
Community Development From The Ground Up: Social-Justice Coffee

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Abstract

This article examines the fair trade paradigm through a study of the Mexican coffee-producing cooperative UCIRI and the U.S. importer-roaster Equal Exchange. This alternative to conventional trade is a partnership aimed at satisfying the interests of small farmers, coffee roasters, and consumers. Farmers in democratic cooperatives collectively address crop and environmental improvement, organic certification, in-country processing, and the negotiation of contracts with roasters in the North. A portion of profits are re-invested in community improvements. Roasters pay a fair trade price, provide credit, and promote the community development context of the coffee in their marketing. We argue that the process is best understood as a social movement aimed at grassroots development. Roasters are both material beneficiaries and conscience constituents, linked to producers and consumers in a moral economy which promotes social solidarity and enhances the social capital of each sector in the movement.

Keywords: *fair trade, coffee, alternative trade, moral economy, community-based development*

Introduction

Since the early 1980s, a fair trade model of market relations has emerged to challenge aspects of conventional global capitalism. Nowhere is this more developed than in the coffee sector which links peasant producers in Latin America with traders and distributors in Europe and the United States.

Small farmers, often members of indigenous communities who grow coffee along with food crops on a few hectares, have organized into democratically-controlled coffee cooperatives so as to seize control of their own economic development. In such organizations, they learn from each other how to improve production and aggregate their harvest for processing and export. With its economies of scale, the cooperative structure allows these farmers to obtain third-party certification of their organic production methods and to secure a premium price over that obtained in the conventional and speculative coffee market. Co-op-owned trucks reduce the expense of local transportation. Growers save on processing costs by using their association's equipment and warehouses. And co-op officials negotiate directly with coffee roasters in the North. At each step in the chain of production from field to packed shipping container, cooperatives use their own labor and capital to capture profit previously lost to such middlemen as truckers, money lenders, brokers, and in-country processors. Farmer-to-farmer systems of crop improvement and cooperative marketing enable participants to improve the quality of their coffee and gain experience in sales, coffee grading, machine maintenance, and accounting. Most of all, cooperative structures allow individuals and communities to direct their own collective affairs, accumulating "social capital" (Coleman 1988, 1990, Ch. 12; Putnam 1993), or what might better be termed "organizational capital" which can be directed toward diverse projects of development. In this instance, social capital takes the form of institutionally-embedded skills and knowledge which facilitate group interaction, community solidarity, and economic efficiency. The income from their enhanced production and marketing sys-

tems lets small farmers remain on their land and improve living conditions through community-directed social and economic projects. Their positive experience collectively addressing the coffee market has opened up a social space in which small farmers can envision and implement their own community development.

These cooperatives market their fair trade coffee directly to importers in the United States and Europe, the major coffee consuming regions. There it is blended, roasted, ground, packaged, and distributed in ways which promote the fair trade identity of the product. The concept of fair trade includes the following:

- Stable, long-term contracts between producers and roaster/importers.
- Prices set at a level that is thought to enable farmers to survive and their cooperatives to accumulate development capital. At present this "fair price" is a minimum of \$1.26 a pound for Arabica beans, no matter how low the world coffee price falls, with the additional increment gradually decreasing to zero as the world price rises to \$1.65 a pound.
- Premiums for high quality coffee and for organic coffee.
- Advance partial-payments of 60 percent of the contract price paid prior to harvest, when farmers and their cooperatives need it most.
- Democratic control of coffee cooperatives by their farmer-members.
- A commitment to ecologically sustainable production, supported by farmer-to-farmer technical training and the organic premium.
- A program of farmer-controlled economic and social development in producer communities, supported through the fair trade premium price (Greenfield 1994, 6-11; Renard 1999, 336-337).

Package labels, sales brochures, and magazine ads inform customers that the fair trade system in which they are invited to participate returns more of the profit to small farmer producers. In the United States, fair trade coffee was initially sold through a system of community-based cooperative food stores established as part of the social movements of the 1960s. Subsequently, mail order catalogues such as Pueblo To People, which dealt directly with Latin American producers of clothing and crafts and returned more profit to producers than conventional systems based on subcontracting, began to carry fair trade coffee. Distribution systems have since expanded to include wholesale buying clubs organized by church groups, college cafeterias on campuses with strong student organizations promoting ecology and social justice, gourmet coffee bars, and independently-owned supermarkets. Most recently, selected stores in corporate supermarket

chains such as Shaws have begun to carry fair trade coffee under the Equal Exchange label.

Within a global system characterized by plantation-grown coffee, speculative commodity markets, and multinational food processors, the fair trade system has carved out a niche. Its alternative marketing practices are in conscious opposition to the conventional coffee trade which commodifies coffee as a uniform product deracinated from the location and conditions of production. The fair trade system rests on an ethically-centered corporate culture which stresses the values of equity to all parties in the commercial transaction, the cultivation of long-term contractual relationships with suppliers, and partial-payments in advance of the harvest to give the producer cooperatives working capital. In contrast to price-based models of consumerism, fair trade labeling and promotional activity encourages coffee drinkers to influence through selective purchasing the conditions under which their beverage is produced. Ultimately, the fair trade system depends on the mobilization of key actors in the North into a movement seeking the sustainability of indigenous and peasant communities in coffee-producing regions as a matter of social justice and human rights; the movement supports cooperative agriculturally-based communities as a valued component of cultural diversity.

