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EMPOWERING PRODUCERS MEANS SHARING POWER WITH PRODUCERS!



by Elizabeth Bennett, professor and fair trade researcher, Lewis & Clark College

The fair trade movement aims to alleviate poverty and empower producers. This means working alongside farmers and workers as a team. This guest blog from Lewis & Clark College professor and fair trade researcher [Elizabeth Bennett](#) discusses why it's important to include producers, and what you can do to advocate for this best practice.

The fair trade movement aims to alleviate poverty and empower producers in the global South through better prices, stable market relationships, and other resources. This means working alongside producers—as a team. Strangely, most fair trade and sustainability certifications refuse producers the right to vote in their highest governance bodies.

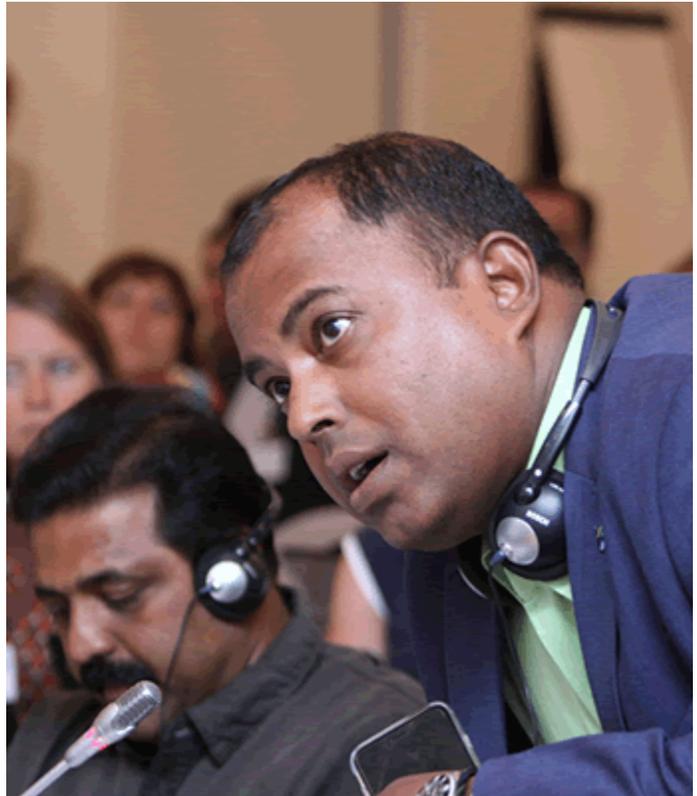
What's the first thing you do when someone you know faces a struggle or challenge? You ask how you can help, of course! And then you *listen*, *ask questions*, and try really, really hard

to understand what is happening, even if you can't relate. Then you put your heads together and collaborate! By working shoulder-to-shoulder, you can pool your experiences, talents, and resources to create the best solution possible. We are most successful in helping people when we work by their side, as a team.

SHARING POWER, IMPROVING GOVERNANCE

That's why the international Fairtrade system aims to work *with* the farmers and farm workers who produce Fairtrade goods to take on the challenge of making trade fair: empowering producers means sharing power with them.

Fairtrade International has two primary governance bodies: the General Assembly and the Board of Directors. The Assembly is 50% representatives of Fairtrade producers and 50% representatives of official National Fairtrade Organizations—like Fairtrade America—who educate consumers, retailers, and businesses in countries where Fairtrade products are sold. The Assembly appoints the Board, which is comprised of four producer representatives, four National Fairtrade Organizations, and three independent experts.



In the international Fairtrade system, producers (from the Global South) and Fairtrade staff (from consumer countries) work in partnership to grapple with extremely challenging questions, such as:

What is a “fair” price? What price is high enough to benefit producers but low enough that traders and businesses will pay?

What type of producer organizations should be certified for each product: Workers’

groups? Smallholder farmers? Contract workers?

Should the Fairtrade certification be expanded to new types of products and producer groups, bringing more people into the system? Or should the focus be increasing benefits to producers who are already part of the Fairtrade system?

