

Negotiating the Spaces of Fairtrade in South Africa's Wine Industry

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I began my 14-month doctoral dissertation research in October 2010. This multi-sited research is based in three regions in South Africa's Western Cape Province: Cape Town and two rural wine producing communities, one in the Breede River Valley and one in the Oliphants River Valley. This research focuses on policies flows and transformations within the Fairtrade movement in South Africa, specifically in the wine industry. Globally certifiable since 1997 and in South Africa since 2004, Fairtrade is a trade-not-aid approach to sustainable development that aims to empower producers and workers who have been marginalized by global capitalism.

This project is based on two guiding research questions: 1) How do the various stakeholders within the Fairtrade system influence policy transformation within both Fairtrade and Western Cape agrarian reform efforts; and 2) What do these negotiations and power plays mean for the ways in which policy is implemented and for on-the-ground realities such as business sustainability and farm worker livelihoods?

I worked with a variety of stakeholders in order to address these questions. These stakeholders—whom I have termed “agentic actors” to represent each individual's relative power within the system—include farm owners, managers, and workers; winemakers; Fairtrade International, Fairtrade Africa, and Fairtrade South Africa personnel; NGOs; and government officials.

There are seven primary policy transformations that have occurred over the course of the past year: 1) new fairly-traded certification bodies are being introduced in South Africa, thus challenging



Fairtrade International's power; 2) Fairtrade Network (formerly Fairtrade South Africa) has become increasingly inclusive and aims to represent a broadly-defined fairly-traded family in South Africa; 3) Fairtrade International and Fairtrade Label South Africa have shifted towards a focus on corporate clients that bring in larger license fees, thus generating more income to grow the Fairtrade brand; 4) the additional certification barrier of state-led Black Economic Empowerment compliance for South African producers is being reconsidered; 5) a ban on the export of Fairtrade-certified bulk wine is being considered; 6) environmental standards on pesticide usage on vines are being challenged and reviewed; and 7) Fairtrade is reevaluating who the “owners” of the Fairtrade certificate should be, with serious implications for the future of the movement and power relations within the value chain.

Preliminary findings have shown that workers on Fairtrade certified farms experience better living and working conditions than their non-fairtrade counterparts and feel more a part of decision-making processes both on-farm and within wider trade and agrarian reform

discussions. However, alternative trade paradigms like Fairtrade often fall prey to the same marginalization patterns that define conventional global capitalism, likely because Fairtrade is not revolutionary, but rather uses the free market to provide alternatives to conventional capitalism. I have also found that Fairtrade has not changed paternalistic power relationships at the sites of production, with workers remaining excluded from many business and policy decisions, despite their ownership share. Fairtrade involvement and certification has also not necessarily served to promote transparency or prevent corruption. Lastly, Fairtrade's increasing focus on corporate clients has left existing producers with little guidance or support, which has resulted in the continued marginalization and disillusionment of workers, Fairtrade's intended beneficiaries.

Alison Montgomery is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology and a former FLAS fellow (Swahili, 2007-2009 and Afrikaans, summer 2010). Her research is funded by Fulbright IIE and the National Science Foundation DDIG.