

# Mobilizing the Ethical Consumer in South Africa

## Abstract

This paper presents a critical engagement with current initiatives for ethically-labelled goods in South Africa, thus offering an intervention in a literature on ethical consumption that has previously prioritized the global North. Through an interview-based methodology supported by focus groups in the Western Cape, the paper attends specifically to the strategies shaping recent forms of ethical consumption in South Africa on the part of business and civil society. Campaigns and strategies associated with three of the most prominent ethical labelling initiatives in South Africa—Proudly South African, Fairtrade Label South Africa and the Southern African Sustainable Seafood Initiative (SASSI)—are evaluated. Barnett et al.'s (2011: 90) notion of “mobilizing the ethical consumer” is brought into conversation with ethical consumption literature on local embeddedness in order to assess the ways in which the organizations responsible for these initiatives combine globalizing business and political networks of responsibility with local institutions and values in South Africa. The role played by the discursive construction of a growing South African ‘middle class’ is also acknowledged as part of the process of encouraging ethical consumption on the part of these actors. In conclusion, it is suggested that understanding ethical consumption in South Africa, as elsewhere, requires sensitivity to *both* transnational networks of globalizing responsibility *and* localized expressions of ethical consumption.

Key words: ethical consumers; ethical labelling; South Africa.

# **Mobilizing the Ethical Consumer in South Africa**

## **1. Introduction**

This paper presents a critical engagement with emerging spaces of ethical consumption in South Africa, thus offering an intervention in a literature that has previously prioritized ethical consumption in the global North. South Africa's expanding domestic markets for Fairtrade (Fairtrade International, 2013), an ever widening range of ethically-labelled products on South African supermarket shelves and increasing consumer concern with sustainability (Belgian Development Agency, 2013) make this a timely contribution. The specific focus of the paper is on the strategies shaping recent forms of ethical consumption in South Africa on the part of business, civil society and, to a lesser extent, the state. In so doing, we aim to address the question of how ethical consumption is defined and expressed in this context, with particular attention paid to the role played by powerful intermediaries such as civil society organizations, retailers and consultancy firms.

Although we acknowledge a much wider literature on ethical consumption, much of which explores and theorizes the contexts and nuances of consumer agency and practice (Carrier, 2012; Hall, 2011; Mansvelt, 2005; Peattie, 2010), this paper specifically develops the notion of mobilization proposed by Clive Barnett, Paul Cloke, Nick Clarke and Alice Malpass in their study of ethical consumption in the UK city of Bristol (Barnett et al., 2011; Clarke et al., 2007a). In that study, mobilization is highlighted as the crucial brokering role played by influential intermediaries, not only in engaging consumers in ethical markets and projects, but also in “represent[ing] their expressed preferences as ‘ethical’ subjects to other actors involved in making markets including state agents, corporations and regulatory agencies” (Barnett et al., 2011: 85). The specific expression of “mobilizing the ethical consumer”, used

and adapted in the title of our paper, is drawn from Barnett et al. (2011: 90). Existing empirical study and theorization of mobilizing the ethical consumer has been focused on projects and ethical subjects in the global North. This paper applies the concept to the work of intermediaries in the global South. Moreover, the process of mobilization in this context is developed by an explicit consideration of how notions of ethical consumption on the part of particular ethical labelling initiatives and intermediaries combine globalizing notions of responsibility travelling through transnational business and political networks with localized understandings of responsibility in South Africa. This brings the notion of mobilization into dialogue with understandings of ethical consumption that appreciate its embeddedness in local contexts and histories (Berlan, 2012; Dombos, 2012; Isenhour, 2012). What the paper also shows is the part played by discursive constructions of the South African ‘middle classes’ in the mobilization process, whereby ethically-labelled goods are often targeted towards this group defined in various locally-specific ways by development organizations and consultancy firms.

Using the case of South Africa, the paper captures a range of ethical labelling initiatives that have appeared in the context of a rapidly growing and globalizing economy since the ending of apartheid in 1994, as well as a rising middle class and expanding domestic markets for consumer goods. While acknowledging that consumption in South Africa has of course always been (and continues to be) informed by moralities in a very wide range of ways, (Authors, in press), the paper addresses three prominent initiatives set up to encourage particular kinds of ethical consumption. These are: (i) Proudly South African (a national campaign and labelling initiative launched in 2001 to support South African employment and to encourage consumers to ‘buy local’); (ii) Fairtrade Label South Africa (the South African arm of Fairtrade International) established in 2009; and (iii) the Southern African Sustainable

Seafood Initiative (SASSI) launched in 2004 by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). These initiatives are selected on account of the wide range of social and environmental issues they cover, from local supply chains, employment and labour standards to the environmental objective of protecting marine resources, as well as their contrasting organizational networks. Also, they represent three of the top four ethical labels recognized by South African consumers (Belgian Development Agency, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, as the paper is seeking to understand the ways in which prominent ethical labelling initiatives are appealing to consumers, these leading labels in terms of consumer recognition represent appropriate case studies with which to begin.

The paper proceeds first by explaining the predominantly interview-based methodology in South Africa before positioning the perspective of mobilizing the ethical consumer in the broader literature in this field. The paper then focuses on the intermediaries and networks (civil society, firms and the state) encouraging ethical consumption in South Africa, highlighting in particular the role played by the discursive construction of the middle class in this context. Following this, we address the understandings of ethical consumption mobilized by our three case study initiatives and the ways in which they travel through South African commercial networks, before drawing conclusions concerning the contingent nature of ethical labelling initiatives and the process of mobilizing the ethical consumer in this setting.

## **2. Research methods**

The empirical material derives from research into ethical trade in the Western Cape. A part of that project combined interviews with focus groups conducted between September 2013

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<sup>1</sup> Dolphin Safe tuna was the other 'top four' logo, but was not explored given its relevance only to one particular product and in order to keep the research manageable.

and March 2014 to understand emerging ethical markets in the region. The Western Cape is an appropriate case study for research into South African ethical consumption for two key reasons. First, Cape Town is home to a large number of NGOs, industry associations and consultancy firms at the leading edge of ethical initiatives, as well as the location of the corporate headquarters of the two South African grocery retail chains most strongly associated with ethical product ranges. This makes it an appropriate setting to focus on the role of influential intermediaries in mobilizing the ethical consumer. Second, the Western Cape is second only to Gauteng in terms of the size of its middle class population (Chronis, 2012)—the socio-economic group most targeted by new ethical marketing initiatives.

