

Fairtrade, place and moral economy: between abstract ethical discourse and the moral experience of Northern Cape farmers

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Abstract

This paper explores the significance of the relationships and disjunctures between the global moral discourses of Fairtrade that are articulated through ethics of fairness in supply chains and the everyday moral experiences, discourses and practices of producers that shape moral economies in specific localities. Due to increased governance through universal codes, standards and certification, Fairtrade risks becoming an abstract ethical and regulatory tool, disconnected from the moral economies of those poor farmers it is intended to benefit. In response, the paper makes a case for a deeper understanding of the moral economies of farmers involved in Fairtrade networks and the ways in which these emerge out of moral experiences that are deeply embedded in local social and cultural relations. Through a case study of Eksteenskuil Agricultural Cooperative in South Africa's Northern Cape, it seeks to demonstrate the importance of understanding the moral experiences of producers to better consider what is at stake for them, focusing on notions of cooperation, fairness and the 'good farmer', perceptions of community, and concerns with survival and self-sufficiency. The paper concludes that working in culturally-sensitive ways with producer communities and understanding how their local moral worlds are structured is vital in bridging the gap between abstract ethical discourses and the place-based

¹ Fairtrade is used to refer specifically to the type of fair trade represented by the global certification scheme of Fairtrade International, known formally as the Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO).

moral experiences of producers, and to ensuring the effectiveness of Fairtrade initiatives.

Introduction

Fairtrade is often conceived of as a form of moral economy (Luetchford 2008b).

However, critics have argued that this invokes imprecise definitions of moral economy. As Moberg (2014: 11) argues, definitions have shifted from E.P.

Thompson's original formulation in *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century* (1971), but one constant theme is that "workers and peasants are guided in their perceptions and politics by a right to survive with a measure of dignity in a changing economic landscape". Fairtrade casts the producer-consumer relationship in moral terms through a vocabulary of justice, partnership and solidarity. However, Moberg suggests that its moral discourse can be at odds with the moral economy of poor farmers – for example, if they feel they pay too dearly for their right to subsistence. The increasing burdens of Fairtrade certification are one such cost for poor farmers creating a potential breach in their moral economy. Developing these ideas, this paper calls for a deeper understanding of the moral economy of farmers involved in Fairtrade networks. We suggest that moral economies are shaped not simply by farmers' reactions to the costs of subsistence, but by and through their broader moral experiences – the contestations and compromises that actualize values for collectives and individuals (Kleinman 1999a) – which are deeply embedded in local social and cultural relations. We argue that understanding these moral experiences is particularly significant in relation to Fairtrade moral discourses, which through forms of governance and regulation have become increasingly abstract.

Of concern in this paper are the relationships and disjunctures between Fairtrade ethics of fairness in global supply chains and the moral processes and practices that shape the everyday lives of producers in specific places. In addition to articulating a moral discourse of fairness, Fairtrade operates as a very specific certifiable form of business responsibility in supply chains with the aim of empowering producer communities. Its principles encompass universal ethics, being based on a number of “human universals in the creation of livelihoods that are both materially sufficient and meaningful” (Goodman 2004: 906). An idea of universal basic needs, including a healthy environment, education, gender equality, democracy, child welfare, and a minimum wage, is core to these principles. These basic needs are also reflected in the key objectives of Fairtrade International standards, which include, *inter alia*, ensuring producer organisations receive fair prices that at least cover production costs, providing a Fairtrade social premium for investment in community development projects, and ensuring that production is socially, economically and environmentally responsible.² Through its advocacy efforts and principles, the wider Fairtrade movement also works toward making all trade relations fair in this universal sense; thus trade itself takes on important and clear moral characteristics based in an ethos of solidarity across difference (Goodman 2004).

While Fairtrade principles encompass universal ethics, Fairtrade practice rests on partial ethics because it prioritises the interests of the poorest producers, there is a gap between consumer expectations of Fairtrade production and the often contrasting “lived experiences” of producers, and there are geographical limitations to the application of ethics (Getz and Shreck 2006: 490). We suggest this is often compounded by limited understanding of the specificities of place and the distance

² See <http://www.fairtrade.net/aims-of-fairtrade-standards.html> (accessed 14/01/14).

between abstract ethics and the moral experiences of producers. Fundamentally, this is a question of whose values underpin Fairtrade production and what challenges this presents within its moral economy. Until relatively recently, research on Fairtrade has tended to evaluate the political-economies of initiatives and their specific economic impacts on producers, leaving the embeddedness of Fairtrade production in particular cultural and geographical contexts under-researched (Goodman 2004; Popke 2003). More recent (predominantly anthropological) research has sought to sensitize Fairtrade to the cultural politics of place, focusing on local-level producer communities (Berlan, 2008; Getz and Shreck, 2006). This has been important in highlighting the need for, and challenges of, developing community participation in Fairtrade cooperatives (Burke, 2010; Herman, 2010). However, as Doherty *et al.* (2013: 181) argue, “the largest vacuum in fair trade research... has to be the producers”, about which there is still “a lack of rigorous research”.

Examining a Fairtrade cooperative in South Africa, this paper highlights the importance of understanding the moral experiences of producers to better consider what is at stake for them, which we suggest is critical to understanding the dynamics of Fairtrade production. The global North has come to dominate Fairtrade ethical discourses and, while these have had to become increasingly receptive to ‘Southern’ voices (Wilkinson and Mascarenhas 2007; Besky 2010), we suggest that bridging the divide between these abstract discourses and the moral experience of farmers is central to improving producer livelihoods. Much of Fairtrade requires smallholder farmers to form cooperatives, resting on the presumption of a ‘community’ upon which cooperatives can be mapped. Recent studies, however, have highlighted the challenges of executing Fairtrade standards through ‘fractured’ producer communities in particular localities (Arce 2009; Dolan 2010b). We develop these ideas by

demonstrating that these cultural ruptures are often articulated through competing moralities that shape economic behaviour and notions of cooperation and fairness.

