

Seeds of the "fair trade" movement in SA

By Wayne Visser

The counter-movement which has arisen as a result of this criticism of free trade consists of a network of "alternative trade organisations" (ATOs) which strive to promote fairness in trade. They do this by agreeing on certain minimum standards and ethical practices which have the welfare of those parties affected (and usually marginalised) by the global trade process as their primary focus.

In Europe, this has resulted in the establishment of around 2 500 "fair trade shops" which exclusively stock products that have been subject to this careful screening process. The UK has been particularly proactive in promoting fair trade through organisations like Traidcraft, Oxfam Activities, Tearcraft and TWIN Trading. As an example of their success and impact, Traidcraft has 2 000 voluntary sales reps; and has managed to get its tea and coffee products stocked by national retail supermarket chains like Sainsburys.

But are fair trade initiatives confined to first world countries? The following South African example seems to suggest otherwise.

One of the best examples of an ATO in South Africa is the Cape Town based company Africa Trading. Established by the Triple Trust Organisation in 1988 to assist people from township communities to implement the business skills training they had received, the organisation now provides vital marketing and trade links which channel income from the first world sector into the third world informal market. Africa Trading states as its vision the establishment of a just trading system:

- where the primary object is not profit maximisation
- motivated by benefiting previously disadvantaged communities
- where producer partners receive fair rewards for efforts
- to create sustainable benefits for small, medium and micro enterprises

Africa Trading is also proof that ATOs needn't be fringe or marginal. In 1995, it won the President's Award for Export Achievement and its growth seems set to continue. While it has built its product offering mainly around arts and crafts (many of them created out of recycled "waste" materials), plans are underway to launch an Africa blend of fair trade tea.

Complementing the work of Africa Trading is another South African company called Just Exchange, started by the UK charity Traidcraft Exchange. This non-profit service organisation aims to alleviate poverty through assisting small and medium-sized

enterprises in SA to balance economic and social objectives. In the words of Juliana Dijksta, "we are enabling people to make their own living. They are learning new skills or upgrading traditional skills ... we provide knowledge of trends in Europe or America where the goods will be sold and help with networking for materials."

But fair trade does not have to be international. Take Jenny Gifford of Gifford Designs as another inspiring SA example. Almost two years ago, Jenny gave up lucrative clothing design contracts with SA's top fashion retailers to pursue a dream. This was the start of International Native, a project which brings together the beautiful traditional embroidery of a rural Shangaan women's workshop in the North Eastern Transvaal with the clothing design and retail marketing skills of Jenny's business. The result is economic empowerment in a marginalised community, preservation of traditional skills and designs, and a wonderful range of high quality African clotheswear.

At the moment "fair trade" is just a seed which has had limited exposure and application, but it is nevertheless worth nurturing. Combined with other ethical economy initiatives, it has the potential to restore some equity and justice which is lacking in our present trade system.

Recommended references:

"Global Consumer" (1991) New Consumer, Kogan Page

"Ethical Consumer" magazine (UK), Tel: +44-161 226 2929 Fax: +44-161-226 6277

Africa Trading website - <http://www.africatrading.com> Email: aftrade@iafrica.com

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