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# **THE NATURE OF FAIR TRADE EXCHANGES AND THEIR OUTCOMES: PRODUCER VOICES IN VIETNAM AND INDIA**

## **ABSTRACT**

This paper brings insights to Fair Trade exchanges by casting commodities beyond material and pecuniary gains to include interpersonal relations. While numerous studies have highlighted that Fair Trade brings benefits beyond the economic, the process through which ‘material things’ may become imbued with non-pecuniary value remains under-explored. Our analysis of interviews with Fairtrade certified smallholder farmers in Vietnam and in India provides insight into the discursive constructs of their participation in Fair Trade exchanges. Social exchange theory enables us to reconceptualise exchanges in the Fairtrade market to take into account interpersonal processes and long-term relations of exchange between actors. We find that Fair Trade is associated with benefits to both community and individuals and that these are intertwined and linked to participation in a democratic process in the cooperative. The pecuniary and non-pecuniary value generated and sustained by farmer democratic organizations need to be recognised by Fairtrade importing businesses.

Keywords: Fair Trade; Fairtrade; exchange; social exchange theory; farmer organizations; cooperatives

## **INTRODUCTION**

In its most general sense, Fair Trade<sup>1</sup> enables marginalized producers in the global south to gain more benefit from trade, thereby promoting sustainable development (Fair Trade Advocacy Office, 2018). Fair Trade seeks to change the ‘rules’ of international trade to enable producers to become capable of competing in the market, and thereby avoid the need for charity, relief work, or any other form of philanthropic aid (Boersma, 2009). Fair Trade is argued to be a fairer and more humane market as it “attempts to re-connect producers and consumers economically, politically, and psychologically through the creation of a transnational moral

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we use the term Fair Trade as the philosophy encompassing both the movement and the certification system, reserving Fairtrade for specific references to the Fairtrade standards overseen by Fairtrade International, Fairtrade certified farmers and the specific market in which they are engaged.

economy” (Goodman, 2004: 891). Critiques, however, have shown poor outcomes for workers hired by smallholders (Le Clair, 2002; Sidwell, 2008; Oya et al., 2018) and that benefits have a gender imbalance (Loconto, 2015; Lyon et al., 2010; Smith, 2015).

Market transactions are understood by mainstream economists as the exchange of commodities – outcomes are thus measured focusing on prices, individual profits and wealth accumulation (Parvathi and Waibel, 2016). Sociologists have long criticized the abstraction of the social world from the marketplace and pointed to the cultural, historical, emotional and interpersonal aspects of commercial exchanges (Emerson, 1976; Bourdieu, 2002). To better understand Fair Trade outcomes, many have taken a sociological approach, with much of this literature considering power relations within commodity exchange and how these are governed (e.g. Ponte and Gibbon, 2005; Raynolds, 2012). However, this is often at the scale of the Fair Trade system or network (e.g. Alexander and Nicholls, 2006) where consideration of producers does not necessarily extend to their voice regarding exchange practices. Moreover, where exchange practices do consider non-pecuniary value, it is from the perspective of the consumer (Goodman, 2004; Low and Davenport, 2005).

There are, of course, many interesting analyses of producer perspectives in the context of commodities traded on a Fair Trade basis with respect to labour practices (Berlan, 2008), product market destinations (Dolan, 2008; Dolan, 2010; Getz and Shreck, 2006), standard practices – including the extent to which producer voices are heard in the development and implementation of a variety of sustainability standards (Tallontire et al., 2014; Cheyns and Riisgaard, 2014), the choice of standards as a tool to promote social justice in supply chains in the first place (Nelson and Tallontire, 2014), and the audit technologies that focus on surveillance rather than stimulate trust (Dolan, 2010). What is frequently missing, however, is the producer view of the trading relationship within Fair Trade and how this might affect the strategies of Fair Trade importers. Indeed, as Le Mare (2012: 312) points out “the role, philosophy and practices of the Southern businesses are given less attention than the practices of NFTEs [Northern Fair Trade Enterprises], the attitudes of consumers or the impact on individual producers”.

In this paper, we are particularly interested in better understanding the nature of Fair Trade exchanges and their outcomes in different contexts (McEwan et al., 2017). In particular, we seek to examine whether only ‘material things’ are exchanged in the Fairtrade marketplace, or whether Fair Trade has acquired non-pecuniary value and become imbued with social values from the viewpoint of Fair Trade farmers. We therefore depart from work that focuses on the

Fairtrade standards and compliance to explore the experience of trading relationships. To do so, we use social exchange theory to help us take into account exchanges characterised by unilateral resource giving and in which the benefits received and the timeframes associated with reciprocity can be indefinite (Sahlins, 1972; Granovetter, 1993). By considering the Fair Trade exchanges from the viewpoint of the farmers, we seek to take into account the ‘people’ involved in these exchanges and the richness of such. It does not only enable us to consider the farmers’ experiences of the Fair Trade exchanges but their construct of the outcomes. We do so by analysing 16 interviews with Fairtrade certified farmers<sup>2</sup> from small-scale producer organizations<sup>3</sup> in the Asia Pacific region. Farmers’ discourses are presented to show how they construct their taking part in Fair Trade exchanges, how they see Fair Trade’s outcomes in their communities, and how they consider the impact of their work.

