

VOICES OF FAIR TRADE PRODUCERS

VOICE 1: My name is Manickam. I am a tea picker in Sri Lanka. Before Fair Trade, we didn't have electricity in our houses. We did not make enough to send our children to school. Now we have money from the social premium and a way to take out low interest loans that we can repay. All the members of our joint body at work got together and decided to use our social premium to install electricity. With electricity, now my children can study at night. In the morning I can iron their clothes and we can use a hotplate for cooking. I am so happy that Fair Trade helps me support my family.

VOICE 2: My name is Rijayatu. I am in 8th grade. My mother is very active in Kuapa Kokoo coop, a very large and well known cocoa producing coop in Ghana. Before we joined Kuapa Kokoo, my mother was very poor and shy. She worked very hard but did not make enough to send me to school. When she started working for Kuapa Kokoo, little by little I saw her change from a unconfident, passive person to a much more outgoing, cheerful and confident person. She has taken some training in leadership and is learning to have an active role in decision making in the coop. I am so proud of her for what she has accomplished. She has also learned another skill to add to our income. With the help of the social premium, she has a side business making and selling soap. With the extra money we receive from the social premium, I can now go to school. Seeing how my mother has grown in self-esteem has helped me grow more confident in myself too. I won an essay competition and a trip to visit the United Kingdom. At school I have started my own cooperative for girls only. We think that it is not fair that the girls have to do all the housework while the boys can ride around the village on their bicycles and play football. We think the work should be equal between the girls and boys.

VOICE 3: My name is Shailesh Patel. I am 40 years old and have been growing cotton in Kerala India for 20 or so years. For a while I had hope of getting out of poverty. The world market price for cotton was pretty good. I was starting to make enough money to have a better, more secure life. But then the U.S. and some other countries started paying big subsidies to their cotton farmers. They started growing large quantities of very cheap cotton and dumping the surplus in India. None of us cotton farmers could compete with their prices even though we can grow more cotton per acre using less energy than the big corporations. We are very proud of our efficient small scale farming methods. But we all started going into debt because the cotton price went down so much. We couldn't cover our production costs and were thrown back into poverty and a state of despair. Many of my cotton farmer friends were so depressed, they committed suicide. One of my cotton farmer neighbor's 19 year old daughter killed herself, leaving a note that read: My family can't make even a thousand rupees a month. And I have two younger sisters...we don't have enough to eat. So I am ending my life." Other cotton farmers tried to sell their kidneys to pay off the huge debt they were in. But I was very lucky. I joined a Fair Trade coop and found buyers who would pay us a decent price for our cotton. Instead of being in a state of despair, we had enough money from the social premium to build a school and medical clinic.

VOICE 4: My name is Blanca Rosa Molina. I am 47 and farm 5 acres of coffee in Matagalpa region in the north of Nicaragua. When people ask me how fair trade has made a difference in my life, I say simply it makes a difference between whether my family eats or does not eat. I am proud to say I am the president of the Cecocafen cooperative of some 1200 coffee producers. I sell about a third of my coffee in the Fair Trade certified system. But my life was not always as good as it is now. When I was 6, I started working on a large coffee plantation with my parents. I had to work because they made so little money, they could not feed me. But the work was very hard and paid so little that my parents decided I should go to the capital city, Managua, and work as a maid when I was 11 years old. I missed my home so much I cried most nights. Then Nicaragua had a revolution and my family got some land because of the land redistribution program. I was able to return to my family. We were so fortunate to have land to farm and to know how to grow coffee. We joined the Cecocafen Fair Trade coop. Our lives got much better. I was even able to go to school. When the world market coffee price collapsed in 2002, so many farmers lost their jobs and their farms. There was a big depression. Thousands of out-of-work coffee workers and their families were reduced to setting up makeshift road side camps. Hunger was widespread. Many of the children were malnourished and many people died from sickness and weakness. The ones who did survive, did so because of the generous help from the towns people and local businesses. But the Fair Trade price allowed the families in our coop to eat and to keep our land. Our children all go to school and we have basic health care. The price has enabled me to send my daughter to the University and build my house bit by bit. I was able to take out a low interest loan from the coop. Small producers who are not fair trade certified can hardly afford a house and have no access to credit. I have been able to diversify production on my land which has given us even greater food security. Looking back to when I was 11 and working as a maid, I never would have dreamed that I would someday be president of the Cecocafen coop.

