

Dissertation Research: A More Equitable Model of Development and Trade?

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Statement of The Research Problem

According to many authors, “most development projects fail” (Bebbington 1996, Escobar 1991, Ferguson 1990). Development agencies are described as operating according to inappropriate or inaccurate assumptions about the nature of local conditions (Ferguson 1990, Roe 1991). Development non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are said to foster relationships of paternalism and clientelism between the target population and a middle class of NGO employees even as they claim to work for individual “empowerment” (Gill 2000). NGO-led development projects are said to often bypass the very poorest in a community, exacerbating local inequality and weakening previous organizations (Bebbington 1996, Gill 1985, Hostettler 2003, Thorp, Stewart, and Heyer 2005). What happens when a development intervention deliberately and explicitly sets out to counter these traditional development practices? Is it possible to alter the practices and narratives of poverty-alleviation programs such that paternalism is replaced by partnership and groups orient themselves towards the concerns of their poorest members? The Fair Trade system attempts to do these things as it works “to build a more equitable and sustainable model of international trade” (TransFairUSA 2005) which will help lift farmers out of poverty.

The proposed project will ask what effect Fair Trade has on inequality within two local producer communities as members of these communities connect to outside people and institutions via the Fair Trade system. Two producer communities are to be studied, one with well-established connections to the Fair Trade system and the other which is currently seeking Fair Trade certification. Three dimensions of inequality will be examined: economic resources, local political and social influence, and wider connections. For the purposes of this project, economic resources will be understood to mean both potentially productive land and other sources of income. Local political and social influence will be understood mostly in the context of the operation of the local cooperative. Fair Trade certifiers direct cooperatives to develop an orientation towards the needs of the very poorest community members. To what degree is this direction carried out? Wider connections for the purpose of this project will mean knowledge about and relationships with people outside the local community. This could include having both personal and business-related relationships outside the community; understanding the Fair Trade commodity chain and other potentially influential institutions; and knowing about outside resources such as laws, institutions, or grants. This project will not attempt to study inequality in any regional sense. It is to be expected that on a regional level, if the Fair Trade system is successful, it will actually increase inequality between Fair Trade certified communities and communities without certification.

The Fair Trade System

Fair Trade buyers purchase coffee from coffee farmers’ cooperatives which possess Fair Trade certification from the Fairtrade Labelling Organization (FLO). These buyers guarantee small farmers a minimum price for their coffee as insurance against the frequent fluctuations of the price of coffee in the international commodity market. When the commodity price of coffee rises above this minimum price, Fair Trade buyers pay the commodity price. In addition, for every pound of Fair Trade coffee bought, a premium is paid to the exporting cooperative for social projects. Buyers also offer cooperatives relatively low-interest credit and technical help in

improving quality control and sustainability practices. Fair Trade buyers enter into long-term contracts with the grower cooperatives to increase the impact of these practices (*Fairtrade Standards for Coffee* 2003). In order to receive and maintain Fair Trade certification, a farmers' cooperative must be a democratically-operated cooperative and at least 50% of the total volume of coffee produced must be grown by small farmers.¹

During preliminary research it was found that Fair Trade certifiers, aware of the potential of creating a Fair-Trade supported middle class with a standard of living far surpassing that of their neighbors, encourage cooperatives to develop an orientation towards the problems of the poorest members of their communities. Farmers expect that with the extra security and income provided by Fair Trade, they will be able to increase the size of their land holdings, over time becoming medium-sized farmers. This is encouraged by certifiers who say this process will not cause the cooperative to lose its certification as long as it continues to recruit smaller farmers to join. Therefore, Fair Trade explicitly tries to work against the creation of local economic inequalities.

