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LIVING IN TIMES OF SOLIDARITY: FAIR TRADE AND THE FRACTURED LIFE WORLDS OF GUATEMALAN COFFEE FARMERS

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Abstract: This paper examines the social effects of fair trade transactions emerging from policies to expand the market around the globe. Focusing on the case of coffee farmers in Guatemala, it examines tensions that are created in local organisational networks linked to production, processing and certification of fair trade organic coffee and how these tensions fracture and fragment the life worlds of these coffee farmers. While the fair trade market has provided positive opportunities for rural producers the research finds that network separation and market exclusion are also social expressions of involvement in fair trade. It is argued that fair trade policies need to reflect a more nuanced understanding of household and community level consequences of production for the fair trade market. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Keywords: fair trade; Guatemala; coffee production; actor-oriented approach

1 INTRODUCTION

The fair trade movement, with its vision of improving the human condition through trade, has popularised the idea of commercial solidarity. This vision reinforces the importance of the market yet shifts our understanding of trade in a globalised world, depicting consumption as a potentially inclusive social development process. Ideas of commercial solidarity have generated distinct spaces and processes that organise and re-organise production, product processing, and the politics of grassroots networks. However, even when all these dimensions operate according to solidarity principles, we cannot assume that all aspects of fair trade are virtuous.

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Policies that have led to an emphasis on certification processes have permitted the fair trade movement to grow and enabled volumes of Fairtrade certified products to increase.[1] These processes order trade and provide quality to an ever-demanding world of consumers. But what is the consequence of these policies for producers; does fair trade act as an international social development policy? A number of studies have analysed the impact of fair trade on producer communities and suggested that these impacts tend to be positive but recognise limitations (e.g. Bacon, 2005; Shreck, 2005; Jaffee, 2007; Ruben, 2008). However, despite recent approaches addressing what Ruben has called 'the spill-over effects' of fair-trade, impact studies tend to neglect the implications of commercial practices on the changing constitution of local social organisation (i.e. Ruben, 2008). In particular, there is limited understanding of fair trade's relationship to social network dynamics in producer communities. This includes the organisational transformations inherent in increasing production volumes through fair trade and organic certification procedures, which can herald profound change for small-scale rural producers.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the consequences of fair trade policies on a coffee producer community by focusing on network politics. Whatmore and Thorne (1997) have analysed the lengthening of networks and the parallel existence and significance of alternative networks as part of the ordering of the world. I want to build on these ideas by considering how the reality of solidarity presents itself to Southern coffee producers and becomes expressed in the way how the experiences of social actors are framed and embodied in local networks. What view emerges if we locate solidarity and fair trade narratives as contradictory aspects of discretional global trading policies, practices and struggles (see Lyon, 2006a), which underlie processes of local self-organisation? Are the politics of fair trade networks inexorably positive? Rather than focusing on innovative trading partnerships, as Lyon does, the emphasis here is on how producers' decision-making regarding their livelihoods and relations to producer networks develops from their experiences and dealings with producer markets, which entail encounters between contrasting ordering processes, discourses, access to productive resources, institutional struggles and opportunities.

It will be argued that when fair-trade is approached as course of action that embodies more than economic decision-making, it can be seen as occupying a locus between the market and the social. This enables us to appreciate how households and family farms acquire a degree of independence from larger fair trade groupings when they actively participate in the politics of social networks. At the same time, diverse extra-local economic and institutional arenas lead to processes of separation within producer cooperative networks at the local level. This is because solidarity/fair trade has been repositioned at the local level, creating divergent conceptions of fair trade, and leading to distinct modes of network organisation. One consequence of these forms of organisation is that while some producers are able to fulfil fair trade and organic requirements, those households that have severe restrictions on labour tend to withdraw from fair trade, engendering social differences and fracturing the life worlds of producers (cf. Hirschmann, 1970). Likewise, other networks, such as female coffee roasters, may be excluded because international markets for fair trade do not accept the quality of their product and few quality improvement opportunities are available to them.

[1] 'Fair trade' refers to the broad fair trade movement and market, while 'Fairtrade' refers to products certified by Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International.