VOICE 5: I'm David Ransom, a journalist. I became intrigued by the Fair Trade movement and wanted to find out more. Is world trade really that unfair? Do developed country trade policies really exploit poor countries and people? I traveled to fair trade and non-fair trade farms to see for myself what the difference was. The most stark differences were in United Fruit non- fair trade banana plantations in Guatemala compared to small scale organic fair trade banana farms in the Dominican Republic. I will tell you what I saw.

The first thing I noticed when I arrived at the Chiquita banana plantation in Guatemala was the conspicuous absence of any living creature. This is a tropical swamp but there was no sign of a single mosquito or bird for that matter. There were only banana plants countless thousands of them. Mile upon endless mile, lining the roadside in numbered squares like the serried ranks of some Godforsaken army decked out in uniform green headgear and ramrod trunks, holding out white plastic bags draped over growing bunches of bananas. I interviewed one of the former banana workers, Octaviano. Here is what he told me. "It began with the women, working here in the packing plant. They had to use chemicals that made them sick, in the washing tank. It gave them sores on their feet. They had to work all hours of the day and late into the night. Many of them are single mothers and they weren't allowed to feed their children. We were only making \$28.00 a month for all our hard work. The only way to protect ourselves was to form a union. But when we tried to, the company intimidated us, threatened to shoot us and finally fired us, still owing us a week's wages. The company has broken the labor laws but the government won't do anything about it. The courts are always on the side of the companies. We have been waiting for 18 months to be reinstated."

From there I traveled down the road to another non fair trade banana farm, the village where a thousand people lived, the families of the banana plantation workers. Stunted trees and mean little hutches lined the only street. The big three banana companies claim that they do not fumigate when the farmers are in the plantations. But the farmers I ask about that all laugh and say if they got out every time the company fumigates, there would be no bananas cut at all. "It's not so bad in the morning," says one worker. "But as the heat increases, these foul smelling chemicals rise up in the air, you have to inhale them, and you start to feel nauseated and have difficulty breathing." Then he stared blankly into the distance as he said, "It's just this wretched poverty. We cannot get away from it. You know what it is?" "You tell me," I said. "Slavery", he said. Exactly the word I had in mind.

Next I flew off to the Fair Trade banana farms in the Dominican Republic. "We don't want to be in the market competing with producers like Chiquita, with a fruit that doesn't taste good, uses a lot of chemicals and employs slave labor", said porfirio emphatically. Porfirio is the production manager of banana marketing for the fair trade banana association. We do not want to endanger our environment. We want to promote reasonable wages for all working people and a good relationship with consumers."

This group of banana farms has a fascinating history. In 1992, 250 families, living in a state of virtual destitution, turned in desperation to the only thing they could think of to make money, burning down the forest to make charcoal to sell. They really didn't want to harm their forest but could think of no other way to make a living. So they asked the government to help them. Fortunately, the government responded. The government built them a village and gave each family two hectares of land to grow food which they did in abundance. They used no chemicals because they had no money to buy chemicals. Further luck led them to two fair trade agencies that helped them start organic fair trade banana production. A Dutch marketing company helped make the Dominican Republic the world's largest producer of organic bananas. Porfirio explains the benefits of fair trade well when he says, "For all the bother of farming organic, I get tremendous satisfaction from my job. It really satisfies me to be involved in something that people are committed to, with people who are overcoming their poverty, with building something good. At this moment I wouldn't want to do anything else." There were no health problems from chemical poisoning. The air, land and water were not contaminated. There were plenty of mosquitos biting. I asked what the farmers were making from organic farming. He told me they make about \$1000 a month and can make as much as \$2000 a month.