PRODUCER SUFFRAGE IS NECESSARY, BUT NOT SUFFICIENT

Of course, empowering producers requires more than simply inviting them to the decision-making table. In Fairtrade International, each producer representative works on behalf of all the producers in their home continent. Since there are more than 1.6 million producers spread throughout 75 countries, that means producer representatives need time, resources, training, technological support, transportation, and translation to learn about what their constituents want and need. Likewise, producers require resources to select and communicate with their representative.

To truly empower producers, Fairtrade must make serious investments in each of the three regional producers' networks—Latin America, Africa, Asia/Pacific. This means transferring responsibilities (and resources) to the producer networks and fully, quickly implementing the policy decisions they reach. It also means ensuring that all producers have a voice—that representatives are not only voicing small producer concerns or farm worker association concerns, for example, but that diverse positions are brought to the decision-making table. While these continue to be challenges for Fairtrade, it is moving in the right direction.

Though challenging, it is absolutely crucial for standards-setting organizations to include producers in the most important governance bodies.

Here are five reasons why:

1. **Self-Determination.** Producers have the most to lose and the most to gain from voluntary certification policies. Since self-determination is a human right and cornerstone of sustainable development, it is appropriate for them to participate in standards-setting and certification policy-making.

2. **Democracy.** International economic institutions such as the WTO do not, traditionally, include smallholder farmers at the decision-making table. Standards-setting bodies offer an opportunity for the voices of producers to be heard in global economic governance.
3. **Leadership experience.** Producer representatives receive benefits such as training, management skills, public speaking experience, and international travel opportunities. These skills may be transferable to their own social and economic endeavors, such as supply chain communications and cooperative organizing.
4. **Communication.** The realities of Fairtrade staff in the Global North and producers in the Global South can be very different. Bringing these groups together on a regular basis facilitates opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.
5. **Producer-centered policies.** When producers have a not just a *voice* but a *vote* in difficult decisions, their perspectives cannot be dismissed or overlooked. The resulting policies are more likely to reflect producer realities and values.

Strangely, Fairtrade International is nearly alone in adopting this good governance practice.

A recent study of 33 voluntary certification organizations shows that—at *most*—only 25% of standards-setting organizations *reserve even one seat* for a producer representative. Two thirds don't even mention an intention or aspiration to include producers in governance! One excellent exception is the Fundación de Pequeños Productores Organizados (FUNDEPPO) or "Small Producers Symbol" (SPP) that was established by small-scale producers, for small-scale producers, and is fully governed by small-scale producers.

If empowering producers is so important, why is producer inclusion such an unusual practice? This study (in the *Social Enterprise Journal*) shows that one of the most important influences on Fairtrade International's decision to empower producers was pressure from watchdog NGOs and other groups in the fair trade movement. When social justice advocates insisted that a *legitimate* labeling organization must put producers at the helm, Fairtrade International listened.

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

When you see a label, brand, or claim, ask, “Who decides what’s ‘fair’?” You can call the organization to ask whether producers have a vote on the Board of Directors and other important governance body (most standards-setting organizations have two). Alternatively, you can check online. Most organizations’ homepages have an “about” link that provides information about how they are governed. This [Fair World Project label guide](#) also provides governance information about 14 fair trade and sustainability labels. Consider producers’ role in governance an important criterion for deciding which labels to support. And when you see governance structures that exclude producers, make your voice heard!

Elizabeth A. Bennett is an Assistant Professor of International Affairs at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon and a Research Associate at the Center for Fair and Alternative Trade at Colorado State. She writes about power and politics in the context of fair trade and environmental certification organizations. Her recent books include *The Handbook of Research on Fair Trade* (2015, with Laura Reynolds) and *The Civic Imagination: Making a Difference in American Political Life* (2014). This blog post draws on her peer-reviewed articles “Who Governs Socially-Oriented Voluntary Sustainability Standards? Not the Producers of Certified Products” in the journal *World Development*, and “Governance, Legitimacy, and Stakeholder Balance: Lessons from Fairtrade International” in the *Social Enterprise Journal*, both published in December 2016. To request the full article or learn more about her research email ElizabethBennett@lclark.edu or visit www.ElizabethAnneBennett.com.

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