In Europe, the ethical motivation and initiative for the system rests with faith-based organizations which created the fair trade label, Max Havelaar, first introduced into the Holland market in 1988. Conventional roaster/distributors pay the certifying foundation, Stichting Max Havelaar, for use-rights to its label, or seal, which they attach to that portion of their coffee obtained under fair trade contracts. Roasters negotiate these contracts; Max Havelaar monitors their conformity with fair trade criteria. The advantage of this approach for small coffee producers includes unimpeded access to mainstream coffee roasters and their supermarket outlets (Renard 1999; Motz 1999). The system was constructed through the pressure which a religiously-based social movement in Holland, together with some Dutch political allies, were able to exert against the conventional roasters. The purpose of the movement was to promote self-development in coffee-growing regions through more equitable trade conditions than the unregulated terms-of-trade between North and South were producing.

Prior to developing the label, this movement supported grants to peasant cooperatives obtained from religious groups and administered through Solidaridad, a Dutch ecumenical foundation. Sales of peasant-produced food and crafts were promoted through a system of fair trade shops in major European cities. This retail system, whose major sales item turned out to be coffee, stagnated due to inefficiencies associated with its volunteer shop labor, the inconvenience of

providing coffee through specialized outlets when consumers were using supermarkets for their other food shopping, and a marketing formula which relied on the conscience of consumers but ignored their desire for the highest quality coffee (Renard 1999, 185-186). "I remember my father buying fair trade coffee," a Dutch woman told us, "but it was so bad that we would never serve it to company" (Motz 1999). With the Max Havelaar label in place, major roasters in Holland began to purchase coffee directly from peasant cooperatives under fair trade contract provisions. The concern of the roasters with the prestige of their established brands, combined with the premiums which the fair trade system provided cooperatives for sending first quality coffee, were successful in changing the image of fair trade coffee. More than 90 percent of Dutch supermarkets now carry coffee with the Max Havelaar seal and use of the label has been extended to certify chocolate products, tea, honey, and bananas (Stichting Max Havelaar 1998, 5).²

The marketing of fair trade coffee in the United States incorporated the pre-existing fair trade standards and development analysis from the Dutch. But it grew from a smaller organizational base of social justice activists who established the roaster/distributor, Equal Exchange, specifically to bring fair trade marketing to the United States. While focusing and growing through a broad movement concerned with just trade relations with Latin America, Equal Exchange remains the only fair trade roaster of any size in this country. While its initial investors included religious organizations, the impetus for any religiously-based consumer support has remained with the roaster, which has organized a portion of its marketing through Lutheran church coffee hours and buying clubs and continued reliance on Catholic religious orders for investment capital. The organizational structure and culture of Equal Exchange incorporates worker-ownership and control. Along with the opportunity to participate in an innovative entrepreneurial organization, these employees are rewarded with the satisfaction of transnational social solidarity as part of a trade reform movement.

Analysts of progressive social movements in Latin America have concluded that the key to change lies in linking material beneficiaries of that change in the South — peasants, rubber tappers, the landless — with extra-regional players in the North, such as social justice and environmental NGOs, supported by value and identity constituencies (Kaimowitz 1997). In other words, change in the interest of the marginalized is most likely when old social movement forms are allied with new social movement constituencies, with a region spanning both South and North as the context in which these actors can combine their efforts. From this perspective, the relationship between producer cooperatives and Equal Exchange constitutes such a linkage.

Fair trade institution-building linking Mexico and the U.S. faces in two directions. Internally, cooperative structures empower their members — farmers or employees of roasters — to improve their individual skills and collective profit margins. Peasant coffee growers use a portion of the higher price they obtain through the fair trade system to develop the educational, health, transportation, and cultural activities that enhance their collective life. As cooperative members, they can measure their gains against what they experienced as individual market actors and rural residents: poverty and powerlessness without hope of transformation. In the U.S., the fair trade roaster/distributor has adopted a cooperative structure in which established workers share in stock ownership and participate in organizational decision-making which allows worker/owners to reinterpret their careers as "callings" with immediate and transcendent satisfactions (Weber 1958). Within a normatively integrated work community seeking market reform goals, there is space for employees to learn new skills and collectively manage their enterprise. In social movement terms, employees of the fair trade roaster are simultaneously "conscience constituents" working for the good of others — peasant farmers — and "material beneficiaries" of their efforts (McCarthy and Zald 1997). This combination of role satisfactions allows worker/owners to escape the moral alienation of bureaucratic hierarchy found with mainstream employment — what some have called the "take the money and run" ethos (Jackel 1988, 75-100).

Each side, then, commits itself to support a system of coffee production that is organizationally democratic, ecologically sustainable, and sufficiently profitable to enable small farmers to remain on the land with the hope that they can improve their lives. The fair trade paradigm offers coffee producers in the South and distributors in the North the satisfactions that come from linking their efforts in a struggle to improve conditions for small farmers generally and to add a moral dimension to the act of coffee consumption. The alternative trade system is most usefully understood as a social movement that seeks to challenge global commodity markets and alter the motivational assumptions built into the culture of capitalism.

This paper examines the fair trade model by describing a small farmer cooperative in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, the Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Región del Istmo (UCIRI), and the fair trade roaster with whom it does business in the United States, Equal Exchange.

UCIRI: The Peasant Cooperative Model

The Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Región del Istmo (UCIRI), a cooperative of more than 2,000 families from three indigenous linguistic groups — Zapotecos de la

Sierra, Mixes, and Chontales — living in a spectacular region of river valleys and mountains north of Tejuantepec in the Isthmus of southern Mexico, is the most fully developed and influential model of peasant cooperative development based on coffee production for the fair trade market. In critical opposition to the economic and political marginalization of Indians in Mexico, UCIRI embodies an integrated community approach to achieve moral and economic development.