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These processes engender local social differences that are reinforced by the specialisation of commercialisation channels and the proliferation of local, regional, national and global political solidarity networks. Heterogeneous elements from global coffee commodity networks are drawn together within the changing configuration of these local networks. This sets in train a series of social, economic and political consequences for people's livelihoods, in which the fair trade movement, because its indeterminate policy source acts flexibly on the action of different coffee traders and consumers. This loose mediation between consumers in the North and producers in the South is of profound importance for the lives of producers in developing countries.

To consider these issues I turn to the case of one community, Loma Linda, which grows coffee at high altitude in western Guatemala. The case is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted for periods in 2007 and 2008. As a background to this case, coffee is the main export of Guatemala and an important source of income for small-holder farmers. However, international coffee markets are price volatile, with up-turns and down-turns, exposing farmers to risk of income loss and unemployment.[2] For example, in 2001 annual export revenues fell substantially, having an adverse effect on the national economy with a reduction of the harvest labour force from an estimated 500 000–250 000 people (Osorio, 2002). This volatile market context positions the fair trade coffee market as an important safety net for producers, given that it guarantees they will receive a price that covers the cost of sustainable production. It is not my intention to focus on the economics of fair trade coffee production in Guatemala (see for example Johnson, 2006), but rather to consider the local dynamics of the social vision of fair trade.

The discussion first provides a background to how ideas of solidarity were organised by the Catholic Church through a network of church activists in the 1970s. It then turns to consider how the Loma Linda Cooperative embraced fair trade certification and attempts at diversification through adding secondary value to coffee, highlighting the dilemmas this has created in the politics of local co-operative networks in recent years.

2 LOMA LINDA: SITUATING SOLIDARITY RELATIONSHIPS

Loma Linda is a rural community situated in Palmar Municipality, Department of Quetzaltenango in Western Guatemala, on the slopes of Santa Maria and Santiaguito volcanoes. The history of the settlement goes back to 1977, when a Spanish catholic priest, 'Celestino', sought to introduce solidarity principles into the region, guided by liberation theology. This occurred at a difficult time in national politics and his leadership cut through institutional and regional divisions to become an influential voice shaping rural producer struggles against landowner power. Through Celestino's work a powerful ecclesiastical discourse was created that emphasised the significance of individual rights to livelihood and the importance of employment and access to land. These rights were seen as a precondition for the participation of landless labourers in modern coffee production, a stance that challenged the political order in rural Guatemala.

[2]There have not been government negotiated country-quotas in the international market since 1989. A total de-regulation of the market was agreed in 1994. This triggered overproduction in Vietnam and Brazil of lower quality Robusta coffee, which has deeply affected countries like Guatemala. Recently, world market prices for coffee have risen. In the past guaranteed Fairtrade prices for coffee and low world market prices have meant the Fairtrade premium was higher than standard prices; however rising coffee prices have reduced this differential. In this context organic Fairtrade coffee can confer an additional premium when compared to non-organic.

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Celestino promulgated the view that individual household production and collective commercialisation of coffee could strength patterns of co-operation in the community. Through a civic movement of Catholic promoters (*catequistas*), Celestino was able to acquire land and apportion it to 77 families that settled in 347 hectares of land. Each family received approximately 50 acres in the community; this was a highly political act that challenged the power of local landlords. The Loma Linda Cooperative was then created, which every community member was duty-bound to join in order to survive landlord pressure and maximise support from the Catholic Church. The Cooperative banned middlemen and prevented the sale of land and individual commercialisation of products; this process enabled producers to legitimise themselves as the organised embodiment of solidarity relations.

In the early 1980s Celestino departed, leaving behind a legal cooperative. Legal recognition meant it could become a member of the Federation of Agricultural Cooperatives (FEDECOAG) and get credit from the National Bank for Agricultural Development (BANDESA). At this time the cooperative movement in Guatemala was being legitimised as a political force. This process led Loma Linda to commercialise its meager coffee production through the strong Federation of Coffee Cooperatives of Guatemala (FEDECOCAGUA).[3]

FEDECOCAGUA enabled information to circulate about fair-trade and promoted the value of economies of scale to make fair trade viable. Some producers disagreed with its policies, the underlying criticism being against a large cooperative federation too remote from the livelihood strategies of petty commodity producers. Nevertheless Loma Linda supplied coffee to the fair trade market through the mechanism of FEDECOCAGUA. However, tensions arose because of the poor circulation of information, lack of transparency, and questions concerning how economic benefits were distributed to local cooperatives like Loma Linda. FEDECOCAGUA argued that everything was administratively correct, however the fact that the fair trade premium did not appear to go directly to local producers led to discontent and political resentment against FEDECOCAGUA.