The paper draws on a case study of the Eksteenskuil Agricultural Cooperative (EAC) in South Africa's Northern Cape, which supplies raisins to Traidcraft, one of the UK's leading Fairtrade organizations. South African national and local policies of empowerment have played an important role in informing and re-shaping Fairtrade codes and standards.³ Rather than allude to "South African exceptionalism" (Kruger and du Toit 2007: 213), we use this case to illustrate that *all* places have histories and geographies that shape the specific moral experiences of producers. Examining definitions of 'fairness' within Fairtrade and their material local impacts is important (Goodman 2004) and assessments have been made of EAC (see SKA, 2010; SLC, 2010). However, a more significant question for us is how Fairtrade definitions of 'fairness' relate to the moral experiences of EAC's producers and how these experiences might stymie both cooperation and the effectiveness of Fairtrade in improving livelihoods. We draw on research conducted between January 2010 and November 2012, which included three periods of fieldwork in Eksteenskuil and 72 interviews (mostly in Afrikaans, translated into English) with raisin farmers, primarily members of EAC. A further ten interviews were conducted with commercial, NGO and government informants in South Africa, and seven with Traidcraft staff in the UK. The paper first examines the moral economies of Fairtrade before expanding our

³ South African Fairtrade policy-makers argued that generic FLO standards ignored Black Economic Empowerment objectives and land reform, were insufficient to guarantee fair labour standards and threatened to undermine socio-economic empowerment. Consequently, FLO re-wrote certification standards in 2004 (Kruger and du Toit, 2007; Linton 2012).

interpretation of moral experience. It then provides a brief account of raisin production in Eksteenskuil. The core of the paper explores three specific issues that are rooted in the moral experiences of Eksteenskuil's farmers: notions of cooperation, fairness and the 'good farmer', which are bound up with broader moralities of behaviour and citizenship; perceptions of community, and; concerns with survival and self-sufficiency. The paper concludes with reflections on the broader significance for Fairtrade of bridging the gap between its abstract ethical discourses and the place-based moral experiences of producers.

The complex moral economies of Fairtrade

The primary drive of Fairtrade to create an expansive "ethics of care" (Smith 1998) and a moral economy of alternative development (FLO 2011a) has been much scrutinised (Raynolds 2002; Murray *et al.* 2003; Goodman 2004). Fairtrade has adapted in recent years to ensure that smallholder producers have gained economic and moral power within Fairtrade networks and are better placed to advocate for changes within the global system (Beedy and Esquith 2011). This includes giving producers equal representation with labelling initiatives in the FLO General Assembly (FLO 2011b). Frictions and complexities within this moral economy have also been scrutinized, including how valuing quality can exclude those poorest in resources (Busch 2000; Beedy and Esquith 2011), tensions between ethics and market enterprise (Renard 2003), accrual of economic benefits by Northern retailers who control the supply chain (Johannessen and Wilhide 2010), and the "challenging double tension of simultaneously marketing morals and moralizing markets" (Shmeltzer 2013: 240). The assumption of a universal notion of fairness within Fairtrade's global moral

economy has also come under increased scrutiny in relation to its material effects in specific localities (Kruger and du Toit 2007).

Many of these debates articulate around the ethics of Fairtrade and particularly the challenges of mainstreaming associated with diverse pathways towards sales growth and increasing commercialisation (Dolan 2010a; Le Velly 2015). Critics have cautioned that enshrining the globally-recognized Fairtrade International standard in detailed codes, and strict monitoring by its auditing arm, FLO-Cert, risks disconnecting Fairtrade both from its roots in an ethics of care and from the specific local contexts in which producer communities live and work (Tallontire, 2009). This shift is seen as a form of abstraction that can be more concerned with the tools of certification (inspections and compliance monitoring) than with the values of fairness associated with producer participation and empowerment (Wilson and Mutersbaugh, 2015). Critics note the simultaneous development of a competing logic at work in the Fairtrade movement to recognize the importance of local articulations of ‘fairness’ (Kruger and du Toit 2007) and the need to sensitize Fairtrade to the cultural politics of specific places and their moral economies (Berlan, 2008; Getz & Shreck, 2006). Anthropologists, in particular, have examined the challenges of translating Fairtrade standards in specific contexts on the ground (Luetchford 2008b; Lyon 2006b, 2015). Thus we suggest that moral economy cannot be divorced from understandings of place.

Doreen Massey (1994) defined place as constituted by the layering of human activity over time that constructs its social forms, providing both resources and obstacles to those who seek to respond to changes in wider political and economic structures. Widely misconstrued as a geological metaphor (see Massey 2005: 201), Massey’s notion of layers implies that local contexts are not simply surfaces upon

which politics are played, but that place itself is constantly made and remade, and that social, cultural, economic and political processes over time are significant influences on, but not determining of, contemporary places. We argue that this geographical reading of place provides an important lens through which to develop a critical understanding of Fairtrade at the local level and the relationship between its abstract ethical discourses and the complex and diverse moral experiences of farmers that.

Despite some recent attempts in policy to align universal notions of fairness with local concerns, and by scholars to analyse how local moral economies sometimes diverge from Fairtrade standards (Moberg 2014), Fairtrade initiatives are still largely blind to local moral economies upon which they seek to map the global moral discourses of Fairtrade. This creates dissonance between Fairtrade ethical discourse, which is increasingly abstract, and the moral experiences of producers, which are thoroughly embedded in local social worlds and cultures. Anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (1999a: 363) defines ethical discourse as:

an abstract articulation and debate over codified values... conducted by elites, both local and global... [It] is usually principle-based, with metatheoretical commentary on the authorization and implication of those principles.

In contrast, moral experience is:

about practical engagements in a particular local world, a social space that carries cultural, political and economic specificity. It is about positioned views and practices: a view from somewhere... [and]...the actualities of specific events and situated relationships. [It] is the medium of engagement in everyday life in which things are at stake and in which ordinary people are deeply engaged stakeholders who have important things to lose, to gain, and to preserve. (*ibid.*: 365; 362)

Not only are there “immense differences in the social and personal realities of moral life” (Kleinman 1999b: 72) in contrast to universal codified standards, but the moral experiences of individuals, or what matters most to them, cannot be understood without considering the local social worlds that they inhabit, and the “local processes (collective, interpersonal, subjective) that realize (enact) values in ordinary living” (*ibid*: 71).