Indians in this region have been producing small amounts of coffee since the beginning of the century. Grown alongside crops for family consumption, coffee was the cash or barter crop. Due to their isolated mountainside location, peasants found that land was readily available, with the amount farmed per household limited by the capacity of family labor to between 4 and 8 hectares. But land alone did not bring prosperity. Living in a region with limited access and few economic alternatives, peasant producers had little flexibility in selling their coffee beans. Too poor to purchase animals to transport their beans to processors in the city or to buy hand depulpers to process the beans for storage, they were captive to the cacique/coyote coffee-buying system. Indian communal lands in highland areas difficult to incorporate into coastal plantation agricultural systems and allocated to families for subsistence farming, acted as a non-market provisioning system and ancillary system of coffee production. Like the insufficient ejido lands near the coffee states in Chiapas, upland communal lands in Oaxaca reduced the price of field labor to coastal estates, shifted the risks of a portion of coffee production to small producers and increased the supply of low-cost green coffee to the processing plants owned by the regional oligarchy.

After the Mexican Revolution, the Isthmus zone was dominated by caciquismo, that is to say, a political system where individual leaders who exercised personal power in the interests of a small group, dominated commerce, lent money, and dispensed favors. Caciques with connections in the coastal commercial centers bought coffee and transported it to commercial processing plants in Ixtepec. In addition, itinerant buyers of coffee beans — “coyotes” — brought goods such as clothing, salt, cement and sugar, into the mountains to producer communities to barter for beans. In either case, peasants lacked leverage to bargain on the value of their coffee beans and were exploited.

The socio-economic landscape changed dramatically in 1967-68 when several communities granted a logging company access to major areas in the region. The loggers opened access roads, built bridges, brought in electricity, and constructed a timber landing compound in Lachiviza, partway up the mountainside. While the loggers were forced out ten years later, the infrastructure they constructed had major consequences. Initially, increased access brought in more mer-

chants and coffee buyers. Traditional caciques began to truck both trade goods and passengers between remote hamlets and the commercial centers. The most significant impact, however, was the penetration of the region by national agricultural institutions, beginning in 1973.

The Instituto Mexicano del Café (INMECAFE) had been created in 1958 to regulate the coffee market. In the 1970s, in a campaign to generate increased foreign exchange through greater coffee exports, INMECAFE intensified its efforts in peasant-producer areas. To maximize production, it developed a coffee-support structure that organized peasant producers into associations through which credit was channeled, marketing organized, and technical advice delivered. The system promoted a Green Revolution model in which full-sun varieties of coffee trees were to be densely planted in monocultures requiring chemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticide applications. To enable farmers to participate in this system where inputs, costs, and risks were increased, INMECAFE provided advances in the form of fertilizer and other chemical inputs or cash to be paid back with the coffee harvest. The harvest was the collateral, and INMECAFE bought it at a guaranteed price. This structure grew rapidly so that by 1990 it encompassed 60% of all small producers, loosening the cacique/coyote grip on the coffee-producing peasantry. By imposing itself as a monopolistic alternative, however, INMECAFE became the target of increasingly militant peasant activism contesting prices and control over the productive process in the early 1980s.³

UCIRI traces its roots back to early 1981 when 26 indigenous peasant coffee growers, together with a Catholic missionary team working in the region, met for five days to reflect on and analyze the conditions of their poverty and marginalization. Realizing that they were caught in a cycle of very low coffee prices, unpayable bank debts, insufficient food, and few if any social services, the group decided to find a way to obtain higher prices for their coffee than was possible through either the coyote middlemen or INMECAFE buyers. They made contact with the Asociación de Interés Colectivo (ARIC) Regional, a recently-formed association of small producers in Veracruz, which agreed to sell 35 tons of their coffee. By combining a portion of their harvest with that of ARIC, the Oaxacan peasant producers received a higher export price, although they did have to wait until their coffee was sold to obtain their payment.

Inspired by this initial success, the peasant farmers intensified their organizational activities on both the local and national levels. By the end of 1982, seven communities in the region were involved in the collective effort. At the same time, they joined with ARIC of Veracruz and groups of small producers from other coffee-growing regions to found ARIC Nacional in Mexico City as a vehicle to process and

export their coffee. The following year, in 1983, an assembly of participants from seventeen communities decided to legalize their organization as the Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Región del Istmo (UCIRI). After a protracted struggle that entailed several delegation visits to both Oaxaca and Mexico City, the organization was officially enrolled in the Registro Agrario.

For the next three harvests (October-March 1982/83, 1983/84, 1984/85), UCIRI continued to sell its coffee through ARIC Nacional. This experience was both beneficial and difficult for UCIRI members. On the one hand, they received higher prices for their coffee; on the other, they had to handle the shipping, which involved much additional time and labor, and wait a long time for payment. While a few became discouraged and withdrew from the group, most stayed because they valued the collectivity and the future they conceived. In addition, they were learning about processing technicalities and exporting procedures that as simply farmers they had not been aware of (Reyes Avendaño 1994; Martínez Morales 1994; Van der Hoff 1992, 1-83).

During this period, UCIRI was introduced to both the fair trade market and organic production. Representatives of Dutch and German solidarity groups visited UCIRI to discuss marketing of their coffee through the fair trade system. Fair trade organizations not only paid more than prices established on world commodity markets, but operated through annual contracts and long-term relationships. Their contracts were based on the needs of farmers, coffee processors and consumers in a context of compromise and mutual respect. This was a sharp departure from the price system of the conventional market in which commodity prices changed daily in response to production amounts and weather conditions, while speculators amplified price shifts and brokers tried to drive the best bargain they could from producers. By eliminating coffee brokers and contracting directly with the processor/distributors in Europe, the alternative system was able to redistribute some of the transaction effort and profit potential back to the small farmers. Perhaps most important, the alternative trade system guaranteed the price for future deliveries and paid a portion of it when farmers most needed the money, prior to harvests (Reyes Avendaño 1994; De la Rosa Alfaro 1994; Renard 1999, 194-195).

