

MAFTTI MESSAGES

'FAIR TRADE' - A SOURCE OF QUESTIONS

On September 11, 2014, Ohio-born journalist Kelsey Timmerman spoke at MAFTTI's Fair Trade Fashion Show. His presentation was based on his travel experiences provoked by a simple question, "What's the story behind the label on my T-shirt?" Kelsey's book, [Where am I Wearing?](#) (2nd Ed. 2012) tells stories all the way from Honduras to Cambodia, stories to do with economic exploitation by the powerful, either local or foreign, unsustainable approaches to environmental issues, the precarious livelihoods of workers who produce items, mainly but not entirely agricultural, for sale in the stores and markets of the Global North.

MAFTTI wants consumers to ask the "Where Am I Wearing?" kind of question when they go shopping. Acquiring knowledge about Fair Trade product certification and companies dedicated to Fair Trade principles is an important means to that end.

FAIR TRADE AND FAIR TRADE TOWNS PROMOTE GLOBAL AWARENESS

On October 24, 2011 the Mankato City Council passed a ['Fair Trade Town' resolution](#) (the first in Minnesota and the 25th in the USA) affirming that the criteria of the national [Fair Trade Campaigns](#) organization (covering Towns, Schools, Colleges/Universities and Religious Congregations) had been met. This resolution established a benchmark for deepening local commitment to the values of 'Fair Trade'. MAFTTI's continuing work is to consolidate the status of Mankato as a 'Fair Trade Town'.

It was in the year 2000 that the first 'Fair Trade Town' declared itself, in [Garstang](#), north-west England, a village half the size of St. Peter. Mankato is now part of a network of over 1,800 Fair Trade Towns (some small, some large) in 28 countries....and the number is rising.

MAFTTI's program squarely supports the Community Development vision of [E2020](#), as in the wording of Goal 2 in the Education KPA mini-vision of 2014:

"Once far away parts of the world are now related to our own community in multiple ways. Accordingly, we now need to have an understanding of how we are interdependent with others in the world – culturally, economically and ecologically. By being able to understand and communicate with others, we will be better able to respect other people around the world and in our own community to cope with increasingly global problems."

The name of Adam Smith, author of [The Wealth of Nations](#) (1776), is associated with the idea of the "invisible hand" and the value of individual self-interest in promoting the good of society.

Interestingly, even ironically, the E2020 vision is not so far from the opening words of Adam Smith's 'other' book, [The Theory of Moral Sentiments](#), published in 1759.

"How selfish so ever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortunes of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it."

WORKING FOR SUSTAINABILITY MEANS WORKING FOR FAIR TRADE – AND VICE VERSA

In more recent times it has become clearer than ever, however, that there is more than “pleasure” to be gained through interesting ourselves in the fortunes of others. As Martin Luther King put it,

*"We are caught in an unescapable network of mutuality.....
Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."*

Consumers in the Global North depend on the sustainability of communities all along every supply chain that brings products from the Global South. The fates of rust-affected coffee farmers in Latin America and exploited garment workers in South Asia are two currently salient examples.

Fair Trade is thus integral to the vision of Sustainability in three dimensions:

- social: empowering women; countering use of child labor.
- environmental: promoting agricultural diversification and adaptation to climate change.
- economic: stabilizing incomes; funding development projects through the Social Premium.

Advocates for Fair Trade in this sense see their work as contributing to the achievement of the [UN Sustainable Development Goals, 2016-2030](#) that were agreed in New York in September, 2015.

BUILDING THE 'FAIR TRADE' OF THE FUTURE

Like all social movements, 'Fair Trade' has experienced several phases in its evolution. The flag of 'fair trade' was initially carried by 'Alternative Trade Organizations' (ATOs), like [Ten Thousand Villages](#) (founded 1946) and [Equal Exchange](#) (1986). In the late 1980s [Fair Trade product certification](#) started in Western Europe, ten years later in the USA.

The growth of Fair Trade product certification influenced the global development of 'ethical' labeling. In response, corporate interests identified niche market opportunities, with the result that some well-known companies sought Fair Trade certification for a very limited number of product lines. The resulting flow of Social Premium funds that resulted from the greater volume of Fair Trade product sales was a not inconsiderable benefit to poor producers in the Global South. But it came with the costs associated with 'fairwashing'.

In the opinion of some Fair Trade advocates in the USA there are major questions to be asked about the future direction of the Fair Trade movement. The distinction is between 'mission-driven' organizations (e.g. Equal Exchange) and 'volume-driven' ones (e.g. [Fair Trade USA](#)).