Fairtrade codes and standards emerge from activist and retailer discourses that are positioned squarely in the realm of the ethical (Dovey 2003), based on normative and universal assumptions about what is fair. In contrast, producer experiences are located in the realm of moral experience, involving “practices, negotiations, contestations among others with whom [they] are connected” (Kleinman 1999a: 358), reflecting multiple interpretations of what matters at both subjective and collective levels. Understanding the latter requires knowledge of how the moral is experienced in everyday lives, contextualised in particular local worlds through which macro-level socio-economic and political forces are mediated. Without this understanding, the moral experience of producers risks becoming ever more distanced from the increasingly contested and complex corporate ethical realm of which Fairtrade is part. Consequently, changing the lives and socio-economic conditions of producers remains challenging despite proliferation of codes and standards.

While Fairtrade ethics rest on the sale of products marketed through social and cultural difference, Fairtrade tends to ignore the significance of difference at local levels and, we suggest, does not take enough account of the moral discourses, experiences and practices of producers. Fostering empathy, care and responsibility among consumers in the global North paradoxically overrides and renders invisible the moral experiences of producers; while consumers are morally reflexive, producers

are passive recipients and adherents of Northern moralities (Berlan 2008; Dolan 2010a). To counter this, we demonstrate the importance of contextualising abstract ethical discourses and their practical implications on the ground by examining how moral experiences shape economic behaviours and logics within a specific producer community. This is important for advancing understanding of the outcomes of Fairtrade standards for producer communities and the ways in which these outcomes derive from the relations (and dis-junctures) between standards and the localities in which they are applied.

Fairtrade raisin production in Eksteenskuil

The present-day farming community of Eksteenskuil (around 1200 people) is scattered across twenty-one tiny islands separated by braids in the Orange River and grouped for administrative purposes into North, Middle and South Islands (SLC 2010). It was formed through an apartheid-era resettlement scheme in the late-1950s (Jari *et al.* 2013) following devastating floods, which prompted the government to classify the area non-viable for agriculture. White farmers were relocated to more productive areas elsewhere and coloured⁴ people from other areas were moved to Eksteenskuil. Most families have lived here for three or four generations. While white farmers had held large areas of land, coloured settlers were allocated plots of one hectare. Despite some consolidation, the majority of EAC members farm very small plots – median farm size is 4.6ha (SLC 2010) – 90% of which are less than half the size considered viable as economic units for raisin production (Jordaan and Grové

⁴ This term is an expression of identity, but originates from apartheid-era race classification legislation and is deeply contested (Erasmus 2001). We use it to refer to people of mixed heritage who self-identify as coloured.

2013: 24). Eksteenskuil's smallholder farmers have limited access to production machinery, are poorly served by infrastructure (especially electricity, fresh water and roads), and experience limiting factors in marketing raisins, including lack of transport, dearth of market information, insufficient expertise on grades and standards, low levels of education (particularly among older farmers) and poor organisational support. The poorest families also experience a range of social problems, including high rates of ill-health, alcoholism and domestic abuse (SKA 2010).

The Northern Cape is one of South Africa's poorest provinces and EAC members are considered historically disadvantaged. The majority of Eksteenskuil's residents self-identify as coloured, but the broader farming community also includes several 'commercial' (defined as working more than fifty hectares) white farmers, landless labourers and, during harvesting, migrant workers. Traidcraft began sourcing raisins from the Eksteenskuil Farmers Association (EFA) in 1995; this was certified by FLO in 2003, becoming the world's first FLO-certified raisin producer and one of only three Fairtrade cooperatives in South Africa. The Eksteenskuil Agricultural Cooperative, comprising 89 farmers, replaced the EFA in 2007 to comply with FLO standards and to strengthen the partnership between Traidcraft and producers. This shift in legal status to a cooperative was encouraged by Traidcraft because it fits with Fairtrade's developmental model and was supported by EFA as a means by which it could consolidate yields, sub-contract processing and market finished products (Traidcraft Report, EFA/SAD, 06/11/2006).

Raisins represent the main source of income for Eksteenskuil's farmers. The Orange River area, with its semi-arid climate and very high summer temperatures, produces some of the highest quality (Thompsons choice-grade) raisins in the world.

EAC sells the majority – 400-600 tonnes per year – to Traidcraft via the dominant local FLO-certified processor, South African Dried Fruits (SAD). The guarantee of stable pricing structures does little in practice to benefit EAC farmers because for several years the Fairtrade minimum price (around £0.45 per kg) has been significantly lower than the market price (recently £1.13 per kg for Thompsons) (SLC 2010). The key benefits are guaranteed access to markets via Traidcraft, a small price premium paid directly by SAD to farmers above the market price and the Fairtrade social premium. In accordance with FLO requirements, the social premium (£0.07 per kg) is paid directly to EAC based on sales through SAD and is intended for community development initiatives determined by the elected Board.

As we have argued elsewhere (Hughes *et al.* 2014), in contrast to other Fairtrade cooperatives, EAC has engaged with very few projects that constitute explicit forms of community development. Exceptions are investment in two community water pumps that filter and supply water from the river and financial support for a Women’s Forum. Funding has not been provided for schools, youth facilities, health clinics or community events, despite being identified as community needs by EAC members (SKA 2010). In part, this derives from EAC’s preference to put money directly into programmes benefiting farmers economically: the funding of training, investment in new farming equipment (tractors, ploughs, grass cutters, pumps, building tools and cement mixers used in the construction of drying courts) for hire at minimal rental fee by members across the islands, and provision of loans for planting new vines. A significant proportion of the social premium also funds EAC administration, which is costly and time-consuming because of the challenging geography and poor infrastructure of the area.

