

## Guest Editorial: Special issue on Fair Trade and the Sustainable Development Goals

This special edition of *Food Chain* focuses on Fair Trade and its relevance for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). With its emphasis on producer empowerment, living wages, fair pricing, and long-term partnerships, linked to socially focused businesses and supply chains, the Fair Trade movement aims to transform both production and consumption and contribute to wider systemic change that supports sustainable livelihoods. We refer to Fair Trade (two words) as a broad range of organizations and campaigning networks, including Fairtrade (one word) certification, social enterprises, and cooperatives that espouse Fair Trade principles and support the International Fair Trade Charter (2018).

Business, governments, and civil society have increasingly recognized the need for new policies and more ambitious approaches to address the global challenges related to human rights, sustainable development, and the climate crisis. Fair Trade has been highlighted as a practical example of the ‘active and inclusive partnerships’ needed in the pursuit of the SDGs (Fair Trade Advocacy Office, 2016). The Fair Trade movement is not alone in attempts to reshape the discourse on responsible consumption and production. Recent campaigns by the Food Ethics Council have also highlighted the necessity of shifting from a consumer to a citizen mind-set to reorientate the food system and reframe the basis on which policy decisions are made (Cura and Crossley, 2019). As part of this new narrative, an opportunity exists to address the producer–consumer dichotomy. Whether it is recognizing opportunities at the base of the pyramid, or marketing products to the growing middle class, the geographies of production and consumption appear increasingly fluid and dynamic.

This is an important moment for Fair Trade as new market actors challenge its position as a sustainability certifier and key supporters question its governance mechanisms and impact on farmers and producers. Our aim in this special issue is to support a transdisciplinary approach to research that brings together contributions from academia, policy, and practice. While mindful of the limitations of the SDGs (Raworth, 2014) and critique of corporate capture (Scheyvens et al., 2016), we believe the goals can offer a useful lens and reference point to explore and reflect on the global challenges we face. In responding to these challenges, we are interested in the potential of the Fair Trade movement to support a global agenda towards sustainable development that has fairness at its core. Articles in this special issue address a range of related questions: How can standard-setting approaches, such as Fair Trade, improve working conditions and livelihoods in global supply chains? How does Fair Trade support a policy and market environment that promotes sustainable consumption and production? How can Fair Trade develop local and global partnerships?

The paper by Discetti and colleagues explores the role that Fairtrade towns and cities can play in achieving the SDGs, especially in terms of raising awareness of the concept, promoting more ethical consumption and building partnerships between

communities. They use the concept of the powercube (Gaventa, 2006) to investigate spaces for participation and critically examine the achievements of the Fairtrade Towns campaign. Recognizing that some campaigners have more power than others, their analysis highlights how some spaces may be closed, others invited, and yet again others claimed. They argue that Fairtrade Towns offer a framework to foster social equity on a 'glocal' level and hold the potential to contribute to multiple SDGs, representing a systemic approach to sustainable communities and cities.

Sonalee Chauhan and Sukhpal Singh's paper assesses the impact of Fair Trade on the SDGs at the local level. Focusing on producer income, this study considers both Fair Trade and non-Fair Trade farmers in the specific context of the producer companies involved in Fairtrade certified peanut production and its marketing in Gujarat, India. Their study found that Fairtrade resulted in higher prices for peanuts compared with conventional trade channels, but prices remained lower than the Indian government's minimum support price (MSP). This raises some important questions about the Fairtrade minimum price (and payment methods) and how these policies interact at a local level with the role of government procurement agencies and institutional mechanisms designed to address low crop prices.

Donovan, Blare, and Peña assess the impact of Fairtrade and other sustainability certifications such as Rainforest Alliance on outcomes for coffee businesses in Central America. They highlight the growth in certification as a tool for sustainable development, often promoted by development agencies as well as companies that wish to demonstrate their credentials for responsible sourcing. The paper provides a reminder of the limits of market-based tools such as individual standards as a mechanism for change. Much more coffee is certified than can be sold under the different labels in key markets meaning that farmers need to engage with multiple certifications to ensure market access. This requires considerable effort on the part of cooperatives to maintain records necessary for audits as well as ensuring that production practices meet the standards required as well as the ever-changing needs of buyers. They argue that certification alone is not sufficient to promote sustainable development as farmers struggle to sustain a living income. Fairtrade International and Rainforest Alliance are likely to agree, as their programmes highlight that certification needs to be accompanied by interventions such as training for producers and policy support as indicated by their theories of change (Fairtrade International, 2016; Newsom and Milder, 2018).

