

Atypicality: foundational principles making trade fairer

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This issue of *The Journal of Fair Trade* is taking a different approach. We are calling this an 'Atypical Fair Trade Collection' (Part 1). We asked people involved in some rather unusual Fair Trade or 'fair-trade-like' initiatives to write for us. From **software** and **seeds**, to **palm oil** and **cannabis**, we wanted to know what kinds of products, connections and social relationships were being developed, and why. What was wrong or unjust about conventional ways of producing and selling those products or services?

We received a fascinating set of essays and articles, half of which are set out in this edition. There are two premises for the a-typicality concept that we want to outline in this introduction. The first is that despite the diversity and unusual nature of these initiatives, compared to more established Fair Trade product areas, some common, perhaps universal or foundational, principles run through and across all the cases. In addition to the interesting array of cases and products presented, we hope that their approaches begin to illustrate what makes trade fairer to all those who need better treatment/terms. It is suggested that these underlying dimensions of all types of trade are critically important to both those who care about what they buy, and those who aspire to make such changes in their own business practices and communities.

Righting Wrongs, Deliberative Collaborations

Firstly, the social movements that began the journey of consumer–producer connectivity and direct trading across all the atypical cases featured in this collection did not prioritise their work based on the scale or commercial potentialities of the products alone. They focused their energies on forming and strengthening small-producer organisations, and creating new supply chains connecting into an international trading system that lacks recognition of those labouring across and within the supply chain. All protagonists described in this collection have strived to right wrongs, end exclusions and build robust economic exchange on fairer terms. Above all, the ways of working they chose to adopt both prioritise producer needs and reflect consumer interests and concerns.

The myriad of initiatives, across all types of products, holds important lessons for those who wish to understand what underlies responsive and responsible trading. Several of our atypical initiatives have drawn on ideas about openness and collaboration developed within the emerging free and open-access culture, free/libre software movement. Nowadays, experimentation with radically open and highly collaborative ways of producing new knowledge and material objects can be found everywhere from agricultural seeds and farm machinery; to scientific hardware; to community based 'maker-spaces'. What is distinctive about these initiatives is that they support a way of working based on a combination of the free circulation of knowledge, unencumbered by property rights and other restrictions, and extensive and deliberative collaborations, widening the number of people involved in working jointly on a shared activity or on a shared conception of a problem. This approach to working has been spurred on by distinct motivations as the articles in this first of two collective sets of Atypical Fair Trade essays shows.

Many forces underpin such initiatives and the studies collected here display a diverse set of drivers. However, prominent among all of these atypicality essays are the aspirations to support more democratic forms of production, addressing problems that are ill-served by conventional markets and state institutions, and enhancing broader ideals and norms of solidarity and sharing between conventionally 'divided' producers and consumers. Undoubtedly the availability of networked digital infrastructure and the idea, first developed by the free/libre software movement, of 'hacking' existing intellectual property law to create a legal basis for creating 'knowledge commons' has helped advance the effectiveness of atypical initiatives and help overcome the issue of 'distance'.

Broader Visions, Moving Away from the Core

Secondly, we need to ask why we are talking about 'atypical' Fair Trade? This is a conscious decision and a reflection of the, by now, deep association of fair trade with a core, mostly conventional commodity, product 'set'. The evolution of Fair Trade under Fairtrade certification systems, with their global reach and inclusion of all kinds of companies undoubtedly led to a boom: in consumer awareness, routes to market, sales, and volumes of certified products sold. Numerous 'Fair Trade' schemes came into existence. The 'Fairtrade Mark' of Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO) becoming the largest and most widely recognised. In 2016, UK retail sales of Fairtrade certified products reached £1.64 billion.

However, sales are concentrated in a small group of products and producers. In 2016 seven major Fairtrade products accounted for 93% of all the farmers and workers in the system: bananas, sugar, cocoa, coffee, flowers, seed cotton and tea. Around the world, nearly 1,600 producer organizations, representing more than 1.7 million farmers and workers, are active in Fairtrade.¹ Fairtrade certified farmers and workers are spread across Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia, but with high concentrations in specific countries. For example in 2014, 49% of all Fairtrade farmers and workers were located in Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia. These constitute the top three countries for numbers of Fairtrade farmers and workers, closely followed by India (Fairtrade International, 2016). Surprisingly, only one quarter of Fairtrade certified farmers and workers are women (ibid). And, excluded from Fairtrade International's geographical scope are members of the European Union and G8-countries, which means that unjust and environmentally damaging work and production systems, and low socio-economic status and exploitation cannot directly be embraced and transformed within this system.²

Many organisations have sought to push at the boundaries of this mainstream 'Fairtrade' system by developing supply chains that bring under-represented countries, women producers, new or less well-established producer groups and different commodities or products into the marketplace. This thrilling diversity, plus the retained focus on producers and community needs, and resistance to trading models that perpetuate exclusions and discriminations, links the Fair Trade movement directly with the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The phrasing of the pledge that 'no one will be left behind' (UN Resolution 70/1, 2015) has since become the unofficial sub-title to the accompanying 17 Sustainable Development Goals. A subsequent publication from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) unpacks this further, suggesting that there are five key factors that contribute towards people 'being left behind': discrimination, shocks and fragility, governance, socio-economic status, and geography (UNDP, 2018). Unpacking this further still, 'discrimination' is explained as 'biases, exclusion or mistreatment [...] people face based on one or more aspect of their identity' – gender, ethnicity and religion for example. 'Geography' encompasses those who, as a result of their place of residence, experience 'isolation, vulnerability, missing or inferior public services [...] or other infrastructure gaps'. Socio-economic status includes those facing 'deprivation or disadvantage' related to income, life expectancy and education. Finally, 'shocks and fragility' refers to exposure to risks such as climate change, natural hazards and violence. The UNDP emphasises that the pledge is aimed specifically at 'curbing inequalities between people, groups and places'; correcting for legacies of discrimination and exclusion both between and within countries.

New Concepts Needed

All of the articles in Volume 2 Issue 1 involve 'Fair Trade' as defined by this Journal of Fair Trade. They reflect thoughtful and successful efforts to create new concepts, supply chains and connectivity within atypical, and sometimes unexpected, product areas. At the same time, all of the essays illustrate some of the challenges of bringing such products to market and overcoming the grip of mainstream, commercial models, which are mostly devoid of, or are operating in ignorance or opposition to such intents.

¹ <https://www.fairtrade.net/act/fairtrade-for-producers>

² https://files.fairtrade.net/standards/Geographical_Scope_Policy_EN.pdf

Notwithstanding, the movement for a just and sustainable economy has exploded into many thousands of forms and multi-dimensional ethical economy engagements, variously local, national and international. There is much here in common between all these experiences and their solution-finding trading with the underlying values of the fair trade movement, but, rather intriguingly, there has so far been little in the way of interaction between these various movements. We have not yet started the vital task of 'joining the dots' and finding the best elements and approaches that spur genuinely fair, change-making trading practices. We hope this collection will take us a further step on the journey.

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