A significant weakness in the economic organisation of EAC has been its negligible and ineffective relationships with external stakeholders. Interviews with the wider agricultural community and government officials (including Local Economic Development and Agricultural Extension Officers) reveal that opportunities to enhance raisin production or to diversify have been missed because of an inability to develop positive relationships with people in outside organisations. This can be linked in part to the re-organisation of local government and the relocation of government offices from Eksteenskuil to Keimoes. Geographical isolation and lack of political visibility have been significant, but factors deeply rooted in local history and culture, such as the inward-looking attitudes of EAC Board members and paid officers and a sense of disconnection from the formal political system, have continued to create difficulties for relations with external stakeholders. Consequently, EAC has not engaged effectively with the municipality, local ‘commercial’ farmers’ groups, or the Department of Agriculture. The history, geography and cultural politics of the area also influence the outcomes of Fairtrade standards in global value chains (Neilson and Pritchard 2009). Interviews with Traidcraft personnel suggest that the organisation had only a partial understanding of contemporary contexts and little knowledge of local histories and cultural-political nuances when it began working in Eksteenskuil. While delivering some tangible benefits, Fairtrade alone cannot be expected to remedy entrenched difficulties. However, we suggest that a deeper understanding of the moral experiences of farmers and how these are shaped by historical, geographical and cultural-economic specificities provides better understanding of, and sensitivity to, the challenges facing EAC and of ways of improving outcomes.

Moral experiences of Eksteenskuil farmers

The formation of EAC should, in theory, bring advantages to its members in addition to the Fairtrade price and social premiums. This includes reducing transaction costs related to marketing, negotiating sales to processors and investing in physical assets such as equipment, transport, and drying and storage facilities. It also has potential for sharing human assets, such as knowledge and skills in the production and marketing of raisins. However, while Fairtrade has helped to provide a stable market for EAC members, overcoming apartheid legacies and other challenges has proved more difficult. Chronic poverty, environmental risk and a complex cultural community present significant participatory and social challenges. This complexity is to some extent rooted in the differences and inequalities between the island groups and the ways in which these differences shape the identities of farmers. Middle Island forms the administrative heart of the farming community, houses the EAC offices, and enjoys relative wealth and better infrastructure (e.g. the only paved road) in comparison to the much poorer North and South Islands. The latter have a greater preponderance of poor farmers, with the problems experienced on North Island apparently most acute. Unemployment rates are highest here at just below 50% (SKA 2010) and, while most housing across Eksteenskuil is modest and mostly without electricity, “shack dwellings” (SLC 2010) are more common on North Island. In addition, the physical landscape across which EAC operates makes community cohesion and infrastructure development between the island groups difficult:

The islands themselves, although they are very close in terms of distance, in terms of... access and getting around they seem to be very, very distant and that distance means that there tends to be quite a small amount of collaboration between the different islands. There is a sense of... exclusion or

resentment towards the Cooperative, just simply because of distance.

(Traidcraft Supplier Support Coordinator, 06/12/ 2010)

While some tensions and divisions in Eksteenskuil resemble those in some other Fairtrade producer communities (Arce 2009; Dolan 2010b), specific challenges are also articulated through the moral experience of farmers. As discussed below, their experiences of cooperation, community and cultural norms of self-sufficiency articulate a very particular moral economy that is often dissonant from and sometimes at odds with wider Fairtrade ethics.

Cooperation, fairness and the 'good farmer'

The success of Latin American Fairtrade banana and coffee-growing cooperatives has provided the model for producer communities globally, shaping the ethics and codes underpinning Fairtrade. However, the cooperative model emerged in places that have regional and historical connections to notions of a “solidarity economy” (Wilkinson and Mascarenhas, 2007: 129; Wilson 2013). While cooperatives have also been successful for numerous Asian and African producers (Bassett, 2010; Hutchens, 2010), including a rooibos tea cooperative in South Africa (Raynolds and Ngcwangu, 2010), this model should not be assumed to be a universal or unproblematic solution for smallholder farmers. In Eksteenskuil, the presumption of a coherent ‘community’ upon which to map a cooperative is problematic, with particular challenges in overcoming a profound distrust of cooperatives deriving from national political contexts and refracting through community divides.

Distrust of cooperatives is rooted not only in the fact that in South Africa they have been historically weak (Ashton, 2011), but they were also a vehicle for the dispossession of non-white farmers under apartheid. As the EAC Chair explains:

People still have the mentality that once they become members... the Coop will take their property away from them. Like what happened in the old days. There are people like that on all islands... They are scared to become part of the Coop due to what happened in the past. They are anti any group projects... It is almost a stigma that was carried from the old regime and that definitely needs to be changed with training. (10/02/2011)

According to a provincial government official, the unwillingness of Eksteenskuil farmers to “speak through one mouth” is a product of:

Apartheid history: ‘This is my piece of land and I don’t want to move from that mentality. I want my piece of land and I don’t want to share in something else’... It’s a big mind-shift needed in these communities to get them to work cooperatively. (07/03/2011)

Rolling out the cooperative model without understanding local experience and memory is thus problematic. While Fairtrade auditors, trainers and Traidcraft staff are now more aware of this, failure to conduct training prior to the formation of EAC is one of the reasons for its under-performance in fostering a collective identity, communicating with members, and developing positive relations with external stakeholders that could improve livelihoods. Provincial government is better aware of the underlying culture of mistrust and, given that it is tasked with supporting empowerment schemes in agriculture, could have been involved in a mediating role in supporting EAC.

Further mistrust of the EAC Board is generated by the lack of experience of cooperation among members. The most recent FLO audit in 2009 verified that EAC operates appropriately with regard to its governance and financial organization. Its Board has seven members, led by an elected Chair, and has representation from each

of the three island groups. However, as Traidcraft's Supplier Support Coordinator explains:

The Coop themselves aren't particularly strong... and so that fosters people being disassociated or mistrust... There is a huge amount of switching off and resentment and anger towards the Coop. People are not democratically involved. (06/12/10)

Many of the initial problems concerned the management of EAC, a lack of transparency in decision-making processes, and a lack of experience in running a cooperative board, which according to an NGO representative supporting EAC was "difficult for Traidcraft to manage from a distance"; "to get involved in the community development of Eksteenskuil is very difficult" and Board members "want to put a good front on, to partners like Traidcraft... the last thing they want is for Traidcraft to think there is something going on here" (Environmental Monitoring Group Co-ordinator 13/09/10). These difficulties are compounded by significant, but often unacknowledged, community ruptures, one of the primary causes of which are competing discourses between farmers concerning, on the one hand, fairness in how EAC distributes support and resources and, on the other hand, a moral discourse of the 'good farmer', who is both successful and a good citizen in a wider sense.

