

Targeting the 'Mainstream' Consumer:

An Evaluation of Public Outreach Strategies in
'Fairtrade Towns'

Supervisor:
Bas van Heur

Course:
MARBLE Nature and the City

Name: Nora Große
Student Nr: i504793
Pigeonhole: 272
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1. Introduction

Many authors (Sonnino, 2009; Donald et al., 2010; Dixon et al., 2007) have criticised the conventional agro-industrial food system for failing to provide a sustainable, equitable way of global food production and consumption. As few multinational corporations (MNCs) have come to control global food production and processing, nutrients travel various distant places before arriving on the end consumer's plate. This has led to a growing disconnection between producers and consumers and a lack of transparency in the production process: Consumers do not know where their food comes from and under which conditions it was produced. Furthermore, intense competition between MNCs has caused an increased application of efficiency-related techniques at the expense of human rights¹, animal welfare and the environment. This is particularly the case for food production in most developing countries, characterized by extremely low wages and inhumane working conditions (ibid.).

As a response to the various economic, social and environmental problems caused by the dominant agro-industrial food system, alternative food networks (AFNs) have received increasing attention within recent years (Venn et al., 2006; Marsden et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2003). AFNs denote any type of initiative “attempting to reconfigure relationships between food producers and food consumers” (Venn et al., 2006, p.248). One initiative addressing the *socio-economic* deficiencies of the conventional food system on a global scale is ‘Fair Trade’ (FT). Since in the 1960s, the FT movement has lobbied for better trading conditions with the Global South² in order to guarantee Southern producers a ‘fair’ and sustainable living (Fridell, 2010). Through the establishment of alternative trading channels providing farmers with a higher price and better working conditions, Fairtrade has been credited for fostering North-South solidarity and for re-linking Northern consumers and Southern producers in unique ways (Raynolds, 2002). Hence, it can be considered a more ‘just’ alternative to the conventional food and trading system.

However, for most of its existence, Fairtrade has had a very limited public outreach. FT products have mainly been distributed by so-called alternative trading organizations (ATOs) and bought by the ‘ideologically committed’ consumer activist. With the arrival of national and international labelling and certification organizations in the late 1980s, Fairtrade

¹ This article embraces the UN's definition of ‘human rights’ as encompassing political, social, economic and cultural rights (UN, 1948).

² The terms ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ are used in the globalization and development literature which witnesses a North-South divide between richer countries in the Northern hemisphere and poorer countries in the Southern hemisphere. The terms will be used interchangeably with ‘richer’/‘poorer’ countries and ‘developed’/‘developing countries’.

arguably gained increased recognition and trust with rather ‘conventional’ consumers (Fisher, 2009). Another recent development has been the “entry of fair trade food products into mainstream distribution channels” such as supermarkets (Low & Davenport, 2005, p.150). Fairtrade’s ‘mainstreaming’ is a response to broader demands for Fairtrade’s greater public outreach in order to have an impact on Southern producers’ lives (Hudson & Hudson, 2003; Tallontire, 2002). Yet, some scholars have been hesitant about Fairtrade’s dissolution in mainstream channels as these may neglect the political message behind the movement (Low & Davenport, 2005, Johnston, 2002).

One contemporary initiative aiming at stimulating the consumption of Fairtrade-labelled and certified products is the Fairtrade Town campaign. First launched by British citizens in 2001, the campaign quickly spread across the UK and the globe, with currently over 1000 campaigns running in 23 countries (Fairtradetowns.org, n.d., *Home*). The campaign’s aim is to promote the sale and consumption of FT products and to raise awareness and knowledge about Fairtrade within the local community. Becoming a Fairtrade Town requires the compliance with certain criteria, including the municipality’s commitment to support and stimulate the supply and sale of Fairtrade products. The criteria further stipulate a certain involvement of different local businesses, organizations and the media (ibid.). Overall, the initiative appears to address the problem of Fairtrade’s public outreach in many innovative ways and thus provides an interesting case to investigate.

