



Fair Trade Connections: Exploring relationality, decoloniality and future directions of a hybrid movement

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Introduction

Fair Trade emerged as a set of practices and relationships to address North–South socio-economic inequalities drawing on ideas of partnership and reciprocity. Whilst the movement has a history dating back to the mid-twentieth century (Anderson, 2015), it grew in visibility and economic significance in the 1990s and early 2000s as a market-based governance approach to sustainability issues, becoming more popular following the

United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) at Rio de Janeiro in 1992. Today there is perhaps less consensus on both the nature of problems and solutions in an increasingly polarized, conflict-ridden, environmentally fragile and unequal world. Whilst there are some vocal critiques of Fair Trade, there is also a challenge of indifference as other campaigns take centre stage focusing on, for example, the climate crisis, the call to phase out fossil fuels, and wider sustainability issues, as well as race, decolonization and protests related to armed conflicts. Fair Trade supporters argue that the movement embraces these concerns, with specific actions on climate change challenges and addressing inequalities. But what space is there today for fairness in trade as a solution to economic and social injustice?

This special issue brings together a series of research articles and reflective pieces that were inspired by the theme of 'Fair Trade Connections'— the focus of the last meeting of the [Fair Trade International Symposium \(FTIS\)](#) that took place at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom in June 2023. FTIS is the leading global gathering for scholars, practitioners and policymakers working on Fair Trade, established in 2002 with its first meeting in Montreal, Canada, with subsequent events in France, the UK, and Italy.

Our theme of 'Fair Trade Connections' for the University of Leeds session of FTIS recognized that whilst the Fair Trade movement aims to transform both production and consumption and contribute to wider systemic change through its emphasis on producer empowerment, living wages, fair pricing and long-term partnerships, it is not alone in its attempts to reshape the discourse on sustainability and social justice through socially responsible business, social enterprise, and supply chains. Questions inspiring the FTIS at Leeds included: *How does Fair Trade influence and support other complementary movements, organizations and activities? How can Fair Trade theory and practice benefit from complementary movements and activities, both in the South and the North? How can we establish new connections and what are the opportunities to extend and reimagine existing connections?*

In planning for FTIS 2023 it was important that the symposium had transdisciplinary spaces to generate shared learning and focus on policy and practice as well as academic paper sessions. We held workshops and panels in person, with most sessions also accessible for online participants. In keeping with the FTIS's aims of being a space for both practitioners and academics, speakers from the main Fair Trade organizations provided strategic overviews of their current work and key priorities for policy, research, and innovation: the World Fair Trade Organisation (Leida Rijnhout, spoke about Fair Trade enterprises), Fairtrade International (Melissa Duncan, thinking about the future of Fairtrade) and Fair Trade Advocacy Office (Eric Ponthieu, Placing Fair Trade at the core of the Green Deal, see [Ponthieu et al., 2023](#)). We also held plenaries focusing on concepts complementary to Fair Trade. For example, Erinch Sahan shared a variety of tools from [Doughnut Economics as they apply to](#)

[business practice](#) and John Steel of Cafedirect reflected on what it means, or does not mean, to be a B Corporation.

Geographies of Connection and Marginalization

During the conference, there were sessions on how Fair Trade is practised in different localities, in both the Global North and Global South, with contributions challenging the perception of the Global North as just a space of Fair Trade consumption and Global South as Fair Trade production. Importantly, different narratives of how Fair Trade is understood and practised within different organizations and geographical contexts were represented, including the papers published in this issue on Fair Trade organizations in West Africa (Coulibaly-Ballet and Loconto), small and medium enterprises in the US (Pavlovskaia and Kara) and artisanal social enterprises in Nepal (Saakha and Discetti).

The paper by Mantiaba Coulibaly-Ballet and Allison Loconto investigates the challenges and controversies in the sustainable cocoa sector. Based on interviews and observations in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and European countries, their paper explores ongoing tensions surrounding three key areas of sustainability practices: fair remuneration of producers, child labour and deforestation.