Twenty-one semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately one hour, were conducted with key Western Cape institutions playing leading roles in the mobilization of ethical consumption. Interviews were conducted with the Executive Director, the former Chief Executive and the International Producer Services and Relations Manager at Fairtrade Label South Africa and also with the Manager of Seafood Consumer Outreach of SASSI and the Senior Manager of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme of the World Wildlife Fund (which hosts SASSI), in order to grasp the strategies, practices and networks of these two case studies of leading ethical labelling initiatives.<sup>2</sup> A wider set of NGO, industry association and business representatives involved in the ethical trade agenda in South Africa and operating in the Western Cape were also approached using contacts from previous research and snowballing methods, in order to situate the case studies and emerging trends of ethical consumption in a wider context of business responsibility in South Africa. This set of interviews involved representatives from the Sustainability Initiative of South Africa (Co-

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<sup>2</sup> Proudly South African has its headquarters in Johannesburg. Our research therefore uses secondary materials for this case study, which is included for its high profile across South Africa including in the Western Cape.

ordinator and board member), the South African office of global auditing firm Social Accountability International, Conservation South Africa, the Perishable Products Export Control Board and award-winning eco-dairy corporation, Fair Cape Dairies.

To gain critical purchase on the industry intermediaries discursively constructing the middle class and mobilizing the ethical consumer in the context of South Africa, both within and beyond our specific case studies, interviews were conducted with executives from consultancy firms. These included one prominent freelance sustainability consultant, two executives from Ogilvy Earth in Cape Town (the South African office of the sustainability arm of global marketing giant, Ogilvy), the Director of Moss Group Consulting (a South African sustainability consultancy based in Cape Town and working with high-profile clients including leading retailers) and the Director of The Strategic Group (a high-profile South African marketing and management consultancy corporation).

The two national retailers based in the Western Cape and most strongly associated with sustainability (Belgian Development Agency, 2013) were also targeted for interviews to understand the corporate retail role in mobilizing the ethical consumer and their engagement with our three case study labels. We were able to conduct two separate interviews with Woolworths' Good Business Journey Manager and one with the Manager of Sustainability for Pick n Pay. And finally, on the suggestion of the SASSI representative, we also interviewed two prominent Head Chefs at high-profile Cape Town restaurants signed up to SASSI's 'trailblazing' restaurant programme in order to gain insight into how the restaurant trade mediates between SASSI's marine conservation labelling programme and practices of ethical consumption. In sum, interviewees were identified from organizations comprising a

very clear group of appropriate, key ‘ethical mobilizers’ in the Western Cape who exercise both regional and national influence.

Although this paper prioritizes interview-based materials, it draws where appropriate on focus groups conducted as part of the wider research project on which the paper is based (anonymized reference). As Authors (in press) explain in a paper that centres on this focus group material, ten focus groups were conducted across the Western Cape. Seven of those were with diverse middle class participants (see section 4.1 below), including three groups in Cape Town (one in the city centre and two in the suburb of Newlands, which were conducted at places of work and therefore included participants from a wide variety of ethnic and social backgrounds) and one each in Hermanus, Bredasdorp, Croydon and Cloetesville. Three further groups, one in Cape Town and two in Elim, were conducted with members of working class communities and were included as part of a wider project to address questions concerning regional commodity knowledge. The composition of the groups reflects the demographic diversity of the Western Cape in terms of ethnicity, culture, language (mainly Afrikaans, English or isiXhosa), socio-economic status and levels of urbanization.

Following discussion of everyday consumption, participants were shown the logos of each of the three case study initiatives as a way of gauging their readings of the labels and the notions of ethical consumption they promote.<sup>3</sup> Focus group material is used in this paper simply for the purposes of illustrating the role of reflexivity in terms of how notions of ethical consumption promoted by the three ethical labelling initiatives can be read *and* influenced by consumers. We do not suggest that the reflections of our respondents are generalizable. Rather, triangulated with the stakeholder interviews and secondary data, they provide insight

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<sup>3</sup> We began with the Fairtrade symbol first because it ensured that the discussion of Fairtrade was not influenced by prior discussion of the two South African initiatives.

into the traction of ethically-labelled goods and the complexity of the ethical mobilization process.

### **3. Critical perspectives on ethical consumption in the global South**

#### *3.1 Broadening the geographical scope of research on ethical consumption*

Ethical consumption can be understood as a very broad range of movements, initiatives and practices through which values, morals, principles and ideals concerning social and environmental responsibility shape consumers' decisions about the purchase of goods and services, as well as their use and recycling. Since consumption became a central field of inquiry in the social sciences by the mid-1990s (Miller, 1995), increasing attention has been paid to such ethical dimensions. Carrier (2012: 2) suggests this means "taking into account the moral nature of objects when deciding whether or not to consume them". An important part of the literature on ethical consumption therefore acknowledges that all forms and practices of consumption are in some way influenced by moral considerations (including care for the self and proximate others, as well as financial responsibility) (Hall, 2011; Mansvelt, 2005). However, a dimension of ethical consumption receiving a great deal of both public and academic attention concerns the institutional dynamics and consumption of high-profile, ethically-labelled goods (Carrier, 2012). Addressing such public and widely-known ethical labelling initiatives, a burgeoning literature considers an array of civil society and consumer projects that have sought to encourage forms of consumption very explicitly intended to be more socially and/or environmentally just than those associated with the mainstream economy. Examples include Fairtrade (Bryant and Goodman, 2004), certified organic schemes (Eden et al., 2008) and initiatives encouraging the purchase of 'local' produce (Blake et al, 2010). Moreover, an important set of insights has come from anthropological research into such ethically-labelled goods, which suggest the significance of cultural values



and local histories in shaping their consumption (Berlan, 2012; Dombos, 2012; Fletcher, 2012; Isenhour, 2012).

