

Participatory commodity networking: An integrated framework for Fairtrade research and support

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Abstract

This article discusses the potential for humanizing production and trade relations by extending action research to multilateral commodity networks. Participatory action research and Fairtrade certification both promote social justice, but the first faces difficulties in terms of scalability, while the second experiences challenges in terms of producer support. As conventional research has failed to deliver methods for improving services, we worked with small-scale farmers in South Africa's rooibos tea industry to meet this gap. Responding to producer concerns regarding market and certification access, we conducted a participatory research, training, and networking program to establish a farmer leadership network within the rooibos industry. Despite the challenges involved in advancing participation in an arena marked by complex power relations, our work helped stakeholders establish trust, improve knowledge, and begin addressing issues. By incorporating commodity network analysis into action research methodology, our model facilitates both community and organizational development, offering a multilateral framework for collaborative inquiry.

Introduction

The global fair trade¹ movement promotes social justice in trade, primarily through a product certification system governed by Fairtrade International. Certification provides producers with access to buyers offering minimum price guarantees, stable contracts, and premiums for development. However, marginal groups have experienced uneven impacts (Raynolds & Bennett, 2015). In postcolonial Africa, small-scale farmers find it difficult to meet Fairtrade requirements due to limited infrastructure (Tallontire, 2015); and in post-apartheid South Africa, producers of color are hindered by stark racial disparities (Keahey, 2015). While few studies have examined the question of support, this matter is salient and timely as Fairtrade International is transferring governance of producer services to its regional affiliates.

In 2010, we conducted a one-year project with small-scale farmers in South Africa's rooibos tea industry. Linking participatory action research (PAR) with commodity network analysis, we generated a participatory commodity networking research (PCNR) approach to producer support. This article presents our framework, explains how it was operationalized, and shares key findings and reflections. Similarly to PAR, our work reconnects theory with practice via a process of engaged inquiry (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). The approach presented in Figure 1 provides: (1) a research platform to identify

World Fair Trade Organization & Fairtrade International. (2009). A charter of fair trade principles. Retrieved June 12, 2015, from http://www.fairtrade-advocacy.org/images/Charter_of_Fair_Trade_principles_EN_v1.2.pdf