Due to its recency, the Fairtrade Town campaign has hitherto been a heavily under-researched area. Some academic work has contextualised Fairtrade Towns within the broader Fairtrade debate, but there is a strong *British* bias without any existing research on the *non-British* Fairtrade Town movement. Furthermore, the dimension of a specific *locality* has almost entirely been neglected in academia. Case studies of specific Fairtrade Towns appear to be restricted to the international Fairtrade Town website.³ There is thus a need to fill this void in the context of necessary research into viable strategies to promote Fairtrade’s public outreach. ‘Viable’ hereby denotes strategies that are simultaneously economically sustainable – i.e., characterised by certain durable structures and mechanisms – and ethically just – i.e., satisfying demands for social inclusion and participation. On a broader level, this paper thereby aims to contribute to research into AFNs that could constitute a viable challenge to the conventional food system.

³ For specific case studies in every participating country, see <http://www.fairtradetowns.org/resources/case-studies/>

To counter the British bias within Fairtrade Town literature, this paper will concentrate on Groningen as the first Dutch Fairtrade Town. Having complied with the Fairtrade Town criteria for the third time in a row since 2008, Groningen stands out on a national scale and has served as a pioneer case for other Dutch towns that are in the process of meeting the criteria. A concentration on one particular locality therefore implies certain relevance *beyond* the locality concerned. In order to investigate strategies of public outreach within the Fairtrade Town initiative, my analytical framework constitutes actor-network theory, combined with semi-structured interviews and an analysis of secondary literature. I will claim that the Groningen campaign has successfully managed to extend Fairtrade's public outreach due to its close relations with the national and international Fairtrade (town) network and the variety of mainstreaming strategies applied. However, I will argue that the Fairtrade Town campaign has largely been a top-down process steered by the municipality with limited inclusion and active participation of local citizens.

In order to substantiate my claim, this paper will be structured as follows. First, the Fairtrade Town campaign will be placed into the broader academic debate surrounding Fairtrade. This will comprise Fairtrade's evolution from 'movement' to 'network' and from 'alternative' to 'mainstream', followed by an outline of existing conceptualisations of Fairtrade Towns as 'collective' Fairtrade consumption. Second, key points from actor-network theory relevant for my case study will be clarified. Third, the selected case study on Groningen will be introduced together with methodological considerations. Subsequently, key findings will be presented in light of my theoretical framework. This will result in conceptualisations of 'Fairtrade Town Groningen' as embedded in the (inter)national Fairtrade (town) network, as an example of broader market-oriented mainstreaming strategies, as a 'collective ethical space' and as a top-down initiative. Finally, the conclusion will summarise key arguments and make suggestions for further research.

2. Conceptualising Fairtrade Towns: Lessons from the Fairtrade Debate

In order to understand the forces driving and sustaining the Fairtrade Town campaign, it is indispensable to consider the broader dynamics behind and the debate surrounding Fairtrade. Much of the current academic literature is concerned with a tension between Fairtrade's original 'radical' political aims and its increasing institutionalisation and professionalization on a global scale. Fridell (2010) has most explicitly conceptualised this debate as Fairtrade's move from *movement* to *network*. It touches upon a paradox between a desire to maintain Fairtrade's political/ideological character and its *need* for a wider public outreach in order to have a far-reaching impact. Considering Fairtrade Towns as an example of public outreach strategies, this debate is highly relevant for my case study.

In particular, within recent years, a heated debate has evolved around Fairtrade's 'mainstreaming'. The latter denotes Fairtrade's increasing outreach to commercial distribution channels in the aim of increasing Fairtrade consumption and awareness particularly in the global North. As will become clear, the Fairtrade Town initiative is deeply embedded in the current academic debate on the potentials and dangers of 'mainstreaming' Fairtrade. However, before delving into this debate, Fairtrade's evolution from 'movement' to 'network' will be helpful in understanding the arguments made afterwards

2.1 From Fairtrade 'Movement' to Fairtrade 'Network'

In the aim of conceptualising Fairtrade's evolution, some scholars draw a distinction between the Fairtrade *movement* and the Fairtrade *network* (Raynolds, 2002; Tallontire, 2006; Fridell, 2010). The former refers to a broader, informal social movement to challenge conventional Northern production, trade and consumption relations with the South (Raynolds, 2002, p.404). Most scholars trace its roots in charity work and left-wing political activism of the 1950s and 1960s (Fisher, 2009, p.986). Its aims were guided by the development school's ideas of the 1970s and 1980s which criticised the structural inequalities brought about and perpetuated by the global trading system⁴ (p.987). Southern governments, international organizations and Northern NGOs therefore lobbied for a wider reform of the international trading system (Fridell, 2010, p.458).