One of the main causes of discontent in Eksteenskuil is the perception, particularly among farmers on North and South Islands, of the unfairness of uneven development and its perpetuation by EAC. Fairtrade does not attempt to equalize income among farmers and, as is the case with cooperatives elsewhere, the greatest benefits fall to those producing most raisins: "farmers in better production zones and with more land" (Luetchford 2008a: 145). As discussed, wealthier farmers tend to be

concentrated on the most fertile Middle Island, also the location of the EAC office and only paved road. This compounds mistrust of EAC, as a woman farmer explains:

There is a saying that all the rich people are on Middle Island, that's why there is no unity. The most successful people are on the Board. If there is money or benefits involved it is just distributed amongst the same families. That's why the more successful families are on Middle Island. The other people are struggling and trying their best but they just cannot seem to grow or progress at the same steady rate as others families have over the years. (Middle Island, 10/03/2011).

Gaps in material wealth are compounded by a sense among North and South Island farmers of disconnection from EAC and unfairness in how it operates.

Another commonly-articulated frustration concerns the implement hire scheme. This began just before the EFA became a Cooperative with the purchase of three tractors and a wide range of farming implements available for rent to members. The scheme is widely used and the majority of interviewees regard it as a crucial element of their farming success and a core EAC achievement. Implements were initially stored on Middle Island, but this generated widespread discontent among members on other islands who were unable to access or transport them to their farms. EAC responded by using the premium to buy more equipment, ensuring that each island has a set of implements available for hire. However, some farmers still experience logistical problems with sharing a limited range of equipment across dispersed locations. For example, a woman farmer on South Island explains that delays in accessing, repairing and maintaining equipment are a frequent problem:

There is always a delay in the process when an implement is broken and not repaired in time... I request the implement and will be notified that someone

else is using it so I need to wait. Each island has a similar problem... It is first come first served but some people always get there first. (07/03/2011)

Even on Middle Island, there is a perception that the larger, more successful farmers are given preferential treatment:

The Coop's response is that they are not a welfare institution... By the time it [the equipment] gets to me the weeds have worsened and I don't have the finances to keep it for long enough to do the spraying. It's a vicious cycle. In the end you seem as if you are not a hard worker, someone who does not want to farm... [and] make your farm more productive. (10/03/2011)

Another farmer states that despite being a member he avoids relying on the Coop because he does not trust it and feels there is "favouritism" in the rental system (Middle Island, 07/10/10). This reflects a common perception that EAC works in the interests of already successful farmers. However, a moral counter-discourse of the 'good farmer', anchored firmly in island identities, is evident among these successful members.

Many established farmers believe their success is an indication that they are 'good farmers' in contrast with other, less successful farmers. These contrasts are not simply about farming practices, but broader moral qualities that are often reduced to island traits or 'cultures'. For example, alcohol problems are claimed by some respondents to be most problematic on North Island, with consequences for farmer participation in the Cooperative:

Some of the farmers are too irresponsible because of alcohol abuse. In meetings people make promises and say they will cooperate. But they don't follow up ... That's why you cannot depend on a lot of the farmers. It [alcohol

abuse] is especially prevalent on North Island. (Male farmer, North Island, 02/09/2010)

Being a ‘good farmer’ means being responsible, hardworking and trustworthy.

Related to this, the moral experience of farmers both shapes the perception of the effectiveness of the implement hire scheme and more deeply complicates and re-defines EAC’s moral geographies:

The islands have their own little cultures. Everyone knows that people on Middle Island will take good care [of equipment]. People on South Island will take good care, but people on North Island? Forget it. *That* island! Things always come back broken... (Male Middle Island EAC member, 01/09/10)

Invoking a moral discourse of the ‘good farmer’ is common among Middle Island farmers who seek to defend themselves against what they perceive as the prejudicial attitudes of farmers on other islands. This often involves drawing a contrast between the hardworking, successful farmer and a stereotypical rural coloured culture of dependence (Bradstock 2005). As an EAC administrator explains:

The North Islanders always say Middle Island is the rich farmers. I came here and we had a little house, just with a sink and with bowls, but in 2009 we got electricity after many years, so I mean if the North Island people say that we are rich, it is nonsense... One thing that coloured people have... [is] a ‘waiting to receive’ attitude... We need to get that culture away...⁵ Today if you do

⁵ This comment illustrates the prevailing power of racist discourses that reduced coloured identities to aspects of ‘servility’ and a ‘coloured psychology’ (Erasmus 2001: 3) and are still sometimes internalised by historically disadvantaged people themselves.

something, you do it for yourself. You mustn't expect the Department of whatever to give it to you on a tray because you are not going to get it any more. Those days are gone. (11/03/2011)

These perspectives highlight the ways in which material practices connected to the Cooperative are tightly intertwined with the symbolic and discursive narratives around island identities and moral experiences of farmers, as well as historical associations with cooperatives outlined above. Farmers' views about EAC and its functions emerge from practical engagements in the particular social and economic spaces of Eksteenskuil and are often in tension with Fairtrade ethical discourses, which seek to benefit a Fairtrade community *in toto*. In particular, the assumption of an ideal moral economy operating through cooperation is compromised by alternative articulations of moral economy by farmers. There are clearly significant benefits of EAC membership for some, but also marked divides between farmers that compromise EAC's success. Competing discourses of fairness and the 'good farmer' create a lack of trust between farmers, which also stymies attempts at cooperation. Related problems of lack of 'community' coherence are captured by a Middle Island farmer who, when asked to explain why there is no communal grape drying area, responds that it would not work:

It is the culture, trust issues. Because there is no communal ground so they don't know how to negotiate around whose property it would be built on and how they would share the responsibilities. They could not come to an agreement. (EAC member, 07/10/10)

Experiencing 'community'

EAC's lack of engagement with community development projects derives partly from a preference to channel money directly into programmes benefiting farmers economically, specifically the provision of training and farming equipment. However, it also derives in part from an absence of a sense of community among Eksteenskuil's farmers and the challenges posed by a complex and divided producer population. Studies elsewhere have demonstrated how "imagined communities of independent family producers melt into air" (Luetchford 2008a: 165) because of political-economic differences in landholding, income strategies and the labour process, which create 'fractured' life worlds (Arce 2009; Dolan 2010b). Understanding the apparent lack of social and economic solidarity in Eksteenskuil necessitates a similar culturally-sensitive and nuanced reading of the 'community'.

