



20 | Looking Behind the Label: *Ethical Consumption Issues Today*

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Be the change you want to see in the world

- Mahatma Gandhi

What is ethical consumption?

Ethical consumption is about making the connection between the products before you, where those products come from and in what context they have been produced. It is about taking the time to look beyond the clean, glossy packaging to the background of what is presented and making choices and purchases based on that knowledge. The smallest of actions – such as buying Fair Trade tea or coffee - is still an action, and has ripple effects. Individuals can make positive changes by thinking about the everyday choices they make - where they shop, recycling more, conserving energy, how and where they invest and so on.

What ethical consumption is *not* about is depriving yourself, or a competition to see who has the most pious shopping list. Harnessing your purchasing power means you can influence business to be more sustainable, ethical and accountable.

'Ethical shopping - and ethical consumerism in general - is about taking responsibility for your day-to-day impact upon the world. ...It means taking the time to learn a little about how your lifestyle affects people, planet and animals, and making your own decisions about what constitutes an ethical or unethical purchase'

- Clark 2004, p. vii

Ethical consumerism – underestimated?

The choices we make are bigger than just one individual action: their impact travels on, having a multiplier effect. According to the annual Co-operative Bank Ethical Purchasing Index (EPI) for 2003, the growth in ethical consumerism in the UK is soaring and is now worth £24.7 billion a year. It showed that in 2003 UK consumers spent an additional £3.5bn on ethical products, an increase of 16 per cent on the previous year. (Over the same period, UK household expenditure increased by only 4 per cent.)

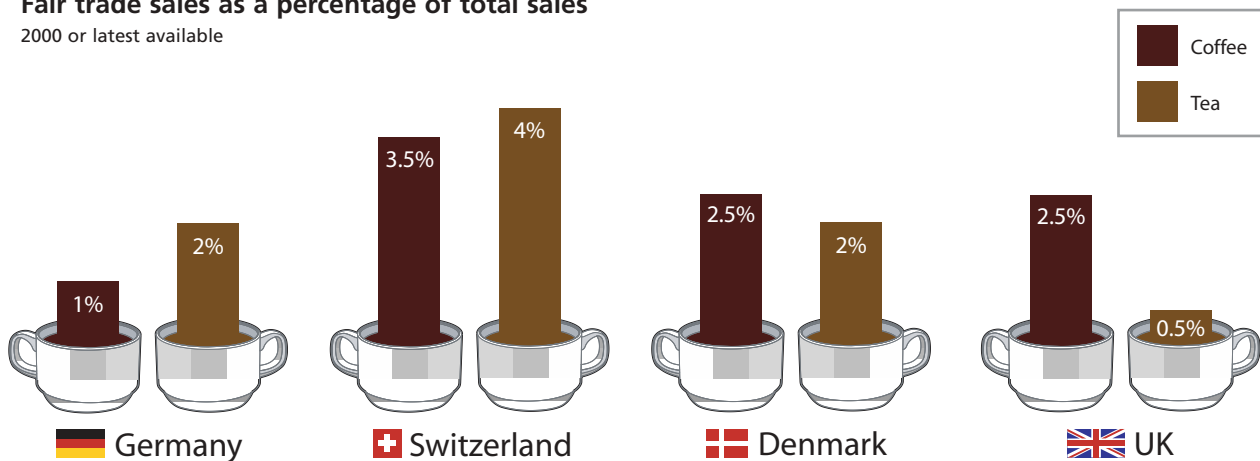
- The overall market share of ethical consumerism has increased by almost 40% in five years.
- Sales of Fair Trade goods, such as tea, coffee and bananas, increased by £29 million to £92 million – growth of 46%.
- A further £1.4bn was placed in ethical investments and deposited with ethical banks and credit unions in 2003, a rise of 18% to £9 billion.
- The total value of boycotts rose to £3.2bn, an increase of £600 million on the previous year.
- Sales of energy efficient household appliances increased by £273 million to £1.1 billion.
- Responsible tourism increased by £105m in 2002 to £127m in 2003 a growth of 17.3%.

- (Co-operative Bank, 2004)



Fair trade sales as a percentage of total sales

2000 or latest available



A history of ethical consumption

Ethical Consumption goes back at least 200 years – the focus at that time was on human rights and working conditions. Until the 18th Century, the slave trade was legal in Britain until the Quakers led a public campaign against it which was successful within thirty years.

