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Unsustainable development: Alternative food networks and the Ecuadorian Federation of Cocoa Producers, 1995–2010

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Although alternative trade have become a *de facto* prescription for any location where there is a need to conciliate economic interest with conservation imperatives, the discursive concept of equalitarian partnerships hides the fact that what for consumers is a matter of choice, for producers is a matter of survival. Producers must meet the demands of their partners to gain access to capital and markets. We explore the results of these unequal alliances with a case study centered on the experiences of the Ecuadorian Federation of Cocoa Producers (FEDECADE) and its 15 years long experience with alternative trade/sustainable development projects focused on the shade-grown fine cocoa variety known as “Nacional.” We found that the external agencies that implemented alternative trade in FEDECADE made assumptions, none of which were fully met at the end of the projects. Our findings point out to the paradoxical nature of alternative trade schemes, because the success of a scheme ultimately leads to loss of profitability from a farmer's perspective.

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1. Introduction: alternative trade and the ‘sustainability’ of Ecuadorian cocoa farmers

Within rural, agriculture and food studies the literature on alternative trade is growing, with increased interest in how alternative food networks might help sustain rural landscapes and livelihoods in the face of volatile commodity markets and downward pressure on prices due to global sourcing. Scholars, policy makers, and activists have proposed that alternative trade initiatives offer a unique opportunity to harness the power of the market to achieve social and ecological goals. Alternative trade, and in particular alternative food networks (AFNs), are heralded as the “new wave” of social activism” following the dashed hopes of mid-twentieth century protest movements (Goodman et al., 2012, p. 3). AFNs are conceived as institutional arrangements through which the benefits generated by small-scale, low-input agricultural producers can be valorized. They are often promoted as win–win arrangements by which consumers get access to high quality,

traceable and ecologically and/or ethically superior goods; manufacturers and dealers gain access to an attractive niche-market; and producers are compensated with economic premiums for their value-added products.

In this article, we present a multi-level case study of Ecuadorian shade-grown fine cocoa. This variety, exclusively harvested from cacao Nacional trees, is used in high-end chocolate manufacturing. We explore the role of alternative trade by examining the results of the implementation of a commodity-centered, sustainable development project that was designed with the intention of preserving small-scale shade-grown cocoa farms while improving the livelihoods of cocoa farmers in Southwestern Ecuador, by connecting them with AFNs.

Alternative trade and third-party certifications have both become a *de facto* prescription for any location where there is a need to conciliate economic interests and conservation imperatives. The wide adoption of alternative trade by the sustainable development community is easily understandable. Alternative trade schemes allow their proponents to link capitalist logic and economic self-interest to sustainability by creating niche markets for products with higher ratings (David Goodman and DuPuis, 2002; Hayes et al., 2004; Bramley and Kirsten, 2007; Taylor, 2005). Cocoa, for numerous reasons—such as its potential to be shade-grown, along with a steep upward trend in dark chocolate

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consumption—would seem an ideal commodity with which to achieve the socially progressive and ecologically sustaining goals of alternative trade. Moreover, Ecuador—as the recognized “evolutionary birthplace” of cacao and the most likely place on earth to find wild cacao today (Young, 2007, p. 7)—would appear to have a national advantage in the heirloom and geographic branding strategies characteristic of alternative food networks. However, our findings lead us to question the validity of the win–win alternative trade idealization specifically in the case of Ecuadorian cocoa and more generally. As has been seen in other development initiatives, the success of alternative trade ventures is contingent with respect to place, time, and funding, and susceptible to decline. Examining the difficulties encountered in attempts to establish AFNs, as we do in this case study, is particularly important given the increasing interest and significant investment of time, resources and money in developing them.

1.1. *Alternative trade as a remedy*

The need for these private actions was born in an era in which globalization and neoliberalism advanced an agenda that diminished nation-states’ ability to regulate natural-resources-based economic sectors and to guarantee the welfare of their citizenry (Barbier, 2000, 2003; 2004; Sonnenfeld and Mol, 2002; McCarthy, 2004). Specifically, alternative food networks developed in this context as a counter to “the unsustainable industrial food system and the exploitative trading relations embedded in global supply chains” (Goodman et al., 2012, p. 4). Considering the loss of faith in state-based regulation, policy makers in the public and private sectors opted for governance arrangements depended on consumers’ awareness of linkages between consumption and the impacts of production. Alternative trade is seen as a tool that connects producers and consumers in a way that transforms the daily act of consumption into an exercise in ecological or ethical global citizenship (Barnett et al., 2005; Clarke et al., 2007; MacMaoláin, 2002; Seyfang, 2006). AFNs thus rely on foods that “are relationally performative by design to be ‘more’ ethical” by, for example, maintaining farmers’ livelihoods, providing healthful food and/or maintaining biodiversity (Goodman et al., 2010, p. 1784).