Research by Zoia Pavlovskaia and Ali Kara explores the motivations, characteristics, and perspectives of owners and managers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Media, Pennsylvania (US) who engage in Fair Trade business practices, investigating their understandings of Fair Trade, as well as the critical motivational factors for its adoption. They found that although SMEs owners and managers struggle to profit from selling Fair Trade products, they persisted in this practice due to their strong beliefs about the benefits to society and the environment. The businesses interviewed in their study expressed beliefs around value creation through collaboration among different stakeholders, including local communities and consumers, thus evidencing a dimension of value co-creation through retail and consumption.

Work by Prasuna Saakha and Roberta Discetti explores how social enterprises set up by Label Step, a Fair Trade organization active in Nepal, supported the skilling and employment of rural workers in the traditional carpet weaving sector. The Fair Trade framing promoted by Label Step in marginalized workers' communities revolves around decent livelihoods and employment for local workers, limiting the migration to more urbanized parts of the country through the provision of dignified jobs locally. Importantly, Label Step promotes a Fair Trade narrative that values the traditional craft of hand-knotted carpet weaving as an artistic artisanal practice, redeeming it from the image of unskilled and undignified work it is often associated with.

In these different ways, the papers cast new light on the meanings associated with Fair Trade networks in diverse geographical contexts,

organizations and production systems, taking into account dimensions often marginalized in the existing literature on this topic.

Education for Sustainable Development

We introduced education for sustainable development (ESD) as a symposium theme, considering Fair Trade principles and practice as a 'gateway topic' for broader ideas about sustainability, and related themes such as decolonization. This created spaces to make links between the Fair Trade movement and academics as educators as well as researchers. Building connections between Fair Trade and ESD objectives of knowledge, competencies, values, and readiness to act, can be fostered through experiential learning (Vogel et al., 2023). The role of active learning especially through gameplay to explore the balance between fairness and environmental priorities in cocoa production was discussed in a presentation by Judith Krauss that reflected on the coloniality not only of cocoa production but also of knowledge production.

In sustainability education, knowledge is socially constructed, emerging from fluid, ongoing, experiential processes of co-creation and collaboration (Sterling, Dawson & Warwick, 2018). Based on this theoretical premise, at the FTIS event in Leeds we created opportunities for greater involvement of students, who created resources to support online collaboration throughout the hybrid event and co-created and facilitated sessions on ESD and modes of engaging with young people on social and environmental justice. Some such a session inspired a paper in this special issue by Laura Smith, Emma Green, Lucy Cligg and Joanna Pollard, two authors of which are undergraduate students. Throughout the event we were attuned to the perspectives of young people, and how they are inspiring new ways of thinking about fairness and trade justice, and also how some are engaging in policy debates themselves, not least through the [Young Fair Trade Advocates](#) programme which was championed by Pedro Sousa at the event.

The theme of education and building awareness of sustainable development is extended in Mark Dawson's paper that investigates the role of faith communities and their connections with Fair Trade Towns. In his research on the Fairtrade Luton steering group, he observed how Fair Trade campaigns raise awareness on the interconnected issues of sustainable communities, social justice, inequality and marginalization, and also concerns for the environment. Establishing connections between social capital and spiritual capital, his research highlights faith communities' ability to bridge social divides whilst challenging the status quo. In other words, the paper stresses how the education promoted by the Luton Fair Trade Town (FTT) campaign works as a social cohesion project, bringing together diverse social groups. Importantly, he reported how the FTT group works closely with faith groups and local schools to embed global citizenship and sustainable development into learning and educational activities.

Throughout the event there were fewer contributions explicitly on environmental issues than might have been expected given the significant

impacts of climate change and the lessons that we might learn from the climate movement (especially with respect to younger people). There were, however, several discussions regarding the deforestation policies, including a presentation reflecting on EU due diligence legislation from Eric Ponthieu (Fair Trade Advocacy Office) and a paper that highlights contrasting perspectives and priorities for action on deforestation between actors in the Global North and Global South from Mantiaba Coulibaly-Ballet and Allison Loconto (this issue). The relative lack of attention to environmental issues, and also the approaches taken (policy impact and narrative analyses), perhaps reflect the dominance of social sciences and humanities within Fair Trade research which has had less attention from the natural and environmental sciences.

Following a call for interdisciplinarity in ESD to build skills to tackle wicked problems, there is a need for greater interdisciplinary research to build knowledge to deal with the complex and often intractable challenges facing Fair Trade systems.

