

Fairtrade – A Bahá'í Perspective

We have heard exactly what Fairtrade is, but how does it work from the Bahá'í perspective, and how do the Writings support the case for it, in 1998 the Baha'i International Community said:-

"The failure to place economics into the broader context of humanity's social and spiritual existence has led to a corrosive materialism in the world's more economically advantaged regions, and persistent conditions of deprivation among the masses of the world's peoples. Economics should serve people's needs; societies should not be expected to reformulate themselves to fit economic models. The ultimate function of economic systems should be to equip the peoples and institutions of the world with the means to achieve the real purpose of development: that is, the cultivation of the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness."

Baha'i International Community, 1998 Feb 18, Valuing Spirituality in Development

The heart of what Fairtrade is all about is the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty, which is a core principle of the Faith, Bahá'u'lláh taught us that economic injustice is a moral evil, in particular he wrote:-

"O YE RICH ONES ON EARTH!

The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease."

Bahá'u'lláh, The Persian Hidden Words No. 54

"O CHILDREN OF DUST!

Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor, lest heedlessness lead them into the path of destruction, and deprive them of the Tree of Wealth."

Bahá'u'lláh, The Persian Hidden Words No. 49

"Be generous unto them whom ye find in manifest poverty. O ye that are possessed of riches! Take heed lest outward appearance deter you from benevolent deeds in the path of God, the Lord of all mankind."

The Compilation of Compilations Volume I, p. 513

We Bahá'ís believe that productive work is a form of worship and Bahá'u'lláh instructs us to work:-

"Please God, the poor may exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood. This is a duty which, in this most great Revelation, hath been prescribed unto every one, and is accounted in the sight of God as a goodly deed. "

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 202

But he says "strive to earn the means of livelihood", now an awful lot of the world live in poverty, because we won't pay a little bit more for our tea, coffee, sugar etc., and these people are working and are trying to earn a livelihood. But because of our insatiable demand for cheaper and cheaper products, they are denied the ability to earn a fair income, and Fairtrade products look to redress that.

"They who are possessed of riches, however, must have the utmost regard for the poor"

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 202

"Service to the friends is service to the Kingdom of God, and consideration shown to the poor is one of the greatest teachings of God."

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 2

The human and material resources at our disposal must be used for the long-term good of all, not for the short-term advantage of a few. This can be done only if cooperation becomes the basis of organised economic activity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that cooperation gives life to society just as the life of an organism is maintained by the cooperation of the various elements of which it is composed:-

...the base of life is this mutual aid and helpfulness, and the cause of destruction and non-existence would be the interruption of this mutual assistance. The more the world aspires to civilization the more this important matter of cooperation becomes manifest.

Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Divine Art of Living, p. 108.

Fairtrade is about justice, its about fairness, so let's look at what the writings have to say about justice:-

"If thine eyes be turned towards mercy, forsake the things that profit thee and cleave unto that which will profit mankind. And if thine eyes be turned towards justice, choose thou for thy neighbour that which thou chooseth for thyself."

Baha'u'llah, Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 64

"O SON OF SPIRIT

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbour. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behoveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes."

Bahá'u'lláh, The Arabic Hidden Words No. 2

"And among the teachings of His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh is justice and right. Until these are realized on the plane of existence, all things shall be in disorder and remain imperfect."

Abdu'l-Baha, Baha'i World Faith - Abdu'l-Baha Section, p. 290

As Fairtrade has a guaranteed price for the crops produced, so workers can be paid a wage which will allow them to support their families and plan for the future, `Abdu'l-Bahá said:-

"Workmen should receive wages which assure them an adequate support, and when they cease work, becoming feeble or helpless, they should receive from the owner of the factory a sufficient pension. The wages should be high enough to satisfy the workmen with the amount they receive, so that they may be able to put a little aside for days of want and helplessness."

Abdu'l-Baha, Baha'i World Faith - Abdu'l-Baha Section, p. 281

Fairtrade also address how employers should treat their employees, clearly we do not want the people who work on the plantations where tea is grown to be abused and given few if any rights. `Abdu'l-Bahá also spoke about labour rights, he was quite clear that disputes between employer and employee are not merely private matters, but affect the entire public, and thus laws and regulations should be put in place to protect all.

"The rights of the working people are to be strongly preserved"

Abdu'l-Baha, Foundations of World Unity, p. 43

One of the ways that Fairtrade helps to empower worker is through the establishment of co-operatives, something which `Abdu'l-Bahá alluded to when he said:-

"The owners of properties, mines and factories should share their incomes with their employees and give a fairly certain percentage of their products to their workmen in

order that the employees may receive, beside their wages, some of the general income of the factory so that the employee may strive with his soul in the work."

Abdu'l-Baha, Foundations of World Unity, p. 43

"According to the divine law, employees should not be paid merely by wages. Nay, rather they should be partners in every work."

Dr. J.E. Esslemont, Baha'u'llah and the New Era, p. 145

I will finish with a passage from `Abdu'l-Bahá in which he likens the whole earth to a single family, and personally I think this is what sums everything up just nicely

"Although the body politic is one family yet because of lack of harmonious relations some members are comfortable and some in direst misery, some members are satisfied and some are hungry, some members are clothed in most costly garments and some families are in need of food and shelter. Why? Because this family lacks the necessary reciprocity and symmetry. This household is not well arranged. This household is not living under a perfect law. All the laws which are legislated do not ensure happiness. They do not provide comfort. Therefore a law must be given to this family by means of which all the members of this family will enjoy equal well-being and happiness.

Is it possible for one member of a family to be subjected to the utmost misery and to abject poverty and for the rest of the family to be comfortable? It is impossible unless those members of the family be senseless, atrophied, inhospitable, unkind. Then they would say, "Though these members do belong to our family -- let them alone. Let us look after ourselves. Let them die. So long as I am comfortable, I am honored, I am happy -- this my brother -- let him die. If he be in misery let him remain in misery, so long as I am comfortable. If he is hungry let him remain so; I am satisfied. If he is without clothes, so long as I am clothed, let him remain as he is. If he is shelterless, homeless, so long as I have a home, let him remain in the wilderness."

Such utter indifference in the human family is due to lack of control, to lack of a working law, to lack of kindness in its midst. If kindness had been shown to the members of this family surely all the members thereof would have enjoyed comfort and happiness."

Abdu'l-Baha, Foundations of World Unity, p. 38