Analyzing alternative consumption, Bryant and Goodman distinguish between two types of “commodity cultures.” One is fair trade, which is “solidarity seeking” with its “focus on social justice through fair labor and exchange practices” while the other is green consumerism, which is “conservation seeking” with its “concern linked to environmental sensibilities” (Bryant and Goodman, 2004, p. 344). They note that there are substantial differences between the two yet they share a political strategy that commodifies resistance so that protest over environmental degradation or social injustice is carried out through consumption practices (Bryant and Goodman, 2004, p. 345). AFNs encompass both types of commodity cultures with a variety of qualifications, among them organic, fair trade, local, “slow” and eco-labeling, utilizing a range of material practices and discursive strategies designed to enhance traceability along the commodity chain. Goodman et al. conceptualize AFNs as “sociological assemblages formed by practices and routines which mobilize and ‘qualify’ material and cognitive resources in particular ways,” creating “‘communities of practice’ of producers and consumers sharing ways of ‘knowing and growing food’” (Goodman et al., 2012, p. 53). Thus knowledge of the socio–ecological relations of production is key to the consumption-based politics of AFNs. While some argue for the re-localization of food systems as a way to maximize relations between producers and consumers, this is not an option for tropical commodities such as coffee and cocoa given the vastly asymmetrical north/south geography of production and consumption. Here the effort to link producers and consumers

in “ways of knowing and growing food” (Goodman et al., 2012) rests on relations at a distance mediated by a variety of entities, including non-governmental organizations, non-profits, corporations, and private public partnerships, which reach consumers through numerous media including documentaries, internet, supermarket displays, printed narratives on packaging and labels, and most critically, through the imprimatur of certification.

Much of the recent ethnographic work assessing AFNs from the point of production focuses on coffee, which was the first Fairtrade certified commodity under the Max Havelaar brand and the Fairtrade product with the highest sales volume (Pay, 2009). Discussing alternative trade in general, Bacon distinguishes between “alternative trade organizations, such as Equal Exchange, whose focus is on fair trade and social justice, to conservation institutions, which have launched separate “environmentally friendly” certifications (Bacon et al., 2008, p. 342). He argues that certification “as a tool for producer empowerment is further challenged by the proliferation of certifications, such as Rainforest Alliance and Utz Kapeh, which offer lower social standards than Fair Trade and lower environmental criteria than organic certification” (Bacon, 2005, p. 508). Fair trade, as Lyon explains, “is a form of alternative trade that seeks to improve the position of disempowered small-scale farmers through trade as a means of development” (Lyon, 2011, p. 1). Nonetheless, careful review of these and other scholars’ ethnographic, multi-sited research findings on alternative coffee networks suggest that even Fair Trade, while improving livelihoods and reducing economic vulnerability, cannot offset the myriad factors leading to decline in small-scale coffee farmers’ standard of living (Bacon, 2005; Lyon, 2007a, 2007b; West, 2012; Wilson, 2010).

A term related to (and sometimes substituted for) “alternative” is “sustainable”, meant to capture both social and ecological values. In analyzing fair trade coffee, Lyon places it within the “sustainable coffee market, which includes organic, fair-trade, shade-grown (or bird friendly coffee grown under a canopy of tropical tree shade), Rainforest Alliance, and relationship coffees (or coffees bought under long-term relationships between producers and roasters without third-party certification)” (Lyon, 2007a, p. 60). Under the banner of a common understanding of the “necessity, desirability and universality” of sustainability (Luke, 2005, p. 230), local and international agencies vie for producers to join alternative trade development schemes. However, the discursive concept of a partnership based in equity and mutual benefit (Ashman, 2001) belies differences at both ends of the commodity chain: what for consumers is a matter of expressing choice, for producers is a matter of survival (Moberg, 2005). The discourse of sustainability becomes normative, because producers must meet their international partner’s standards to gain access to capital (Melo and Wolf, 2007). In fact, scholars have reported that certified operations management systems are burdensome and complex, which leads to situations where farmers perceive that the costs of certification outweigh economic gains (Gómez Tovar et al., 2005; González and Nigh, 2005; Mutersbaugh, 2002, 2005).

In this article, we present research documenting the results of the implementation of sustainable development projects designed to preserve small shade-grown cocoa farms in Southwestern Ecuador by developing AFNs which involved multiple certifications. We analyze the discursive framework under which these projects were conceived and implemented. With a case study focused on the Ecuadorian Federation of Cocoa Producers (FEDECADE), and its fifteen years’ experience with alternative trade projects, we trace the outcomes of these initiatives. Our study shows how partnerships for development failed in view of changing market circumstances, NGO and IGO flight, and reliance on international capital.

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