Another good example from the 1800s is the Factory Health and Morals Act of 1802 which was concerned with working conditions and child labour in cotton and woollen mills throughout Britain. The movement for change was started in the 1700s by people interested in social justice. Their aim was to get a bill through Parliament which would improve the working conditions in factories. The law was ignored by the factories at first, but eventually succeeded in ending child labour in Britain and to better working conditions overall. Over the last three centuries, there have been many religious, cultural, political and environmental groups which have practised and promoted various types of ethical production and consumption. For example, the Anabaptists, Mennonites, Amish and Dukabors have historically argued that everyone must accept personal, moral and spiritual liability for all harm done (at whatever distance and time) to anyone else as a result of one's own choices.

However, the fair trade movement as we now know it, has more recent origins and began in the 1940s and 50s with the first attempts to commercialise 'fair trade' goods in Northern countries by religious and/or political groups such as the Mennonite Central Committee and the Church of the Brethren. In the 1960s, fair trade became strongly associated with 'anti-imperialist' campaigns, the targeting of

multinational corporations and the promotion of 'Third World' issues and concerns.

One slogan adopted by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development at the time was 'Trade not Aid' and this placed primary emphasis on the establishment of fairer trade relations with the developing world. The first Alternative Trading Organisation (ATO) was established in the Netherlands in the 1960s and was called S.O.S. Wereldhandel – "Wereldhandel" means "world trade" and SOS initially stood for "Support Underdeveloped Regions".

Today, ethical consumption covers a huge range of issues, but it is the Fairtrade ethic and label that is most commonly associated with the term. The first Fairtrade product came about in 1988, following an initiative by Mexican coffee farmers supported by a Dutch development agency – Solidaridad. They exported an ethically produced coffee – which they named Max Havelaar – to the Netherlands and this was, in effect, the beginning of the Fairtrade labelling system. In 1994 the first British Fairtrade product was launched – Maya Gold chocolate, produced by a farmers' cooperative in Belize. Fairtrade labelling and certification bodies can now be found in 19 countries, with a central international organisation (the FLO) coordinating policy.

The movement has begun to experience significant growth in recent years. Up to 2004 there were only 150 Fairtrade products for sale in the UK but by 2006 this figure had risen to over 1000. The value of sales in Europe is estimated to have been €260 million in 2000 but this figure had increased to an estimated €660 million in 2005. Sales have increased in the Americas and the Pacific Rim from \$291 million in 2003 to an estimated \$376 million in 2004.



Why ethical consumption?

Most commentators identify four key arguments in favour of ethical consumption:

- Eventually *'you reap what you sow'* – in time, all unethical practices will have negative consequences at a variety of levels and, thus, there are personal and self-centred reasons for supporting an ethical and sustainable approach. As individuals, we are not just consumers but have many other roles and responsibilities.
- There are economic reasons - everyone lives 'in community' and those communities need viable and sustainable employment to sustain them. If, for example, we support a textile industry that pays 'slave wages' in Nicaragua, the repercussions will eventually be felt here at home in the form of job losses and industrial relocation.
- There are justice reasons - tolerance of injustice anywhere in the world can help fuel and feed further injustice, so exploitation of peoples a world a way affects us through contributing to the general undermining of hard won standards.
- There are strong moral and environmental reasons. We are all citizens and caretakers of this planet and the way we are currently living is unsustainable in the long term. It has been estimated that if all inhabitants of this planet lived the lifestyle and consumption patterns of the now 'developed world', we would need five additional planets to sustain it.

'The act of buying is a vote for an economic and social model, for a particular way of producing goods. We are concerned with the quality of goods and the satisfactions we derive from them. But we cannot ignore the environmental impact, and working conditions under which products are made.'

- Anwar Fazal, former president of the International Organization of Consumer Unions

Ethical Shopping Successes

Especially since the 1980s, consumers have been making an ever-increasing impact on the way governments and companies behave in all parts of the world. Here are just a few examples:

- The campaign against testing cosmetics on animals changed the behaviour of nearly all the main cosmetics companies.
- A boycott in the US against Heinz forced the company to stop catching tuna with purse-seine fishing nets, which killed tens of thousands of dolphins each year – the tuna trade and the Whale and Tuna Conservation Society then launched a 'dolphin friendly' logo.
- In 1991, Friends of the Earth launched a campaign against the stocking of tropical timber from unsustainable sources by the six largest DIY chains – the campaign eventually because a consumer boycott and proved very successful. By 1994, all six had agreed to stop selling mahogany.
- Probably the most dramatic single environmental boycott was Greenpeace's campaign in 1995 against the dumping of Shell's oil platform Brent Spar – sales of Shell petrol were down by 70 percent in some German outlets and the company gave in after only a few days.
- Increasing numbers of clothing retail companies and sports shoes manufacturers have adopted codes of conduct about the conditions of workers making their goods.
- Ethical consumerism encouraged the phasing out of the worst ozone-depleting and greenhouse gases used in fridges and freezers.
- The UK campaign against genetically modified (GM) foods was so successful that the leading companies changed their policies – eight supermarket chains in the UK now sell their own GM-free own brands.
- The consumer boycott of fruit and wine and other products from apartheid South Africa helped bring about democratic change.
- The Good Shopping Guide first edition sold out in just 3 months – showing there is consumer demand for reliable information.

