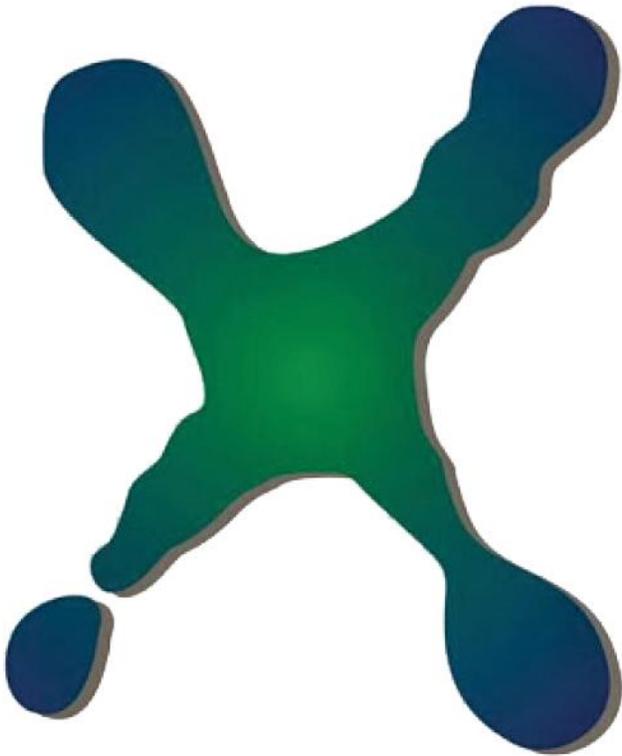


SWEATFREE TRIBE  
INTERVIEW SERIES  
PRESENTS



AN INTERVIEW WITH  
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**What was your experience at the 2014 Fair Trade Federation's Annual Conference held in Indianapolis? Can you reflect on your keynote speech and the roots of fair trade?**

The FTF conference was a wonderful experience for me. I got to see some old friends like Bob Chase and Pushpika Freitas and meet many new fair traders, including some amazing young people—their sophistication, innovation and commitment renewed my faith in our capacity to create a more just world.

One interesting thing for me was the experience of being with a largely artisan focused crowd as opposed to my usual coffee and food communities. The culture felt very different. While there is a similar passion in both, the coffee world is a bit hard edged, focused more on competing in a global food world and also aware of the ever changing biological reality of agricultural goods.

Also, the coffee world is more dominated by men, though fortunately there are more and more women emerging there as well. The artisan world is filled with strong women leaders and participants—very refreshing!

My keynote talk was originally inspired by an experience I had a few years ago with the TransFair USA (now [Fair Trade USA](#) or F-TUSA) website. When they started they told the story of fair trade starting in the 1940's and moving up to include Equal Exchange, certification, and had a movement perspective. As they got more powerful I saw the history erased. Today, there is no mention of any history of fair trade, as though it was invented by F-TUSA.

My own spiritual tradition, Judaism, includes a powerful connection to understanding our own history, reflecting on it and continuing to learn from it. This erasing of history, including my own small role as a co-founder of Equal Exchange, I felt both as a personal and community erasure. Being cut off from history, I believe, creates an unhealthy hubris or sense of self-importance, pushes speed of action at all cost and removes much of the potential learning from our journey by removing the context. It also creates an urgency to solve problems that perhaps are not solvable. As I understood fair trade to be a simple tool that can become a way of life, I saw as an extension of the struggle for justice that has always been part of human communities.

I started to do some research and found powerful quotes in Vedic texts, Buddhist text, the Koran, the Torah, Bible and across the centuries. I was humbled to find many of our beliefs about fair trade already written many centuries ago and continuing throughout modern history.

For example, in the late 1700's Quaker abolitionists in the UK started Free

Produce Movements. These activists believed that if they were against slavery they should refuse to wear clothes made with slave-grown cotton or eat food grown with slave labor. This idea was brought to the US by women Quakers and was found in small pockets around the North eastern US until the Civil War. Logistical challenges prevented the movements from growing large. The birth of the coop movement in the UK with the formation of the Rochdale Pioneers in the late 1800s was also a market-based response to unfair labor conditions.

Modern food coops have played an instrumental role in the US in the promotion and growth of fair trade foods that eventually led to the launch of TransFair USA.

At the same time as unpacking the long history of fair trade, I wove a bit of my personal story of coming to fair trade as a way to live my values in the search for a way to reduce suffering and help us all understand how we are all connected.