Until very recently, social science research on ethical consumption, whether focused on broad consumption ethics or particular labelling initiatives, has prioritized the global North, viewing the South largely in terms of spaces of production supplying these markets.

Research on ethical trading issues concerning South Africa almost exclusively attends to South African export producers and the ethical initiatives and issues affecting them (see, for example, Bek et al, 2007; Herman, 2010; Kritzinger et al, 2004; Linton, 2012; Mather and Rowcroft, 2004; Raynolds, 2009).

Over the past few years, corporate responsibility and consumption ethics have grown in importance in rising power and emerging market economies of the global South as a kind of regulatory check on particular aspects of recent economic growth and the expansion of domestic markets in consumer goods (Guarin and Knorrinda, 2014). This growing importance is influenced, though not determined, by forms of business and consumer ethics travelling from the global North and intertwining with localized and historically-embedded moralities of consumption and business responsibility. An embryonic literature addresses these transformations, including in India (Gupta and Hodges, 2012), Korea (Hong and Song, 2010) and Malaysia (Rahim et al, 2011). Our paper responds to a need for a wider set of case studies of ethical consumption in the global South, with a specific focus on influential labelling initiatives that are serving to frame ethical consumption in South Africa in particular ways.

### *3.2 Advancing perspectives on ethical consumption in the South through the notion of mobilization*

To advance understanding of how the kinds of high-profile ethical labelling initiatives highlighted by Carrier (2012) increasingly frame and mobilize ethical consumption in the global South, the paper develops existing theoretical work in the social sciences specifically emphasizing the agency of political decision-making, or “ethical problematization” (Barnett et al., 2011: 27), on the part of institutional actors and consumers. Recent work theorizing ethical consumption in the global North, in particular in Western Europe and North America, has viewed it as a blurring of the boundaries between market and civil society in an advanced liberal context and as an emerging means through which politics can be practised by citizens as consumers (and consumers as citizens) (Micheletti, 2003). However, Barnett et al (2011) argue for a displacement of agency away from the consumer per se and suggest that consumption’s politicization is articulated through influential intermediary organizations (e.g. civil society groups and initiatives) *and* embedded in the broad field of practices constituting everyday life. This perspective revises top-down conceptualization of neoliberal subject formation and acknowledges the more recursive relationship between discourses of political power and everyday self-reflexivity and action. When considering the role of consumers, Barnett et al (2011) focus on the realm of practices, contributing to perspectives that see consumers neither as passive dupes nor autonomous individuals, but rather as reflexive agents who rework ethical consumption campaigns and initiatives. The campaigns and initiatives are part of a process of mobilizing the ethical consumer, which is argued to involve two dimensions:

“ ... [O]n the one hand, it involves organizations making practical and narrative resources available to people to enable them to act as ‘responsible’ subjects not only in relation to their own circumscribed criteria of utility but also in relation to broader social and environmental ‘responsibilities’; on the other hand, it involves organizations making a collective of ‘consumers’ knowable through market

research, surveys and other technologies in order to speak to their name in policy arenas and the public realm” (Clarke et al, 2007a: 235).

We suggest that there is a further aspect to mobilizing the ethical consumer reflecting anthropological insights into the significance of local histories: as Dombos (2008: 123) argues, “While ethical consumption might offer itself as a global phenomenon, it is always practised in local contexts with their particular struggles, histories, and trajectories” (see also Zukin and Maguire, 2004). It is this local embeddedness that we seek to grasp in the case of South Africa. Specifically, we demonstrate that the mobilization of ethical consumption in this context is shaped by South Africa’s very particular struggles, histories and trajectories—a post-conflict society in which racialized poverty is entrenched and the poor are proximate, in which socio-economic transformation is seen as the antidote to social and political unrest, in which government affirmative action policies have given rise to emergent black middle classes, and in which ethical consumption takes on very specific meanings. So although it is beyond the scope of the paper to present an in-depth account of the very wide range of middle class consumption practices and their ethics evident in contemporary South Africa, we seek to demonstrate specifically how local histories shape notions of responsibility bound up in the “practical and narrative resources” (Clarke et al., 2007a: 235) made available to and interpreted by consumers in the context of prominent South African labelling initiatives.

#### **4. South Africa’s middle classes and the mobilization of ethical consumption**

##### *4.1 South Africa’s middle class consumers*

The growing middle classes represent a part of the context for increasing consumption in rapidly developing economies like South Africa. With significance for this paper, they are also considered targets for the kinds of ethical labelling initiatives we discuss. However,

more than this, we suggest that the middle class represents a discursively-constructed category that itself is part of the process of mobilizing the ethical consumer.

Definitions of ‘middle class’ are subject to intense debate in contemporary South Africa and calculations often use different measures, such as occupation, per capita household income, household expenditure, or income measures based on lifestyle and status. However, whichever definitions and measures are used and mobilized, the most significant socio-economic shift since 1994 has seen the growth of the black middle class<sup>4</sup> (Rivero et al. 2003; Southall 2004; Seekings and Natrass 2005; Udjo 2009; Visagie 2013a; 2013b), mainly as a consequence of improved access to education and affirmative action legislation (e.g. the Employment Equity Act of 1998 and the Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment Act of 2007). As we argue elsewhere (Authors, in press), although there is a difference between objective and subjective notions of class (Burger et al., 2015), South Africa’s middle classes are often understood as “the consumer class[es]” (Kharas, 2010: 5). Despite representing a relatively small fraction of the population (see below), the South African middle classes are diverse and include a large proportion of white South Africans (both affluent and very affluent), the so-called ‘Black Diamonds’ or very-affluent black individuals, and an emerging group of black professionals and white-collar employees in both the public and private sectors.<sup>5</sup>

The South African Audience Research Foundation’s (SAARF) Living Standards Measure (LSM) has become popular as a way of identifying the middle-class, consumer classes<sup>6</sup> and is

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<sup>4</sup> We use the term ‘black’ as it is used in South African legislative terms to refer to all people of colour.