Tallontire et al. in this issue frame the relationship between the University of Leeds and Fairtrade International's Monitoring Evaluation and Learning team in relation to the changing approach to impact in the higher education sector, leading to greater opportunities for collaborative research. This paper highlights that building up collaborative approaches, even when many objectives align, is not simple, and relies on an open and trusting relationship, 'as well as willingness to invest significantly in developing mutual understanding' (p. 75). The authors recognized themselves in the label 'pracademics' coined by Stevens et al. (2013), which refers to NGO staff who have a focus on learning and the appreciation of the role of theory and academics aiming at practical applications of their research. They noted the importance of jointly owned spaces to cultivate such collaborative relationships. Indeed, this kind of relationship can be very challenging to sustain, as recognized by Hughes et al. (2020) who note

the dependence on key individuals as well as the risk of the focus of activity being too problem- or donor-focused as opposed to being informed by theory.

### **Sustainable partnerships**

The challenge of embedding partnerships between academics and organizations in the Fair Trade movement is manifest in both directions. Fair Trade academics tend to be scattered across institutions, departments, and disciplines: clusters of people working on Fair Trade in any single university are the exception rather than the rule, so it is difficult for Fair Trade organizations to identify the right academics to work with. For the academics themselves it can be difficult to develop the ‘critical mass’ in any one academic institution that would help in building more permanent linkages and offer Fair Trade organizations ‘one stop shops’ for engagement. Reflecting on an academic team’s experience of engagement and projects with businesses and organizations, Hughes et al. (2020) contrast such ‘proactive’ and ‘long-term partnerships’ between academics and organizations with three other approaches that academics may adopt to enhance impact and practical relevance of their work. These are specific consultancies and arms-length approaches as well as an approach where individual academics are identified by external organizations for specific tasks or advice. Interestingly they promote a hybrid approach drawing on socio-technical thinking that identifies factors such as culture, process, and infrastructure that affect success in the ‘pursuit of impact’.

### **Research impact**

Fair Trade research has potential to foster cross-sector collaboration around the ‘impact agenda’. However, this potential may not always be recognized due to different understandings and hidden assumptions about what impact means and how it is measured. For practitioners impact is often considered in relation to specific project outcomes and the ability to attribute an intervention to particular results. In this context, impact is primarily framed in relation to monitoring and evaluation metrics. Impact is reported in commissioned independent evaluations such as by Doherty et al. (2020), and detailed annual monitoring reports (e.g. Fairtrade International, 2019). Members of the ISEAL Alliance, including Fairtrade International, commission regular evaluations of standards and processes including syntheses of such evaluations at sector level (e.g. Rangan, 2017). These outputs are important to account for donor funding and to demonstrate to certification users, civil society and the media, that the approach works.

In contrast, academic definitions of research impact are often framed (and assessed) in relation to ‘significance’ and ‘reach’ (REF, 2019). For academics working on Fair Trade these different understandings of impact and institutional drivers, as well as the different capabilities of Fair Trade organizations to engage, generate data, and to operate at scale may narrow opportunities for research collaborations and limit engagement to a relatively small number of organizations. There is a danger that smaller and more marginalized Fair Trade organizations are excluded from Fair Trade research, both as a subject and as a partner. Another challenge of long-term

partnerships between academics and practitioners can be that the research becomes overly focused on problems identified by particular organizations or managers as opposed to more generalized problems (Hughes et al., 2020). It is important for both practitioners and academics to reflect on their often hidden assumptions and drivers, especially if collaborative research is to lead to change, and achieve the SDGs.