While INMECAFE had attempted to induce small coffee producers to adopt agrochemical production practices, the peasant farmers in this region clung to the natural production methods of their ancestors. In 1984, a European agronomist visiting UCIRI suggested that they build on their natural practices to become "organic" producers. UCIRI members visited Finca Irlanda, a private coffee estate in Chiapas which had initiated the first successful system of organic coffee production in southern Mexico using biodynamic farming

methods pioneered by the German social philosopher, Rudolph Steiner. Impressed by this comprehensive system of compost fertilizing and pest control that promised higher yields than the traditional natural system, UCIRI members brought the ideas back to the Isthmus. As they implemented this organic approach, they not only saw their yields improve but they acquired a complex and externally certified technology. As technologically sophisticated producers, they could take pride in their work and resist the designation of failed or incomplete farmer applied to them by proponents of agrochemical modernization. Most of all, the organic system of production was sustainable, a cyclical activity of human and natural interdependence improving both incomes and soil fertility (Martínez Morales 1994; Reyes Avendaño 1994; Martínez and Peters 1994).

In adapting to organic agriculture, UCIRI was also increasing the value of its coffee on the fair trade market. The alternative coffee system occupied a market niche which combined fair dealing with producers with a superior coffee for consumers. Product superiority meant gourmet quality but also and increasingly organic characteristics. Coffee fetching the best price in this market was that which was considered more wholesome and ecological than ordinary coffee; it was grown with compost for fertilizer under the shade of fruit and nitrogen-fixing trees in micro-climates kept moist and weed-free with terraces, mulch, and hand-weeding. Chemical fertilizers, herbicides, fungicides, and pesticides were not applied. Third party inspectors certified coffee grown in this way as organic, and that certification earned the grower a higher price.

With an organic production system in place and fair trade buyers ready in Europe, UCIRI began a struggle with INMECAFE for a permit to export coffee. Large, plantation producers, organized into their own political associations including La Confederación Mexicana de Productores de Café (CMPC) and the Unión Nacional de Productores de Café de la Confederación Nacional de Productores Rurales (UNCP-CNPR), participated directly in the Directive Council of INMEXCAFE (Santoyo Cortés, Cárdenas and Padrón 1994, 108-109), and had an interest in restricting export quotas to large producers. At the same time, INMECAFE's strategy of encouraging small growers to increase their production and the legitimacy requirements of the ruling political party, the PRI, to represent the interests of the peasant sector within a national system of corporate social sector representation, resulted in some export concessions to better organized small producer groups, if only as a co-optive strategy.⁴ Direct exporting required more marketing sophistication but promised greater self-determination and income. After a very difficult struggle, they obtained export rights in 1985. With the harvest of 1985/86, UCIRI exported its first coffee di-

rectly to Holland through the alternative marketing system. In order to export, UCIRI established warehouses and a coffee processing facility in the former logging compound at Lachiviza, a community more or less centered in the mountains where members live. Here, coffee beans are sorted by quality, mechanically cleaned, and bagged. After several successful years, UCIRI was able to acquire a second processing plant in the small regional center, Ixtepec, that had belonged to a bankrupt processor whose coyotes had once traveled the mountains of the Isthmus region (Martínez Morales 1994; Reyes Avendaño 1994; De la Rosa Alfaro 1994).

In economic terms, UCIRI is a coffee improvement, processing, and marketing cooperative of small producers. Direct sales to overseas customers through the alternative trade network enhance their returns, increase their working capital, and provide them with partners who affirm their status in positive ways and can offer some political support when that becomes necessary. But more broadly speaking, the production and sale of coffee is part of a comprehensive human and community development project that integrates the economic, the social, and the spiritual. UCIRI's complex vision is reflected in the scope and nature of its projects (Valdivia de Ortega 1994).

Central to this vision is the *trabajo común organizado* — organized communal work — a practice that integrates human development, analysis and collective work. UCIRI began the practice in 1984/85 in order to foster social consciousness and to meet the urgent material needs of the cooperative and its member communities. Its objectives include continuing occupational and cooperative skills formation, establishing committees to implement needed projects, promoting organic coffee production, rescuing and maintaining traditional culture, and moving toward a more just society (Martínez Morales 1994).

The organization's administrative headquarters are in the coffee-processing compound at Lachiviza. Here once a month, delegates from all member communities assemble to discuss issues and make decisions by consensus, then share that information with their respective communities. The delegate assembly appoints members to standing committees, such as health, education, and transportation, and selects technicians and specialists who work with the administration. Day-to-day responsibilities are handled by administrative and vigilance councils, each with four members elected for three-year terms, who work and live in the compound. Since most of the communities are at some distance from Lachiviza, elected officials temporarily give up involvement in the daily lives of their families, making administration something of a community obligation in the older indigenous tradition of civic and religious office-holding. Members of peasant households, officials are invariably male and their families

keep their plots under cultivation during their terms of service.

Each locality elects its own administrative committee, vigilance committee, and assembly delegate. In addition, local work committees are formed as needed. At this level, women do hold administrative and committee positions. Each member is urged by the rules of the organization to be an active participant. Members who do not attend meetings can be fined a day of community work, or what their community committee decides.