<sup>5</sup> Our focus group participants were primarily white-collar workers or retirees (not the very affluent) and included people from across the Western Cape’s ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.saarf.co.za/LSM/lsm.asp> (accessed 03/04/14).

now the most widely used marketing research tool in Southern Africa. It is also being used as a means of identifying and targeting those consumers most likely to be in a position to exercise ethical choices, though this makes a debatable assumption that ethical consumption is something of a luxury linked to discretionary spending. The LSM divides the population into 10 groups, from 10 (highest) to 1 (lowest). It is seen as a significant means of segmenting the South African market because it cuts across 'race' and other techniques of categorizing people and it is a wealth measure based on standard of living rather than income (Haupt n.d.). The segment of the population categorized as LSM 7-10 has grown from below 6.5 million (22% of the adult population) in 2001 to over 12 million (35% of the adult population) in 2011 (Chronis, 2012). In terms of regional geography, Gauteng and the Western Cape are the dominant LSM 7-10 provinces (Chronis, 2012). Almost 39% of LSM 7-10 lives in Gauteng, accounting for just below 60% of the province's population and 18.5% of LSM 7-10 lives in the Western Cape, which makes up 63.6% of the province's population. Whatever the distribution of this group, 'LSM 7-10' has become a powerful category constructed through various measures and calculations by organizations involved not only in the research, but also in the creation, of emerging (including ethical) markets.

#### *4.2 Mobilizing the ethical consumer in South Africa*

Recent market research conducted by Nielsen and funded by the Belgian Development Agency (2013) reveals that 44% of a sample of 1507 consumers within LSMs 5-10 across Kwazulu-Natal, the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Gauteng and Free State do not see sustainability as a priority, while 67% acknowledge they have very little understanding of it. The survey was designed to gauge ethical product trends in South Africa in order to support South African Fairtrade organizations in their strategies to grow domestic Fairtrade markets, discussed below. The research forms part of a wider project on the part of the Belgian

Development Agency concerned with ethical and sustainable markets in different developing economies. Significantly, it illustrates the double-sided nature of mobilizing the ethical consumer highlighted by Clarke et al. (2007a), as it serves simultaneously to capture and encourage ethical purchasing practices. Conducted by a global market research firm, funded by a European development institution and commissioned and adopted by an NGO-driven social certification system to foster domestic ethical markets, the survey shows how the process of mobilizing the ethical consumer in South Africa is shaped by a combination of global business and development networks, North-South power geometries and neoliberal pathways of development within a rapidly growing economy.

The institutional actors we interviewed in the Western Cape confirm a clear connection between the growing middle classes in South Africa and their discursive construction and the development of consumer awareness of social and environmental issues on the part of intermediaries. As one of the managers of a pioneering eco-dairy firm supplying national retail markets, Fair Cape Dairies, remarked, “We’ve got an emerging, massive middle class based on consumerism ... and they are becoming more socially aware of things, they are becoming more environmentally aware” (Interview, 13<sup>th</sup> December 2013). This statement is informed by external market research commissioned by the company (Interview with Director of The Strategic Group, 13<sup>th</sup> December 2013). Moreover, there is acknowledgement that current ethical market growth is predominantly focused on the most affluent amongst these middle classes—the LSM 7-10s (Interviews with the Senior Manager for the Sustainable Agriculture Programme, WWF-South Africa, 4<sup>th</sup> October 2013 and the Social Accountability International Global Auditor, 8<sup>th</sup> October 2013). A developing ethical industry in South Africa, influenced by in-country sustainability departments of global

management consultancies, seeks to support South African business in engendering ethical awareness on the part of LSM 7-10 groups.

Also of significance for the ethical purchasing of consumer goods are South African corporate retailers, in particular those in the grocery and clothing sectors. Barnett et al (2011) seek to displace retail and the act of purchase from the centre stage of ethical consumption studies, in favour of foregrounding the politics of consumption embedded in everyday practices of social reproduction. However, in a critique of that position, Whitehead et al. (2013) argue that retailers continue to be highly influential in shaping ethical product ranges, and South Africa is no exception (Interview with Sustainable Agriculture Senior Coordinator, Conservation South Africa 30<sup>th</sup> September 2013). Naidoo (2011) outlines the structure of grocery retailing in South Africa, showing that the sector is highly concentrated with the five largest chains accounting for 60% of the market. The same author presents estimates from analysts suggesting that Shoprite (which also trades under the name of Checkers) accounts for 36% of the market, Pick n Pay and Spar each occupy 28%, Woolworths has 8% and is increasing its share rapidly and Walmart entering the market relatively recently has around 2%.<sup>7</sup>

In terms of variation in South African supermarket offerings of ethical product ranges, the aforementioned Nielsen survey shows that Shoprite is the least associated with Fairtrade and other ethically-labelled goods. Woolworths is the retailer most associated in consumers' minds with sustainable products, connected to the corporation's high-profile sustainability strategy, the 'Good Business Journey', since 2007. Moreover, with significance for

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<sup>7</sup> Woolworths occupies an upmarket niche in South African retailing, while Pick n Pay is a mid-market retailer with a reputation for prioritizing consumer satisfaction through the sale of good quality products and value for money. Shoprite (including Checkers), Spar and Massmart (owned by WalMart) pursue high-volume/low margin corporate strategies.

understanding the role of travelling business ethics, this sustainability strategy was explicitly modelled on UK retailer Marks and Spencer's 'Plan A' programme. These ethical credentials are targeted specifically at the LSM 8-10 group (Interview with the Good Business Journey Project Manager, Woolworth, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2014). Pick n Pay, who serve a broader demographic than Woolworths, announced their formal commitment to Fairtrade in 2010 and have expanded their Fairtrade certified product ranges since then. As one sustainability consultant acknowledged "Pick n Pay actually are much more green than Woolworths and they have always won the Sustainability Award" (Interview, 9<sup>th</sup> December 2013). However, there is a sense that in South Africa corporate retail involvement in developing markets for ethical products is at an early stage and that "... retailers should be doing a great deal more to enable and encourage sales of sustainable products" (Belgian Development Agency, 2013: 34). Within this context of nascent retail ethical drivers, in what follows we trace the ways in which particular notions of ethical consumption in South Africa are mobilized by a range of actors through three of the highest-profile ethical labelling initiatives.