From early in Loma Linda Cooperative's history we can see a process of specialisation taking place, based on the sale of high quality coffee to supply the global fair trade market. This dissuaded producers from continuing with established household livelihood strategies, which had combined non-wage and wage labour. The speed of market differentiation, stimulated by coffee retailers and consumers in Europe, led to a different reality unfolding at the site of production, one that was underpinned by the influence of the Catholic Church and politics of rural production in Guatemala, shaping the way producers' engaged with the solidarity/fair trade movement.[4] The combined effects of these various interactions generated complex links of loyalty and affiliation, which were imbued in local producer networks.

3 TRANSFORMING SOLIDARITY THROUGH COMMERCIALISATION

At the end of the 1980s, the Loma Linda cooperative struggled to survive, under pressure from the combined effects of a bank debt, poor relations with FEDECOCAGUA, plant

[3]In Guatemala the fair trade movement started around 1973, when SOS Holland and Aachen Germany began commercialising Guatemalan coffee internationally via FEDECOCAGUA under the trade mark Indio Kaffee (Johnson, 2006: p. 58).
[4]For a comparative example see Fisher (1997).

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disease, low productivity and increased production costs. These problems obliged the Cooperative to withdraw from FEDECOCAGUA.

The decision to sever ties with FEDECOCAGUA prompted the Catholic Church to implement a training programme to improve coffee productivity and cooperative administration.[5] For the first time producers interacted with the Catholic Institute of Capacitation (ICC), which led them to learn about organic coffee production. Emphasis was placed on the need to re-organise solidarity relations and improve production.

Financially, this proved a positive move: by the 1990s increases in production and in the price of coffee enabled a bank debt to be paid off and helped the community to become fair trade registered through the Dutch foundation Max Havelaar.[6] It began to export around 3000 quintales[7] [3 tons] of coffee per year to Europe.

In 1993, ICC and a group of producers discussed the creation of a regional network of local cooperatives to give collective voice to coffee producers; the values of livelihood improvement and solidarity through fair trade underpinned a national debate on how to improve conditions for commercial coffee production. An association of small organic coffee producers from the Diocese of San Marco, Maya-Mames of Tajumulco, joined this discussion bringing with them experience of solidarity production, fair trade organisation and organic commercialisation; their experience was fundamental to how the fair trade identity of this new network was defined.

Alongside formation of a regional network, the Catholic Church connected Loma Linda to ANACAFE (the National Association of Coffee Producers of Guatemala) to provide technical assistance to producers. This assistance and the arrival of a national buyer who paid a better price for coffee, helped to reverse the fortunes of the Cooperative. In the process, producers improved their understanding of commercial coffee production and trade.

In 1997 the Civil Society Organisation of Small Coffee Producers, Manos Campesinas (Peasant's Hands), was established. Manos Campesinas received support from programmes linked to the Catholic Church, British Oxfam, and Agronomists and Veterinarians without Frontiers; these institutions enabled the network to export fair-trade/organic coffee from the 1997/8 harvests onward. Manos Campesinas also sought to influence public policy, to shape ANACAFE's credit orientation, and to promote development alternatives. It obtained provisional registration from the newly formed Fair Trade Labelling Organisations International (FLO). FLO offered a differential price for organic, as compared to non-organic coffee, which led producers in Loma Linda to establish organic practices.

FLO granted full membership to Manos Campesinas in 2000 and Eco-Logic Enterprise Ventures lent the network US$100 000 as a pre-finance payment for the organic coffee harvest of 2000/2001. This led Manos Campesinas to focus on financial self-sufficiency through a process of reorganisation, incorporating the Associations of small coffee producers of the South Basin Atitlan, Sololá. The network grew to 1073 members, representing seven local organisations across four departments in the southwest.

To summarise, low international prices for coffee and producers' negative experiences with the large national-level cooperative network reoriented producers towards smaller regional networks. This scaling down was supported by the Catholic Church and

[5]Supported by CARITAS.

