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Fair-trade commerce: a green, social solution

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

The only problem with making the world greener is that so many other problems remain.

Persistent global challenges ranging from poverty to disease can make our green concerns seem trivial, so it's especially satisfying when we're able to address environmental and social issues at the same time.

The rapidly growing fair-trade movement provides the perfect vehicle for this. Today, we celebrate World Fair Trade Day.

Q: Is fair trade the same as free trade?

A: They are actually very different concepts. Free trade usually means reducing trade restrictions among nations. This can result in companies continually moving production to countries with cheap labor and lax environmental regulations. It may also hurt workers in developing nations when products from other countries flood the marketplace.

Fair trade, on the other hand, seeks to pay workers reasonable wages while also setting standards for worker safety and environmental protection. The fair-trade movement primarily focuses on items produced in developing nations and sold in richer countries.

Q: Coffee and handicrafts are the main fair-trade products, aren't they?

A: Fair-trade coffee and handicrafts blazed the trail and have been available in the Seattle area since the 1990s. However, in recent years fair trade has expanded to cover a whole shopping-basket full of items including tea, chocolate, sugar, fresh fruit, wine, rice, vanilla, honey, flowers, cotton and even soccer balls. A partial list of retailers is at www.transfairusa.org/content/WhereToBuy (searching by city or state works best).

Since public awareness and support of the fair-trade movement are greater in Europe than in the U.S., some fair-trade products such as bananas are much more widely available there.

Q: How is fair trade regulated?

A: Several national and international organizations, including TransFair USA and the Fair Trade Federation, certify or manage fair-trade products and programs. Except for handicrafts, most fair-trade products carry the black-and-white "Fair Trade Certified" logo.

Many fair-trade programs provide cooperative groups of farmers a guaranteed minimum price, plus an additional premium for certified organic crops. These programs also restrict the use of toxic pesticides, provide safe working conditions, prohibit forced child labor and invest in community-development projects for workers.

Q: Are fair-trade products expensive?

A: Sometimes you will pay more, but fair-trade products such as coffee, tea, chocolate and handicrafts often cost about the same as comparable products. That's mainly because fair-trade programs offset the higher wages for producers by reducing the role and profits of the "middleman" (an intermediary buyer or broker).

Q: How fast is the fair-trade movement growing, and what's driving it?

A: In 2008, purchases of fair-trade products increased by 10 percent in the U.S. and more than 20 percent in several European countries. Continued increases are projected. Although some countries have higher sales of fair-trade products per person, the U.S. leads the world in the overall value of fair-trade products purchased at well over \$1 billion a year.

Independent stores and co-ops introduced Americans to fair trade, and now nearly every major retailer in America, from Starbucks to Costco to Wal-Mart, carries at least a few fair-trade products.

The movement has also garnered strong support from many churches, which have made fair trade a keystone of their relief work and humanitarian efforts.

A fair-trade chocolate fundraiser brought in \$50,000 at Holy Names Academy, a Catholic girls high school in Seattle. The national Lutheran World Relief program invested \$280,000 to become a stakeholder in Divine

Chocolate, a cooperative co-owned by 40,000 cocoa farmers in Ghana.

But the key to fair trade's success is that it truly helps people without being just charity. And what's fairer than that?

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