In a region with few, if any, public services and little access to consumer goods, UCIRI has responded with several significant projects. The cooperative runs a bus which travels the region on a daily basis, transporting passengers and goods among the small mountain communities and to Lachiviza and Ixtepec. Using a warehouse at its Lachiviza headquarters as the depot for consumer goods, it has established a network of cooperative stores in its member communities. It also opened a hardware store in Ixtepec where small farmers can buy tools at reasonable prices, with a discount for UCIRI members. Consistent with its interest in public health and seeking to lighten the burden on women, UCIRI has located cornmills in many of the communities.

In 1994, the organization completed construction of a health clinic at Lachiviza that supports a regional revival in the medicinal use of natural herbs and plants based on a comprehensive notion that health is ultimately located in a relationship correctly linking nature, the community, and the spiritual world. The clinic runs an apprenticeship program which teaches lay health promoters from the various communities to address disease and public health issues. Their approach to health stresses prevention, emphasizing hygiene programs, healthful diets and the construction of dry latrines. Work groups that promote the improved cultivation of corn, beans, and vegetables for household consumption are dispersed in the communities. The clinic also offers on-site emergency medical care and dental care to all at affordable prices.

A critical element in UCIRI's development program is education. It built a secondary school in the mountains, the only one in the region outside the cities, where 25 students live and study agronomy and academic subjects for a 13 month period. Following the school experience, graduates undertake community service work, including agricultural extension. Some individuals have been sponsored by the community for further study outside and have returned to UCIRI as accountants or teachers.

Consistent with the pedagogy of Paulo Freire (1973), the purpose of the school is, in part, an effort to train the region's residents to meet an expanding set of skills needed by the communities. With its own school, UCIRI can make educa-

tion supportive of the larger project of building sustainable, self-administered communities based on agriculture where collective responsibility provides the social insurance and cultural framework for meaningful lives.

UCIRI views cultural activities as an integral part of the construction of community. Every October, before the harvest begins, the families that make up the UCIRI membership gather at the compound in Lachiviza for several days of celebration which combines the sacred with the joyously secular. In the tradition of Mexican flower petal mosaics and Hopi sand paintings, they use the concrete floor of the empty warehouse to create temporary tapestries of multicolored corn, green bean seeds, and coffee beans, a collective art honoring the cyclical flow and mutually interdependent aspects of nature and human community. Other activities include a Catholic Mass, singing, feasting, a basketball tournament, music and dancing.

Integrated into the culture that sustains UCIRI is its members' appreciation of the value of solidarity — the sharing of knowledge and material support with other peasants. In this spirit, UCIRI has worked with and sent technical teams to visit peasants seeking to build similar cooperatives in the Mexican states of Oaxaca, Puebla, and Chiapas, as well as to Guatemala and Nicaragua. It provides ongoing material support by making its facilities available to other cooperatives for coffee processing.

An example of this horizontal outreach is UCIRI's support of the coffee co-operative ISMAM, Los Indígenas de la Sierra Madre de Motozintla, which began to organize in 1985. Like UCIRI, ISMAM started with a meeting of reflection and situational analysis which led these peasants also to conclude that they needed an independent cooperative in which all members participate and develop consciousness. They sent a group to visit UCIRI. In their efforts to support this new cooperative effort, UCIRI agreed to sell ISMAM's coffee. For its part, the newer organization came to see itself as a pilot group that would support other small cooperatives in the Sierra (Sánchez López 1990, 20-45).⁵

Equal Exchange: Fair Trade Partner

Equal Exchange, located near Boston, Massachusetts, is the U.S. trading partner of UCIRI and 12 other small-farmer coffee cooperatives in Latin America. The venture grew from discussions in 1983 among Jonathan Rosenthal, Rink Dickinson, and Michael Rozyne, employees of Northeast Cooperatives, a distributor to community-based food cooperatives in New England and New York. Impressed with the advantages that direct trade between farmers and wholesalers gave both parties, the three decided to use this model to import various foods from Latin America (Greenfield n.d.).

Support for their effort came from the European alternative trade network, centered on Third World crafts and coffee. One of the larger alternative trade organizations (ATOs), Stichting Ideeel Import (SII) gave the fledgling Equal Exchange its initial impetus. SII had been importing coffee from Nicaragua, processing it in Holland, and reshipping a portion to Canada for sale; Equal Exchange took on part of that trade, intending to package and wholesale this coffee to retailers in the U.S. as *Café Nica*. The U.S. had frozen trade with Nicaragua, and the initial shipment from Holland in 1986 was held up in U.S. customs for six weeks while Equal Exchange argued it was a Dutch rather than a Nicaraguan product. This challenge to U.S. policy created political visibility for the new trade initiative among those opposed to the trade ban, and *Café Nica* became widely distributed in community-based cooperative food stores in the U.S. (Rozyne 1998).

In 1987 and 1988, Equal Exchange participated in international meetings of the ATO network and helped to create the International Federation of Alternative Trade (IFTA), dedicated to "cooperate with poor and oppressed people in the Third World countries to improve living conditions by directly importing their products" and "to educate consumers about the unfairness of conventional trade" (Dickinson 1989).

In its first twelve years, Equal Exchange moved twice into successively larger facilities within the greater Boston area. The expansion of the company was facilitated by alternative sources of capital: socially conscious lenders interested in alleviating Third World poverty, including the Adrian Dominican Sisters. By 1997, capitalization had grown to over \$600,000 in shares owned by 114 outside investors to whom the company paid a modest dividend.⁶ Twenty-five employees, 19 of them worker-owners, were shipping over 700,000 pounds of coffee annually to food co-ops and other outlets in Canada and the United States, an impressive rate of growth but only a small part of a world fair trade system that linked 17 countries and sold 32,000,000 lbs. of coffee (Equal Exchange 1997; Equal Exchange 1996).