My talk began and ended with a comparison to the struggle the singer Prince had with his record label years ago. Rather than record music he didn't fully believe in, he changed his name to a symbol and became known as the artist formerly known as Prince. Corporate brand managers had seized control of his artistic integrity.

Our movement to create a more just world has had more success than most of us could have imagined 20-30 years ago. And, part of the consequence of that is that we have given away our brand, fair trade, to the corporate world. We have become the movement formerly known as fair trade.

Rather than complain about what we have lost, I suggested we celebrate how much we have accomplished and create a new dream for a more just trade system and forge new alliances beyond our narrow fair trade world to regain a new relevancy.

**Do you have any particular takeaways from the conference you'd like to share with our readers? What can consumers (& fair trade advocates) expect to see in the movement in the near future? (What does your experience and gut tell you?)**

To build on my call in my talk, I think the next step for our movement is to build new common ground between the artisan niche and the food/coffee niche. Celebrate our common values and work together to forge alliances outside of our movement. The potential to connect with worker coops, food sovereignty

movements, climate change movements, peasant movements, labor movements, women's movements and others is almost unlimited.

What's next is to realize that only by working together with other grassroots organizations and movements can we create a powerful enough presence to create the kind of change we want.

Creating this kind of unity is not easy, of course. I think with the FTF and the [World Fair Trade Organization](#), we have two networks—one binational and one global—that have the potential to bring together food and artisan movements as an important step in rebuilding our movement.

Ironically, we were stronger 15 years ago when fair trade sales in North America were a fraction of what they are now. As we grew and desired to move volume (this is mostly in the food sector) for farmers, we allowed certifiers to become the hub of our movement. As the main US certifier gained momentum, there was increased conflict. T- FUSA realized they were in a weak movement and gained as much momentum as possible. Eventually, they left the progressives behind and moved to capture as much volume as they could as quickly as possible. This meant focusing on the corporate sector as T-FUSA became F-TUSA.

The end result was that one dominant player in the system, F-TUSA, made unilateral decisions based on their strategy and vision. This left the rest of the system/movement, in weaker shape than when F-TUSA entered the system, despite the fact that fair trade sales grew more than a hundred fold!

Today, with all of the success of fair trade, we are in a re-building moment. We succeeded and yet lost what cohesion we had. I believe we need to rebuild our networks around a new vision of what is possible.

**I think it's safe to presume that FTUSA and the re-emergence of FLO stateside (Fairtrade America) were topics of discussion with both attendees and presenters. What is your take on Fair Trade Certified™ apparel as well as the overarching certification and label debate?**

Interestingly, as this conference was mostly artisan focused traders, F-TUSA and FLO were not discussed very much. There was some talk about apparel but it was more about growing markets, supply chain challenges and scaling up challenges. Also, the complexity of apparel supply chains compared to food/coffee were noted as challenges for certification, challenges to manage and to connect with the end users without using an overly complex story.

One of the challenges that F-TUSA apparel gives us, as I understand it, is that they are only certifying the cut and sew operation. And, they have shifted fair trade, built on the banana and tea plantation models introduced by the Europeans, to be more about incremental improvements for workers than about small farmer/worker empowerment.

Perhaps it is inevitable to water down standards when scaling up—new ideas inside the capitalist market either get integrated or crushed. The good news is fair trade has been integrated. The bad news is fair trade is now being reformulated to work for large corporations instead of the small is beautiful organizations it was designed by. For F- TUSA, the challenge is to bring people into their program as opposed to programs with even weaker social standards such as Utz or Rainforest Alliance. They give little attention to the movement that birthed them as they believe that volume equals impact.

For the final purchasers of fair trade goods, the different seals and brands are hard to differentiate. While we can despair over this, we can also be pleased that this will mean that more and more trade uses more and more producer and environment friendly approaches to trade.

The challenge is that the original goal of deep empowerment of poor people is gone from the core of fair trade.

The opportunity presented is to create a new movement of transformative trade to rebuild a new high bar based on empowerment and let the corporate world fill in the gaps with fair trade.

**As the Executive Director of Cooperative Coffees how do you weigh or qualify co-op, direct trade, and fair trade certifications? Do you see them as separate or interdependent?**

A complex question! For me, coops are an effective way to organize people in an efficient manner that is built on the needs and well-being of those involved. Sometimes this is as far as it goes. In fair trade, coops have been short-hand for a way to organize people, who are used to being largely voiceless, in a way that creates community based power. Fair trade was a way to support this organizing by creating a market giving preferential treatment to organized artisans or farmers.

