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Researchers study women and fair trade in Ecuador and South Africa

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Giving a voice to flower workers in Ecuador and small farmers in South Africa is the focus of two newly funded projects in Colorado State University's Center for Fair and Alternative Trade.

Improve socioeconomic conditions

Fair trade is a rapidly growing initiative that challenges historical global inequalities and ultimately seeks to improve the socioeconomic conditions of marginalized producers and workers. By promoting innovative business models spanning production, distribution and consumption, fair trade advances greater social equity and environmental sustainability in the global economy.

Fair trade is growing fastest in commodities, such as flowers, which are produced by large-scale enterprises using hired workers. In a newly funded National Science Foundation project, sociology researchers from Colorado State University will study fair trade flowers produced in Ecuador for sale largely in the United States. Researchers will study how fair trade affects socioeconomic conditions and gender dynamics for the largely female workforce.

First detailed analysis

The CSU flower trade study in Ecuador will provide the first detailed analysis of fair trade's impacts on plantation enterprises and gendered labor in Latin America. Although fair trade has been quite successful in coffee, its potential in other areas is not yet well understood. The growing interest of American consumers in fair trade opens up new opportunities to foster improvements



Graduate student Jennifer Keahey (*center*) is working with Trax Ghana, a grassroots agricultural NGO servicing small farmers in Northern Ghana.

around the world.

“This research strengthens our understanding of globalization and new forms of regulation by focusing on an initiative that is both a social movement and a certification system,” said Laura Reynolds, CSU sociology professor and lead researcher on the project.

How global commodity chains operate

“Our project results will provide insight into how global commodity chains operate, focusing on how alternative norms of fairness may be integrated into trade relations. Perhaps most importantly, our study will shed light on the implications of fair trade for workers, exploring particularly the integration of female workers.”

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean in South Africa, fair trade offers the potential for empowering small farmers through access to high-value markets and support for community development and sustainable production.

South African rooibos tea farmers

The second project out of CSU’s Center for Fair and Alternative Trade, or CFAT, is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development and is projected to directly benefit 500 South African farmers and family members producing rooibos tea. CSU researchers will identify challenges and opportunities for integrating emerging farmers into fair trade networks, and provide training to farmers and farmer organizations in how to better capture the added benefits of fair trade.

While some South African small farmers have increased their wellbeing through fair trade practices, emerging black farmers historically excluded from land and market access have yet to gain entry into these beneficial networks.

Rooibos, also known as South African red tea, is well-suited for poor farmers since it can be produced with little capital investment. The tea has been popular in southern Africa for generations and is becoming a favorite in the United States and other countries.

Fostering racial equity and combating poverty

The rooibos tea project fosters racial equity and combats poverty in one of South Africa’s poorest regions and promotes gender equity, recognizing that women play a key role as farmers and household workers yet are often the most disadvantaged.

“These awards reflect the growing recognition of the CFAT as a leading international research center in the area of fair and alternative trade,” said Douglas Murray, co-director of CFAT.

“Further, they reflect the reputation of the principal investigator and CFAT Co-director Laura Reynolds as a preeminent scholar in the field of gender and development, as well as in the field of fair and alternative trade. Both projects, in keeping with our educational mission, have important roles for CSU graduate students as well.

Contact: Kimberly Sorensen
E-mail: Kimberly.Sorensen@colostate.edu
Phone: (970) 491-0757

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