

# Cultivating an Authentic Fair Trade



Jose Osmin Romero, member of Las Marias 93 cooperative in El Salvador. The same mountain these farmers hid and fought on has now become their peaceful livelihood, covered in coffee.



## Contributing Writers

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Fair trade falls short when the relationships along the chain are reduced to simple “trading partnerships.” Trade is the vehicle for the relationship, but the road it travels should lead to the foundation of real global communities, through which people connected by economic exchange can see each other and interact. This is the transformative piece of the ideal. True fair trade is often buried beneath “certifications” that do more for the marketing of coffee in the Global North than for the actual well-being of the farmer in the Global South. If we want to build an authentic model of fair trade that stands up to its name, we must work directly with small farmers and transform the term from a marketing device to a real movement based on building economic democracy. Certifications alone do not accomplish this and, at times, can actually “dumb down” the real work that we need to do in our companies and in our communities.

We started our respective businesses as experiments in building this type of exchange. In January of 2013, we went to Southern Mexico and Central America to see what a decade of fair trade has done for the farmer cooperatives we work with and the families that comprise them.

In those travels through Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, we met with our partners and listened to their thoughts and stories, which sometimes inspired us and at other

times broke our hearts. Through conversations, it became even more clear that the term “fair trade” does not have a unified meaning. There are some potentially good things that can come from big corporations following minimum fair trade standards – including short-term benefits for farmers. But what we increasingly found is that the small-scale farmers we work with are not satisfied with the results of “certified fair trade,” and they are investing in building a more authentic model that truly is better for all involved.

In order to participate in an authentic fair trade, we need to hang our hats on our relationships and not simply on the prices we pay. Nearly 75% of the world’s coffee growers are small-scale farmers working less than five acres of land. Many of these farmers and their families make up the one-sixth of the world’s population without access to potable water. Additionally, health care, education, food security and other human rights are not always a given. The cash from coffee sales – even at fair trade minimum prices – is not enough to cover all the needs in their households and communities. In a better model, we connect and dedicate some of our own resources beyond that sale to helping farmers get to where they want to be. Our conversations with coffee farmers reinforced the notion that “consumer” and “producer” are just two of the many roles we claim as members of a global community. We

connect with the people who grow our coffee when we engage in the economic transaction of purchasing it, but we should also use that connection to find more ways to creatively support and work with the coffee farming communities.

We began working with the Chiapas, Mexico cooperative Maya Vinic in 2002, some four years after the Acteal Massacre galvanized the formation of the group. This was the beginning of a great friendship, and we continue to visit Chiapas at least once a year. On our most recent visit, we were able to see old friends and talk about how things were going in general. There have been some successes in the past year with Maya Vinic’s new cafe in San Cristobal and with a swell of members joining the cooperative.

Despite small successes, the lives of these farmers remain difficult. In the village of Aurora Esquipulas, we slept in the house of a farmer named Gerardo. He told us that he would not make enough this year to pay for his production – or for unexpected costs like a trip to the clinic, new shoes for his kids or a home repair. He had hoped to replace his dirt floor with concrete this year, but now he must put that project off until 2014.

While there, we attended the christening of a water line, water tanks and washing station in