- Source: The Good Shopping Guide (2nd edition.)



So, what issues need to be considered when buying a product?

Being an ethical consumer demands not just considering a product in terms of what it costs financially, but looking at its true cost. There are three main areas to consider:

- Environmental costs
- Social costs
- Political costs

The environmental impact

When considering the environmental impact of a product we have to factor in how the product was produced or grown, transported, packaged and stored. These factors determine whether a product is ethically and ecologically fit to consume.

How a product is produced means looking at the impact the production has on the surrounding environment. Hardwood furniture, for instance, while beautiful to look at, often contributes to the destruction of important ecosystems like rainforests. When buying food, we need to examine how it is grown - is it doused in chemical fertilisers and pesticides, which poison the water table? Or is the food genetically engineered, contributing to less and less biodiversity? Is the packaging superfluous and contributing to mountains of waste.

How can we be more environmentally conscious?

There are thousands of ways to be environmentally conscious, and many of them are very practical:

- Conserve water by using less
- Conserve energy by using energy conserving appliances, or switching off when not in use
- Reducing the temperature of your heating by one degree will save on the cost of your heating bill
- Unplugging your phone charger when not in use saves energy.

These are all small things but, when combined, make a difference.

How green is your washing machine? Ethiscore.org

From a purely practical point of view, there are two problems with ethical consumerism - *quantification*, and *focus*. Quantification refers to the difficulty of 'rating' the ethical value of a product – how to decide whether one brand of coffee is more ethical than another? Which production values should one take into account? Are human rights violations worse than environmental degradation? How to create a 'scale' of ethical behaviour? Secondly, the ethical consumption movement continues to focus on a very narrow product range, generally agricultural products and clothing. When buying a television, DVD player, perfume or furniture, discerning which brands are more ethical than others is difficult.

Ethiscore was created with both these concepts in mind. With a massive product database – ranging from honey to gin, flatscreen monitors to sewing machines – it ranks companies and their individual products on a scale of 0-20, depending on their ethical value. A score of 20 represents excellent ethical values, while a zero score means a company/product has contravened practically every ethical consideration.

A branch of the Ethical Consumer Research Association (ECRA), ethiscore.org uses the ECRA's Corporate Critic database (www.corporatecritic.org) of over 30,000 companies. It analyses company track records on a number of issues such as animal testing, labour conditions, use of tax havens, political activities, workers' rights, environmental impact, business partners and health and safety procedures, as well as taking various environmental and human rights NGOs reports and publications into account.

The [ethiscore](http://ethiscore.org) website provides users with a variety of free 'trial rankings'. To access the entire database, a Stg£15, 1-year subscription is required. There is little corner-cutting: Nestle chocolate bars get a zero score, and no mobile phone manufacturer gets a score higher than 9.5.



The social impact

The social impact of consumption looks at how the production of a product affects the people in the community where it is made. For example, many textile and clothing manufacturers have outsourced production to developing countries and, faced with constant reports of sweatshop conditions, the questions arise:

- Is this product produced under unacceptable conditions?
- Are workers systematically exploited?
- Is buying goods produced in such conditions beneficial to those people and countries in the long term?
- What sort of impact does it have at home?

On average, about 80 per cent of garment workers in Eastern and Southern Africa are women, often facing high levels of exploitation, irregular pay, wages of as little as 10 pence an hour, impossibly long working weeks, sometimes with forced overtime, adding up to 120 hours. Often, workplaces are very unhealthy - health and safety regulations are routinely ignored, with verbal, physical or sexual abuse; unions face restrictive labour legislation, the right to free association is denied and, with no job security, only 5 per cent of garment workers are unionised (see www.labourbehindthelabel.org).