The Fair Trade system also explicitly attempts to address inequality within the commodity chain which connects farmers to people and institutions outside their local community. The higher price paid to producers is said to come from the small amount of extra money that consumers pay, but also from the elimination of some profit-taking intermediaries in the chain linking producer and consumer. With fewer intermediaries, the chain is supposed to be more accessible and transparent to farmers. The network is said to operate with an ideology of egalitarianism and empowerment for the weak. Fair Trade retailers sometimes attempt to increase the transparency of the production process for consumers by including pictures and stories about producers in product packaging. Producers also receive more information about the exporting system, in theory eventually building their capacity to export to conventional coffee markets (Tallontire 2000). This increased information flow is supposed to also contribute to the lessening of inequality by empowering producers. However, it is clear that Fair Trade in its current form could never provide and does not seek full parity between consumers and producers or even intermediaries based in the global North and South. Rather, it seeks only relative empowerment for the weak participants in the chain.

The Nicaraguan Context

The Fair Trade movement in its current form arose in the context of the rise of the neoliberal economic model, with its vision of deregulated international trade (Fridell 2004, also see Maseland and De Vaal 2002: 252, and Reichman 2005). According to Fridell, the success of this movement, with its voluntaristic nature and the non-involvement of government, is very much a consequence of neoliberalism's defeat of a broader agenda, which was also known as fair trade, which pushed for greater regulation of international markets to protect poor countries. Fair Trade and other specialty coffee similarly assumed importance in the context of a weakening of the coffee economy in general. Beginning in the early 1980s, according to Segovia, Central American economies were shifting away from the agro-export dependency which had characterized them for the previous century (Bulmer-Thomas 1987, Santana Cardoso 1975) and towards a new economic model in which the importance of coffee was dramatically lessened in contrast to other generators of foreign exchange such as assembly manufacturing, tourism and foreign remittances from migrant workers (Segovia 2004). During this time, although total coffee consumption was in a decline, specialty and gourmet coffee niche markets were creating

¹ In Nicaragua, a small farmer is one who owns less than 5 manzanas of land, or about 3.5 hectares.

differentiation within what was formerly a homogenous commodity (Roseberry 1996). Increasingly, the production of higher-quality coffee for gourmet, organic, and Fair Trade markets is seen in Nicaragua as the future of the coffee industry (Nuñez Soto 2000, Nuñez Soto, Cardenal, and Morales 1995, Rocha 2004).

The institutions of Fair Trade were strengthened in Nicaragua during the recent world coffee crisis which caused the world commodity price for coffee to be at a sustained low for approximately five years. During this time the price available to farmers through conventional channels was frequently lower than the cost of growing and harvesting the coffee, leading many farmers to abandon their lands and seek alternate sources of income in cities (Gresser and Tickell 2002, Varangis et al. 2003). Many others lost their land altogether due to bank foreclosures. In Nicaragua, farmers moved to vast encampments along highways to protest the low coffee prices. Fair Trade prices allowed many farmers to continue growing coffee during these difficult years. Since the 2004-2005 harvest, prices have recovered somewhat. It is commonly reported that coffee growers' cooperatives are weakened during periods of high prices because outside buyers are able to offer growers more competitive prices, usually with quicker payment than that available from the cooperative (e.g. Sick 1999). But during preliminary research in October 2005, farmers reported still feeling a strong commitment to Fair Trade as insurance against the next inevitable downturn in the coffee market, which researchers agree is highly volatile (Talbot 2004).

A wide variety of institutions function to support the Fair Trade system in the coffee-growing regions of Nicaragua. Base cooperatives unite small producers within local communities. Second-tier cooperatives unite base cooperatives and conduct exporting. Fair Trade inspectors represent the certifying agency and control which cooperatives may participate in Fair Trade. Coffee importers in the United States negotiate with the exporting second-tier cooperatives to determine the terms of trade. Development NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) give institutional and organizational support to second-tier cooperatives. Activist organizations in the United States promote the purchase of Fair Trade and buyers and donors and activists often visit producer cooperatives and stay with farming families as "eco-tourists."

