

**The Organic and Fair Trade Movements:
Fostering Global Ecological Sustainability and Social Justice**

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The international organic agriculture and fair trade movements represent important initiatives fostering ecological sustainability and social justice around the world. These movements critique destructive production and consumption practices and seek to create a more sustainable and just global food system. The international organic movement focuses on re-embedding farm production in "natural processes," encouraging organic cultivation and markets for certified organic products. The fair trade movement focuses on re-embedding production and distribution in "equitable social relations," developing more egalitarian trade for socially and environmentally sound products. These initiatives often intersect and have complementary strengths: the organic movement in addressing ecological practices and the fair trade movement in addressing social practices. Though organic and fair trade certified products represent a minor share of world trade, their production and consumption involves large and rapidly growing numbers of people, enterprises, and sales. The organic and fair trade movements are making

important strides in enhancing global ecological sustainability and social justice, yet they face key challenges resulting ironically from their recent market success.

Organic and Fair Trade Ideas and Institutions

The organic and fair trade movements criticize the unsustainable and unjust character of the global food system. These initiatives argue that the agro-industrial food system understates true ecological and social production costs and thus fuels the degradation of environmental and human resources, particularly in the global South. Since mainstream political and economic institutions fail to stem this degradation, the organic and fair trade movements have developed higher ecological and social standards and voluntary certification and labeling systems that identify products which satisfy these standards. The international organic movement re-embeds crop and livestock production in organic / ecological farm practices and promotes sales of the resulting more sustainable certified organic foods. The fair trade movement re-embeds production and marketing in egalitarian social relations and promotes sales of the resulting more equitable certified fair trade products. Organic and fair trade certification systems identify the ecological and social relations embedded within labeled commodities making it possible for consumers to support these practices via their purchases.

Important non-governmental organizations, the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) and the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO), have worked to translate abstract organic and fair trade principles into verifiable standards and certification systems. IFOAM's organic standards revolve around the natural enhancement of soil fertility and disease control, rejection of synthetic fertilizers and

pesticides, and minimization of damage to the environment. IFOAM principles link social and ecological concerns, though no social standards are solidified. Over recent years organic standards and verification procedures have been cemented in national legislation. Fair trade standards require that producers and workers be represented by democratic organizations, that buyers pay guaranteed minimum prices, provide credit, and trade directly using long-term contracts, and that a social premium go to support local development needs. FLO specifies environmental standards which are weaker than in organics. Fair trade production and trade standards are upheld by FLO and are not legally institutionalized. Products which meet set standards can be labeled for sale as organic and/or fair trade, with compliance verified by a third party. Particular products can (and many are) certified as being both organic and fair trade. The translation of organic and fair trade values into formal standards and audit procedures has facilitated broad-based sales of certified products, though this codification simplifies much more extensive movement visions.

Organic and Fair Trade Distribution and Consumption

Rising organic and fair trade certified purchases are fueled by recent changes in consumption patterns in major North American and European markets. Northern consumers are increasingly concerned about food health and safety issues and the social and ecological implications of their international purchases. Given their growing distrust of conventional agro-industrial foods, consumers have turned in large numbers to organic and fair trade labeled products. Organic and fair trade products represent some of the fastest growing segments of the global food industry, with demand expanding at 20-35 percent per year. Certified organic sales

are currently valued at US\$ 25 billion. Though domestic organic production is important in major Northern markets, the most rapid growth is in imports from the global South. Over recent years imports of organic tropical products (such as coffee, tea, cocoa, and bananas), counter-seasonal produce (such as apples, pears, berries, and lettuce), and inputs for processed foods (such as baby food and fruit drinks) have grown rapidly. Northern markets for fair trade products are much smaller, with sales valued at just over US\$ 1 billion, but sales are booming with the increasing availability of labeled items. Only 18 fair trade certified products are available and most of these are still only sold in a few European countries. Fair trade labeled coffee, tea, cocoa, and bananas dominate sales, but the most rapid growth is in newly certified fresh fruits and vegetables, spices, and grains imported from the global South.

Given mounting consumer interest, organic and fair trade products are increasingly sold in large-scale supermarkets under dominant corporate brand names. While this mainstreaming has greatly increased the availability of certified products it has also allowed mainstream corporations to appropriate the market shares and price premiums generated in these sectors. There is substantial movement concern, and increasing evidence, that powerful retail and brand corporations are putting downward pressure on certification standards and threatening key movement values. Since enterprise characteristics and trade conditions are not regulated under organic rules, organic certification can not check rising corporate influence. Fair trade's price guarantees and other trade regulations help limit the threat of corporate take over, yet even here the practices of power distributors with questionable commitment to movement goals raise serious concerns. Conscious consumers have a critical role to play particularly in organic, but also in fair trade, arenas in supporting dedicated small-scale shops and companies and refusing to

accept a lowering of ecological and social standards.

Organic and Fair Trade Production and Exports

Production of organic and fair trade commodities has grown rapidly throughout the global South over the past decade, with the vast majority of these products destined for export to rapidly growing Northern markets. This growth has been fueled by rising international demand and favorable prices as well as by mounting local producer and movement interest. Latin America represents the hub of both organic and fair trade production, though numerous countries in Africa and Asia are also currently entering this dynamic trade. There are almost 370 thousand enterprises of varying size engaged in certified organic agriculture across more than 60 countries of the global South. This corresponds to about 7 million certified hectares which are being cultivated without the use of harmful chemical inputs and are enhancing sustainability in a range of critical ecological zones, from mountainous coffee parcels to lowland banana farms. There are 433 certified fair trade producer organizations in 53 Southern countries. This corresponds to hundreds of thousands of small-scale farmers who are represented by democratic cooperatives and guaranteed fairer prices as well as numerous large production enterprises where workers are ensured representation and favorable labor standards. Fair trade networks are providing important development opportunities for disadvantaged individuals and communities and enhancing the capacity of local organizations. Where organic and fair trade arenas intersect major ecological and social justice concerns are both being addressed.

The market success and mainstreaming of organic and fair trade products is placing new pressures on producers in the global South. In both cases mainstream market demands for large

continuous volumes and exacting product quality renders the participation of peasant producers more difficult. In the organic sector, increasing buyer demands and certification expenses are limiting the participation of small-scale producers. The rise of large scale corporate organic production threatens the ecological goals and implicit social goals of the organic movement. Market forces favoring large scale producers are weakened in fair trade networks by trade and enterprise regulations, particularly in key commodities like coffee and cocoa where large enterprises are prohibited. Yet even here mainstream distributors can limit the participation of marginal producers, shutting out the very producers the fair trade movement seeks to support. The challenge in both organic and fair trade arenas is to create partnerships with local movements in the global South to bolster the capacity of small farmer cooperatives and labor unions and with movements in the global North to support these initiatives.

Conclusions

The international organic agriculture and fair trade movements promote environmental sustainability and social justice by challenging destructive practices in the global food system and creating alternative circuits for items produced under favorable conditions. These initiatives have created substantial and rapidly growing markets for certified foods. They question conventional market practices that devalue the natural and human resources and reveal the true ecological and social costs of production. Perhaps most importantly, both movements demonstrate that we can foster ecological sustainability and social justice in the global food system. To sustain the vision of these promising initiatives and thwart the pressures of conventional mainstream markets, consumer and producer movements must work across the

North / South divide to support the rights of people and places everywhere.

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