The beauty of the original fair trade certification is that it included a strong commitment and some funding to movement building. This allowed individual coops to form and to join together to form secondary level coops. And, it allowed those coops to organize regional and global networks. This allows for

much needed systemic change at all levels of society.

The down side of the coop approach was that often the impact on individuals was not looked at or included. Direct trade in coffee has been a way for traders to work directly with coops, estates and individual farmers and understand the impact of different trading experiments on the individual. It also has added a quality component to the equation that at its best has tremendous potential to support farmers to become better farmers. And some direct traders are now financing farm improvements instead of basing everything on outcomes (cup quality). This shifts some of the risk of quality improvement from the farmer to the purchaser—a powerful concept.

The weakness, in my mind, of the direct trade approach is that it has not so far included attention to movement building and larger systemic change. Just as micro-finance has learned, if we only focus on improving incomes for individuals, it is very hard to create long lasting systemic change. Also, there are no standards and uniformity of claims by direct traders. This does save money and avoids the “zooification” effect of examining every aspect of producers’ lives for certification but it makes it harder for eaters and drinkers to know if claims are credible.

Certification is an imperfect tool. As with most policing activity, it can seem to add cost with little value. On the other hand, without some kinds of policing, we have learned that it is difficult to create community well-being. A difficult dilemma.

I do think these concepts are inter-related. There is no right answer. For me, fair trade or direct trade are not answers or solutions. They are tools that enable us to directly address the suffering of humanity, to take action to engage in our own healing along with those of farmers, eaters, traders and other human beings. They are fairly blunt and crude tools but they are real. Success is using them, researching the impacts, reflecting, and then refining our actions. I don’t believe we are solving problems as much as building awareness of oppression, exploitation and suffering and then engaging in concrete responses.

In the coffee world, I think about what will happen in 100 years. If there is still coffee and farmers, if we are still tied to a commodity market that hardly adjusts for inflation, life will be even more dire for farmers, with or without fair or direct trade as manufactured goods adjust upwards over time. Seen in this light, all of these market experiments are ways for us to learn to walk together with our sisters and brothers who are growing our precious berries and find common approaches to creating more just lives for ourselves and future generations.

**As a coffee lover (A little shout out to roasting member [Coffee Exchange in Providence](#)- they rock my coffee loving world!) I am curious if, as ED of CC, you're able to visit with farmer coops or work more in North America to develop roaster membership? Is the Coop being affected by coffee crop "rust"?**

So far, my work has mostly been focused on strengthening our systems here in North America and revising some of our perspectives based on the changing specialty coffee world. So, I have traveled numerous times to our offices in South Central Georgia and Montreal, Quebec as well as to many of our member roasters while I have only been to visit farmers once (Honduras). We have a very talented and experienced staff that does visit our supplier coops frequently so that is not a major focus of my work.

The rise of direct trade in coffee has created new opportunities and challenges for us as we deepen our commitment to solidarity and look to deepen our commitment to supporting farmer coops to produce great coffee and build solid communities.

The coffee rust crisis that is exacerbated by climate change has profoundly affected many of our cooperative suppliers. The combination of warmer temperatures and increased moisture has brought devastation and deep challenges to some farmers. Sadly, the most vulnerable farmers are often the ones with the oldest trees and the least advanced agronomic techniques. Some of our coops are developing very powerful approaches that ward off rust by focusing on creating healthy soil with healthy trees in a healthy ecosystem. This takes education, experimentation and resources. Coop Coffees is working to support the exchange of best practices between coops and also supporting re-planting and emergency response to rust in all our coops.

Last summer my colleague Monika Firl led our staff and members to quickly develop an emergency rust fund, financed by roaster payments of 5¢/lb that has generated tens of thousands of dollars for immediate use. Each coop decides how to best use its share of the funds to address the impact of rust. We are working with other NGOs now to replicate this approach and amplify the impact with matching funds.

[UCIRI](#), the grandmother of fair trade coops, based in Oaxaca, Mexico, recently sent a letter to their customers (not Coop Coffees) that stated that rust has drastically reduced production for many of their farmers. The result is that average farmer income will go from \$3/day to \$1/day. Fair trade is structured to ensure stability through a minimum price/pound not a daily

wage. In the best of times, this stability enables farmers to think and plan beyond putting food on the table; even then it is still not enough to unilaterally lift farmers out of poverty. It is, however, a powerful step through a doorway into recognizing we are all connected. When one person suffers, we all do.

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