In the course of this research, the researcher will be working with two base cooperatives. The first base cooperative is known as La Corona. Members hold land individually or as families, and most are either already certified as organic producers or are seeking organic certification.² It is a member of the exporting cooperative CECOCAFEN which has been Fair Trade certified since 1997 and has well-established relationships with Fair Trade coffee buyers. It also operates in a zone in which there is a very high concentration of development NGO projects, probably related to the original involvement of certain founding aid organizations (Bebbington 2004). In four CECOCAFEN base communities including La Corona, one important way Fair Trade benefits are distributed is through an eco-tourism project, which is directed by a committee of community residents. This project was initially developed because Fair Trade coffee buyers, pursuing the goal of establishing long-term personal relationships with growers, often wish to meet the growers, to visit their rural communities, and to stay overnight with families. Once the project was established, more visitors began to come, including students and Fair Trade activists. Today almost all of the tourists who visit are related in some way to Fair Trade in the global North, either as employees of trading companies, as activists, as donors to development NGOs active in the area, or as loyal Fair Trade consumers.

² While Fair Trade certification applies to an entire exporting cooperative, organic certification applies to individual farms.

The second base cooperative is known as El Castillo and is a member of the second-tier cooperative CECOSEM MAC. Like La Corona, in El Castillo families hold land individually, and many are working to get organic certification. However, in El Castillo, land holdings are much smaller and people are much poorer than in La Corona. Both base and exporting cooperative have only been in existence since July 2004 and CECOSEM MAC is currently applying for Fair Trade certification. If certified, the organization hopes to be able to export the coffee crop from the 2005-2006 season under the Fair Trade label. El Castillo is in an area with a much lower concentration of NGO activity than La Corona, but the cooperatives were formed with the administrative support of the development NGO Catholic Relief Services (CRS). In the upcoming year, CRS is expected to withdraw its financial support from the cooperative, which plans to make up the difference through Fair Trade sales. Therefore, this new cooperative will be facing an important set of challenges during the fieldwork period.

Review of the Literature and Significance

Several recent works have called for greater equality, not just poverty alleviation or the acceleration of growth rates, as an essential component of any development strategy. The United Nations 2005 report on the World Social Situation was entitled “The Inequality Predicament” and stated that ignoring inequality within nation-states in pursuit of development would not only undermine that same development but also leave areas of the world vulnerable to upheaval (Ocampo and Schölvinnck 2005). Michael Blim argues that equality of outcomes in economic terms is the most appropriate goal for human society (Blim 2005). He points out that without economic equality, the less controversial goals of political and social equality are unattainable even in theory (2005: 60). He goes beyond the UN analysis of single countries and regions, arguing that equality is equally important on all scales, from the strictly local to international governance structures such as the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank and the UN itself.

One of the goals of Fair Trade is to reduce inequality in trading systems and to reduce social and economic distance along the chain between producers and consumers (Barrat Brown 1993, Reynolds 2002a). One of the most crucial locations in this chain for reducing inequality is the link between members of local communities and their outside connections. However, rather than studying these relationships, various studies of the impact of Fair Trade have focused instead on its effectiveness in generally alleviating poverty (Bacon 2005, Lyon 2005, Murray, Reynolds, and Taylor 2003, Taylor 2002). Researchers have also examined the new forms of trading being fostered in Fair Trade systems variously conceptualized as corporate cultures or modes of connectivity (Grimes and Milgram 2000, Littrell and Dickson 1997, Renard 1999, Tallontire 2000), and contrasted the trading and marketing of Fair Trade with more conventional systems (Lyon 2006, Renard 2001, Smith 2005, Taylor 2005). Several of these works state, but do not investigate, the proposition that Fair Trade creates a more democratic and equitable trading system (e.g. Grimes 2000). Other studies have issued warnings about Fair Trade, pointing out that it will not reform the structural volatility within the coffee commodity chain (Talbot 2004), that there are inherent conflicts in a movement that tries to work against the logic of the market from within the market (Moberg 2005), that this type of certification initiative may undermine the legitimate role of states in governing corporate conduct (Gereffi, Garcia-Johnson, and Sasser 2001), or that Fair Trade’s potential macroeconomic advantages over free trade are questionable (Maseland and De Vaal 2002).