[6]From 1990 Max Havelaar (The Netherlands) awarded the fair-trade seal to 10 cooperatives and registered them in the International Register of Coffee Producers, a common register between European certifying companies, prior to the creation of FLO (Johnson, 2006: p. 58).

[7]1 qq=1000 kilos/1 ton.

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international NGOs and was not simply an outcome of the natural dynamics of the market. For communities like Loma Linda, a local/regional network did not hold the same distant and normative connotations as a national federation of cooperatives. These regional networks are a means of coordination that carry long-term voluntary cooperative relationships rather than compulsory organisational alliances.

4 COFFEE PROCESSING: MUNDO VERDE AND THE KUCHUBAL NETWORK

Within the Loma Linda community there was another fair trade initiative: Mundo Verde (Green World), which had its origins as a women's group established in 1993. After unsuccessful attempts to cultivate vegetables and keep chickens, the women held discussions with the commercialisation unit of the Catholic Church, which led them to experiment with coffee roasting.

The Catholic Church and Pastoral's Land Commission[8] facilitated the women to gain funding from an Austrian development agency, which enabled them to buy machinery for roasting and processing coffee. Later, USAID (US Agency for International Development) provided funding for packaging and market training to establish a small sales network, which led in 2003 to Mundo Verde being awarded organic certification in sustainable production, agriculture, farming and trade. Mundo Verde produced three qualities of roasted ground coffee: Café Mundo Verde Dorado (100 per cent first grade coffee), Café Mundo Verde Traditional (50 per cent first grade and 50 per cent second grade) and Café Popular Lupita (100 per cent third grade).

The group had started with 35–40 women from Loma Linda but in 2007 only 12 women remained. According to the women, men in the community did not support the group, perceiving them to be neglecting their housework and the coffee plots. A reason for this criticism was that sales of the roasted coffee were low, as the women had only limited access to a market, working only when they receive an order (on average once a month, generating small gains for each woman).

In 2005 a group of activists interested in agro-ecological and solidarity, who were a part of Manos Campesinas, decided to create a new network named Kuchubal to promote communitarian trade alternatives and support women's business initiatives. Both solidarity networks, Manos Campesinas and Kuchubal, operated side by side although their aims were different. The Kuchubal network sought to differentiate itself from 'traditional fair trade'. Members argue that one of the problems with fair trade in Guatemala is that it does not add value to local level production and therefore local artisanal processing of coffee is blocked by the practice of exporting the best quality coffee to European fair trade markets, in effect excluding women's participation.

What becomes apparent from this example of the women's' networks is that negotiations and struggles were taking place between the policy orientations of the various fair trade actors at the local level. The different networks operating in Loma Linda were the consequence of the fragmentation of large collective groupings and the way how solidarity frames, meanings and ideas of development were mobilised locally to distribute resources and target specific social segments within existing community groups. These paths to fair

[8]Pastoral's Land Commission is composed of lay people and progressive religious thinkers linked to the Catholic Church.

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trade generate different texts[9] in a context in which people's life worlds become fractured to embody a diversity of solidarity and fair trade categories. These categories overlap through people's involvement in different local networks, and challenge our ideas of harmonious communities and typical notions of fair trade co-operative organisation held by actors in Northern fair trade movements.

5 THE ORGANIC COFFEE CONTROVERSY

In 2007 Loma Linda was deeply affected by members' migrating to the US leaving the coffee plots to be neglected (*cf.* Jaffee, 2007). Poor production levels, alternative household livelihood strategies, and low market prices for organic fair trade coffee led producers to question whether they should continue to produce coffee for the organic fair trade market:

> 'Once, the harvest was excellent. . .[but]. . .people made mistakes and they mixed pacayina (ornamental palm) and even mangos. . .it is no surprise that the coffee plants do not respond. There is too much competition and the coffee plants became old the same as us, they don't produce beans like in the past, because we have not given much attention to the plants' (field diary, 2007).