Socio-economic divisions and cultural ruptures in Eksteenskuil create fractures and generate uneven participation in Fairtrade. These fractures are articulated through moral discourses about particular groups who might be targeted for community development projects. For example, a discussion with three members of the Women's Forum (two Middle Islanders and one South Islander, 08/10/10) reveals that the EFA had formed separate committees on each island to initiate community projects. However, "the money was not always used responsibly, so when the Coop started they stopped that and focused on more agricultural uses for the money". There is a very strong sense, also voiced by other EAC members, that this was the correct decision:

The money could be used to help the youth and make their lives better. A community facility could be built. But... the youth are not responsible... It would be better to put the money into farming to increase incomes, then the

farmer can put money into his own children and make their lives better that way. (*Ibid.*)

Thus, while Fairtrade advocates use of the premium for social, environmental and economic developmental projects to improve businesses *and* communities, a commonly held view within EAC is that the Coop “should focus on farming” (*ibid.*) rather than wider community issues. This desire to separate economic from social development has emerged from the moral experiences of EAC members.

As discussed, a strong moral discourse associates social problems with particular islands and groups. These perceptions undermine community and create cleavages across geographical, generational and gender divides. Some respondents suggest that community ties used to be stronger: “In the old days the community was very close and everybody helped each other, now it is a different story” (Middle Island, male EAC member, 01/09/2010). Others bemoan a lack of community-mindedness: “That’s how people are on the island anyway: not very committed to help each other, greediness and things like that” (Middle Island, male EAC member, 08/10/2010). However, one observer suggests that community is undermined by long-running disputes between farmers:

Their fights are so bitter because the stakes are so small. They are so marginal and isolated – a little community in a sea of large-scale commercial farmers – and small sparks can ignite big fires. There are some feuds that go back generations. (Environmental Monitoring Group Coordinator, 13/09/10)

These fractures are perhaps unsurprising given the legacies of apartheid and the fact that farmers were resettled in Eksteenskuil from disparate locations.

As with oppressed or impoverished communities elsewhere, the conditions of apartheid created inward-looking, poor communities in which social structures were

based on ascribed roles, goals were short-term, and a high degree of conformity was apparent. Fear of change and conservatism among some groups continues to fuel a lack of will to develop and a determination not to let others develop. Such deep-seated cultural issues, easily overlooked by political-economic analysis, are partly responsible for community fractures in Eksteenskuil, with particularly negative effects on women and youths. For example, the daughter of a North Island farmer in her twenties explained that she has skills and education that could make a contribution locally; instead she wishes to leave because:

The culture of the people of North Island will not support whatever you want to do. I might want to better myself. I will get support from my family, but no-one else will help me. (Interview, 09/03/2011)

Similarly, a farmer trained in chemical spraying with work experience with the Department of Forestry and a range of skills that could be used in grape-growing feels prevented from using these skills by:

The community. The community will be jealous of me pursuing my dreams. The community is such that were I to get a contract, people would wonder why. What did I do to get this contract? ...People do not want to see someone else go ahead in life (South Island, 09/12/2011)

As Burke (2010) found in Latin American cooperatives, a combination of uneven participation in Fairtrade and prevalence of social conservatism appears to widen rather than narrow social cleavages in Eksteenskuil, with better-off farmers disengaging from the developmental role of EAC:

They think that as soon as you do better they [the poorer farmers] try to grab you and bring you down. They don't want to see one guy getting too big. Also, there is a lack of trust: 'What is he doing? Why is he getting that?' ... They

don't want to get involved in the politics... They just want to get on with things, make money and go... They don't have time for... sorting out all the small guys. (Marketing Director of SAD 11/03/11)

A Middle Island woman farmer argues that people:

seem less concerned about their neighbour or the other person. So you end up trying to look after yourself. Farmers are getting more and more selfish...

That's what divides the community... There is no sense of unity. (EAC member 09/02/2011)

Perhaps because of these difficulties, there is more evidence of cooperation between some of Eksteenkuil's women farmers. The Women's Forum, while still struggling to deal with the challenges posed by geography, has been successful in providing support and initiating projects – for example, small gardens and fruit-processing – that have helped diversify incomes. In contrast, EAC struggles to foster a sense of solidarity and community through which to improve the livelihoods of all its members because of cultural and socio-economic fractures, which in turn present barriers to the effectiveness of Fairtrade. Those who successfully grow raisins are making some progress, but there is an under-class – mostly illiterate and low-skilled farmers – that is not benefiting. This group remains outside the 'emerging' farmer class and cannot access vine planting opportunities, which are few, expensive and small-scale, because they are not seen as having the necessary skills to be 'good farmers'. A moral economy based on fairness and community solidarity, which Fairtrade assumes to exist or seeks to build in producer communities, is perceived to have little relevance to the most marginalised of EACs farmers. Instead, close friends and family appear far more significant in their everyday lives than identification with a wider community at an island scale or beyond.

Survival and self-sufficiency

Raisin farmers' experience of economic vulnerability and environmental risk, and a need to ensure survival from year to year, often affects their decision-making, which in turn influences both willingness to cooperate with other farmers and the effectiveness of EAC. EAC does not sell raisins to SAD (the only FLO-certified processor); rather, individual farmers negotiate individual deals with SAD and other non-FLO-certified processors, such as Red Sun. Higher premiums for EAC are produced if more of its members sell their entire yield to SAD, but individual farmers see this as less important than obtaining the highest possible price. Unlike most EAC members, 'commercial' farmers have the means and capacity to negotiate between the different processors, yet if EAC was able to negotiate on behalf of the Cooperative it would mean better prices for all of its members. However, members are unwilling to collectivise – they have one crop that makes money at only one point in the year and they seek to get the best possible returns for themselves. As one North Island farmer explains, "Last year I delivered one third of my whole harvest to Red Sun. It was like a carrot being waved in front of me as the price was higher" (male EAC member, 07/10/2010).