Our contributions are twofold. First, using social exchange theory enables us to conceptualise exchange behaviours uncharacteristic of mainstream assumptions by accounting for the ‘people’ involved in the transactions, rather than solely the commodities exchanged. This conceptualisation highlights how Fair Trade actors consider what are typically restricted transactions in economics (i.e. exchanges associated with stipulated returns of commensurate worth and utility within a finite and narrow period) to be generalised exchange (i.e. benefits are received from different actors, and the timeframes associated with reciprocity can be indefinite). Second, we prioritise the voices of producers. While a growing number of studies focus on Fair Trade’s impact on producers (e.g. Valkila and Nygren, 2010; Murray et al., 2006; Bacon, 2005; Baumann et al., 2012), they are often dependent on a small number of commodity-specific case studies (Nelson and Martin, 2014), and often argue that Fair Trade may not be sufficient to counteract poverty due to historical and structural inequalities (e.g. Jaffee, 2007; Jaffee and Howard, 2010). Overall, there is an imbalance, especially in the economics literature, towards the consumer end of Fair Trade (e.g. Hira and Ferrie, 2006; Wright and Heaton, 2006; Chatzidakis et al., 2007) with a lack of focus on the mutually reinforcing economic and social aspects of exchange, implicit in all actions, and fundamental in the Fair Trade design. However, there is a call in the literature for a greater understanding of the impact of place on the experiences and understanding of Fair Trade, given that fairness can have locally specific connotations and also based on how local policy and regulatory as well as cultural context can shape the way in which Fair Trade operates in practice (Getz and Shreck, 2006; McEwan et al.,

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<sup>2</sup> A Fairtrade farmer is a certified producer as per the Fairtrade standards.

<sup>3</sup> Small-scale producer organization are legally registered Fairtrade groups.

2017). Our paper, thus, provides new insights allowing us to better understand Fair Trade exchanges by listening to the voices of the producers with regards to their everyday experiences of the practices of Fair Trade in specific locations, and in our case in Asia, a region often overlooked in the literature.

## **CHARACTERISING FAIR TRADE EXCHANGES**

Social exchange theory takes its roots in multiple fields: sociology (e.g. Mauss, 1969; Homans, 1961), psychology (e.g. Malinowski, 1960) and anthropology (e.g. Lévi-Strauss, 1969), as well as management and marketing (e.g. Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). Social exchange theory examines repeated interpersonal interactions, often imbued with intrinsic value and, hence, without a clear attribution of price to the exchange (Das and Teng, 2002; Lawler et al., 2000). It enables us to recognise that economic exchanges encompass moral and social relations alongside utility maximizing behaviour. Benefit, thus, can be derived from social ties and interpersonal connections, as well as the exchange act, including: (1) The exchange action – “the behaviours, or outward manifestations, in which the entities engage”; (2) the exchange experience – “the psychological states that are a consequence of the exchange”; as well as (3) the exchange outcome – “the value received in the exchange exclusive of the preceding variables” (Houston and Gassenheimer, 1987: 7).

In the exchange of a ‘material thing’ marked as a commodity by those in the exchange relationship, actors exchange resources directly with each other (Sahlins, 1972) – i.e. the resources that one actor gives are directly contingent on the resources that the other gives in return (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). These types of exchanges are associated with stipulated returns of commensurate worth and utility within a finite and narrow period and referred to as ‘restricted exchanges’ (Sahlins, 1972). They are based on formal contracts, making individuals in the exchange relationship accountable as individual responsibilities can be easily observed and addressed, thus, reinforcing a sense of trust through norms of reciprocity between the two parties (Ekeh, 1974). While research in economics has concentrated on this notion (Takahashi, 2000), the process through which material things become imbued with non-pecuniary value has remained under-explored, especially outside of work on the social and solidarity economy (Utting, 2015). Of course, numerous studies have highlighted that Fair Trade, especially in the solidarity model involving alternative trading organizations, brings benefits beyond the economic (Reed, 2009; Doherty and Davies, 2013) and impact studies have uncovered benefits in organizational development and improved labour practices (Nelson, 2017). However, often, these studies are limited to considering the ‘outputs’ and do not engage with producer’s

priorities or practices with respect to exchange, or indeed how they imbue them with meaning. For this, we argue, there is a need to focus on the discourse of everyday exchanges.

For many sociologists, the significance of the economy lies in the transactions of which it is composed “and therefore in the quality of relationships which these transactions create, express, sustain, and modify” (Firth, 1967: 4). These are referred to as ‘generalised exchanges’ and are characterised by unilateral resource giving (one’s giving is reciprocated not by the recipient, but by a third party) (Granovetter, 1993; Mauss, 1969) – benefits are received from different actors, and the timeframes associated with reciprocity can be indefinite (Sahlins, 1972). Reciprocal relations, however, cannot be strictly accounted for – thereby generating a sense of indebtedness and reinforcing moral obligations (Muthusamy and White, 2005). The involvement of multiple and often loosely defined networks creates monitoring difficulties since the transacting parties cannot be clearly observed and the collective benefits or non-pecuniary value resulting from the exchange is non-time bound (Molm et al., 2007; Das and Teng, 2002). In this context, group stability becomes heavily reliant on social sanctions, normative conditioning and altruism, as well as member’s motivation and high levels of trust in members fulfilling their social obligations (Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Jussila et al., 2012). As such, those merely seeking individual gains will not enter an exchange relationship in which they expect only collective outcomes, and vice versa (Jussila et al., 2012). Trust enables individuals to prioritise the broader social structure over direct benefits, thus, bypassing the need for contractual agreements (Ekeh, 1974).