Fair trade commercial interests are oriented to improve organic production and grow high quality coffee, but this is not easy to achieve in a harsh mountainous environment where migration takes its toll on labour availability. Importantly, though, the incentive to clear the coffee plots creates a dilemma for household livelihood diversification strategies. Cutting back plants from the coffee plots means the need to eliminate ornamental palm leaves (*pacayina)* to increase production[10], which households use as a source of cash income, particularly when there are delays in payment for fair trade coffee. As a producer said:

> 'Pacayina is good income for our families and the action to separate it from the coffee plants is diminishing our income. This is a serious problem for us. In my case I have separated pacayina from coffee, but other producers have not done that. For the pacayina we receive between Q 17.000 (£1000) to 20.000 (£1300) a year and for coffee between 8.000 (£549) to 12.000 (£823) a year per family (field diary, 2008)'.

During 2007–2008 the fair trade price became an issue because there was a levelling of the price differential between fair trade organic and conventional coffee (reflecting world market prices). Several members of the Cooperative argued that there was no point in producing organic coffee, which requires intensive labour, special agricultural practices and expensive certification. Underlying these differences is the perception that the fair trade market does not properly valorise the quality of Loma Linda's fair trade organic coffee.

In 2007 debates about organic and non-organic production came to a head: 53 people opted to produce non-organic coffee for the market and 57 opted for organic fair trade coffee. In the process coffee production became a power arena characterised by a tussle over which

[9]The term text 'refers not to script alone, but any articulation of intelligibility, that is to say, of being' (Schatzki, 2002: p. 61). Text is used here to encompass narratives, discourses and speech-acts as languages of performance, weaving distinctions from differences in peoples' diverse interpretations that constitute the fabric of solidarity and fair trade. This refers to the etymological root of the three meaning of the term 'text': generate, hit and prepare, orienting the performance of networks and socially expressing different kinds of solidarity and the tasks involved in the co-ordination of fair trade and its involvement within social life.

[10]Lyon (2006b: p. 384) emphasises the purity of shade; in Loma Linda the purity of the soil is important.

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type of coffee (organic, non-organic) would secure the path to commercial and welfare relations in the community. Differences centred on the meaning attributed to, and the social implications of, the certification demands for organic production. For some households organic production was not viable and the strict fair trade organic certification regime was not enough to mediate local supplementary relations between households with elderly people or where family members had migrated. These instances of unequal welfare were used by the 'dissident organic-producers' to justify their decision to use chemical fertilizers in their plots. In spite of these differences, all the producers decided to remain together in the cooperative to share administrative services and keep control over their own arrangements, while at the same time attempting to profit from whatever outside resource may come their way. As one producer said:

> 'we still have one cooperative, when we sell our coffee, the cooperative is the one receiving the money, when organic or conventional producers need their money it is the cooperative that will give it to them. When we have to pay some duties, for instance by using water, it is the cooperative that discounts for us and for drying the coffee; the cooperative is the best at organising and managing these activities' (field diary, 2008).

These local controversies and decisions over coffee production illustrate how important mediation is for fair trade certification procedures. As a producer said:

> 'MayaCert is the representative of FLO and they have created problems and unhappiness among producers; they want to renew our coffee plants and that is a very expensive thing to do' (field diary 2008).

Producing the volumes of coffee needed for the fair trade market has impacted on social organisation in Loma Linda because only some producers can fulfil certification requirements and continue to produce organic coffee; others cannot fulfil the organic criteria. This generated a discontinuity between smallholders and the standards required by Manos Campesinas, which led a group of producers to sell their coffee directly to a private wholesaler from Coatepeque in Quetzaltenango. Today private national and international middlemen are buying high quality non-organic coffee directly from the producers. Coffee sales to these middlemen have become attractive because they are flexible regarding production practices (and world market prices have improved).

In the end, differences around organic and non-organic production are associated with household livelihood strategies, rejuvenation of plants and labour issues in ways that are not taken into consideration by certification procedures. This generates processes of network separation and market segmentation that do not benefit fair trade; even where divisions are complementary[11] they do not lead to technological improvement for the sustainable production of high quality coffee. Yet the return of middlemen working in partnership with regional networks, precisely the group of people the Fairtrade market seeks to cut out, has played a critical role in promoting the viability of non-organic coffee.