Business Engagement and Impact

Impacts of Fair Trade was a theme running through many of the papers presented during the event as well as a focus of one of the plenary sessions. Vidya Rangan from ISEAL Alliance provided an overview of the evidence base with regard to the impacts of voluntary sustainability standards such as Fairtrade, highlighting what we know and gaps in knowledge. Not surprisingly, there is more evidence about Fairtrade than newer standards or commodities such as cotton. ISEAL are keen to focus on standard systems and how impact is generated and sustained across a sector or landscape, and to also share the knowledge generated through commissioned and academic reports. Vidya showcased the 'Evidensia' platform that provides access to both [study reports](#) and also more recently [visual representations](#) of findings from studies from the application of tools including, but not only, voluntary standards such as Fairtrade.

In this issue, Allison Loconto summarizes the learning from recent studies that have explored if and how voluntary sustainability standards, including from Fairtrade standards, generate impact. Her paper draws on the experience of commissioned studies (for Fairtrade International, see [Loconto et al., 2019](#); and for Fairtrade and the European Union, [Loconto et al., 2022](#)) and specifically explores the use of the Fairtrade Premium and the impact of engagement with the Fairtrade system on business practices and interface with regulatory frameworks.

Listening to and Engaging with Farmers

There were papers at FTIS reflecting on Fair Trade practices and impacts in specific sectors, including coffee and cocoa, the sectors where labelling has been strongest and where there has been significant work on building the

capacity of farmers' organizations. Ian Agnew of the Lorna Young Foundation (LYF) gave a plenary presentation on [Farmers Voice Radio](#), an innovative programme that brings knowledge about farming techniques and markets to smallholder farmers broadcast via radio in accessible ways, both in terms of how this is packaged and the languages of delivery. The LYF has developed training packages for online and in-person delivery to scale up their impact, with [open-source materials](#) available for those working with small-scale farmers' organizations to create programmes to be broadcast. Listening to and articulating farmer and worker voices was the focus of two contributions from the UK's Fairtrade Foundation (specifically from Alistair Stewart, Carley-Jane Stanton and Rachel Wadham), one focusing on methodologies and one presenting findings from the cocoa sector.

In this special issue, however, we include sector-specific papers on product categories that have had less academic attention, including woven products (Saakha and Discetti, as discussed above) and cannabis. Elizabeth Bennett's paper on 'Fair Trade cannabis' in Portland, Oregon, in the US builds on ideas about 'atypical fair trade' covered in this journal ([Tiffen, Williams & Van, 2020](#)). Bennett talks about 'distant' products raising questions about what 'counts' as Fair Trade especially where a product does not cross borders, and what might be the core elements of Fair Trade noting how the enterprises she studied were more concerned with environmental sustainability and privileging small producers than with the fairness of trading relations and contracts such as price, payment terms and transparency or wider issues of governance.

Fair Trade International Symposium Into the Future

Finally, there were several workshop discussions regarding the purpose and future of FTIS, how it can continue and thrive as a gathering of academics and practitioners, taking advantage of our networks and experience, making the best use of technology and recognizing different needs. These conversations will be continued in conjunction with the Journal of Fair Trade recognizing the synergies and potential for greater collaborations.

Our future-facing discussions at FTIS inspired two further contributions to this special issue: a direct invitation for greater collaboration between academics and Fairtrade International and what this might entail, by Schneider et al. from Fairtrade International, and a reflective piece exploring what FTIS might learn from other professional academic associations that have a close relationship with a values-led movement by Darryl Reed. As discussed in the paper by Schneider et al. and previous reflections on the roles of academics working in partnership with the movement ([Tallontire et al., 2020](#)), there is work to be done to forge more lasting relationships. Following this, Darryl Reed's paper explores what we might learn from the co-operative movement recognizing common features beyond the shared values, including the way in which academics have generated and shared knowledge regarding each of the movements. Reed explores the ways in which knowledge generation has developed in relation to co-operatives through 'the development of *fields of*

study and the establishment of *knowledge management systems* among practitioners', to suggest lessons for the Fair Trade movement, making a proposition for the formation of a scholarly association with more a formalized role than the current FTIS.