## Spaces for collaboration

The most recent meetings of the Fair Trade International Symposium (FTIS) have explicitly sought to create spaces for constructive collaboration between academics and Fair Trade practitioners, in addition to its original intention to share knowledge. This began in Milan in 2015 with the initiation of Fairtrade International's researcher engagement strategy and was continued at Portsmouth in 2018 with special sessions convened by the Fair Trade Advocacy Office (FTAO) to identify research topics that would engage with, and inform, policy dialogue. This ongoing discussion requires considerable facilitation and investment of time to align expertise with need, as well as funding opportunities.

Methodologies for effective joint working in workshop contexts need also to be considered and FTIS can draw on good practice in other efforts to bring together practitioners and academics, such as on sustainable food systems (Schoen et al., 2016) as well as the kinds of tools collated by Cornish et al. (2017). We need to consider how tools can be developed to sustain conversations between meetings and so develop an epistemic community. Online platforms such as the Fair Trade Institute (<https://www.fairtrade-institute.org/>) can also play an important role here.

The next meeting of FTIS will, for the first time, move to the Global South and be hosted by El Colegio de la Frontera Sur (ECOSUR) in San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas, Mexico. This was originally planned for June 2020, but will be postponed until the following year due to the coronavirus COVID-19. The research community will meet not only with practitioners from the standard setting organizations of the Fair Trade movement, but also producer groups. Participation in these spaces has indeed broadened, but it needs to be recognized that the spaces are to a large extent 'invited'. If research is to be effective there will need to be efforts to ensure that the spaces are not closed to new kinds of participants or ideas.

Based on the papers in this special issue and our engagement with Fair Trade practitioners and academics at the FTIS we conclude with some thoughts on how research on Fair Trade might be more effective and impactful, and engage with a wider range of topics and concerns.

## Framing the research agenda

As we have discovered in recent iterations of the FTIS, using the SDGs as a broad framework for reflecting on Fair Trade has enabled both reflection of the impact of Fair Trade practices and initiatives and has also helped identify under-explored research questions and approaches. Fair Trade research to date has been predominantly focused on production and consumption from Global South to

North (Nelson, 2017). There is considerable potential for new Fair Trade research linking up with new partners to enhance impact for marginalized producers. There are a variety of emerging issues that may become increasingly influential in framing the public discourse on sustainable development that have relevance for Fair Trade: circular economy, the role of local government, and the challenge of sustainable oceans. These areas represent potential new avenues for Fair Trade research and collaboration – and opportunities to establish ambitious research agendas that maintain a focus on issues of social inclusion, gender equality, and just transitions.

### ***Circular economy***

The concept of a circular economy is gaining increased attention as a business and policy response to sustainable value chains (European Commission, 2020). However, there are still important questions to consider about how circular economy models contribute to sustainable development and inclusive growth: Is there an opportunity to disrupt conventional value chains? What does this mean for primary producers? What mechanisms are needed to ensure that value circulates?

### ***City-led initiatives***

There is a growing network of city-led initiatives (such as C40 Cities and the Global Covenant of Mayors for Climate & Energy, n.d.) that are providing ambitious global platforms to promote dynamic, multi-level collaboration to tackle sustainability challenges and support local policymakers. How can Fair Trade, and initiatives such as the Fairtrade Towns movement, contribute to debates about sustainable communities? How might this be framed in different national contexts? What are the implications for food citizenship?

### ***UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development***

The ambitions of the Decade (2021–2030) are not limited to work with ocean scientists, but recognize the contribution of social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge in better understanding the impacts of ocean health on human wellbeing and livelihoods (Vadrot et al., 2018). The Fair Trade research and practitioner community are well-positioned to inform these debates: How can Fair Trade producers contribute to the protection of coastal zones? What governance frameworks are needed to coordinate action at local, regional, and global levels? How can we monitor and evaluate the impacts on community wellbeing and livelihoods?

We look forward to new and exciting research presentations and the development of new collaborations at the next FTIS in Mexico in 2021, with opportunities to enable projects to develop organically and continue conversations in Leeds, the host of the FTIS in 2023.

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