[11]By a complementary orientation I refer to differences that can combine creating social distinctions within solidarity and fair-trade relations that generate situations that are less than complete totalities. This can be distinguished from a supplementary orientation, which refers to situations or things added to increase value or remedy a deficiency below a certain level of equality within solidarity relations like in Mundo Verde. Both terms are a way to address the differences that are created in social life and refer to social actors, which are cut from some social and solidarity/fair-trade relations. These terms may help us to describe the exact situations when dissociated or discontinuous social relations are being mobilised by actors themselves (see Hetherington and Munro, 1997: pp. 7–9; Strathern, 1992, 1997, and 1999).

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In effect they have become an alternative for producers unable to fulfil organic production requirements.

6 POLICY DISCUSSION: SPECIALISATION AND A POST-SOLIDARITY VISION OF FAIR TRADE?

The purpose of this paper has been to show how fair trade policies on organic and non-organic coffee production influence the dynamics of producer networks at the local level. The case of a rural community in Guatemala shows how a local co-operative acted on complementary social principles in order to maximise welfare gains in ways that are not as specialised as the Western consumer-oriented fair trade networks operating in Guatemala.

There are significant differences between people's experiences of fair trade within a community, as well as between communities and localities. Recent solidarity network politics happen against the backdrop of a debate about the orientation of fair trade: is the aim simply to penetrate mainstream trade or is it to recover the value of human welfare to reduce poverty, promote human rights, and promote sustainable crop production? Are the two necessarily mutually exclusive? This is a global debate concerning fair trade that is not exclusive to Guatemala (see Fisher, 2009 this volume). As more detailed case studies on fair trade are developed we will begin to discern how larger numbers of producers living in rural areas, particularly marginalised or excluded groups, can be brought into fair trade solidarity networks, so that fair trade can better meet the socio-economic needs of poor rural populations.

In Guatemala there is a re-positioning process taking place between local producers, retailers and consumers, involving national and regional middlemen who buy high quality coffee. Global networks for fair trade coffee are moving towards specialised coffee production related to standards, quality and values other than price alone. On this basis, the need to ensure good quality coffee to justify a price differential may translate locally as a demand for labour inputs and some households simply cannot mobilise this labour. This warrants a need for the fair trade movement to consider how additional support can be given to such households.

Moving to the women's group experience, it is possible to identify differences between fair trade activists' views in Guatemala about how to provide a genuine fair trade alternative rather than a proxy to boost Northern consumer consciousness (see Lyon, 2007: p. 247). Projects like Mundo Verde are important ventures because they challenge the dominance of male gender relations and social inequalities in rural Guatemala. However female coffee roasters in Loma Linda remain marginal to fair trade's formidable global networks, but also to the local producers' cooperative, which highlights a need to ask questions about actors' experiences, rather than relying on generalisations about patterns of participation and transparency (as Raynolds *et al*., 2004 seem to suggest). We cannot assume that all aspects of fair trade networks are positive because they can also create exclusion and market limitations for some producers.

7 CONCLUSION

We started this paper by asking what the consequences of fair trade policies are for producers, and questioning whether the politics of fair trade networks necessarily lead to

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positive outcomes at the local level. A focus on the case of one community in rural Guatemala has shown how changes within the fair trade movement and Fairtrade markets can have dramatic impacts on the life-worlds of producers in ways that are not necessarily taken into account by the fair trade movement; this includes negative processes of exclusion, as well as positive livelihood opportunities.

This suggests that policy decisions within the fair trade movement and businesses need to be based on a more differentiated view of the impacts of fair trade on producer communities, taking into consideration dynamic social processes and networks, including processes of social exclusion, in order to consider whether and how equity is to be achieved at the local level. The complexity of relationships between different conceptions of solidarity and fair trade embedded within local networks, and the way in which network politics can shape livelihood opportunities, should make these networks an important focus for impact studies. The emergent properties of fair trade networks and the political texts of fair trade do not simply drive the market. Cooperation is an important factor underpinning the promotion of justice, solidarity and equity amongst southern producers; it is the interaction of solidarity relations that make the market change into a space where fairness may be possible. This issue remains a challenge for those shaping policy within the fair trade movement. While it is not possible for any single policy to encompass everything that is of importance in the broad solidarity vision of the fair trade movement, a good global strategy can still seek to maximise the complementarities and supplementarities that might exist between the local potential of social relations for fair trade opportunities, welfare orientations and diverse ways of imagining solidarity, especially for those interactions addressing gender equity and household labour issues.

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