



## **Mankato Area Fair Trade Town Initiative**

### **5th Anniversary – Mankato-Fair Trade Town**

Conference – October 27, 2016

9:30am-2.30pm.

Minnesota State University-Mankato

Co-sponsors: Global Education, Department of Government

### **Theme - Fair Trade for a Sustainable Future**

#### **KEYNOTE**

The keynote speaker was Mark Ritchie, former Minnesota Secretary of State and, previously, founding Director of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade policy in Minneapolis. He reflected deeply on his long involvement with people and institutions concerned with trade policy, how it is made and why the Fair Trade Movement as it is being given new expression in Mankato through MAFTTI provides a vital contribution that is worthy of celebration. These notes, with some small amendments contributed by Mark Ritchie, have been compiled by Paul Renshaw, MAFTTI Chair.

#### **A STORY OF TWO TRADITIONS**

Minnesota – a “north star” in the Fair Trade Movement - is a place where, historically, two streams of life flow, intermingling:

- Trade and commerce from the time when Pipestone’s quarries were at the center of Native American trading networks that were continental in range, through the opening to the wider world resulting from the encounters between Native Americans and the French, and more recently the era of global trading of Minnesotan products from mining and farming to medical devices and computers.
- A long-held popular concern to demonstrate a social and moral consciousness in national and international affairs, from the state’s admission to the Union as a ‘free state’ in 1858, through the role that ex-Governor Harold Stassen played in the foundation of the United Nations to the work of the Minnesota Fair Trade Coalition for the last 25 years.

This ethical tradition, in dialogue with trade and commerce, places Minnesota, according to Mark Ritchie, at the leading edge of the Fair Trade Movement. There are, of course, serious ecological and sustainability issues involved in all of this, but the link between trade, commerce and ethics must be preserved and strengthened, in his view.

#### **FAIR TRADE MAKES FOR PEACE**

Pipestone, 5,000-10,000 years ago, was a sacred site for Native Americans concerned to live the full, spiritual life as they understood it. Inter-tribal rivalries were put aside when the focus was on stone quarried for ‘peace pipes’.

Much more recently, Mark recalled, officials involved in setting up the post-WW2 international financial system (World Bank, IMF etc.) affirmed the centrality of fair trade rules in commercial practices of all kinds to the avoidance of conflict which, in a nuclear age, could result in WW3. Citing the adage “If you



want peace, fight for justice”, he argued the need to marry economic with human rights issues to find and sustain peaceful international relations. (No wonder Peace Coffee is called Peace Coffee, given it was set up by the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy that Mark founded in Minneapolis!)

#### TRADE RULES REALLY MATTER AND NEED TO BE DISCUSSED OPENLY

Mark recalled the 1980s when he was a Trade Policy Analyst in the MN State Department of Agriculture. Corn and soybeans were top of his agenda. However, with some new international forces being felt, he realized that

- thinking about trade policy always needs a nuanced understanding of the international political context.
- Minnesota is a long way from the ocean and needs to have an active voice in trade negotiations.
- TRADE RULES REALLY MATTER because, otherwise, only the power of well-connected lobbyists would have decisive influence.
- transparency and public discussion of these issues is essential. Arguing for the former and resourcing the latter were primary reasons for the establishment of the IATP in 1986.

#### THE CONTRIBUTION OF FAIR TRADE CERTIFICATION

In the early 1990s, Mark and the IATP began to have contact with Europeans interested in ‘fair trade’. It was a period of awakening from commitments expressed as “Third World solidarity” and the growth of Ten Thousand Villages shops to a wider consciousness that TRADE RULES MATTER. Furthermore, he saw that Fair Trade certification potentially

- provided a rule-based framework for agreement between producers and consumers with very different power dynamics between them.
- enabled ‘conscious consumers’, through a product label or seal, to make informed choices in their purchases of, initially, coffee and tea, on whatever grounds were important to them – social, ethical, religious, environmental.