Such behaviour could be read as simple individualism that runs counter to the idea of a moral economy based on community solidarity, but it is also rooted in moral experience. Despite deregulation after 1994, the dried fruit processing industry is still controlled by a small number of actors and their oligopsonic position means that they control the farm gate prices to farmers and ensure that the majority of profit remains with processors. Traidcraft returns some of the profit to the farmers, but many EAC members resent SAD's monopsony and the higher margins it extracts from the value

chain. This explains why producers are often willing to sell their raisins outside the Fairtrade network, despite receiving lower Fairtrade premiums as a result. Some farmers have sold to Red Sun even when its prices are lower than those of SAD. This happened, for example, after the 2011 floods⁶ when an estimated 20% of the harvested crop was sold to Red Sun simply because some farmers believed that grading decisions and payments would be quicker. With cash flow under extreme pressure, farmers were desperate to salvage something from their significantly reduced crop and prioritised immediate income over the Fairtrade premium. A further factor influencing decision-making is other networks of cooperation that exist outside of and often pre-date the Fairtrade network. One Middle Island EAC member explains that for the last two years he has sold raisins to a ‘commercial’ farmer in return for assistance during the harvest, loan of tractors and spraying equipment, and a reasonable price (interview 07/10/2010). Thus, in what Renard (2003: 91-2) calls the “compromise between civic and market coordination”, Eksteenskuil’s Fairtrade producers are, “to the ire of much of the activist community”, creating relationships with large conventional distributors paying market premiums. Such decisions are predicated on the material fact that “producers, who are often excluded from the luxury of purist positions, are more preoccupied with the struggle for survival” (*ibid.*).

While survival is clearly an important factor in shaping individualist responses and often puts their moral economy at odds with Fairtrade principles, particularly in

⁶ These were the worst floods since 1988, arriving at harvest time with catastrophic consequences. They destroyed vines, irrigation channels, electricity lines, roads and bridges, particularly on North Island (Middle Island’s new road remained intact). Raisin yields and quality were affected, with EAC’s supply of Choice grade reduced by 50% to 200 tonnes (EAC Officer 05/12/2012).

times of economic stress, the values and self-identities of EAC's farmers also shape their attitudes towards Fairtrade and cooperation. While they might be considered historically disadvantaged and marginalised, this is not how EAC farmers perceive themselves. Rather, according to one observer, farmers have a "sense of pride and don't want to be seen as useless victims"; even in difficult circumstances, "they may say things are fine, we don't need help" (Environmental Monitoring Group Coordinator 13/09/10). Being (seen to be) independent is particularly valued, again relating to the 'good farmer' discourse, and explains further why producers are reluctant to commit fully to EAC and why problems within the Cooperative often remain undisclosed. As one EAC member explains, "I have almost no relationship with the Coop as I am selling to another farmer. I am independent enough to work without the Coop. I don't want to rely on the Coop" (Middle Island, male, 07/10/10).

The desire for self-sufficiency also emerges from the absence of a sense of community, which is felt keenly when individual farmers are dealing with the impacts of natural hazards, such as floods and summer hailstorms. One woman farmer recalls a time when fire damage destroyed 90% of her crop and while "others came and looked and sympathised" only her grandsons helped. She explains:

Don't depend on others. People's attitude is that if something happens to you then it is your responsibility to sort it out yourself... There is no communal sense of shared responsibility. (EAC member, Middle Island 10/02/1011)

Many of Eksteenkuil's farmers believe that individuals are the authors of their own fortune or misfortune, which sometimes works against neighbourliness and cooperation. As one woman farmer explains:

Each farmer needs to take responsibility for their own lives... You need to rely on your own resources, your own family. You cannot rely on other people to make things better for you. (South Island, 11/02/2011)

These are commonly-expressed sentiments. There are many complex factors influencing the strong desire for self-sufficiency among EAC's farmers. Significantly, this complexity is not often factored into Traidcraft's work with EAC because of a lack of knowledge about the moral experience of farmers; consequently, farmer behaviour is often at odds with the cooperative model that Fairtrade relies upon. Traidcraft representatives who have worked with EAC for over a decade have a clear sense of the organisation's own "ethical responsibility to make it [the Fairtrade partnership] work", based on a "moral duty" because farmers in "Eksteenskuil have been exploited for a long time" (Sourcing and Development Manager 19/05/2010). However, while there is recognition that "problems remain within the local structures" (*ibid.*), much more recognition needs to be given to the challenges posed by practical engagements in the particular local world of Eksteenskuil's farmers and the fact that their relationship to Fairtrade is shaped "in a social space that carries cultural, political and economic specificity" (Kleinman 1999a: 365).

Fairtrade cooperatives are economic organisations, but EAC demonstrates that even when their behaviour is economically rational in providing services, knowledge and market access that might be otherwise unavailable, a local moral economy works to undermine cooperation and renders cooperatives less effective than they might otherwise be. Fairtrade is also embedded in complex moral-economic networks that are often poorly understood. For example, many Fairtrade organisations work with state agencies and other grassroots organisations to provide services; some are immersed in local politics and agrarian policy-making. While EAC is active within

the South African Fairtrade movement and was a founder member of the Association for Fairness in Trade, its embedding in a wider moral-economic network is somewhat attenuated. Consequently, Fairtrade's role is limited to product marketing, reflecting the geographical and political isolation of the area, the lack of capacity within the community and the difficulties that Traidcraft has faced in attempting to navigate the complexities of the local political and cultural landscape. Understanding these place-specific moral-economic networks and the everyday practices of production are important in improving the effectiveness of Fairtrade.