Equal Exchange patterned its mission principles closely after those of IFTA. These include: promoting direct trade with democratically organized small farmer cooperatives; providing advance credit for crop production prior to coffee delivery; paying a fair price for coffee; providing high quality food products; supporting its producers in sustainable farming practices; maintaining itself as a democratically-run cooperative, and developing environmentally sound business practices (Equal Exchange 1996, 9).

The commitment to pay a fair price rather than the world market price for coffee is central to the Equal Exchange mission. IFTA negotiates with coffee cooperatives to establish a

minimum price which applies throughout the ATO world. Taking that IFTA minimum as a floor price, Equal Exchange negotiates annual contracts specifying coffee amounts and prices with its producer partners. When international coffee prices fell to 46 cents a pound in 1992, Equal Exchange paid at least the threshold minimum, which was \$1.20 at that time. In 1998 the IFTA price was \$1.26 a pound plus 15 cents for organic beans and an additional quality bonus. Equal Exchange estimates that between 1988 and 1992 it paid \$750,000 to producers in excess of prices which brokers in the conventional trade would have paid. At times, Equal Exchange claims to be “guaranteeing farmers a living wage for their labor,” but this is a difficult notion to measure across various regions; more recently payment is described as “a fair price” (Greenfield 1994; Equal Exchange n.d.).

The second linchpin concept in Equal Exchange’s mission is support for sustainable farming practices. This includes promoting organic agriculture to maintain the soils in coffee regions. Third party organic certifiers such as Naturland of Germany are hired by producers to confirm the validity of the organic claim. Beyond this, however, Equal Exchange defines sustainability as a production system in which peasants and small-scale growers work their own land and market through cooperatives which pursue comprehensive community development plans. Sustainability must be social and economic, as well as biological (Equal Exchange 1994, 2; Greenfield 1994, 6-11).

Equal Exchange can be described as a for-profit business with a strong, not-for-profit culture. That culture took shape with the founders’ goal of solidarity with Nicaragua and has been supported by the organized fair trade network in Europe and North America with whom the organization sets fair trade minimum coffee prices. It is reinforced by the interests of socially-conscious investors, retailers, and customers. Contacts with farmer-partners are particularly powerful in making the goals emotionally vivid to Equal Exchange employees. The culture has remained consistent and without apparent erosion over the years; there has not been a major shift toward profit taking by the employee-owners who set policy. While pay and benefits have increased, they remain objectively and subjectively modest — in the \$20,000 to \$55,000 range from bottom to top of the pay scale — for a corporation with sales of \$3.6 million. In 1996, the decision was made to invest an additional 10% of pretax profits in a fund to promote education among farmer-partners and other nonprofit activities (Equal Exchange 1996).

Its social justice culture is continually expressed in the organization’s publications, its sales literature and its marketing contacts with religious organizations and food cooperatives. The nature and clarity of that culture attracts prospective employees and rewards them with extra-economic satisfactions. Established employees, including the origi-

nal three partners who retain management positions, have successfully kept the culture alive and transmitted it to new employees.

But also of importance is the worker-owner mode of organization. As a growing company with no clear precedent, Equal Exchange has hired employees who are well educated in the liberal arts — college graduates in Spanish, anthropology, international development — for sales, marketing and design roles, rather than business majors with more technical training. Of great importance in hiring has been the prospective worker’s enthusiasm for the company mission. The absence of conventional preconceptions about business on the part of employees and the scope the company provides for individual autonomy within an egalitarian setting have resulted in staff creativity and organizational loyalty. Few have quit, and those that did so for personal reasons such as relocating with a spouse, rather than dissatisfaction with the organization.

Employees see themselves as having grown with their jobs. “I actually started out here in sales,” said a Brown graduate in anthropology. “That was the last thing on earth I would have considered doing. But I did it solely to work in this place.” After a year and a half in sales, he negotiated directly with his supervisor and arrived at a unique job description consisting of “a third design and marketing, a third doing work in the workplace like being a coordinator for democratic decision making here, or attempting to, then doing work on special projects.” He works with 400 churches affiliated with Lutheran World Relief marketing coffee to their fellowship meetings and fundraisers. “I began working with the churches because I believed it would work. The sales department thought it was a waste of time and they were concerned that it would conflict with my sales goals. I did it anyway; it showed some success.” Despite believing he could earn twice as much with another company, this worker-owner said, “I just often think to myself there is no other place that I’d be doing this” (Crowell 1998).

Equal Exchange began to buy and process a part of the UCIRI harvest in 1990. By 1996 the company was importing coffee from 12 cooperatives in Latin America and generating 3.6 million dollars in sales (Equal Exchange 1996). The increase in sales results from the effort of Equal Exchange to seek out new partners and to expand its long-term relations with producer cooperatives. Potential partners are recommended by human rights organizations or by existing partners who may have processed and shipped the coffee of a start-up cooperative lacking facilities of its own. UCIRI assisted La Unión Majomut, another Equal Exchange Mexican partner, in this way, as Majomut then did for San Pedro de Cancuc.

While ideologically committed to expanding markets for peasant-produced coffee, the ATO is also a gatekeeper. Equal Exchange visits potential partners to learn about their internal

organization and development plans, examines the reports of third party organic certifiers, and tests coffee samples. "We try to get a quality coffee we can work with in our blends," explains an Equal Exchange marketer (Crowell 1998).