Ethical Tourism

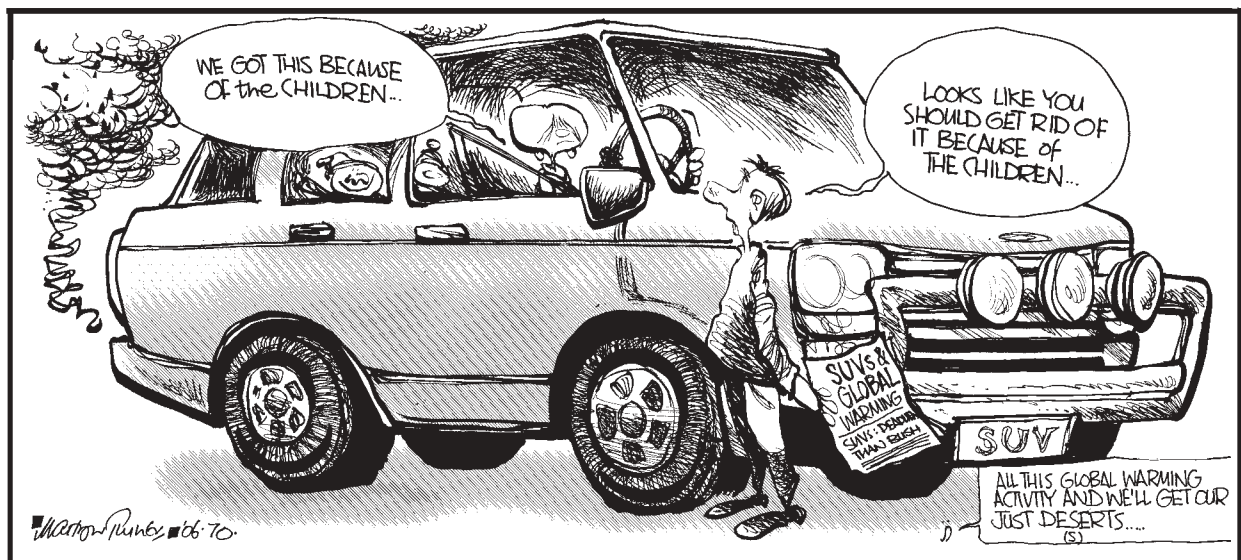
You can consider the environmental impact you are making in every area of your life, even as regards how and where you go on holiday.

It may come as a bit of a surprise that holidays can bring about an entire chain of harmful events. Setting aside the pollution caused by the plane journey, tourism can damage ecosystems, impoverish the local economy and waste valuable resources, such as water.

Rather than forgo holidays altogether, ethically-minded consumers are increasingly turning to agencies offering ethical tourism packages as alternatives. Ethical tourism aims to ensure that local communities and their environment benefit directly from tourists. Using a fair trade model, it seeks to employ and train local workers, encourages the sale of local products and promotes local entrepreneurship. Most importantly, ethical tourism ensures that the largest possible percentage of holiday costs remains in the host region – with traditional package holidays, it is estimated that as little as one-fifth of all costs is reinvested locally.

Ethical tourism also includes consideration of environmental sustainability, offering a holiday which conserves resources, respects local cultures and traditions and ensures that the least possible damage is done to the environment.

Information about ethical tourism abounds and a number of online sources are available. See, for example, www.tourismconcern.org.uk or www.thetravelfoundation.org.uk. Companies such as www.bespokeexperience.com or www.responsibletravel.com offer online bookings of ethical holidays ranging from top-end luxury breaks to back-packing budget adventures.





The political impact

Politics surrounds us – what we say or don't say, and how we act and react can all be construed as political statements. Likewise, what we consume has a political impact – it says something about ourselves, but also has a wider, more far-reaching impact.

Every purchase we make is a vote of support for the company producing or selling the product or service bought. Sometimes, to create influence, corporations channel money towards third parties. Sometimes money is given to charities and other philanthropic causes; on other occasions, companies indulge in massive political donations in order to curry favour. In the most unethical cases, corporations do business with oppressive regimes, turning a blind eye towards human rights records or labour standards.

The Co-Operative Bank, for example, believes that any business which operates within an oppressive state, whose activities benefit or support the regime at the expense of the indigenous population, can be considered businesses with links to that oppressive regime. Likewise, businesses which use state security forces or supply arms to these forces are also considered unethical.

A government gathers a significant amount of revenue from its country's exports – partly due to a number of tariffs and taxes, but mainly due to the economic productivity that such foreign direct investment generates. By buying products produced in these countries, we can be, in effect, channelling support to oppressive regimes. But is a boycott a solution? Some commentators argue that economic prosperity is likely to lead to political emancipation, and that therefore the best course of action is to actually *support* such products. Others argue that it is only through economic isolation that such regimes will be overthrown even if, in the short-term, the population will endure various hardships.