## **5. Labelling initiatives and the mobilization of ethical consumption**

### *5.1 Proudly South African: ethical problematization, national economic growth and localized responsibility*

Proudly South African is a campaigning and labelling initiative arising out of the Presidential Job Summit in 1998. It was formally established in 2001 through the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC) with support from government. Although it draws on similar South African notions of community-building to the case of Fairtrade Label South Africa (see below), it represents a far more state-led and South African driven socio-economic initiative than the other two cases we address. Indeed it is now closely aligned with South Africa's 2011 Local Procurement Accord, which raises awareness and encourages



more local purchasing on the part of both the private and public sectors. Proudly South Africa's objectives are to support the South African economy and employment growth by encouraging consumer purchases of local (South African) products. Its rules state that for goods carrying the Proudly South African logo, "At least 50% of the cost of production must be incurred in South Africa and there must be "substantial transformation" of any imported materials".<sup>8</sup> It also has requirements that production meets particular social, environmental and quality standards. Product categories bearing the label include crafts, clothing and food items, as well as services such as the hospitality sector. More than ten years on from its inception, the Nielsen research discussed above revealed that Proudly South African was viewed as an ethical initiative and was the label most strongly associated with sustainability in the country. Significantly, 85% of the 1507 sample of LSM 5-10s across South Africa recognized its logo (Belgian Development Agency, 2013: 75) (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here]

An important explanation for the traction of Proudly South African is the desire on the part of South African consumers to support local producers in the face of ever more global sourcing by the country's corporate retailers, in particular those in the clothing sector. As a middle income country, South Africa is increasingly sourcing consumer goods such as garments from cheaper overseas locations, the most high-profile being China. This pattern follows that of North American and Western European retailers, who have progressively decreased their domestic sourcing since the 1980s and forged global value chains by purchasing from manufacturers in economically less developed countries (Tokatli, 2008). In terms of ethical responses in Western Europe and North America, media and campaigning attention since the

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.proudlysa.co.za/membership> (accessed 28th May 2015).

mid-1990s has focused predominantly on improving poor labour conditions in overseas producing localities rather than protecting their domestic manufacturing industries (Cravey, 2004; Moor and Littler, 2008; Silvey, 2004), though the latter issue has also received some attention. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this stands in contrast to South Africa where the shift to global sourcing has taken place in a far less affluent domestic economic context.

From a European and North American perspective, an initiative like Proudly South African promoting national identity and patriotism, albeit through local sourcing, might seem at odds with ethical forms of consumption. However, when situated in the context of a country continuing to experience high levels of inequality, chronic poverty linked with jobless growth (Aliber, 2003), an unemployment rate that has risen to over 25% (Statistics South Africa, 2015) and ongoing financial constraints for many of South Africa's middle classes, care for more proximate others and a desire to contribute to national community-building through local economic growth represents a very popular form of ethical consumption. This is evident from our focus groups, illustrated by a discussion among three professional women from Focus Group 9 (Newlands, Cape Town, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2013), which reflects the importance attributed to local product origins in the context of a globalizing economy:

Participant 1: A lot of stuff in Woolies [Woolworths] is made in China.

Participant 2: I'm trying not to buy stuff from China.

Participant 1: Country Road [Australian brand found in Woolworths]. Is Country Road not gorgeous? Made in China ... It freaks me out ...

Participant 3: But at the same time you're giving people jobs in the same way ...

Like you give so many people jobs. There are a lot of jobs that you are supporting as well and if they are going to pay minimum wage ... at least they are getting paid something.

Participant 2: But I think the thing that pertains very much to this country is whether those jobs [in China] are taking jobs away from people here. I think that's why I like to support small businesses and local shops.

The comment made by Participant 3 regarding the importance of supporting labour globally, and not necessarily only in South Africa, challenges the concern expressed by other group members about imports and points to the contested nature of Proudly South African's ethical position and the way it can be viewed by consumers. Indeed, the impact of Proudly South African on employment in neighbouring low wage countries such as Lesotho, while not discussed in the focus groups is a significant political issue. However, discussion across the focus groups expressed a strong connection made between Proudly South African and a national sense of community, in particular support for proximate Western Cape textile producers. This is backed up by the Nielsen survey and demonstrates firm support for Proudly South African anchored in the post-apartheid, national-institutional context of South Africa and its associated policies encouraging national and local economic growth amid global competition.

### *5.2 Fairtrade Label South Africa: global certification networks and localized responsibility*

Fairtrade Label South Africa was launched in 2009 as the first organization marketing Fairtrade in the global South. As such, it represents a pioneering and localized articulation of a highly prominent international labelling initiative. Fairtrade refers to the global certification scheme of Fairtrade International. The Fairtrade movement has evolved as a specific kind of business responsibility from its post-Second World War roots in small-scale trading organizations run by religious groups in Western Europe and North America to its current incarnation as a high-profile certification system for securing social standards in global supply chains. Until recently, the initiative has predominantly involved material supply chain links between smallholder producers in the global South and ethically-conscious consumers in the North. Discursively, its "solidarity-seeking commodity culture" and "relational ethics" (Bryant and Goodman, 2004: 357, 358) have been driven by Northern care

for distant, Southern Others (Clarke et al, 2007b). Such relational ethics have also been strongly supported by the Christian values of the movement's pioneers and practitioners. At first glance, this would appear to be in direct contrast to Proudly South African. However, both material and discursive dimensions of Fairtrade are being adapted and transformed through recent shifts in the movement's global consumption patterns, including its market expansion in South Africa.