The repetition of these exchanges, thus, both flows from and strengthens members’ feelings of loyalty and trust towards the collective, establishing lasting social patterns and cohesion (Jussila et al., 2012; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Molm et al., 2007). The formation of this collective identity, through a process of negotiated needs and understandings, is argued by some to be the key motivation in democratic participation – involvement by the group in the decision making process generates a sense of empowerment amongst members, as explored in cooperative theory (Birchall and Simmons, 2010; Jussila et al., 2012), and essential in cohesive structures (Lévi-Strauss, 1969). It highlights the importance of group dynamics influenced by the need to give and share. In particular, it suggests a certain interdependence between parties as well as a degree of ‘togetherness’ in the exchange action leading to a shared understanding, conceptualization of, and commitment to the group. Trust and interdependence appear clearly linked with the cooperative organizational form, which, when it works well, is associated with effective governance, mechanisms for member voice, the exercise of choice on

the extent of participation in or withdrawal from the cooperative's activities, and therefore, the creation of non-pecuniary value (Hannan, 2014). While a strong sense of collective identity strengthens the likelihood of non-pecuniary value to be created in exchange relationships, it is not restricted to a fixed and identifiable network structure, such as the members of a cooperative. 'Paying it forward' – also referred to as indirect reciprocity; acts as a moral code extending obligations beyond explicitly defined communities (Baker and Levine, 2013).

Participation in exchange relationships, thus, is complex (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005) and often imbued with intrinsic value and, hence, without a clear attribution of price (Das and Teng, 2002). Motives can range from individualistic (Tuominen et al., 2010) to collectivistic ones (Bataille-Chedotel and Huntzinger, 2004); be subject to reciprocity (Plickert et al., 2007); and imbued with values such as integrity, trust and goodwill (Weber et al., 2020) as well as psychological notions of group identity where successful exchange strengthens group cohesion (Lawler et al., 2000). Social exchange theory enables us to reconceptualise exchanges in Fairtrade markets to take into account interpersonal processes and long-term relations of exchange between actors and, therefore, better understand the producer view of the trading relationship as well as the nature of the exchanges and their outcomes.

## **METHODS**

We recognize the necessity of generating context-specific theories and therefore favour a case-oriented explanation. We followed Ragin's (1997) approach to case study methods as it enabled us to emphasize the importance of context-specific results. The case study approach is frequently used to provide a valid and nuanced, though not necessarily generalizable, view of reality (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and provides an opportunity to test theories in new contexts (Patton and Appelbaum, 2003).

In this article, we were interested in how meanings and realities are created and negotiated, so as to gain insight into how farmers construct their participation in Fair Trade exchanges. Discourse analysis was used as it allows us to explore "how structured sets of texts come to function as 'reality constructors', which help constitute the social phenomena in question" (De Cock et al., 2005: 38). Texts are central to the creation of meaning (Maguire and Hardy, 2009) and refer to a variety of forms such as, but not limited to, written documents, transcribed interviews, verbal reports and also spoken words and dialogues, artwork, symbols, and pictures (Phillips et al., 2004). Discourse analysis is concerned with how language is used and a piece of text constructed (Dick, 2004; Phillips et al., 2004). It offers a method enabling the examination of language used to produce explanations of the world we live in (Dick, 2004),

filling an epistemological function informing us about how social reality is created (Phillips and Hardy, 2002).

### **The case studies**

The *Fair Trade movement* emerged some 50 years ago, rooted in trade justice and human solidarity, it follows alternative distribution channels characterized by shared understanding of fairness and trading partnerships (Dolan, 2010; Tallontire, 2000). The *Fairtrade labelling system* emerged later on and from the movement in 1988, enabling market expansion (Low and Davenport, 2005), with Fairtrade International established in 1997 to facilitate the development of global standards and processes (The Fairtrade Foundation, 2009).

Fair Trade impact studies have overwhelmingly focused on Latin America and to a lesser extent Africa (e.g. Valkila and Nygren, 2010; Jaffee, 2007; Murray et al., 2006; Baumann et al., 2012; Dolan, 2010; Tallontire, 2015; Ruben, 2008), whilst those focusing on Asia have considered plantations (Besky, 2008) or handicrafts (Le Mare, 2012) rather than small-scale producers. We, therefore, focused on the Asia Pacific region typically missing in the field – with Fairtrade certified farmers in this region representing about 15% of Fairtrade certified farmers and workers worldwide (NAPP, 2018). We selected two case countries: Vietnam and India from which to contrast Fairtrade actors. These were purposefully chosen for their diversity, not only in terms of national characteristics but also the number of certified Fairtrade cooperatives and crops produced. While both countries fulfil the requirements for Fairtrade certification (i.e. developing countries), their respective national profiles with regards to Fairtrade diverge. In 2017, India accounted for 37 % of worldwide Fairtrade producer organizations and 52% of the total Fairtrade farmers and workers of the Asia Pacific region, while Vietnam accounted for 11% and 1% respectively (NAPP, 2017).