In this area Mark identified a useful, important overlap between institutional policy-making on the one hand and everyday purchasing decisions by individuals and groups on the other. “RULES MATTER” applies in both spheres. This is important to realize as it is an informed, aware citizenry that can ensure that the special-interest lobbyist is exposed.

#### HONOR THE PAST, TAKE CARE OF THE PRESENT, ENGAGE ABOUT THE FUTURE

In his concluding remarks, Mark recapitulated on these three ideas that had permeated his speech.

- Historical awareness is a great resource for present-day leaders of Fair Trade in the Mankato area. Because they are standing on the shoulders of others, they need to recognize their roles as stewards of the tradition, its values and institutional expressions.
- Taking care of the present means maintaining progress in the availability of Fair Trade certified products and the educational work on Fair Trade that is being done in Mankato. All this deserves celebration.
- The issue for MAFTTI and Mankato is to ask whether the celebration serves as an energizing force with which to tackle such questions as, “Where do we go from here?”

## PANEL

### **Some of the questions posed to the panel were at the macro level**

#### Do the World Bank and IMF take any notice of the Fair Trade Movement?

The panel did not claim expert knowledge but Mark felt that, over the last ten years, there has been a greater openness within the World Bank to thinking about alternative ways of looking at trade and development, at least to some extent. Lee cited WB funding of co-ops in Indonesia, but did not know if this was specifically related to Fair Trade.

#### Where does the Fair Trade Movement stand in relation to NAFTA and the TPP?

Mark recollected the fact that elements of what is now called the Fair Trade Movement were active well before NAFTA. The Fair Trade certification era has helped to create a wider knowledge base on the central topic, i.e. trade rules matter. Even business has started to realize this. It is important that the work continues because no agreements are ever perfect and they will always need monitoring.

### **Two were posed by students about how or why their generation should be interested.**

Lee reflected on the values she grew up with, in a post-farming family, where thinking about alternative business was essential. She was glad she had found a career where she is able to express her values in her work, and encouraged students and other young people to think in similar terms.

Margo Druschel, clothing workshop leader, encouraged students to use the internet for self-education purposes. It has never been easier to find answers, for example, to the question that led Kelsey Timmerman around the world before writing his book, [Where Am I Wearing?](#) She reckoned that exposure to such stories can be a life-changing process for a consumer who is not yet conscious of the realities of the production of agricultural and other products from the Global South that are bought every day in the Mankato area. She commended the [Fashion Revolution](#) initiative that is taking root in many countries as a response to the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory building in Dhaka, Bangladesh in April 2013 that killed over 1,100 workers.

### **One questioner was concerned with confusion about the proliferation of product labels.**

The panel has some sympathy! Lee suggested that company research was the ultimate safeguard, though it is probably not for everyone. She felt that the relatively new [Small Producers' Seal](#) generated from within Latin America and the Caribbean was important as it was a Southern farmer-led initiative and not a Northern consumer-led project. The [Fair World Project](#) is doing a lot of education on this and related issues, including making comparisons of the claims behind the most commonly-seen Fair Trade labels.

Mark said that having a directory ([Shopping Guide](#)) such as the one produced by MAFTTI was a big help. Organization is important!

### **Perspectives of a Fair Trade banana producer from Ecuador**

Mariana Cobos took the opportunity at a number of points to stress the value she had found in the Fair Trade system. Before she joined AsoGuabo, the first co-op in southern Ecuador to enter Fair Trade business relationships, she noticed that its members received higher prices and were paid regularly,

which was not a common practice. Regular payment helps everyone, both farmers in their work and families in their daily lives.

Mariana valued the Fair Trade Social Premium (\$1.00 per box) which is used for community development purposes, not just for the benefit of co-op members.

She also felt that AsoGuabo provides a good base from which to organize taking care of the environment that is so vital to future generations.

On the question of motivating American youth, she spoke of rural poverty back home and suggested that the idea of “young people helping young people” should be explored.

Paul Renshaw