Pearly Gonzales

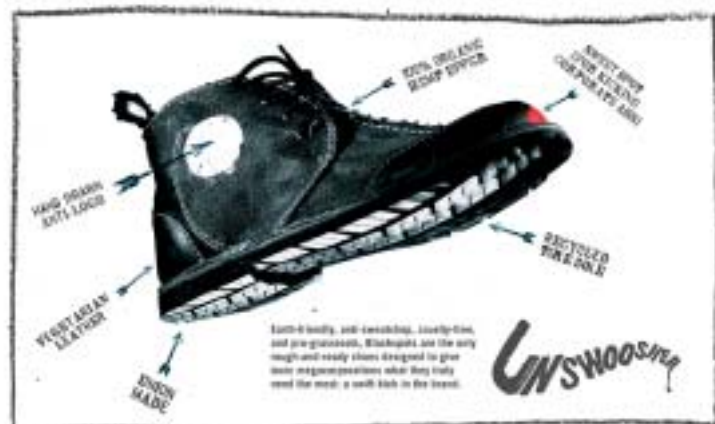
In 2003, 33 year-old Pearly Gonzales collapsed from heat exhaustion while working a 13-hour shift at a garment factory in the Philippines. The day was hot and, as usual, the industrial fan was broken. Sweating and working through the heat, she was working furiously to finish assembling as many bundles of bras as she could - which was essential because her wage was set on a piece rate scale.

After almost a year of recuperation, Pearly returned to work at the factory. She hoped that things would be better, only to find that conditions were still the same. Pearly still has to work 13-hour shifts and, occasionally, even 22-hour shifts. Her piece rate is so low that, even for 13 hours of work, Pearly receives less than the legal minimum wage stipulated by Filipino labour law. She receives no overtime pay or night pay, and the heat inside the factory is still unbearable - especially during the summer.

Three hours away, at another branch of the same company in central Manila, the working conditions are different. An independent labour union with a collective bargaining agreement represents workers, safeguarding the rights of workers. Yet, hundreds of other workers in facilities outside of Manila do not have the protection of a union. The company is headquartered in New York City and specialises in the manufacturing and distribution of intimate apparel. It generates estimated revenues of \$150 million annually through the sale of its products at large-scale discount retail stores in the USA.

Once manufactured, the apparel is branded with big-name labels. Using its Philippines branch as the manufacturing flagship, the company makes many of these goods in its facility in metro-Manila and distributes other orders to subcontract facilities that exploit workers like Pearly Gonzales.

- Source: www.behindthelabel.org



See <http://adbusters.org/metascorpo/blackspotshoes/home.php>



True-Cost Economics

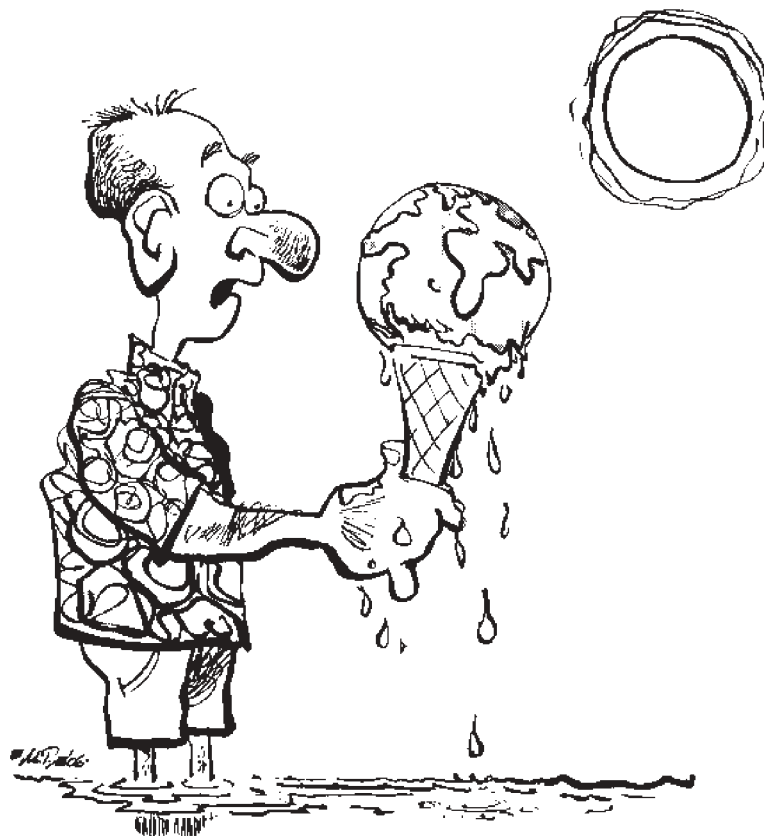
True-cost economics is essentially a philosophy which argues that the true ecological and social costs of the products we buy are not reflected in their price. It therefore advocates a shift in taxation - rather than pay taxes on 'positives' such as personal income, taxation should be on 'negatives' like pollution, unjust working conditions or consumption of natural resources.