The Fairtrade certification system covers different models – i.e. small-scale producer organizations, hired labour, and contract production (Fairtrade International, 2019); we chose to focus on small-scale producer organizations, the most widespread in both countries. Under the Fairtrade certification system, small-scale farmers are required to organize themselves as democratic member-led organizations, which enables them to have both a structure that facilitates getting products to market and which gives the opportunity for all members to have a say in how it is run (Fairtrade International, 2015). The small producer certification system has roots in democratic farmer movements and small-scale producer organizations are, commonly referred to as cooperatives, though there may be different regulations, and histories relating to what is regarded as a cooperative (Raynolds, 2012).



Five cooperatives were purposefully selected (two in Vietnam and three in India) based on information available on the Network of Asia & Pacific Producers' (NAPP) website (i.e. Fairtrade International's regional network (NAPP, 2019)) to represent a range of sizes and crops as well as for their proximity to our local contacts. In Vietnam, our cooperatives came from two locations: VanChan in YenBai and BanLien in LaoCai – 300 and 178 members, respectively. Both were situated in small rural communities, grew tea and became 'Fairtrade active' in 2008. In India, our cooperatives came from three locations: Sagar and Karwar in Karnataka and Kasargode in Kerala. While all three were also situated in small rural communities, they grew a mix of cocoa, coffee, herbs, spices and nut seed oils, and varied in size: from 110 members in Sagar, to 283 in Karwar and 3,500 in Kasargode. All three became 'Fairtrade active' between 2004 and 2005. Fairtrade cooperatives selected in Vietnam had the particularity of grouping certified farmers from an entire village, while cooperatives in India were organized slightly differently in that they grouped certified farmers from different villages – covering a radius of up to 200km. Getting a sense of who the cooperatives were selling to was difficult – the farmers did not appear to have knowledge of ultimate markets, as has been found in other contexts (Dolan, 2010). From what we were able to gather, cooperatives sold their Fairtrade crops both to mainstream companies and Alternative Trade Organisations (for distinctions between Fair Trade value chains, see Doherty and Davies, 2013), with their main aim being to sell as much of their crops on the Fairtrade market as possible. Any remaining crops were sold on the mainstream market. While some cooperatives had specifically organised for Fairtrade, others had been previously organised to sell on the organic market. All farmers had previous experience in growing their crops. Targeting the Fairtrade market, especially where there are established standards via Fairtrade International for the crops meant that they were able to benefit from the Fairtrade Premium. Based on its origins as a mechanism to address structural inequalities in trade, Fairtrade standards explicitly include an extra payment or premium in their pricing structure, as well as minimum prices depending on the commodity. This 'social premium' is described as follows: "Over and above the Fairtrade price, the Fairtrade Premium is an additional sum of money which goes into a communal fund for workers and farmers to use – as they see fit – to improve their social, economic and environmental conditions" (Fairtrade Foundation, 2021). Fairtrade certification also specifies a democratic decision-making process within the farmer organization to decide on its use, with the aim for it to benefit members and their community (for processes of premium use, see Loconto et al., 2019).

## **Data Collection & Analysis**

A total of 16 interviews were conducted, all face to face. Interview invitations were sent by our local contacts who facilitated their dissemination to the cooperatives we had previously selected. Our local contacts also accompanied the interviewer during the interviews to ensure a country national familiar with the culture and other social dynamics was present at all time. Our contacts in Vietnam and in India were academics who had never heard of Fair Trade before, and therefore had no preconceptions of what standard-setters or buyers would prioritise. In Vietnam we interviewed one cooperative representative, a cooperative board member and a farmer in each organisation (total 6). A total of 10 interviews were carried out in India minimum of one cooperative board member and two farmers were interviewed each time. The advantage of this sampling approach was the ability to engage with the perspectives of members of multiple cooperatives, however interviewing three people in each cooperative, sometimes those who were initially involved in establishing the organization, means that our ability to explore understanding of, and experience of Fair Trade amongst the broader membership, was limited. Our sample is also relatively small and solely made of men, largely due to the membership structures of the co-operatives (and recognising that this is a structural limitation of Fair Trade models where cooperative membership is predicated on land ownership (Centre for International Forestry Research, 2020)). However, we ensured that the interviews were open and wide ranging following the interests of the interviewee and to allow for careful probing rather than rigidly following an interview schedule.

The interviews were semi-structured open-ended questions. All interviews ranged from 30 to 90 minutes, were tape-recorded with consent from participants, transcribed verbatim and analysed – the recruitment and analysis were undertaken in full compliance with our institution’s ethics protocols. All interview data were made anonymous to protect the identity of interviewees and a code given when reporting the findings (i.e. ‘V’ for Vietnam and ‘I’ for India). The interviews were conducted and framed as an informal conversation with the respondents. The semi-structured approach enabled us to “maintain a tone of friendly chat” (Fontana and Frey, 2003: 86) as well as translating the interview questions into the relevant societal context. The semi-structured approach also allowed the interviews to flow at a natural pace, which was important to build rapport with interviewees from different backgrounds (Rowley, 2012). In this climate of ‘trust’ and informal conversation, the interviewees frequently felt comfortable introducing other issues or topic of interest that were pursued when relevant,

providing diverse and rich responses, new insights and time to explore the nuances of the various discursive constructs (Travers, 2012).