In addition to growth in the established markets of Western Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, Fairtrade International (2013) reports rising Fairtrade sales in emerging market economies. In South Africa, sales increased by 220% in 2012 (Fairtrade International, 2013: page 13). The promotional activities of Fairtrade Label South Africa have been crucial in securing this growth and its success is being mirrored in Brazil, Argentina, the Philippines and Kenya (Fairtrade International, 2013). Although a wide range of overseas produce certified Fairtrade is being sold in these markets, there is also strategic emphasis placed on marketing local Fairtrade products, implying that a key part of this new trend is a connection made between ethical consumers and an already strong and well-known Fairtrade supply base *within* local and national economies. This shift challenges the traditional geography of Fairtrade's ethics.

In the case of South Africa, which according to Fairtrade International (2011, 2013) is the fastest growing Fairtrade market at present, sales grew from €7,273,254 in 2011 to €22,263,619 in 2012 (Fairtrade International, 2013: 13). In 2013 sales reached a record R287 million, representing a 22% increase on the previous year's figure and in 2014 they rose to R294 million (Fairtrade Label South Africa, 2015). In addition to the efforts of Fairtrade Label South Africa, supermarket chains such as Woolworths and Pick n Pay are an important

part of market development, as key distribution channels and conduits for Fairtrade marketing and awareness-raising. Pick n Pay is the largest South African vendor of Fairtrade, which in 2014 showed sales growth in core product categories such as coffee (182% increase in sales from 2013), sugar (11% increase) and tea (335% increase). Woolworths also saw a 153% increase in their sales of Fairtrade coffee (Fairtrade Label South Africa, 2015). Moreover, Fairtrade Label South Africa (2015) reported that Shoprite Checkers is to form a new partnership with Fairtrade in 2015, which is highly significant given that Shoprite has been the supermarket least associated with sustainability in the Nielsen ethical product market research (Belgian Development Agency, 2013: 49).

Despite significant market development, the Nielsen research found that only 7% of their sample of 1507 consumers was aware of Fairtrade as an organization and 6% was familiar with the logo (see Figure 2) (Belgian Development Agency, 2013: 73-74). However, when made aware of the organization 22% expressed willingness to purchase Fairtrade products at any price and 26% would purchase them if they matched the price of the cheapest brand (Belgian Development Agency, 2013: 84).

[Figure 2 about here]

Limited awareness of, but interest in, Fairtrade illustrates potential for further market growth. And it is precisely this potential that fuels Fairtrade Label South Africa's continuing attempts to mobilize the South African ethical consumer. One of the challenges it has to overcome is a current association of Fairtrade with the empowerment of overseas rather than South African producers. This is a considerable obstacle given the importance consumers place on

responding to local problems, which is in evidence in support for Proudly South African and illustrated by the focus group discussions:

Female student (FG9, Newlands, Cape Town, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2013): If I could see that [the Fairtrade label] more on grocery related products, that would be fantastic because it would definitely persuade me to buy more things...

Female professional (FG9 continued): But I also think about the other decision that I keep on thinking—is it produced here or does it come from somewhere else in the world? Because that impact needs to also be considered.

Male professional (FG10, Newlands, Cape Town, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013): It's interesting because I haven't seen that [Fairtrade label] on a lot of products except for coffee, perhaps because I love coffee ... Farmers in Kenya and Ethiopia, that's all I remember when I see the sign... A lot of products I buy but I've never looked for that [Fairtrade] ... But I look for sustainability, and South Africa has its own social and environmental [standards] so I look for that instead of, like, Fairtrade.

The latter comment is a reference to South African standards that, by virtue of being in accordance with South African labour and Black Economic Empowerment (BBE) laws aimed at bringing about empowerment and transformation, are often more exacting and seen as 'fairer' than international standards. Moreover, while the focus groups aimed to discuss Fairtrade prior to and independently of Proudly South African, some participants pre-empted the discussion of the latter to draw their own comparisons:

Retired school teacher (FG4, Bredasdorp, 12<sup>th</sup> December 2013): If I have a choice I would rather pay a little bit more if the quality is the same and buy the Fairtrade product. I do believe in the Fairtrade way of thinking and the Proudly South African as well. I'm always happy to buy things that I like and if it's South African made I'm really happy with it. So I would support Proudly South African definitely.

School teacher (FG4, Bredasdorp continued): I would support Proudly South African before I support Fairtrade. For me there is no question, I would rather choose the local because I think that choosing local is sort of, for me, fair.

Fairtrade Label South Africa is aware of this prevailing perspective of backing more proximate producers and is increasingly tailoring its strategies to this context. Therefore, just as Fairtrade organizations in South Africa on the producer side have adapted the standard to

fit the political-economic context of South Africa,<sup>9</sup> so the movement is also adjusting to more consumer-facing issues in South Africa by connecting with concerns about supporting local jobs and businesses. The initiative is therefore prioritizing the marketing of South African grown and manufactured/processed Fairtrade goods, though with a recognition that middle class consumer knowledge about product origins is itself complex and differentiated:

“I think our consumers understand that some products are not produced in South Africa, so they understand that. But I think it is important that we try to make it more local... For the majority from the middle class who do not travel so much, are not so exposed to other countries, local products will be more important to them as they have a lesser understanding of problems in other countries or the reality in other countries” (Interview, Former Chief Executive of Fairtrade South Africa, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2013).