The vigor of the debate around Fair Trade makes this an exciting time to be involved. Critical questions are being asked. Charting a broadly-supported course will depend on the effective sharing of stories, exchanging experience of producers' realities and priorities, and learning from policy encounters with companies and politicians.

THE FUTURE OF FAIR TRADE IS THE YOUTH

MAFTTI is by no means unique among Fair Trade promotion projects in having been instigated and supported significantly by the 'active retired' or 'soon-to-be-retired'. Finding its early core support among mainline church-goers, its constituency is skewed heavily towards the over 50s - a demographic that is very largely Caucasian as well.

The future, obviously, belongs to the youth of every heritage and circumstance. It is their world that needs to be sustained with greater economic justice, a stronger commitment to environmental stewardship and social inclusion – employing the kinds of digital communications methods with which the young people have grown up.

Respondents to a MAFTTI Survey in late 2015 put work with the youth high in a list of activities that they wanted to see maintained and even expanded.

Allies within MAFTTI's core Christian church constituency can help by taking advantage of educational resources provided by denominations as well as secular agencies to work with young people and their families. Fair Trade resources are also obtainable to meet the needs of other traditions, especially Judaism and Islam.

Outside the religious sphere, the merits of Fair Trade need to be shared with a range of young audiences in order to secure their active interest and engagement – through the K-12 age range to college and university level and among out-of-school youth groups. MAFTTI has done some work in this field as opportunity has arisen, experience that needs to be evaluated and developed by people with expertise.

It's never too early to teach our kids to make the world a better place.

THE FUTURE IS DIGITAL

To say that the "the future is digital" is trite. But the digital sphere of activity has not, so far, been one of MAFTTI's strengths. On the positive side, a website has been maintained for over six years. So has a Facebook page, though its potential may well not have been fully realized. The 260 Facebook 'likes' are good to know about but do not, apparently, represent a reservoir of additional practical support.

Significantly, the MAFTTI Survey in 2015 revealed a generational divide over the active use of social media for organizing purposes. MAFTTI has no experience from which to make a judgement on the value of Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat.....or whatever comes next.

It remains a fact, though, that the digital world offers a way into the Fair Trade world that previous generations never had – from websites of specialized agencies, to religious bodies committed to Fair Trade, to short, human interest stories on YouTube. Capitalizing on the greater awareness generated by the communications revolution, the organization of consumer power in support of small farmers and producers is one of the key tasks of the Fair Trade movement.

CUTTING TO THE CHASE

One of the first pieces of 'Fair Trade propaganda' that MAFTTI put out in 2009 featured a quote from the late American anthropologist Margaret Mead,

*"A small group of thoughtful people could change the world.
Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."*

MAFTTI's aspirations have not been quite that high, but the 15 people who have served on the Steering Committee since its inception in mid-2009 have been a small group who have tried to be thoughtful as well as ambitious, at least about changing people's minds on how they shop – but also more than that.

One of the certainties about MAFTTI's future is that the Steering Committee in 2021 will not be the same as at present. The second five-year period following the Fair Trade Town Declaration will feature the retirement in January 2017 of Paul Renshaw from the roles of Chair and Lead Organizer, and of Arlene Renshaw from the Steering Committee.

The remaining five members will need new allies as they reshape MAFTTI's program, taking into account such findings of the 2015 Survey as these:

- The need to diversify community support for Fair Trade.
- Drawing people in from other circles, especially those with younger demographics.
- Increasing active volunteer involvement.
- Renewing MAFTTI's priorities for the next few years.
- Finding 'new blood'.
- Defining the direction of Fair Trade advocacy.

The addition of three or four new members to the Steering Committee would make a world of difference. WHAT ABOUT YOU?

MAFTTI asks you to think about whether any of these areas appeal to you:

- Advocating for Fair Trade in the retail sector
- Advocating for Fair Trade in other networks (e.g. business)
- Creating educational displays on Fair Trade and the trade justice issues
- Developing the MAFTTI Facebook page
- Developing the MAFTTI website
- Education in churches and other religious bodies
- Education in schools
- Exploring the potential of social media in Fair Trade education and advocacy
- Fundraising to facilitate visits to Fair Trade producers, meet conference expenses etc.
- Organizing community events
- Promoting MAFTTI in the press, on radio & TV
- Updating the Fair Trade Products Shopping Guide

If you can join the MAFTTI effort in any way, please CONTACT US via the [MAFTTI website](#) - or send an email to any member of the Steering Committee by November 10, the date of the next meeting of the Steering Committee:

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Thoughts to end with

You sometimes have to change people's experience before you can change their ideas.
(Vicki Phillips, educator formerly with the Gates Foundation)

All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make, the better.
(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

Join the Fair Trade Experiment. Another World is Possible!

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