The interviews were transcribed and coded in NVivo to facilitate the organization of texts. Analytic coding involved considering how meaning was constructed, creating conceptual categories and abstracting from the data, and was an on-going, iterative process (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Open coding was used in the first instance, which involved looking for initial themes (or ‘units of meaning’) to create theoretically informed categories (Locke, 2001). From these themes, we looked for hierarchical relationships to further refine our coding and created second-order categories from which further categories could be developed (Daniel, 2012).

## **FINDINGS**

In this article, we were interested in investigating the farmers’ discursive constructs of: 1) the nature of the Fair Trade exchanges; and 2) the nature of the exchange outcomes resulting from the transactions.

### **The nature of the Fair Trade exchanges**

When asked about the nature of the Fair Trade exchanges through their experience in the Fairtrade market and their motivations for taking part, the farmers produced a discourse characterised by empowerment and trust as well as individual (i.e. profit seeking) and collective interest (i.e. the need of the group).

The findings suggested a discourse of empowerment characterized by the establishment of a democratic decision-making process. The knowledge of the decision-making process involved with the use of the Fairtrade premium – that is paid above the Fairtrade minimum price and to be used for social developments, was well-known by the farmers and integrated through the cooperative: “The overall objective is community development. A community, common project is set up to benefit all not just one person, this project should receive common consent from all the farmers by following a democratic decision making” (Cooperative V-1, representative). Empowerment, especially with regards to collective decision making as well as profit seeking, appeared a core construct of the farmers’ discourse – for example:

We are free to put forward our suggestions. And another thing is that we have a good community. And there is a good organization which supports us the farmers. If this process is not there, if I don't raise my opinion, they will not be heard about my points. We can sell our crops to the consumers and get a good price, we are very

independent. We get more price, we have the freedom to sell (Cooperative I-5, farmer).

This potential to act collectively was not just related to discussions about the Fairtrade premium, but was also related to how the cooperatives worked in practice:

I can raise a question and can get the answers also. We can independently deal with our business. Firstly, when I combined with you if I like your business I can deal with you. That type of freedom is with us. I have the freedom of taking decisions (Cooperative I-4, farmer).

The findings suggested the farmers expected the ability to have a say and that their voice would be heard – thereby suggesting trust amongst interdependent members of the group. Trust is an important element in exchange relations as it is the foundations for participation and mutual understanding and therefore how empowerment is built (Jussila et al., 2012).

In the context of our study, farmers in Vietnam specifically commented on feeling empowered as this process was providing them with the freedom to take their own decisions compared to more government-led ones in the past. In India, the farmers enjoyed the opportunity to make decisions themselves as to where and how to invest without having to rely on potentially paternalistic programs from the west or non-governmental organizations. Overall, the farmers commented on the benefits of being able to raise their own voice and having the freedom to make their own decision as a farmer-owned democratic cooperative – thus reinforcing a feeling of belonging as per the voluntary nature of the social exchanges, as opposed to projects that are, for example, government-led.

The generation of and decisions about the use of collective resources (i.e. the Fairtrade premium) appeared as one of the most cited motivations and outcome expectation for engaging in the Fair Trade exchange, potentially as this is one of its more novel aspects. For example:

Before we had this community house [funded by the Fairtrade premium], every time when there was a meeting among villagers, we had to gather at the village head's house. It was very inconvenient and there was no place for villagers to discuss their problems and issues. But since we had this community house, things have been much easier. Talking about the bridge, it was aimed to connect the resettlement residence with the village. Before the bridge was built last year, people could not cross the stream whenever there was a flood. We are planning to build another bridge (Cooperative V-1, chairman).

Similarly, another farmer stated:

It has helped the community to grow 11 acres of forests and it has helped the village schools by providing them plates and furniture. It has helped me to purchase 20 honeybee boxes and a fertilizer digest. Because of the extra money I reinvested and my standard of living is improved (Cooperative I-3, farmer).

The farmer's discursive construct of the exchange experience was one where individual interest and collective interest appeared combined – to the extent that it impacted the community as a whole and thus beyond the cooperative. The findings suggested the notion of generalised exchange was core to the farmer's discursive construct. For example, the chairman of cooperative V-1 expressed satisfaction that others were now able to cross the stream; while a farmer from Cooperative I-3 talked of benefits to the villages as well as himself. The findings suggested the importance of access to a collective pool of resources – i.e. the Fairtrade premium; “the members’ (indivisible) common property to which no single individual can claim sole ownership rights” (Jussila et al., 2012: 17). This highlights the importance of groups’ dynamics influenced by the need to give and share, typical in social exchange theory. In particular, it suggested a certain interdependence between parties as well as a degree of ‘togetherness’ in the exchange action leading to a shared understanding, conceptualization of, and commitment to the group.

Social exchange theory tells us that outcome expectations play a key role in individuals’ decisions to engage in an exchange relationship (Flynn, 2005). As such, those who merely seek collective outcomes will not enter an exchange relationship in which they expect only individual outcomes, and vice versa (Jussila et al., 2012). While it is clear social development projects from the Fairtrade premium have benefited the community as a whole, the second quote hinted at the premium being used slightly differently. In the first quote, developments were aimed at the community in general, easing the farmers’ lives as well as people of the village. In the second quote, the premium was used to benefit the farmers individually by providing them with extra money they can reinvest. It is interesting to note that the premium, if utilised in a strategic way, can bring a multiplier effect to the communities, the cooperatives, and the farmers individually, while being a simple, one-time investment in other cases. Both economically- and socially-driven investments were made, illustrating a context in which no one single approach is represented but both integrated. Both individual and collective benefits thus were reported, and both were regarded as valid. This contrasts with other investigations that refer to decision making and distribution of benefits use of the premium in which farmer members have

questioned investment in projects that had wider community benefits (Dolan, 2010; Phillips, 2014; Loconto and Frank, 2012). This might be related to trust in the organization as well as factors linked to the specifics of the value chain and socio-economic context, or indeed the interview sample. While not only interviewees with positions of responsibility in the cooperatives emphasised democracy and participation, a broader sample and use of more anthropological methods might have revealed more nuanced views about decision-making and equity of outcomes.