Equal Exchange has formal criteria for evaluating potential partners. These include their degree of poverty and exclusion from access to markets; authentic farmer-member control over the cooperative organization; democratic decision-making; a commitment to sustainable agriculture and land stewardship; a strategy for long term community development; and ecological consciousness. But these may not all be in place and some may dissipate over time. Even a long-standing partnership can be severed if site visits and the reports of objective third parties reveal that the organization lacks true farmer control or is without a comprehensive community development plan. The Ashaninkas Association in Peru was dropped for these reasons in 1993 (Equal Exchange 1993). Most partners are moving toward the model exemplified by UCIRI rather than fully realizing it. Few producer groups have had the time and resources to extend their community development plan to include a chain of rural stores or a healthcare clinic. On the other hand, a women's chicken marketing project, distribution of cement to make the drying patios necessary for organic production, or support for a system of organic agricultural promoters are very positive evidence of a development trajectory.

Not only does a cooperative's commitment to high quality organic production and reliable shipping depend on a comprehensive development plan, so does the longevity of the group. "If these things aren't integrated, and if the only reason they come together is coffee, and for whatever reason the coffee market or the system of coffee trade becomes non-advantageous, then the purpose for this group is gone. Whereas with groups like UCIRI there's a whole network of issues binding them together" (Crowell 1998).⁷

The relationship with producers is not simply economic. Equal Exchange staff members visit these cooperatives, attend festivals, introduce North American church officials and students, and work with human rights NGOs when political repression threatens their members.

The specter of repression, state-led via the uniformed military or state-tolerated in the form of paramilitaries, continues to stalk Equal Exchange's Mexican partners. National governments are often antagonistic when local communities combine movement toward an independent economic base with ideological autonomy (Bookchin 1982, 1987). When an indigenous uprising in Chiapas in January 1994 was followed by a massive militarization of the countryside by the Mexican Army, community life for tens of thousands was disrupted. UCIRI, in Oaxaca, was temporarily occupied by the Mexican Army, while members of Majomut in Chiapas were driven

from their communities by the combined action of the Army and paramilitary groups. Equal Exchange issued a press release seeking to contextualize the violence as due to failed conventional development models. It said in part, "Small-scale peasant farmers have never been able to earn enough money to meet their basic human needs" and "when there is no hope, violence may seem to be the only option" (Equal Exchange 1998). The press release went on to cite UCIRI as an example of viable development based on alternative trade and solidarity with North American coffee drinkers. Equal Exchange played a role in informing U.S. citizens about the human rights situation faced by indigenous small farmers in Mexico. But with the model of community-controlled comprehensive development being portrayed by government leaders as insurgent, these public appeals appeared to have little influence on the human rights policy of Mexico.

As an ATO located in the United States, Equal Exchange both adds value to coffee through processing and constructs a critical consumer culture. It handles the tasks of blending, roasting, grinding, packaging, and wholesaling the beans. Because it is a food item consumed on a daily basis, coffee has trade advantages over crafts which tend to be seasonal purchases in the North. But while a demand exists for coffee per se in the United States, the job of an ATO such as Equal Exchange is to create a market for their particular product. Given the regularity of coffee purchases and consumer taste preferences, a roaster/distributor has to provide coffees with consistent flavors and quality that distinguish them from conventional coffee. To do this effectively, Equal Exchange argues, processors have to be located where the product is consumed. Once roasted and ground, coffee rapidly loses flavor unless vacuum packed, so the nature of coffee supports final processing close to the point of consumption. So does the culture of coffee drinking. Roasters must closely follow diverse preferences in roast temperatures, grinds, flavorings, and blend composition. Sales depend on presentation in attractive packages, store display units, and advertising appropriate to the market. "It's better for us to be dealing with that because we can change a roast in the blink of an eye; we can get feedback from our customers and so concentrate on getting as much [money] for their [the growers'] processed green as we can," said an Equal Exchange marketing employee (Crowell 1998).

At an ideological level, distributors in the ATO network generate an interpretive context which frames their products. In Europe, coffee is certified as a fair trade product both by the Max Havelaar coffee symbol and the IFTA Transfair symbol. In the fall of 1998, Transfair certification was introduced in the U.S. This third-party certification will strengthen the credibility of claims made by Equal Exchange in its marketing materials (Dickinson 1998).

Equal Exchange provides its retail outlets with a variety of leaflets and newsletters. An effort is made to reach consumers through literature available at store coffee displays and product descriptions in catalogues circulated by religious and humanitarian organizations which promote fair trade items of many kinds. The goal of this program is to alter the awareness of consumers, teaching them to connect coffee as a commodity with the social context of its production and trade. Through producer profiles, Equal Exchange tries to give a face to its farmer partners and to recast coffee consumption as an act of solidarity with peasant producers. This contextualizing involves organizational cooperation with social justice and religious groups. For example, together with Neighbor to Neighbor and Oxfam America, Equal Exchange sponsored a two week trip which allowed six U.S. college students and three officials from food corporations to visit coffee cooperatives in El Salvador in 1994. It later worked with Global Exchange to send eight U.S. citizens to visit their trade partner Majomut in Chiapas, Mexico, in 1997. In each case individuals embedded in organizations — churches, college communities, food corporations — were selected so they could discuss the social conditions of coffee production with those audiences on their return. In 1997, Equal Exchange initiated a six-month market development campaign in Madison, Wisconsin, in which it used community organizers and newspaper advertising to mobilize an existing network of co-op food stores and social justice and religious organizations to generate pressure on area supermarkets to carry fair trade coffee. In 1999 it initiated a similar campaign in Burlington, Vermont. Taking the form of a social movement, these market development campaigns carry the message that consumers have real power in the marketplace to improve the condition of small coffee growers.

