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Buyer, Be Fair: The Promise of Product Certification Discussion Questions

1. Paul Rice, TransFair CEO, comments that consumers are a “sleeping giant.” He claims that great change can come about through consumer purchases and the power of the market. Do you agree? What does it mean to “vote with your dollar?” What does it mean to say that Fair Trade is a “market-based” solution?
2. The film showed how a small group of committed activists converted the English town of Garstang to the first Fair Trade town. What other ways can people make change in the world? (ie, voting, protesting, contacting elected officials, direct action, donating to charity, etc.) In what way are you most comfortable making a difference?
3. People in the film talk about a global oversupply of coffee that has caused world prices to plummet. Classical economists would argue that coffee producers should exit the market and find a more profitable occupation. Do you agree? What kinds of alternatives exist for rural coffee producers? (ie, migrating to US, to cities, planting even more to compensate for low prices, moving to other crops?)
4. How does “direct trade,” in which organizations of small-scale farmers sell directly to the international market, benefit individual farmers?
5. In what ways does Fair Trade protect the environment and preserve migratory bird habitat?
6. We often think of higher prices for farmers as being the primary benefit of Fair Trade. But La Trinidad, the Mexican cooperative featured in the film, spent their Fair Trade premiums to purchase a copy machine and a new truck and repair the local church (see attached profile for other initiatives that La Trinidad funded). Other cooperatives choose to spend their Fair Trade premiums on education, health care, and other initiatives. In your opinion, is community investment important or should the additional premiums go straight to the individual farmers?
9. Why do you think Fair Trade label awareness is so high in the Netherlands? (92%) What can we do in the US to increase awareness?
10. What’s in it for companies and retailers? Why do you think businesses would want to get involved in Fair Trade?
11. One woman in the film says companies have a responsibility to source ethically. She believes companies should make ethical choices for their consumers and it’s their job to inform consumers about the origins of their products. Do you agree, or do you think companies should simply respond to consumer demand? In other words, whose responsibility is it to buy Fair Trade Certified products, companies, consumers or both?
12. How is Fair Trade different from charity? What is the importance of just markets as opposed to charity? Which is more sustainable?