Perhaps the study of Fair Trade which comes closest to addressing the current questions about equality in Fair Trade connections is that of Anne Tallontire (Tallontire 2000). She studies

the degree of “partnership” found in the relationship between a British Fair Trade importer and a Tanzanian coffee producers’ cooperative. She evaluated this partnership according to a number of criteria, including trust, shared objectives, distinct contribution (of each partner), mutual commitment and shared understandings and found that the two “partners” had significantly different conceptions of the purpose of their relationship. However, she does not directly address the issue of inequality, despite the fact that several of the criteria of her partnership model would depend heavily on the economic situations of each partner.

The question of the degree to which local inequality is increased has also not yet been systematically studied in relation to Fair Trade, although Lyon has some qualitative data suggesting that Fair Trade increases inequality within producer communities in Guatemala (Lyon 2005). Raynolds identifies local inequality as a potential pitfall with Fair Trade and speculates about a trade off between the efficiency of the operation of the cooperatives and the equity of benefits distribution (Raynolds 2002b: 23-24) (also see Bebbington 1996, and Thorp, Stewart, and Heyer 2005 for work on this trade-off in other agricultural cooperatives). Likewise, Bacon calls for a less equal distribution of Fair Trade benefits in favor of incentives for quality (Bacon 2005).

There is some work showing that more traditional development programs among the rural poor tend to exclude the very poorest from assistance, contributing to local inequality. Bebbington writes that NGO development projects, under pressure from donors to show short-term results, have tended to shift their aid away from the most impoverished towards families with the human and educational resources to take advantage of development aid more quickly (Bebbington 2004). Other work supports the finding that successful development projects and “group formation” may tend to exclude the poorest (Bebbington 1996, Thorp, Stewart, and Heyer 2005). However, Thorp et al write that this is not inevitable, and that there is not necessarily a trade-off between group exclusivity and the success of the program.

Preliminary Research by the Student

During September and October 2005 I spent one month in Nicaragua’s coffee-growing regions conducting preliminary research for this project. During this time I focused on identifying a research site, making institutional affiliations, and conducting formal and informal interviews with people in various positions relative to Fair Trade coffee production including members of farming families, organizers from Fair Trade certified cooperatives, agronomists, workers at development NGOs, and the Fair Trade inspector. I also conducted ethnographic observation of several events related to my research interests such as a training session for the eco-tourism project and the four-day preliminary inspection. This research helped me to refine my research questions and to identify the potential sources of data for my research. In addition to the agreements that I have with CECOCAFEN and CECOSEMAC, I have made agreements to conduct my research with institutions which arrange for groups to visit the eco-tourism communities of CECOCAFEN. Equal Exchange, a Fair Trade importing company, sends all its employees to visit a cooperative after they complete their initial evaluation period. The Center for Global Education arranges for groups of Fair Trade activists, usually affiliated with universities or churches, to visit the cooperatives.

While I was in Matagalpa, I was able to conduct ethnographic observation of the initial visit of a Fair Trade inspector to the new coffee producer’s cooperative (CECOSEMAC) which is seeking Fair Trade certification for the first time. During the course of the inspector’s four-day visit I was granted access to almost every activity that she participated in. This gave me a

very valuable introduction to the way that Fair Trade is interpreted by these crucial intermediaries between consumers and producers.

I have also conducted preliminary research for this project in the United States, consisting of interviews with employees of Fair Trade companies and with Fair Trade activists, investigations of the structure and history of the Fair Trade movement, and observation of consumers of Fair Trade coffee in a high-end supermarket. This research has resulted in three conference presentation papers, three unpublished research papers, and a brief article published in *North American Dialogue*.

Research Design and Methods

The proposed project will ask whether the Fair Trade system is succeeding in its goal of creating more equitable development and trade. More specifically, the research will ask what effect Fair Trade has on inequality within two local producer communities as members of these communities connect to outside people and institutions via the Fair Trade system. Two producer communities are to be studied. The first, La Corona, has been Fair Trade certified for nine years and has well-established connections with the Fair Trade system. The second, El Castillo, belongs to a cooperative which is currently seeking Fair Trade certification. These two communities were selected because their different circumstances can provide a comparative focus. They are located relatively close to one another, within the same municipality, at similar elevations, and have similar micro-climates. Therefore a comparison of the two communities will not be affected by large variations in these external factors.