As critical literature on Fair Trade has shown, there may be differential access to benefits from a group's participation in the system, including the social premium (Dolan, 2010; Phillips, 2014; Ranjan and Grote, 2017). Fair Trade USA, for example, has promoted a model that does not rely on farmer organizations on the basis that they might exclude the poorest (Tallontire and Nelson, 2013). Nevertheless, the data from our sample highlighted the intertwined nature of exchange relations under Fair Trade systems and suggested the positive impact of a democratic process to the farmers individually (the value of 'self-worth' derived from being able to state their own opinion), the cooperative (the value derived from the ability to take decisions as a unit), and the community as a whole (the value derived from access to greater financial returns and support and a unified vision).

Lastly, a minority of participants commented on their relationships with non-certified farmers. For example: "The non-Fairtrade farmers feel happy that we have joined the Fairtrade. They ask us the information about how they could become Fairtrade" (Cooperative V-1, farmer). In this quote the farmer alluded to the 'open' nature of Fair Trade, stating that anyone can join thereby emphasizing the idea of 'partnership' as opposed to a more competitive mindset as per a free market ideology. One cooperative, however, mentioned potential tensions:

Fairtrade [i.e. the Fairtrade certification scheme] is an open organization, in case the other person wants to join, he can come and join. It did happen during the peak time, some people with jealousy but no tension, but there is a jealousy happened, like 'these people are making more money than the other people', but it was only jealousy, that is it, it is not there anymore, just during the peak time (Cooperative V-2, secretary).

'Jealousy' from non-certified farmers towards Fairtrade farmers was only mentioned once in the interviews. During our interviews, Fairtrade farmers were eager to involve more farmers in Fairtrade certification to benefit more individuals, as well as the community and the country as a whole and therefore did not demonstrate being merely self-motivated but also motivated by

collectivistic interest. The mention of ‘jealousy’, however, is of interest as it suggested the existence of certain power dynamics. In social exchanges, power is used as a way to achieve mutual benefits – it denotes “the partners’ ability to take advantage of the outcomes of the exchange” rather than used in an authoritative manner (Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2012: 999). While the concept of power did not seem of significant importance to exchanges we examined, it remains under-studied in our research and an interesting avenue for further research. Indeed, notions of obligation, gratitude, fear etc. were not mentioned in the interviews – providing an encouraging sign that power was not significant in the exchange relationships examined. Nonetheless, future research could investigate the extent to which Fairtrade farmers are considered elites in the context of their cooperatives and their communities, and how power might be exerted to mutual or individual advantage.

When referring to the nature of the Fair Trade exchanges through their exchange experiences, the farmers produced a discourse characterised by individual and collective interests, as well as empowerment and trust; this, occurred both in Vietnam and India despite socio-economic differences between the two countries. The Fair Trade philosophy appeared integrated into the farmers’ experiences of the exchanges further demonstrating reconciliation between individual and collective interest anchored in broader relational and ethical dimensions through producing a discourse in which the farmers did not dissociate between their own benefits and the benefits of the community.

### **The nature of the Fair Trade exchange outcomes**

When referring to exchange outcomes, the farmers produced a discourse characterised by individual and collective value. In their discursive construct, the farmers commented on the positive impact getting higher rates for their crops on the Fairtrade market generated – they did so constructing the impact both at the individual as well as the wider community level. For example:

Interviewer: Is there any difference in how much the farmers make selling Fairtrade products compared to non-Fairtrade?

Interviewee: Minimum we got 20 to 30% higher rate, minimum.

Interviewer: Okay

Interviewee: In case of vanilla, we got 100%.

Interviewer: How has this surplus impacted everyone?

Interviewee: Then we will provide some money to the schools and the social forestry and constructing Samudaya bond [collective bond] etc., it's good for the community (Cooperative I-3, secretary).

In most instances, whether in Vietnam or in India, when referring to the outcomes resulting from the Fair Trade exchanges, the farmers did not isolate their own benefits from those of the community. For example: “I receive the premium amount, better price, and it helps the group or the village that I live in, if I sell it to the Fairtrade... It means there is a better life, standard of living” (Cooperative I-3, farmer).

A discourse characteristic of fairness was also observed. For example, the farmers expressed getting access to a more equitable distribution of wealth:

Life is changed, these are towards positive things and there is a lot of betterment in each and everyone's life, distributed to the all the farmers. It's not that one person gets the full, like I am Fairtrade and I am directly selling to them all my products I am getting all the rate, but because of the democratic way the wealth is distributed, distributed equally to them (Cooperative I-3, president).

