How Turkey Became a Fast Food*, [online], BBC website, February 7. Available from:
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6331007.stm> >

BBC (2007) *How Turkey Farms Work*, [online], BBC website, February 6. Available from: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6333073.stm>>

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(In particular see Figure 12.1, on page 349 showing the US Chicken Production Circuit, URL, [online], Available from:
<[http://www.sagepub.co.uk/upm-data/12584_12_Dicken\(5e\)_Ch_12.pdf](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/upm-data/12584_12_Dicken(5e)_Ch_12.pdf) >

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Wikipedia's Posting on Food Miles, [online], Available from:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Food_miles>

Additional Pressure Group Resources:

Agri Food Network, [online], Available from:
<<http://www.sustainweb.org/page.php?id=173>>

Christian Aid, [online], Available from: <<http://www.christian-aid.org.uk/>>

Genetix Snowball, [online], Available from: <<http://www.fraw.org.uk/gs/>>

Greenpeace, [online], Available from:
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Make Trade Fair, [online], Available from:
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