It is recognized that the small scale of the study will not allow the researchers to make generalizations about all Fair Trade communities. Likewise, the changing nature of both the Fair Trade system and the local political situation mean that El Castillo cannot be considered to represent the past of La Corona, nor should La Corona be considered the future of El Castillo. However, the advantage of a small-scale study is that changes and dynamics may be understood in their context, according to the framework of meaning constructed by local residents. It would be possible to study economic inequality on a larger scale, and hopefully future studies will accomplish this. But inequality in political/social influence and wider connections would be difficult or impossible to understand using a large-scale quantitative method.

As already mentioned, three dimensions of inequality will be examined: economic resources, local political and social influence, and wider connections. For the purposes of this project, economic resources will be understood to mean both potentially productive land and other sources of income. This question will be studied quantitatively. First, a survey of household assets including potentially productive land will be conducted in both La Corona and El Castillo among community residents, both cooperative members and their non-member neighbors. In this survey, the researcher will ask about quantity of land owned and quantity in production with various crops, about income from agriculture, and about other sources of income. Based on preliminary research and on the literature, it is expected that these other sources of income will include wages from local agricultural labor and from migrant labor, remittances from family members living abroad, and wages from work in assembly manufacturing facilities (Segovia 2004). Although small land owners in Nicaragua do not always possess titles to their land, members of the two base cooperatives to be studied do almost universally possess titles. Therefore, the researcher will use the municipal records of Matagalpa to understand the changes in patterns of land tenure in these locales over the last 30 years (starting during the last years of the Somoza dictatorship, following through the ten years of

Sandinista rule, through the neoliberal governments of the 90s and the formation of the current cooperative.) One focus of investigation will be to identify any changes in land tenure patterns and ownership brought by cooperative organizing, and whether the introduction of fair trade certification made any visible difference. For example, does land become more equally distributed or more concentrated in the hands of a few people? Is there any shift in the gender of land-title holders and cooperative members? It is not yet known what state these archives are in, especially for the period of the Sandinista agrarian reform, so the researcher will supplement the archival research with discussions with long-term community residents. Finally, economic changes for residents in El Castillo will be carefully monitored during the fieldwork period, during which time the community is expected to receive Fair Trade certification and begin exporting to this market. At the end of the fieldwork period the household assets survey will be administered a second time.

Local political and social influence will be understood in the context of the operation of the local cooperative. Fair Trade certifiers direct cooperatives to develop an orientation towards the needs of the very poorest community members. Is this direction carried out, or are the cooperative's activities mainly directed towards helping the relatively wealthier members? This question will be examined using ethnographic observation of community dynamics and informal interviewing. For example, cooperative meetings will be observed to determine whose interests and concerns dominate. Some of our methodology will be based on the work of Lesley Gill. Gill, studying a similar two-level agricultural cooperative in Bolivia, attended the cooperative meetings of two base communities and the central cooperative, and noted interactions among participants such as who was speaking, whose concerns were being expressed and who felt free to raise objections (Gill 1985). Gill noted that the meetings were dominated by the voices and concerns of one group of richer peasants.

Like Gill, the researcher for this project will attend cooperative meetings and note meeting dynamics to evaluate whether there is a similar process of domination. To compliment these meeting observations, the researcher will conduct informal interviews with members of the cooperatives and other community members outside of the meetings, in addition to conducting participant observation during other types of gatherings. The principle objectives for this outside-meeting research will be to identify those concerns, objections, and points of view which do not get expressed during public gatherings, or what James Scott has referred to as "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1985). As part of these informal discussions, the researcher will ask meeting participants to describe meeting dynamics in order to both verify her own impressions about who is dominant and also to help better understand the hidden dynamics of the interactions observed (for example, is there a rivalry of long standing which would explain a hostile reception given to one participant's expressed concern?). The researcher will seek out and incorporate into these understandings any forums where community decisions may be made outside of meetings. One other way of understanding patterns of influence will be to note the years of service and frequency of service on the cooperative's executive committee of various community members. Has the committee been dominated by a particular person or group?