Darryl Reed's lessons from the co-operative movement highlight important questions about the role of universities in the Fair Trade movement, with respect to the generation of knowledge in education and also as actors in a particular city or community, questions that are also raised in work on education for sustainability at both the local and global levels. There are important challenges to address to build on local linkages and personal relationships to create a more connected and truly global movement.

Final Reflections and Looking Forward

This special issue is a compilation of research and discussions that took place at the FTIS at the University of Leeds in the UK in June 2023. We also take the opportunity here to reflect on the missed opportunity for an FTIS event to take place in the Global South. It was hoped we would have an event in 2020 in Mexico, but this was cancelled due to the Pandemic, being replaced by an online event focusing on '[Fair Trade and resilience in supply chains: insights from the past, perspectives on the future](#)'. As a global network, it is vital that we find spaces to meet that are accessible for all and that reflect the diverse priorities, perspectives, and modes of engagement and learning.

Hybrid sessions can only take us so far in terms of inclusivity— even with Padlets and Zoom chats, we know that many online participants felt excluded from the discussions and there is more to learn about making such events interactive. Similarly, language poses barriers, and whilst there were papers presented in Spanish and French, we learned how challenging it can be to offer translation. Beyond the complexities of the practicalities of managing a global network of academics and practitioners, we also recognize the coloniality of language, knowledge, and power dynamics characterizing North/South exchanges, and that Fair Trade epistemologies and methodologies have often been characterized by global North paradigms related to conducting and disseminating research. There is work to be done to make FTIS more embracing of the linguistic and cultural differences within Fair Trade, but also decolonize language (Bock & Stroud, 2021), epistemologies (Canagarajah, 2022) and methodologies (Smith, 2021) characterizing research and knowledge exchanges within this network.

The contribution of universities is increasingly recognized as important for raising awareness of the issues of unfair trade and support for public campaigns calling for fair prices, fair share of power and rapid action on environmental sustainability and climate justice (Fairtrade Foundation, 2024). Universities have the potential to support Fair Trade community campaigns and wider activism and collaborate on research initiatives to provide evidence-based strategies on how to tackle systemic issues of unfair trade. However, Fair Trade relationships between academics and practitioners need more work—not only

in terms of learning from other movements but in terms of understanding the challenges and complexity of global relationships. Following [Fransman et al. \(2021, p. 331\)](#), it is perhaps better to see ‘partnership’, as a ‘verb rather than a noun ... a set of relationships framed by particular contexts and in a continual process of “becoming”’. Although several papers of this special issue are co-authored among academics and practitioners, a commendable practice supported by the *Journal of Fair Trade*, more needs to be done to ‘pluralize academic writing’ and facilitate alternative modes of thinking, writing, and sharing knowledge ([Canagarajah, 2022](#)).

Fair Trade, as practised at an organizational level, has been depicted as a hybrid business model ([Davies & Doherty, 2019](#)), where social enterprises operate between different institutional logics often bridging the conventional categories of private, public and non-profit sectors. Similarly, Fair Trade consumer activism has been discussed as ‘hybrid activism’ connecting different narratives and modes of operations ([Discetti & Anderson, 2023](#)). A hybrid concept of Fair Trade may also be useful at a more conceptual level when investigating ideas of fairness and the evolution of Fair Trade as a movement.

Fair Trade has multiple dimensions connected to its practice as an enterprise model, civil society campaign and certification scheme. This can lead academics and practitioners to debate the boundaries of Fair Trade as a concept and a movement. However, Fair Trade is not alone in facing these theoretical and practical challenges. By expanding our field of vision there may be lessons to learn from related, and potentially connected, concepts and movements such as the circular economy ([Blomsma & Brennan, 2017](#)).

There are parallels here with work by [Hirsh and Levin \(1999\)](#) on the life cycle of umbrella constructs. They depict the tension between ‘umbrella advocates’ who see broad global concepts (or fields) as interesting and to be celebrated; and ‘validity police’ who view umbrella constructs as too broad and inconsistent. For Hirsh and Levin the challenge was how to strike a balance between relevance and integration, on the one hand, and scientific rigour and focus, on the other. To support an approach that is both scientific and relevant, the FTIS community will need to regularly review and revisit our understanding of Fair Trade as a construct and reflect on the role of FTIS as an ‘umbrella advocate’ or ‘validity police’.

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