

Bringing Fair Trade Home to the US: The Agricultural Justice Project

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Abstract

Fairness and social sustainability are basic to organic agriculture, yet in the marketplace there are separate labels for organic and fair trade. Elizabeth Henderson of the Agricultural Justice Project in the US will describe their development of social standards, present results of pilot projects, and outline future plans.

The concepts "organic" and "fair trade" are two sides of a coin, and stand for a sustainable, organic method of agriculture, which preserves natural resources while pursuing fair trade relationships that offer viable economic returns to all involved. Family-scale organic farming in the United States builds on methods, which smallholders have already been applying by long tradition. These practices can only be termed "sustainable," however, if the growers can live off the sale of their products and farm revenues provide an economic base for future prospects. In the US marketplace, sales of domestic organic products and international fair trade products are on the rise. The goal of the Agricultural Justice Project is to bring the benefits of fair trade home to struggling family-scale farms and exploited farm workers, and in the long term, to all who labor from seed to table.

Born of the recognition that the National Organic Program of the US Department of Agriculture did not address the needs of the people – farmers or farm workers – who make organic agriculture a real alternative to conventional agribusiness, the Agricultural Justice Project (AJP) came together in 1999. Four US grassroots organizations are partners in the project: the Rural Advancement Foundation International, Comité de Apoyo a los Trabajadores Agrícolas/Farmworker Support Committee, the Northeast Organic Farming Association, and Florida Organic Growers/Quality Certification Services. They created universal social standards for sustainable and organic agriculture, codifying in concrete terms what farms and those who buy from farms would have to do to make a claim of social justice.

The AJP standards address:

- *Workers' rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining*
- *Fair wages and benefits for workers*
- *Fair and equitable contracts for farmers and buyers*
- *Fair pricing for farmers*
- *Clear conflict resolution policies for farmers and farmworkers*
- *The rights of indigenous peoples*
- *Workplace health and safety*
- *Farmworker housing*
- *Farm interns and apprentices*
- *Children on farms*

The AJP has also developed the tools and materials necessary to conduct audits for certifying farms and cooperative retail stores to those standards. In 2008 – 2009, based on the pilot projects, AJP will revise the standards, adding standards for retail stores, in an open, stakeholder process.

Since 2006, the AJP has been working with Minneapolis-based Local Fair Trade Network to pilot a social justice label in the states of Minnesota and Wisconsin. During the 2007 season, four farms sold products labelled "Local Fair Trade" in two food coops, and the AJP monitored the resulting sales and consumer response. This response was positive enough that in 2008, the pilot will expand to additional farms and food coops. AJP has also initiated pilot projects with the Farmer Direct Coop, a marketing cooperative for grain growers in Saskatchewan, Canada, and Native Harvest, a program of the White Earth Recovery Project of the Ojibwe, indigenous people who harvest wild rice and make maple syrup.

Conclusion

While international fair trade has provided some relief for family-scale farmers in developing countries, the financial pressures on farmers in industrialized countries like the US continue unrelenting. Bringing fair trade home for the benefit of US farmers promises to alleviate the loss of farms and to make farms that are using ecological practices economically as well as environmentally sustainable.