Wider connections for the purpose of this project will mean knowledge about and relationships with people outside the local community. This could include having both personal and business-related relationships outside the community; understanding the Fair Trade commodity chain and other potentially influential institutions; and knowing about outside resources such as laws, institutions, or grants. The project will ask whether opportunities provided by Fair Trade to increase these connections are considered a valuable resource by

farmers. How are they valuable to farmers? Are these opportunities monopolized by a few people, or are they more generally distributed? Further, in the context of Fair Trade, do outside relationships take on a dynamic of cooperation or of clientelism/patronage? These questions will be addressed by using ethnographic observation of interactions between community members and outsiders, especially in the context of short “site visits” of the communities and of slightly longer visits of a few days by touristic visitors to the community of La Corona, which has an established tourism hosting program. In addition, interviews will be conducted with a cross-section of community members to determine how certain pieces of knowledge are distributed within the community: how is the Fair Trade commodity chain structured; who are important and influential people and institutions outside the community; and what are important structural constraints, such as laws, finances or market forces, on the operation of the cooperative’s leaders?

It is anticipated that inequality within a local community will fall along the lines of pre-existing social divisions. These will probably include gender, age, and previous amount of economic resources. Other existing divisions include religion (Protestant or Catholic), political affiliation (either now or during the Contra war of the 1980s), and education level. This project will not attempt to study inequality in any regional sense. It is to be expected that on a regional level, if the Fair Trade system is at all successful, it will actually increase inequality between Fair Trade certified communities and communities without certification.

As part of the ethnographic research, analysis will be conducted both as the fieldwork is ongoing and after the fieldwork has ended. During fieldwork, rough notes are taken during ethnographic observation. These are written up in a more formal manner as soon as possible after the observation. These notes include both direct observations and characterizations, but also initial attempts at generalizations about the findings. It is planned that some interviews will be tape recorded if and when appropriate. Likewise rough transcriptions will be made of these recordings as soon as possible after they have been made, together with notes about the context of the interview. As more evidence accumulates, the generalizations in the notes become more informed and sophisticated. During this process, the research hypotheses are frequently modified to be more relevant to local conditions. Thus ethnographic research is an iterative process of data collection and analysis. The project also includes some small-scale archival research with land tenure records and a survey of household assets which includes quantitative data. While detailed analysis of the collected data will be saved for the end of the fieldwork period, the researcher will begin some analysis of this data while in Nicaragua in order to attempt to identify the most dramatic shifts and changes. This initial analysis will then be used to formulate questions for community members about their experiences of these changes.

Upon the end of the fieldwork period, analysis will be focused on the integration of the various strains of inquiry, and of the evaluation of the significance of findings in light of existing research. The quantitative data will be analyzed in more detail, using some basic statistical methods. The preliminary hypotheses already formulated in the notes will be evaluated according to how much evidence there is to support them. Further research in the literature will be conducted in response to any new directions the research has taken.

Research Schedule

January 2006 – July 2006

Ongoing correspondence with contacts in Nicaragua regarding developments in the cooperatives.

Continuation of related Fair Trade research with consumers and activists.

July 2006 – Arrival in Nicaragua

Initial survey of household assets conducted in El Castillo and La Corona.

Observation of cooperative meetings, informal interviews with participants.

August 2006

Archival research will be begun.

Ongoing observation of cooperative meetings and community gatherings and informal interviews with participants.

September 2006

Archival research completed.

Ongoing observation of cooperative meetings and community gatherings and informal interviews with participants.

Evaluation of data collected and redirection of methods or reformulation of research questions, if necessary.

October 2006

Ongoing observation of cooperative meetings and community gatherings and informal interviews with participants.

November 2006 – February 2007. Harvest season

Interactions between farmers and “outsiders” such as buyers, financiers, and inspectors are at a maximum. Focus will be on the ethnographic observation of these interactions and on the continued observation of community dynamics.

March 2007

Household assets survey conducted a second time.

Ongoing observation of cooperative meetings and community gatherings and informal interviews with participants.

Departure from Nicaragua.

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