Supermarkets are filled with goods from all over the world, but the distance travelled by these products is not discernible from their price tag. The cost of a chicken does not cover the river pollution caused by poultry factories. True-price economics emerged as a reaction to this - as the environmental toll of production increases, goods should be taxed accordingly.

In practical terms, the air freight shipping of products releases tonnes of carbon dioxide into the air, exacerbating the global warming crisis even further. True-cost economics calculates the economic damage caused by 1 tonne of carbon dioxide emissions, and applies a green tax of equal value on each tonne of emissions.

Why bother, one might ask? Why not simply work towards reducing emissions in the first place? The answer lies within the profit incentive which drives businesses - businesses hunt for the cheapest price, rather than the lowest human cost to society. If no financial penalty is incurred when the soil, air or water is polluted, then production lines will continue to do so.

The Polluter Pays Principle (PPP) and introduction of various ecological taxes is a manifestation (albeit a timid one) of true-cost economics. Countries such as Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands have all shifted up to 4% of their tax burdens away from income tax revenues onto PPP revenue. A number of other states, however, remain extremely resistant to tax shifts, primarily due to the leverage exercised by corporate lobby groups.





Positive buying

Positive buying means favouring ethical products, be they fair trade, organic or animal friendly. This option directly supports progressive companies and there are many more ethical alternatives than one might think. Fair trade is no longer simply about coffee or chocolate – it is fast spreading into a far broader range of products and options. Fairly traded products are even beginning to spread to online service industries such as music downloads (see ‘Calabash Music’ below). Also, several online sites offer consumers “green” products, including **EcoMall**, **Green Market**, **Real Goods**, and **Go-Organic**.

Sports brands have been the subject of many ethical controversies, with allegations of child labour, sweatshop use and union suppression. As a result, a number of ethical sports apparel alternatives have appeared. No Sweat Apparel, for example, sells clothing and shoes that have been produced by independent trade union members across the world. Another example is ‘Blackspot’ shoes. The shoes are made from “vegetarian materials,” including organic hemp and recycled tires and are manufactured in a “safe, comfortable union factory” in Portugal. See www.nosweatapparel.com and <http://www.adbusters.org/home/blackspotshoes> for more information.

Fairtrade – what’s the impact?

The stated objective of the fairtrade movement and the sale of its products include the desire to improve the quality of life and the return from their labour for producers, usually in developing countries. What is the current evidence that it does so?

One study, carried out in 2002, by Loraine Ronchi of the Poverty Research Unit of the University of Sussex examined the impact of Fairtrade on the CooCafe cooperative in Costa Rica. She found that Fair Trade strengthened producer organisations and concluded that *‘in light of the coffee crisis of the early 1990s, Fair Trade can be said to have accomplished its goal of improving the returns to small producers and positively affecting their quality of life and the health of the organisations that represent them locally, nationally and beyond.’*

Calabash Music

Offering music of various genres from every region around the world, Calabashmusic.com offers fairly traded music downloads. It provides fringe artists visibility and a means of selling their music online without the backing of a major label. Calabash splits download sales evenly with the artists – approximately five times more than traditional music sales models provide. Artists continue to own their music, get to set pricing levels themselves, and do away with expensive marketing and distribution overheads.

The music selection is an eclectic one: from more ‘mainstream’ genres like pop or R&B to rarities like Congolese Rumba, Arabic Ghazal or classical Hindustani music from India.

In the words of Calabash Music’s founder,

The traditional structure of music commerce has been based on a vertical axis in which producers and distributors sit at the top with all of the power and the musicians and music fans are at the bottom. With the growth of Internet use and music file sharing, this axis has shifted horizontally with musicians and music fans on more level ground with producers and distributors.

Besides providing artists with a fair deal, Calabash Music also provides a cut of profits to non-profit radio and TV stations that play music by artists listed on Calabash Music. It thus helps foster vibrant music communities across the world, proving that equitable distribution of income can result in profitable business.