Conclusions

Fairtrade attempts to create a moral economy connecting consumers to producers in a relationship based on notions of justice, partnership and solidarity. However, this paper has argued that with the shift towards increased governance through universal codes, standards and certification, Fairtrade risks becoming an abstract ethical discourse (Kleinman 1999a, b) and regulatory tool, disconnected from the moral economies of poor farmers it is intended to benefit. In response, we have attempted to demonstrate the importance of a deeper understanding of the moral economies of farmers involved in Fairtrade networks and the ways in which these emerge out of moral experiences that are deeply embedded in local social and cultural relations. The case of EAC illustrates the ways in which moral experiences are both rooted in and give rise to everyday practices of cooperation and community, and social and cultural norms of self-sufficiency, which in turn have a bearing on the effectiveness of Fairtrade in improving livelihoods. The behaviour, strategies and politics of poor farmers in Eksteenskuil and elsewhere are determined by their desire to survive economically and with a measure of dignity (Moberg 2014). This desire is shared by

Fairtrade, but the behaviours it produces are often at odds with Fairtrade ethics of fairness its assumptions about cooperation and solidarity among poor farmers. As the EAC case demonstrates, these disjunctures are important in determining the local effectiveness of Fairtrade, yet remain poorly understood. Therefore, understanding the moral experiences of farmers is important, not simply in response to the dearth of rigorous research on producers identified by Doherty *et al.* (2013), but also in conceptualising the moral economies of Fairtrade. We suggest that countering the disjunctures between increasingly abstract and universal ethics of Fairtrade and moral economies in producer communities requires a deeper knowledge of the specificities of contemporary places in which Fairtrade is engaged, as well as the social, cultural, economic and political processes over time that are significant influences on these places.

Understanding the complex moral experiences of farming communities – which in EAC’s case are woven through post-apartheid politics, local histories and cultures, island divisions, values, and vulnerability to natural hazards – is key to unravelling not only the impediments to community development, but also potential resolutions. It fosters an appreciation of Fairtrade’s relational spatiality that is alive to the ongoing and situated entanglements of materiality, resource allocation, and cultural identity. Unlocking the geographical complexity of the global Fairtrade movement, working in culturally-sensitive ways with producer communities, and understanding how their local moral worlds are structured is vital to ensuring success. This places importance on “the ethical values of... the marginalised people ethical trade is intended to assist” (Blowfield 1999: 753) and understanding the place-based moral, cultural and political-economic contexts of Fairtrade initiatives in order that they retain their “ethical force” (Popke 2006).

Accepting that cooperatives appear to be the linchpin of Fairtrade success at sites of production, recent literature highlights the need for, and challenges of, deepening community participation in Fairtrade cooperatives (Burke 2010; Herman 2010). Indeed, Burke (2010: 30) argues that “cooperatives must be rooted in participation, democratic member control, and autonomy if they are to promote ‘fair globalization’ or social transformation rather than institutionalize existing patterns of exploitation”. However, this normative approach rests on an assumption that smallholder farmers are universally inclined towards cooperative working and organisation. Our research in Eksteenskuil challenges this assumption by revealing the moral experiences, discourses and practices of farmers. These shape the moral economy and how farmers conceive of cooperation, fairness, ‘good farming’ and community; they also ensure that Eksteenskuil’s farmers place higher value on a more intimate community of family and friends, self-sufficiency and survival than they do on cooperation and wider communal benefits. Moreover, moral experiences are diverse and give rise to different notions of fairness, ranging from the most marginalised farmers, who perceive EAC as failing to deliver equality of opportunity or working in a distributive way, to the more successful Middle Island farmers, who articulate a strong notion of the ‘good farmer’ who values reciprocity in the fair use and care of equipment. And like producer communities elsewhere (Lyon 2006a; Blowfield and Dolan 2010), while EAC members value the fact that Fairtrade ‘cares’ for them, they have limited understanding of Fairtrade itself and remain concerned primarily with acquiring a good price for their product. Thus, while Fairtrade ethics are of undoubted importance in changing the terms of global trade, the “concrete encounter” with smallholder producers “who demand that their needs, desires, and perspectives be recognized” (Smith 1997: 26) asserts different and diverse moral

points of view. Sometimes conflicting senses of morality, equality, justice and spatiality are part of the structures within which farmers experience (un)fairness.

Through the example of EAC, we have attempted to illustrate the significance of moral experience in the context of producer communities. This requires moving beyond assumptions that smallholder producers share aspirations and are predisposed to cooperative modes of organisation to appreciating and acknowledging positioned views and practices that emerge from “the actualities of specific events and situated relationships” (Kleinman 1999a: 362). While others have made the case for acknowledging that producer communities are often fractured along socio-economic lines (Arce 2009; Dolan 2010b; Luetchford 2008a), it is equally important for Fairtrade initiatives to understand the ways in which smallholder farmers engage in everyday life through the medium of moral experience, rather than abstract ethics. This also involves acknowledging that they are already deeply engaged stakeholders with a keen awareness of having important things to lose, to gain, and to preserve, which in turn shapes their behaviour and attitudes. In some cases and with some individuals these might cohere with the ethics of Fairtrade (the willingness of some women farmers to cooperate through the Women’s Forum, for example), but in others they might present considerable challenges and obstacles (for example, the unwillingness to trust in others or work for collective benefit).

As a movement invested in alternative development, Fairtrade is part of “the continuing struggle . . . for the moral claims of the disempowered poor against the existing hegemonic powers” (Friedmann 1992: 8). As Goodman (2004: 910) argues, this requires widening the definition of fairness “contra its economic logic to facilitate a broader constituency from which to construct a less privileged, more sustainable, and more just sense of development”. We have argued that it also requires taking

seriously the moral experiences of farmers. As our study of Eksteenskuil illustrates, this involves individuals in specific situations and contexts weighing different options, each of which has potentially different consequences and relationships to what is at stake for those individuals in their local worlds. What matters for individuals cannot be considered universal. Thus, Fairtrade ethical formulations of fairness need to “begin with the local moral conditions of poor people” (Kleinman 1999b: 72). They need to connect with “an integral, viable life-world – ethics must emerge organically ‘from below’, rather than be arbitrarily imposed ‘from above’” (Gardiner 1996: 122). In the case of EAC, this might require Traidcraft helping the Cooperative to work outside of the Fairtrade network to develop links with local farming networks, local and regional organisations, and provincial government bodies. Traidcraft might also work more closely with local Fairtrade organisations – the Association for Fairness in Trade, for example, which seeks to represent the interests of South African smallholder farmers – in order to better understand and give voice to EAC members. Working in partnership with such local organisations could also help EAC develop greater attentiveness to the challenges faced by its members in more remote areas, and training and resource redistribution to reduce disadvantage. More broadly, engaging with moral experience recognises that all Fairtrade actors and organisations “weigh alternatives, make judgments and intervene in contexts whose complexity will always exceed predetermined formulations” (Popke 2003: 311).

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