Such a quote brings significant insights into understanding the extent to which there is an interface between Fair Trade, especially its focus on supporting and empowering farmer organisations and cooperative values and operating principles (as set out by Hannan (2014)). In his comment, the president of cooperative I-3 referred to the opportunity for greater equity Fairtrade has created, one of Fairtrade's central aims.

In the farmers' discourse, individual outcomes were expressed in terms of financial stability, increased standard of living, and 'better access to marketing' (for the farmers this meant increased access to information and international markets). For example, the chairman of cooperative V-1 stated: “We realize the benefits that Fairtrade brings about to farmers. For example, production input and output are stabilized, their life and income is more stable and the community also enjoys the benefit”. Here again, the discursive construct was one where economic and social outcomes were combined – hinting thus at the exchange of material things becoming imbued with non-pecuniary value. Interestingly, we also note the construction of a collective identity through the use of the pronoun 'we' – core to successful cooperative exchange relationships and reinforcing a notion of trust and interdependence had been established (Birchall and Simmons, 2004; Jussila et al., 2012). In another example, a farmer



from cooperative I-5 expressed financial, social as well as environmental benefits of value to all, and overall a more holistic approach:

Why I joined the Fairtrade, one is because of the association and there is a good marketing. And because of the Fairtrade we get a lot of profit, there is the premium which is benefiting the community. The environment is protected through Fairtrade, by producing organic crops. Before becoming Fairtrade, our motivation was only concentrated on increasing yield. But after coming to Fairtrade we received awareness about producing healthy products.

In this discursive construct, this farmer provides another instance in which individual value is considered alongside that for the community by the cooperative – challenging the solely individualistic, utility maximising view of mainstream economic behaviour. We note also how the farmer put forward the importance (to others) of producing healthy products for his cooperative after receiving information from Fairtrade's certification scheme and alluding to moral aspects of production extending the notion of obligation towards society beyond one's immediate neighbourhood.

A discourse characterised by empathy for others' wellbeing was also observed. For example, a farmer from Cooperative I-4 talked about the positive impact of the Fair Trade exchanges on the environment both on his own farm, and on others' through a demonstration effect:

Me as a farmer, what I can give to earth if you ask me, the earth gets destroyed, the soil contents becomes weak firstly. And the second thing is that, the crops that we grow and consume won't be good enough for our health. And another thing, if I sell these crops to other people, it will be harmful to them also. When we involve ourselves in cultivation, we will encourage other farmers to follow us, because organic farming is good when we spread this information to others their vision, their attention automatically turns towards us and they will start observing what we are doing, instead of using the chemicals, how we are able to grow healthy crops, what crops we are growing, and those who are interested will learn from us (Cooperative I-4, farmer).

The personal involvement and attention to the environment and human health presented in this quote showed the thoughts and attention given to the farming process, and that not only for the farmer's own health but also for the consumers and 'the planet' as a whole. This suggests a

strong alignment with Fairtrade values around sustainable farming practices as well as the farmers' willingness to fulfil one's obligations towards the boarder community as it is emphasised in social exchange theory through the notion of generalized exchange.

Overall, despite socio-economic differences, Fair Trade exchange outcomes appeared homogeneously expressed by cooperative representatives, board members and farmers in both Vietnam and India. This could be a positive sign of shared values and benefits in the cooperative, but also a sample bias in terms of the farmers who agreed to participate in the study. Most interestingly, the Fairtrade system enables certified farmers to take responsibility for transactions that would normally be considered generalised (e.g. building a school that would normally be expected to be built by government from taxes paid). Through operating in Fairtrade markets and engaging with Fairtrade principles that support cooperation and working for mutual benefit, the farmers are enabled to work together and adopt a broader view of responsibility to provide for societal needs and plan on a longer-term basis that builds up social capacities and protects the environment.

## **DISCUSSION**

In this paper, we have taken a sociological approach and sought to better understand the implications of exchanges in the Fairtrade market from the perspective of the farmers. Social exchange theory has enabled us to better understand how and where market transactions in Fair Trade demonstrate non-pecuniary value. Further, drawing from discourse analysis has enabled us to take into account the 'people' involved in these exchanges by listening to their voices and ultimately the way in which an intervention in the market such as globally defined Fairtrade standards and trading relationships are embedded in, or interface, different societal contexts.

Our study has shown that the act of combining into a cooperative to access Fairtrade markets has provided a vehicle for non-pecuniary value to be expressed. We find that not only 'material things' were exchanged in the Fairtrade marketplace, but that Fair Trade has acquired non-pecuniary value and become imbued with social values from the viewpoint of Fairtrade farmers. For example, our findings suggested a discourse of empowerment characterized by the establishment of a democratic decision process. The knowledge of the decision-making process involved with the use of the premium was well-known by the farmers and integrated through the cooperative. The findings suggested the farmers expected the ability to have a say and that their voice would be heard – thereby suggesting trust amongst interdependent members of the group. In our study, farmers in Vietnam specifically commented on feeling empowered as this process was providing them with the freedom to take their own decisions compared to the top-

down structures prevalent in the communist era. In India, the farmers enjoyed the opportunity to make decisions themselves as to where and how to invest, which contrasted with more paternalist processes linked to aid programmes and hierarchical kinship structures. Overall, the farmers commented on the benefits of being able to raise their own voice and having the freedom to make their own decision as a cooperative – thus reinforcing the importance of farmer owned democratic institutional structure core to Fair Trade and a feeling of belonging as per the voluntary nature of the social exchanges. Furthermore, the farmers highlighted how being part of the Fairtrade relationship enhanced feelings of community which they articulated in locally specific ways.

