



*Sent via email to the Yes! Magazine editorial team and author of "How to Become a Citizen Eater."*

Dear Editor:

It is always exciting to see articles about coffee, supply chains and fair trade that encourage consumers to think deeply about what makes an ethical choice. However, the details and conclusions in your recent article, "How to Become a Citizen Eater: A Trip Behind the Labels of Your Ethical Cup of Coffee"

<http://www.yesmagazine.org/new-economy/how-to-become-a-citizen-eater-a-trip-behind-the-labels-of-your-ethical-cup-of-coffee> were disappointing.

The focus on whether fair or direct trade is more ethical, while common, is troubling. The best fair traders develop long-term direct relationships with coffee farmers and the best direct traders have a more holistic vision for trading relationships than simply meeting buyers face to face.

As mentioned in the article, fair trade is a more developed and cohesive movement that seeks to change economic systems. Direct trade is a market term devoid of the social movement history and context bound up with fair trade and arguably is better known for its role in catering to refined consumer tastes. However, instead of delving deeper into models for social change, the article spent far too much time on one difference, that of certification. Third-party auditing is indeed important due to its role in mitigating false market claims. However, the focus on certification is simplistic. Not all fair traders use certification and all direct traders avoid it.

Another marker of fair trade's evolution as a movement is the existence of several trade and advocacy organizations dedicated to fair trade. The article states that fair trade certification looks at both ends of the supply chain, both the producers and the companies. Unfortunately, this is misleading and in reality there are very few requirements for companies. However, fair trade membership organizations such as the World Fair Trade Organization and the Fair Trade Federation do look at a company's practices.

The article says that direct trade purchases benefit individual farmers while fair trade purchases may only benefit the co-op. This again is misleading as coffee co-op's in the global south are often made up of small-scale farmers who need to organize in order to take advantage of economies scale, gain access to funding and the market, but these are all individual farmers organizing so to state the purchases by fair traders do not necessarily benefit individual farmers is wrong. The reality is that direct trade companies are often buying from small-scale farmers who are part of their local co-op. Despite the growth of the premium coffee sector in recent years,

most farmers cannot sell all of their coffee to premium markets like the fair or direct trade markets. But when fair trade companies buy from the co-op, the additional purchase price and premiums are spread among all of the farmers. When direct traders buy from one or a handful of farmers, they may benefit those few farmers, but they may also cause inequality among farmers in the co-op. In addition, though the author quoted Rob Everts of Equal Exchange as he explained the role of the co-op, she seemed to not grasp the significance of it. Though the co-op may receive some of the benefit of the fair trade purchase, this is a benefit, not a draw back. The co-op is the unit that is able to lobby for longer lasting change and negotiate for fair prices for all members (in addition to in some cases creating additional jobs for the local community).

Fair trade is not perfect. High fees for certification and minimum prices that do not lift farmers out of poverty are two valid critiques. These are being addressed by many people within the fair trade system.

Another major difference between fair trade and direct trade, which was not mentioned at all in the article, is that traditionally fair trade is a small-scale farmer movement and in particular is focused on organized small-scale farmers – through the promotion of co-ops, farmer associations and other progressive forms of organized labor. Direct trade companies may buy from small-scale farmers, but may also buy from large-scale farmers. That means large-scale farms may benefit from direct trade even if they do not pass those benefits on to farmworkers or the farming community.

We are concerned that the author also seems to quote Naylor of Community AgroEcology Network in isolation also when she says:

“As direct trade is practiced now, I think it steps outside of the entanglements of power between producers and consumers,” she writes, highlighting the work of the Community AgroEcology Network (CAN), which works on food and trade justice in Mexico and Central America. That group’s approach, said Naylor, is “based on maintaining a relationship, not on imposing standards on producers to meet a particular ‘ethics of care’ that is desired by wealthy consumers.”

Previously in the article the author acknowledges that quality and taste are among the main goals of direct trade. Though these are not ethical goals, they are demands of wealthy consumers in the north as much as any fair trade standards may be perceived as mere demands of northern consumers.

My own organization, Fair World Project, has done much work to educate consumers on these issues. For a broader perspective on the fair trade versus direct trade issue, we would have recommended talking to a broader range of experts. Rob Everts and Daniel Jaffee are without a doubt an excellent start to understanding fair trade issues. The Domestic Fair Trade Association has excelled at building consensus among domestic fair trade stakeholders, but have not extended the

model to include coffee farmers or roasters. To understand more well-rounded view of fair trade we would have recommended also talking to the Small Producers Symbol to explore a model of fair trade certification owned by farmers and not replicating a model of power imbalance. Peace Coffee, a roaster synonymous with fair trade , and the Fair Trade Federation, the trade association that promotes fair trade in the marketplace would have also helped to provide critical insight to the breadth, nuance and integrity in the fair trade space.

Stumptown is probably the best known direct trade company, but to get a more well-rounded picture, we would recommend talking to Counter Culture, the one direct trade company that has embraced third-party auditing and that has laid out an ethical framework that places the burden of certification on the company, not the farmer.

We look forward to your magazine taking this conversation to the next level. And thanks to all of you at Yes! Including Rachael Stoeve for the space and energy you have each dedicated to these important issues thus far. As an organization dedicating to critical thought, analysis, and discourse in the fair trade and labor movements, we sincerely appreciate your exploration of the issue.

Thank you,

Kerstin Lindgren