In 2003, the Fair Trade Research Group at Colorado State University, conducted seven case studies of Latin American Fairtrade coffee producers and concluded that Fairtrade has ‘in a short time greatly improved the well-being of small-scale coffee farmers and their families.’ The various case studies concluded that producers had, under Fairtrade, greater access to two key business ingredients - credit and external development funding. The studies also found that Fairtrade certified producers had, compared to conventional coffee producers, greater access to training and enhanced ability to improve the quality of their coffee. Families of Fairtrade Certified producers were also found to be



better off, with their children having better access to education than 'conventional coffee farming families'.

Buy Local

This means buying from farmers markets, in small independent shops etc. How does this help? Every time you spend in a supermarket it increases their bulk buying power, allowing them to pressure their suppliers to drop their asking price. To facilitate these price cuts, suppliers often resort to providing poor working conditions for their labourers, often in the developing world.

Another benefit of buying locally is that the money generally goes back into your locality, helping maintain employment and creating a sense of community. Produce bought from farmers markets will be in season and healthier: many agricultural goods contain massive doses of pesticide in order to remain well-preserved in their long journey to supermarket shelves. There is another indirect benefit: buying locally saves on transport miles.

Buying local also creates accountability: one of the difficulties in 'selling' fair trade to individuals is the sense of detachment they feel. This is not as big an issue when buying local, since people are less likely to tolerate someone they know being cheated than they are an anonymous person living thousands of miles away. Furthermore, any negative environmental impact will have to be dealt with as it will be right on our own doorsteps.

Boycott

The ethical consumer website has a list of the latest boycotts and the issues involved, for example, www.ethicalconsumer.org or www.boycotts.org www.stopesso.org www.babymilkaction.org, www.cokewatch.org

One of the most well known consumer boycott movements of previous years was aimed at South African goods in protest at the nature and impact of Apartheid. But, do boycott campaigns really work? The evidence seems to be that they do, if:

- Enough people support the campaign and the rationale behind it
- The campaign is targeted directly and effectively
- It has the backing of those directly affected by the action.

Baby Milk Action – the Nestle boycott

The Baby Milk Action campaign is one of the longest-running, not to mention most famous, boycotts around. Ever since 1977 it has called for a blanket boycott on all Nestle products in protest at its baby milk promotion in the third world. UNICEF has stated

'Marketing practices that undermine breastfeeding are potentially hazardous wherever they are pursued: in the developing world, WHO estimates that some 1.5 million children die each year because they are not adequately breastfed. These facts are not in dispute.'

Although there is nothing dangerous about Nestlé's baby milk powder, it is fatal for infants when mixed with unclean drinking water. Despite the widely-recognised difficulty in accessing clean water within the third world, Nestle persists in marketing its baby milk powder within countries which lack adequate sanitation and clean water.

This is in clear contravention of World Health Assembly regulations and disregards the health hazard its promotional campaign poses. The Baby Milk Action campaign intends to continue its boycott until Nestle abides by these regulations, in both policy and practice.

Unlike traditional boycotts, the campaign extends to public demonstrations as well as challenges at debates. At one point it was Nestle company policy to refuse to speak at public lectures and debates if Baby Milk Action campaigners were present, although it subsequently reversed this decision following public criticism.

Some advocates of ethical consumption such as Clark (2004), argue that branded companies are more visible and so subject to unfair criticism and focus. Since they are constantly under the spotlight, large corporations are bound to face more ire than smaller companies. They argue that this public scrutiny drives corporations to have codes of conduct unmatched by their smaller rivals:

'McDonalds uses free range eggs, shuns milk from cows injected with the controversial protein known as "bovine growth hormone" and doesn't use eco-unfriendly polystyrene in its packaging. Can your local burger joint say the same?'

- Clark 2004



An ethical stock market?

Further evidence that ethical and sustainable consumption is increasingly acknowledged as a functional model of doing business can be seen in its spread to the highest echelons of business power – the stock market.

In 1999, Dow Jones created the Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes, which was closely followed by the FTSE launching the FTSE4Good Index Series. Both these indices list companies which adhere to a number of corporate and social responsibility standards.

The Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes (DJSI) analyse a number of sustainability trends in order to determine which companies are eligible for inclusion. The assessment comprises around 50 different criteria, including corporate governance, environmental performance, human rights policies and other such criteria. The DJSI World comprises the leading 10% of the largest 2,500 companies in terms of corporate sustainability from each industry.

The DJSI also includes additional indexes, which exclude companies generating revenue

from tobacco, gambling, alcohol, armaments or firearms.