“We do of course highlight that Fairtrade aims to improve labour conditions, but we approach it from a side that this is South Africa and you’re buying the local product and by buying this Fairtrade local product you’re promoting the wellbeing of the community ...” (Interview, Executive Director, Fairtrade Label South Africa, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

In terms of the breakdown of South African Fairtrade sales figures, which demonstrate the significance of domestic markets for South African Fairtrade products, South African sales of Fairtrade goods produced within the country by value were R44 million in 2014, representing 15% of total South African Fairtrade sales that year. However, domestic sales of Fairtrade

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<sup>9</sup> South Africa’s legislative context invokes more radical notions of ‘fairness’ than those embedded in Fairtrade codes. Consequently, Fairtrade has been required to link to government-incentivized Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) initiatives (Kruger and du Toit, 2007), which means that “the movement is, in effect, certifying and labelling transformative programmes to economically empower members of previously disadvantaged groups” (Linton, 2012: 725). This has required some re-negotiation of fairness and of the role of the international Fairtrade certifier. By adding BEE clauses to the Fairtrade standard for commercial estates since 2004 the Fairtrade label on South African products means that they were produced not solely in compliance with rules written in the global North, but also in accordance with South African notions of fairness that aim to promote social transformation.

goods manufactured/processed (but not produced) in South Africa were as high as R209 million, representing 71% of total South African Fairtrade sales in 2014.<sup>10</sup>

Fairtrade Label South Africa's Executive Director and the Fairtrade International Producer Services and Relations Manager for Southern Africa, despite both being of Western European origin, reflected on how South African understandings of community with which Fairtrade Label South Africa is attempting to engage are evocative of the concept of Ubuntu (Interviews, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2014). This is a Southern African communitarian philosophy of openness, generosity and interdependence between humans that has been widely recognized and used in political speeches in South Africa since the ending of apartheid (West, 2014) and which is more critically and deeply associated with experiences and understandings of 'becoming' in a "decolonizing setting" (Motha, 2010: 285). Although the marketization of Ubuntu and its inclusion in neo-liberal policies of post-apartheid South Africa have been widely critiqued, some commentators continue to argue for its value in creating more progressive socio-economic pathways (McDonald, 2010). The Fairtrade International Producer Services & Relations Manager for Southern Africa suggests that notions of ethical consumption mobilized in South Africa are shaped by an Ubuntu philosophy and are influencing South African Fairtrade in a way that differs from the more European-style Christian ethics driving the movement's traditions:

"Fairtrade couldn't play on that charity kind of borderline—help the poor people. There is more of a South African thing of let's do these things together and let's make it happen ...It's what the country's doing—building a community in the South African way ... And I think that's really what consumers are asking for and that's [also] how retailers are responding in their credentials" (Interview, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2014).

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<sup>10</sup> Reported by Fairtrade Label South Africa on 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2015 in personal communication and granting permission to use in this paper.



Fairtrade Label South Africa is thus seizing an opportunity to mobilize the emerging black middle class ethical consumer, for whom Ubuntu may have greater salience. In terms of building the South African market for Fairtrade, the approaches adopted to mobilize the ethical consumer therefore combine a globalizing standard with localized political histories, philosophies and struggles.

### *5.3 The Southern African Sustainable Seafood Initiative (SASSI): localized articulations of global environmental intentions*

SASSI—the Southern African Sustainable Seafood Initiative—was launched in 2004 by World Wildlife Fund South Africa (WWF South Africa). Both WWF South Africa and SASSI are national-level initiatives connected to global sustainable fisheries programmes addressing the overarching problem that 85% of the world’s fish stocks are either at or beyond their limits of exploitation (UN Food and Agriculture Organization, 2010). While WWF South Africa has a broader Sustainable Fisheries Programme involving environmental research and developing more sustainable practices in the fishing industry, SASSI forms a connected initiative focused on communicating the implications of this programme to wholesalers, retailers, restaurateurs, the media and consumers. In addition to educational outreach work, it mobilizes sustainable seafood consumption effectively through a logo, which is placed on products in supermarkets and restaurants as well as being available to consumers as part of a pocket guide and mobile phone application. The logo depicts three fish—red, orange and green (see Figure 3). This symbolizes SASSI’s database that categorizes different fish species ‘red’, ‘orange’ or ‘green’ according to the degree to which they are sustainably fished. Red-listed fish include those that are illegal to sell in South Africa according to the Marine Living Resources Act, as well as those known to be unsustainably fished (e.g. species particularly vulnerable to commercial fishing practices).

Orange-listed species are moderately vulnerable species for which consumers should consider the potential impacts of their purchasing on overfishing. And green listed species are categorized as species that are most sustainably fished and managed and are therefore considered appropriate to buy. While some fish on these lists are sourced globally, the majority are from South African Major Fishing Areas. As such, SASSI's programme articulates local concerns about sustainable fisheries, but is positioned in a much broader context of over-fishing on a global scale and objectives to protect marine resources.

[Figure 3 about here]

SASSI's logo was recognized by 6% of the Nielsen ethical market research sample, though the panda logo of its supporting organization, WWF, had 24% recognition, second only to Proudly South African (Belgian Development Agency, 2013: 75). It represents an NGO-led initiative informed by global environmental politics, but whose marine research and consumer outreach programmes are very strongly localized. In contrast to our previous two case studies, its spaces of political intention are environmentally focused, in particular on protecting fish species through more sustainable fishing.

SASSI has evolved from an original political motivation to educate consumers by providing them with more detailed (predominantly legal) knowledge of the sourcing and distribution of fish species. This strongly resonates with many similar ethical initiatives at the time, which adopted a method of geographical detective work essentially to create more knowledgeable consumers (Hartwick, 2000) in the context of a shift away from state control over fisheries and towards private governance based on "democratized concern" (Bush, 2010: 305). Significantly, it is retailers, as well as restaurants, which are viewed by SASSI as

fundamental to the initiative's success and mainstreaming, seen as "inhabiting a fulcrum position in the seafood supply chain" (ibid). This compares with the case of mainstreaming Fairtrade. However, in the mid-2000s South African retailers expressed disinterest in the movement in the absence of consumer demand, prompting SASSI to re-think its strategies and instead prioritize engagement with consumers, the success of which could then be presented to retailers. This illustrates Clarke et al's (2007a) double movement of mobilizing the ethical consumer, where ethical consumption is both engendered and rendered knowable as a category to influence firms and organizations.