In this discourse we see, to some extent, the conflation of the Fair Trade practices and cooperative operating principles, in which it is difficult to disentangle whether it is Fair Trade that has facilitated farmer participation in decision-making and led to respondents articulating an ability to shape their own futures, or whether this is related to an understanding and articulation of good cooperative governance. Such conflation might be expected given that in the small producer model, the Fairtrade standard explicitly works through democratically organized and farmer-led groups and its theory of change refers to producer organization support as a core input (Fairtrade International, 2019) and strengthened farmer organizations and ability to represent members are recognized as an output of Fair Trade exchanges (Tyszler et al., 2018). For both the Fairtrade model and effective cooperatives, good governance structures, the ability of farmers to exercise their voice and an effective balance of social and economic objectives are key to success (Hannan, 2014; Middendorp et al., 2020).

Evidence of Fair Trade acquiring non-pecuniary value from the farmers' viewpoint was also found in the way in which farmers construct exchange outcomes – the farmers produced a discourse characterized by individual and collective outcomes. In their discursive construct of the Fair Trade exchange outcomes, the farmers commented on the positive impact getting higher rates for their crops on the Fairtrade market had – they did so constructing the impact both at the individual as well as the wider community level. The findings showed several instances in which the farmers considered individual outcomes alongside collective ones – challenging the individualistic, utility maximizing view of mainstream economic behaviour. The findings also suggested the farmers understood the importance (to others) of producing environmentally friendly products alluding to moral aspects of production, and a discourse characterized by empathy for others' wellbeing. Through their discursive constructs, Fair Trade farmers showed nuanced perspectives of economic behaviours as economic and social motives

and outcomes appeared reconciled through exchanges characterized by unilateral resource giving and benefits received (Sahlins, 1972; Granovetter, 1993). The findings further showed the farmers considered multiple values (i.e. economic and social) as well as multiple transactions – i.e. they did not restrict their trade to the buyer of their goods, but saw the broader ‘stakeholders’ in their transactions. While such uniformity is unusual in the Fair Trade literature (e.g. Phillips, 2014), this could be related to the cultural context in which the interviews took place: communitarian in India wrapped up in the logic of kinship system of obligations (Jodhka, 1999; Mines, 1988) and collectivist in Vietnam (Nguyen et al., 2005); as well as our sample, which tended towards chairs and committee members of the cooperatives we interviewed.

The findings further suggested the construction of a collective identity reinforcing a notion of trust and interdependence had been established (Birchall and Simmons, 2004; Jussila et al., 2012). Extant literature tells us that exchange relationships are imbued of values of which trust is an important element and the foundation for participation and mutual understanding and, therefore, how empowerment is built. Traditionally, economic transactions are based on contracts – in social exchanges, however, exchange relationships are characterized by a high degree of interdependence (Lawler, 2001) and incomplete contracts (Das and Teng, 2002). Trust is, thus, a crucial component in generalized exchanges as it enables individuals to prioritize between the broader social structure and seeking direct benefits (Blau, 1964; Ekeh, 1974).

An important aspect our study was not able to cover, is whether any difference emerges depending on who these Fair Trade cooperatives are selling to – e.g. mainstream versus Alternative Trade Organizations and whether particular strategies implemented by fair trade businesses importing from these producers had shaped, supported or conversely undermined the non-pecuniary values that were exhibited (Donovan et al., 2020). Whilst we have contributed to the call for more place-specific research on Fair Trade (Getz and Shreck, 2006; McEwan et al., 2017), we acknowledge the need to adopt a more gender sensitive lens and also to explore the less progressive elements of community structures with regards to class and ethnicity. Further research is called for that seeks to better understand the experience of Fair Trade exchanges for a wider range of farmers in an Asia Pacific context, linking social exchange theory with a focus on producer voice in the everyday transactions of Fair Trade to ascertain if and how these pecuniary and non-pecuniary values extend across producer communities, and how Fair Trade importer business strategies affect these exchanges in varied contexts.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our study has enabled us to gain insights into the discursive constructs of Fair Trade exchanges in a context that remains understudied (i.e. farmers' perspectives in the Asia Pacific region). Combining social exchange theory and discourse analysis, we have highlighted how the restricted transactions governed by Fairtrade standards, and involving Fair Trade sellers and buyers, explicitly and purposefully encompass what would normally be regarded as generalised exchange considerations (e.g. building a school that would normally be expected to be built by government from taxes paid). This may be because the farmers know that in order to generate benefits for themselves, their cooperative and the local community, it is necessary for them to act and act together to mitigate against the limitations imposed by the socio-economic, geographic and political context (e.g. weak economy, limited infrastructure). The generation of non-pecuniary values, however, are not necessarily just due to Fair Trade, but how these ethics and practices interface with those of the Fairtrade farmers. Our study shows that non-pecuniary values were associated with decision-making and participation, and farmers having a say in investments to benefit the organization and community, as well as pecuniary value to themselves. Fair Trade, thus, reinforced and added value, purpose and direction to good democratic organizational practice. For businesses importing from Fairtrade farmers, our study underlines the significance of farmer democratic organizations generating and sustaining the benefits from Fair Trade, both in dialogue with their own members and articulating their priorities to their business partners.

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