

# Who buys fairtrade products and why? Characteristics of consumers of fairtrade in Colchester, UK

*Siobhan O'Sullivan shares the results of her research, which could usefully inform the approaches of development education practitioners to community education on fair trade and trade justice.*

## 1.1 Introduction: An unequal world

We live in a world of vast inequalities, where 20% of the world's people in the highest-income countries account for 86% of total private consumption, and the poorest 20% account for 1.3%; a world where more than a fifth of the world's population (over one billion people) is deprived of basic consumption needs (Boer, 1998). With the increasing institutionalisation of a worldwide free trade regime, the domains of consumption and production have been altered from national to global orientations. This globalisation project (growth through integration to world markets) has resulted in shifts in the methods of food production and distribution, whereby an increased proportion of our daily diet is drawn from distant places and arrives through commercial channels.

However, the effects of globalisation are not uniform. For industrialised countries globalisation signifies an increase in the diversity of foods and commodity choices available. For less industrialised countries it results in the local food supply being destabilised as farmers grow non-traditional plants as cash crops for human and animal consumption in the West, and are vulnerable to the dictates of transnational corporations, world markets, and liberalisation under Structural Adjustment Policies. Negative effects on the conditions of production are widespread e.g. depressed wages, long working hours, unstable market prices often not covering the costs of production for small farmers and slavery conditions for labourers on some plantations. These modes of production are often invisible to the consumer, whose attention is instead drawn to the price, quality, taste, image etc. of the product. In fact, the consumer is used as the justification for the dominant model of free-market capitalism i.e. that markets work as they do because people want cheap food (Lawrence, 2004).

The fairtrade movement began in Europe approximately 40 years ago as a more efficient way of encouraging sustainable development than aid by paying 'third world' producers a fairer price for their products (Levi and Linton, 2003). It has since been seen as a counter to the free market capitalism of contemporary society in several ways. On the production side, the fairtrade movement concentrates on providing living wages to small farmers in 'developing countries' and fair pay and conditions for workers on plantations and in factories, also taking into account environmental sustainability. On the distribution side, the

fairtrade movement is comprised of 'ethical businesses', as well as ethical institutions (such as churches, educational bodies, and councils) and promotional and labelling organisations. Fairtrade products were initially sold in 'alternative' shopping outlets but in recent years supermarkets have begun to stock a range of products. One of the criteria for fairtrade shops is an educational component focusing on the world trade system (e.g. through information leaflets, outreach programmes and connections to Development Education Centres). While 'Free trade encourages no concern with economic sustainability of small farmers ... fairtrade tries to change the ethical calculus of consumers so that they consider economic sustainability as important as price and quality' (Levi and Linton, 2003, p.417).

## 1.2 Research on fairtrade consumption

This paper reports on research that addresses the consumption of fairtrade products in a small city, Colchester, in the south east of England, as a case study of ethical consumption. The research explored the socio-demographic profiles of consumers of fairtrade and their reasons for purchasing fairtrade. Research specifically on the consumption of fairtrade is scarce, concentrating on the market share of fairtrade and positing motivations of consumers, e.g. a sense of market inequalities. Limited attitudinal and socio-demographic studies have been carried out previously on ethical consumption in Europe e.g. studies have found that women were more active than men, and older people more active than younger, positing that the age difference was due to income. Some writers express scepticism as to the possibility of ethical consumption being extended beyond a small proportion of people, arguing that only the wealthiest can engage in ethical consumerism (Levinson, 2001). This has been countered by studies such as Andersen and Tobiasen (2004) who find that ethical consumption in Denmark is not causally linked to income but to education, global political orientation and grassroots activism.

This research draws on both interviews and surveys in order to supplement findings from one method to the other. An explorative survey was conducted with 30 people who buy fairtrade and 6 in-depth interviews were carried out with more regular consumers of fairtrade. Consumers were drawn from 3 locations in Colchester – a supermarket, charity shop and fairtrade shop – and participants were selected on the

basis of answering yes to an initial question 'Do you buy fairtrade products'. The survey explored *who* are the fairtrade consumers, *why* do they shop ethically/buy fairtrade and *what* products are bought and other 'ethical' practices carried out. The interviews were conducted to explore in greater detail the motivations and reasons of people buying fairtrade and the generators of these reasons (i.e. paths to fairtrade).