SASSI conducted a significant amount of research into their target consumer audience, in particular 'new' urban middle classes in Johannesburg and Cape Town, in order to engage with the influences behind their purchasing practices and the relative importance they attribute to sustainability issues. The findings fed into the production of the logo, pocket guidebook and mobile application (discussed subsequently), which give consumers very easy access to information on red, orange and green-listed fish species and simple-to-follow guidance on appropriate purchasing decisions. The demonstration of such consumer interest in SASSI has dramatically translated into significant engagement with the movement by mainstream retailers and the restaurant trade. As the Consumer Outreach Manager reflected when comparing the current position with the project's early and unsuccessful attempts at corporate engagement, "Fast forward eight years and we pretty much have restaurants and retailers clamouring at our doors" (Interview, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2013). Most of the main supermarket chains now use the SASSI logo on their products, and Pick n Pay has a 2015 target to retail only green-listed or Marine Stewardship Council labelled fish.

In addition to engagement with supermarket chains, SASSI also works with what it calls ‘trailblazing’ restaurants, which are mainly high-profile and often upmarket restaurants led by chefs keen to promote sustainable foods. This connects to SASSI’s aforementioned market research and the targeting of ‘new’ middle classes that might seek to differentiate themselves by consuming ethically. For some SASSI supporters, eating in one of SASSI’s trailblazing restaurants is also about providing reassurance—“If restaurants display that [the SASSI logo], then you know you are okay” (Female professional, Focus Group 6, Cape Town city, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2013). However, there are possibilities for far more active consumer engagement in the circulation of knowledge and political action. As another female professional member of Focus Group 6 explains, “There is a number that you can SMS if you are not sure what you are consuming” and many focus group participants discussed the use of SASSI’s mobile application and also the process of asking questions of waiting staff during visits to restaurants. Such devices and opportunities effectively enable consumers to ‘perform’ their ethicality publicly and reflect the kinds of ‘cool ethics’ referred to by Podkalicka and Potts (2014) in the context of particular kinds of middle class consumption. In terms of the implications for restaurants, a Cape Town chef supporting SASSI reflected on the reputational risks associated with a failure to serve only sustainably sourced fish in his restaurant:

“We try not to go near the orange list at all. It is hard to stay to the green list because it is limited what you can get. There’s angelfish, mackerel and sardines and stuff like that. If we use something on the orange list, say for example Kingklip, then we get slated on Twitter ... That’s why we avoid those sorts of fish ... And if it is on the red list, then it’s bad press, you know what I mean, unethical as a restaurant” (Interview, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2013).

Such active participation on the part of consumers, who are empowered to influence the industry, reflects an initiative involving continual questioning and engagement of political pressure through consumption. Driven by understandings of ethical consumption mobilized

by SASSI, this illustrates the very dynamic way in which environmental governance is occurring through market-based political action (Klooster, 2010). Moreover, while the case of SASSI is influenced by consumer-driven initiatives elsewhere (e.g. it is a supporter of the Marine Stewardship Council), it is also embedded in the particular sustainable fisheries programmes, legal frameworks and commercial structures including the supermarket and restaurant sectors of South Africa.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper captures evolving articulations of ethical consumption in South Africa in the context of rapid economic growth and growing middle classes. The key focus of the paper is on the brokering roles played by influential intermediaries from the worlds of business, civil society and government in engaging consumers to participate in rapidly growing ethical markets in South Africa. This research helps to rectify a common tendency in work on ethical consumption to prioritize consumers in the global North and products from the global South. Our approach uses the concept of mobilization (Barnett et al., 2011; Clarke et al., 2007a) to understand how such intermediaries engage consumers in ethical labelling initiatives and in some cases how they also represent ethical consumers as a collective to other influential business and political organizations. The paper applies this notion of mobilizing the ethical consumer, developed from research in the UK, to the case of South Africa. In making this move, our specific contribution to the literature is to highlight the ways in which mobilizing the ethical consumer in South Africa combines globalizing networks and understandings of responsibility with values shaped by national and local histories and political-economic context. Conceptually, this brings Barnett et al.'s (2011) mobilization concept into dialogue with literature on ethical consumption that emphasizes its local embeddedness (Berlan, 2012; Dombos, 2012; Fletcher, 2012; Isenhour, 2012; Zukin

and Maguire, 2004); this is a dialogue original not only in itself, but also in terms of its application to a global South setting.

Against the backdrop of a broader institutional context for mobilizing the ethical consumer, linked to the acknowledgement and discursive construction of South Africa's middle classes as consumers with potential to engage in ethical markets, three prominent ethical labelling initiatives were evaluated. In the cases of Proudly South African and Fairtrade Label South Africa, localized concern for proximate producers was shown to shape the notions of ethical responsibility mobilized through these initiatives. This arises from a combination of the legacies of apartheid, global supply chains threatening domestic industries, ongoing financial constraints for many of South Africa's middle classes living in proximity to struggling workers and growing numbers of unemployed, and the institutionalization and marketization of Southern African communitarian philosophy. However, the case of SASSI shows that notions and initiatives of sustainable consumption gaining traction in South Africa are not confined to those with a national, socio-economic focus. Concern for environmental protection is also being mobilized, in particular amongst the urban middle classes. However, in this case globalized forms of environmental governance (Bush, 2010) are also highly localized through the communication of SASSI's labelling system to urban middle class consumers in South Africa and the implementation of the label through national supermarket chains and local restaurant channels.

Notions of ethical consumption found to be mobilized in South Africa are neither separate nor entirely distinct from ethical mobilization operating elsewhere, including in the global North as well as comparable cases in the global South (on which more research is needed). Indeed, the paper shows that some of the influential intermediaries in South Africa are part of

wider, transnational networks through which notions of responsibility travel and transform. We therefore argue that an important part of research on ethical consumption in the global South is engagement with the nuances of travelling and shifting concepts of responsibility and the ways in which they are marshalled by intermediaries to engage consumers in particular settings. This requires sensitivity not only to transnational networks of globalizing responsibility, but also to localized expressions of ethical consumption when these (and other) networks play out in particular places. Our paper addressing the mobilization of the ethical consumer in South Africa by business, civil society and the state forms a part of this academic project, which in turn is just one dimension of understanding ethical consumption in the global South.

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Figure 1. Proudly South African logo



Fig 2. Fairtrade logo



Figure 3. SASSI logo