A second ideological focus has been environmental preservation. Shade-grown coffee, unlike full-sun coffee plantations or deforested grasslands, creates a biologically diverse environment essential to North American migrating song birds. Equally important, economically viable small coffee farmers are a social force resisting the commercial deforestation of their lands by loggers or ranchers (Rozyne 1994, 1-3). Both ecological and humanitarian contexts for drinking fair trade coffee have been featured in ads in national environmental and politically liberal magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *Sierra*, *The Nation*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Though Equal Exchange makes no positive health claims for coffee, it does present its organic labels as being without the health risks associated with pesticide-sprayed coffee. The drink is presented as a satisfying social ritual, additionally rewarding when the coffee is of gourmet quality and steeped in social justice.

Conclusion

Equal Exchange and its coffee cooperative partners share a perception of an alternative trade model. It combines a strategy of comprehensive community development in the South and an ethical contextualizing of coffee by roasters and consumers in the North. In this model, authentic Third World development is seen as comprehensive; it has interrelating social, economic, political, and spiritual dimensions. Its vehicle is the interactive community embedded in place and history, not an abstract and individuated “economic man.” Rather than the volume of economic activity in an increasingly commodified culture, progress is measured in human well-being.

Next, comprehensive community development is understood to begin with an anti-hegemonic exercise of consciousness-raising (Gramsci 1971, 12-13; Freire 1973). Subaltern people who wish to act in their collective interest must first understand the cultural, economic, and political systems which have assigned them their subordinate and marginal place. They can only reach this understanding through action within an interdependent group whose future they can collectively imagine. As consciousness takes form within an organization accountable to its members, it guides actions which affirm personal identity and a conviction that life can be changed through collective effort.

The organizational structure of UCIRI allows its members to reclaim their identity in positive terms as indigenous people, as farmers, and as actors in global trade. Their development model lets them move beyond simply affecting economies of scale in processing their crops. Their aim is a democratic process defining their collective needs as a people determined to remain rooted in their land, even as they renegotiate their place in the world trade system.

Equal Exchange, as a First World ATO, developed as a response to the cultural impoverishment of capitalism — its erosion of social solidarities and its materialist rather than transcendent motivational structure. As an employer, Equal Exchange provides its employee-owners with workplace solidarity based on democratic decision-making and the broader goal of reducing the exploitation characterizing conventional commodity markets. Rather than masking that exploitation with occasional philanthropic donations to Third World peasants, Equal Exchange structures its trade relationship to help its small farmer partners build sustainable communities with diversified economics able to both supply the outside world with coffee and their own members with services and a sustainable environment. From this trade base, small farmers seek to negotiate a more favorable place for peasantries in global markets which would otherwise grind them up.

This task requires that Equal Exchange redefine First World consumer culture from a relationship between purchasers and products to one in which consumers are aware of the social, environmental and cultural conditions under which their products are created. This awareness can add meaning to the lives of consumers, potentially enlisting them in a transnational social movement to promote social justice and ecological sustainability.

The moral economy linking UCIRI with Equal Exchange is the normative expression of a social movement in which organizations in the North and South support a common project which accumulates cultural and social capital. This project seeks to enhance cooperative skills, enrich cultural diversity, and promote a critical awareness of the processes of neo-liberal globalization. Where commentators such as Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 233) saw cultural capital as an attribute of individuals, useful in the social climb within highly stratified societies (Bourdieu 1984), the alternative trade movement suggests another conceptualization: the rooting of individuality within trans-national circles of solidarity and accountability. Social and cultural capital, when they are attributes of workplace and territorial communities, can further the goal of liberating participants from the economic determinism born either from impoverishment or cultural materialism. As an oppositional movement, fair trade seeks to subvert, by example, the broader system of economic integration in which peasants of the South and cosmopolitans of the North have found themselves delinked, deracinated and culturally depleted.

Endnotes

1. E-mail: charles.simpson@plattsburgh.edu; Phone: 518-564-3311
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2. In 1996, more than 14,000 tons of green coffee were imported into Europe through fair trade, up from 11,000 tons in 1995. There are 21 coffee roasters with license agreements with the Max Havelaar Foundation. Sales in 1996 represent 2.8% of the Dutch coffee market, 5% of the Swiss market. Globally, fair trade coffee amounts to over 250 million dollars in sales, and continues to grow (Stichting Max Havelaar, 1998; TransFair USA homepage, 1999, <http://www.transfairusa.org/why/coffee.html>).
3. Background history is based on Paz Paredes, Cobo and Bartra 1995-96; Van der Hoff 1992, 63-67, 75-79; Guzman 1994; Diaz Cárdenas 1994; Martínez Salazar 1994; Santoyo Cortés, Horatio, Cardenas and Padron 1994, 108-114 and Moguel 1991 discuss peasant dissatisfaction with INMECAFE in terms of its monopoly control, low prices, high administrative costs, and its failure to deliver promised credits.
4. The PRI's co-optive policy toward the peasant sector dates from the Cárdenas presidential *sexenio* of 1934-1940 when more than 20 million hectares of land were redistributed to the poor. The collapse of the International Coffee Agreement on national export quotas in 1988 and the emergence of a "free and unrestricted trade in coffee" (Pendergrast, 1999, 362-3) deprived the Mexican state sector of what was at once a co-optive and discriminatory tool, the allocation of exports within the quota. For a discussion of Mexico's move toward free trade and away from any pretense of protecting the peasant sector from global market competition, see Tom Barry 1995.
5. For an analysis of ISMAM, see Nigh 1997; Hernández Castillo and Nigh 1998.
6. Average interest over the last nine years has been 3.22 percent, but reached a high of 8 percent during the profitable 1996 year. Worker/owners earned a bonus of 11.0 percent of wages in 1995, and can earn up to a ceiling of 20 percent in worker-rebates, varying with company profits (Annual Report, 1995 Equal Exchange).
7. For another perspective, see Nigh 1997.

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