## 2.1 Characteristics of fairtrade consumers in Colchester

Colchester, an old Roman and Norman centre and now an army town, has a population of approximately 155,000, with the majority of the population white and British. Over 70% of the population are of Christian backgrounds.

Approximately 8% of the population have educational qualifications at degree level, and approximately half the population are employed. An 'alternative shopping culture' is evident but in a minimal way. Colchester has many supermarkets in the outskirts of the town as well some in the town centre. A farmers market is held just once a month in the Arts Centre, away from the main town centre. Health food shops are small and stock a limited range. Organic box schemes are promoted by the Environmental Centre which have had limited success in the area. Colchester has one independent fairtrade shop located in the town centre, which is connected to a development education centre. Fairtrade products are also available in some of the supermarkets in Colchester, in charity shops, several other outlets and the University campus. A Fairtrade Town campaigning group has been set up recently with a wide support base to lobby the council and local businesses and organisations to stock and promote fairtrade products.

The fairtrade consumers in this research were spread across a range of ages, with twice as many women taking part in the survey and interviews as men. The participants were predominately highly educated (with 75% of participants university-qualified). Perhaps surprisingly, income was not a significant factor regarding buying fairtrade with household income spread across a range of incomes. The participants had by and large a left-wing political allegiance and most were politically active (in terms of voting and signing petitions/writing letters). While a high number of the participants vote (over 80%) there was low trust in politicians and membership of political parties was low. These results articulate most with the work of Andersen and Tobiasen (2004). Interestingly one of the most significant factors amongst the fairtrade sample was religion (with almost 60% of the sample Christian), especially amongst the female proportion of the sample. However, specifically religious reasons for buying fairtrade were not prominent, with the reasons consumers buy fairtrade centring primarily on a sense of injustice and empathy with poor farmers and their families. The survey asked people to rate their top three reasons for buying fairtrade (out of 9 options) and overall the most common reasons were 'better conditions for workers' (25.6% of responses), 'to use

consumer power for a fairer economic system' (19.5% of responses); and 'better environmental care' (17.1% of responses), overall indicating a high commitment to civil society. Support for charities was also high (and was closely correlated to religious background), and the fairtrade consumers were quite environmentally conscious. These dimensions of religion, environment, and commitment to civil society are explored further below.

**Religious background:** Religion and practising religion appear to be significant factors in people regularly buying fairtrade. Of the 30 participants, 70% were members of a religion and the majority of these were practising their religion. Religion is a more significant factor for the females in the sample with almost three fifths of the female sample stating they were Christian. Word of mouth (particularly through church groups, family and friends) is an important way to come to buy fairtrade and consumers who heard about fairtrade that way are most likely to buy fairtrade on a regular basis (perhaps due to social norms). Many participants have a family member or friend who runs or ran a fairtrade stall in their Church and some run Church stalls themselves. Thus the connections to the Church are quite strong with religion figuring widely in how consumers started to buy fairtrade.

*So the interest in what people were earning from the things that ended up on our breakfast table was very strong and it strikes me especially if you're involved in church you tend to be involved in a lot of charity and being made aware of fundraising for this that and the other (Interview 1)*

However regarding why consumers buy fairtrade products, in the interviews most participants' reasons for buying are not identified with their faith but as generalised principles of care, respect and justice. This articulates with the result from the survey where consumers were asked to rate their top three reasons for buying fairtrade (out of 9 options) – just 2.44% of reasons for buying were 'for religious reasons'.