The FTSE4Good Index aims to provide a tool for responsible investors to identify and invest in companies that meet globally recognised corporate responsibility standards and social responsibility levels. In order to be included within the FTSE4Good Indexes, a company must meet criteria requirements in five areas:

- Working towards environmental sustainability
- Developing positive relationships with stakeholders
- Upholding and supporting universal human rights
- Ensuring good supply chain labour standards
- Countering bribery.

Unlike the DJSI, the FTSE4Good Index specifically excludes companies from a number of controversial industries. Companies operating in the fields of tobacco, armaments, nuclear power production and uranium extraction are not eligible for inclusion within the FTSE4Good Index Series.

Debating ‘Green Consumption’ and other things ...

Debate about the value and impact of green or ethical consumerism is ongoing - its critics claim that it has negligible effect, does not address wider economic, social and political issues relating to the creation of needs and that it has been co-opted by advertisers as a marketing tool. Supporters argue that ethical or green consumerism offers a real opportunity for consumers to realise their values and beliefs and to ‘actualise’ them through their purchasing choices and power.

Waste itself has a long history and while human consumption is now at its highest point ever (and, in 2000, surpassed the earth’s natural capacity to absorb it by 15%), the process began with the industrial revolution. Except in

times of war, consumption has been fundamental in developed world consciousness and governments and corporations have continuously highlighted consumerism as a panacea for many ills, domestically and internationally, and have usually presented it as necessary for economic prosperity and domestic stability. Most citizens of the developed world now tend to regard any reduction in their capacity to consume as a threat to their quality of life and/or to their jobs and, for some, to their values and belief systems. Consumerism and all that it implies, has become a hallmark of western, ‘developed’ society and a dominant defining characteristic of ‘development’ itself.



Reviewing the arguments

The critics of ethical or green consumerism often argue the following:

- It supports the corporate ideal that places environmental responsibility on the shoulders of individuals, this hides larger structures and decisions that continue to ensure that already wealthy corporations continue to benefit from pollution and the mass extraction of resources. It does not challenge or alter institutional arrangements or make possible radically new ways of living.
- It places broader civic involvement in a secondary position after consumption. For many, confronting the consumption problem demands the sort of institutional thinking that the individualisation of responsibility undermines.
- It does not place citizens in their 'real world' of participatory democracy - working together to change broader policy and larger social institutions.

However:

- As companies begin to understand the power of the alternative consumer, they have attempted to clean up their act in many, tangible ways – sometimes referred to as 'greenwashing' by those concerned with the environment.
- When alternative consumption is matched by government action, the results are real. In Germany, the state decreed that 72% of the bottles that a company produces must be refillable, in Denmark, 98% of the bottles are refillable and in these countries, some 98% of the public stated that they consistently return the bottles for the deposit. By insisting on corporate change, these governments have not only altered the environmental activities of the companies but also the general public. Equally, ethical or eco-labelling may often be an 'entry-point' for less committed citizens into the area of responsible living.

But:

- Who is to say that a decision not to buy paper products harvested from virgin forests is less significant an act than publicly protesting the way in which the government supports companies that produce such products?
- Some might argue that the second choice is more valuable as it may increase people's awareness of the company's practices but, in exercising choice, we are addressing a company through the means of money - which may be the only language it understands.
- Some also argue that consumption offers a perfect opportunity for individuals to begin to exert power by extending the idea of participatory democracy to the area of consumption thus influencing the decisions that affect the future of our society and ultimately, our planet.
- Some activists see ethical or green consumerism as reinforcing capitalism, offering products that may mitigate significant ecological impacts but which do not, ultimately, question the '*assumption of consumption*' - goods are good and more goods are better, consumption itself is beyond question.
- Critics also highlight the ways in which alternatives have been co-opted by advertising and marketing - a trend that is growing and is often referred to as the marketing of dissent.

But:

- For many, the debate goes much further - it is more than a debate about individual choices among different products – it is an agenda of choices linking the various stages of production and consumption from extraction and manufacturing to packaging, transport and final use as well as disposal. Each of these stages contains a set of human and environmental relations that revolve around power and its impact. If the act of consumption is politicised and understood in context, then individual choice can create opportunities for thought, analysis and action.
- This leads us finally to the idea of '*everyday action*' – a variety of ways to lessen (environmentally) or increase (politically) the impact of our choices.



And in conclusion,

As researcher and writer Annie Muldoon (of Carleton University, Ottawa – the piece on page 301 summarises many of her arguments) notes:

'In a society in which consumption is structurally positioned as the answer to so many needs, desires, and problems, and in which alternatives are structurally blocked, moral suasion is insufficient. Asking people to act ethically is important, but we must also analyse and transform the structures that make it difficult for them to do so.'

Readings

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