

# Taking Fair Trade to the Consumer

BY ZACK GROSS

Fair Trade in Canada has come a long way in the last 25-or-so years. In the late 80s, the organization I worked for, the Marquis Project, began selling those not-particularly-tasty bricks of Bridgehead ground coffee, along with crafts we brought in from partners in East Africa.

In those days, you'd often see me carrying large hockey bags full of goods across borders and through airports. Fair Trade was in its infancy, and few consumers took the long walk down our dark office hallways to purchase our products. We probably sold only a few dozen bags of coffee each year. Our dedicated buyers were often members of the church community, people with strong political motivations, or folks living alternative lifestyles. Most consumers had no idea Fair Trade existed.

Now, Fair Trade products can be found in most grocery stores across the country. More than six million kilograms of Fair Trade coffee alone was sold in Canada in 2011.

A major issue we seek to address with Fair Trade is the ineffectiveness of conventional foreign aid programs—many of which haven't been able to reduce poverty in less-developed communities. Even now, for every dollar of aid we send to developing countries, we take back more through exploitive trade policies: debt repayment schemes, and other measures. Often, these practices exacerbate issues such as child slavery, resource extraction and conflicts, environmental destruction, and the abuse of women.

Our challenge is to create awareness of these issues and to establish a means for effective trade that encourages a fairer model of support for social development.

Twenty-five years later, Manitoba has made significant inroads in consumer awareness and purchasing. According to a recent telephone study that surveyed 1,000 participants, 64 percent of respondents were likely to purchase Fair Trade products even though they may cost an average of 10 percent more. Also, 47 percent said they buy Fair Trade products on a monthly basis. Demand in general is strong, as 52 percent of respondents wanted more Fair Trade available in local eateries, and 44 percent supported more Fair Trade products in their staff rooms.

The study also showed that students, young people, urban shoppers, and women are more likely to buy Fair Trade products. Other support for Fair Trade comes from people with higher education, higher income, and younger families. While these trends are promising, they also show that there is

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still work to be done in providing good information to a broader range of consumers and lowering prices to appeal to wider demographics.

Fair Trade can still be a back burner issue for many consumers. We want it to be front and centre, where people care passionately—and where intentions lead to actions. There have been consumer paradigm shifts before. For example, less people are buying cigarettes these days. And support for eco-friendly products is much more common. Our ultimate hope is to bring that level of awareness and response to Fair Trade. ☺

Zack Gross is the Outreach Coordinator for Fair Trade Manitoba, a program of the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation. He is also a member of the Fair Trade Town Committee in Gimli, Manitoba, and the President of the Canadian Fair Trade Network.



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