*I think I would be involved in fairtrade anyway but certainly you hear a lot about it through the churches and I've come to it I suppose through the church really but I don't think it's a particularly religious thing I think it's a humanitarian thing (Interview 1)*

**Environmental consciousness:** Vegetarianism and green practices seem to be important dimensions of the consumer's practices. 25% of the participants are vegetarian (more males than females). There is a high level of environmental practices, with the majority of participants recycling (which may correlate to Colchester Council's promotion of recycling) and buying environmentally friendly household products. The level of green practices was similar in both male and female. Organic products are popular, with over 85% of the participants buying organic. Regarding where people shop, most participants shop in a mix of locations including supermarkets, local independent shops, farmers markets and farm shops. Thus it appears that buying

fairtrade is part of wider environmental practices, which connects to the significance of one of the reasons for buying fairtrade – ‘better environmental care’.

*We buy environmentally friendly stuff we're sort of going back to wholefood vegetarian stuff which is part of the reason why I started going to the fairtrade shop as well (Interview 6)*

**Commitments to civil society:** Membership of, and donating to, charities is quite high in the sample. Over 40% of participants are members of a charity or voluntary group with the membership of charities strongly correlated with religious orientation (75% of the participants who are members of charities belong to a religion, mainly Christian). There is a high level of trust in charities. However there is also a frustration with the continued poverty in the world, despite the work of NGOs. Thus the participants identify fairtrade as an alternative to ‘traditional’ charity practices.

*I think it's mad that what we give out in aid we get back in debt it's ridiculous ... so yeah I think we need it's sometimes you get frustrated because you see all these charities and non governmental organisations doing all this work and you think it should have had some effect by now it's frustrating (Interview 5)*

Fairtrade consumers were very concerned about the conditions of production, drawing from concepts of justice and equality.

*The more you find out the unfairness of the whole system and how the big companies just dictate terms to everybody is quite appalling ... people can work very hard and they ought to be rewarded the same as way as we expect to be rewarded if we work hard here (Interview 1)*

The participants empathise and identify with the producers, seeing them as ‘real’ people who are being exploited.

*I've worked for peanuts before you know I've picked apples over here and fruit over here and you don't get a lot of money certainly you don't get a living wage out of it you know ... you start to see them as real people not just a product on a shelf (Interview 3)*

Most of the participants think their purchasing has positive effects with 90% of the participants in the survey agreeing that fairtrade improves producer welfare and has many benefits for his/her family and community.

*I started thinking about not just about buying a jar of coffee but where that coffee came from who supplied it and started reading some stuff some of the literature about people who can't make ends meet or are selling at a loss that actually get some a positive benefit from fairtrade you know having an education for their children, electricity in the house (Interview 5)*

73% of the participants in the survey also agree that buying fairtrade changes business practices in that buying fairtrade collectively has an effect on business practices. Thus the consumer has a responsibility to buy such goods.

*Well I think everyone should take responsibility for their involvement including the consumer I do think that people involved in trade people involved in any activity should take moral responsibility for their actions (Interview 4)*

### 3.1 In conclusion

There were multiple elements in consumers reasoning, motivations and paths to ethical consumption. From the research it is apparent that the ethical consciousness of the consumers centred around three main dimensions – a commitment to civil society (focusing on unfairness and empathy at a global level), environmental consciousness and religious connections. As paths to buying fairtrade, religious involvement, green practices and charity membership were amongst the most significant factors emerging from my research, which no previous study had highlighted. Perhaps these dimensions were significant because of the relatively low visibility of fairtrade in Colchester shops, thus word of mouth and personal contacts were important and the support from Christian Churches is particularly strong (with many Churches moving towards becoming fairtrade churches). Different aspects may be more significant in other towns with differing consumer cultures and socio-demographics.

In conclusion, fairtrade may be seen as effective in challenging the dominant model of consumerism in free-market capitalism, which forms part of our everyday lives. Through the alternative model of production and consumption that fairtrade presents, consumers of fairtrade are conscious of *who* produces the product bought and how such products are produced, changing and considering their ethical consumption habits as a part of collective struggles for a more just world.

### References

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- For further information on fair trade, see: [www.fairtrade.org.uk](http://www.fairtrade.org.uk)

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