⁴ Most vigorously, adherents accused the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the post-1995 World Trade Organization (WTO) of perpetuating the South's structural dependency on the North.

This was combined with the creation of alternative trading channels which would *circumvent* the conventional corporate sector and thereby shield Southern producers from an ‘unjust’ trading system (Fisher, 2009, p.987). These channels concentrated on “long-term partnerships between alternative trading organizations (ATOs) and producer co-operatives” which guaranteed a fair price and arguably established relations of *trust* between Southern producers and Northern consumers (Renard, 2005, p.422). Hence, the Fairtrade *movement* combined larger political aims with a strategy of personalising consumer/producer relations. The movement was sustained by a strong ideological commitment of its adherents bound by values of global redistributive justice. These characteristics – or their loss – will be revisited in the later discussion on Fairtrade’s move from ‘alternative’ to ‘mainstream’.

Despite a rise in sales of fairly traded produce during the 1970s in most of Northern Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world, Fairtrade’s public outreach remained marginal (Low & Davenport, 2005, p.146). One of the contributing factors was the global recession which turned Northern consumers increasingly cost-conscious and resulted in an overall free trade agenda (p.147). Most dramatically, the suspension of the ICO’s⁵ Coffee Agreement in 1988 led to a drop in the world coffee price and an ensuing ‘coffee crisis’ in Southern coffee-exporting countries. As a response, the *Max Havelaar* Foundation was founded in the same year to help coffee exporting producers survive (Fisher, 2009, p.988). This event signified coffee’s entry into the Fairtrade market, now constituting the “backbone of Fairtrade” with well-established markets in most parts of the world (Raynolds, Murray & Taylor, 2004, p.1110). It also signified the introduction of Fairtrade certification through standards and labelling and thus, the emergence of the Fairtrade *network*. The latter will be crucial for my case analysis, as the Fairtrade Town campaign is deeply embedded in it.

Fridell (2010) defines the Fairtrade *network* as “a formal system of NGOs that connects peasants and workers in the South with partners in the North through a system of fair trade rules” (p.458). Within recent years, this system has been elaborated by various regional and international alliances of labelling, importing and distribution organizations.⁶ Most crucially, in 1997, different national standard-setting and certification organisations that had evolved after 1988 were merged into the *Fair Trade Labelling Organisations International* (FLO). In 2004, the FLO, the *International Fair Trade Association* (IFTA, now WFTO), the *Network of European Worldshops* (NEWS) and the *European Fair Trade Association* (EFTA)

⁵ International Coffee Organisation

⁶ This has included the creation of the *European Fair Trade Association* (EFTA) in 1987, the *International Fair Trade Association* (IFTA, now WFTO) in 1989, and the *Network of European Worldshops* (NEWS) in 1994.

created an umbrella organisation called *FINE*⁷ to coordinate their advocacy activities. Together, these organisations elaborated a common definition⁸, vision⁹ and principles¹⁰ of what constitutes ‘Fair Trade’ (FINE, 2001). The ‘10 Principles’ include, among others, a price premium paid on top of the usual market price, long-term agreements with and advance payments for producer associations, and investment in social infrastructure (WFTO, 2011). This way, Fairtrade organizations are supposed to ensure a sustainable, equitable and secure living to Southern farmers (ibid.).

What does the Fairtrade ‘network’ imply for strategies of public outreach such as the Fairtrade Town campaign? Inevitably, the arrival of standard labelling has provided for Fairtrade’s greater recognition with consumers. Furthermore, objective and transparent labelling and certification standards and mechanisms have invested Fairtrade with a certain credibility and trust with otherwise sceptical consumers (Raynolds, 2002, p.414). Finally, links with importing organizations could organize Fairtrade production and trading on a larger scale, contributing to larger markets and access points for Fairtrade products. The establishment of various institutional links on a global scale has provided Fairtrade with certain durable structures that have been referred to as the *global* Fairtrade actor-network (Alexander & Nicholls, 2006; Dicken et al., 2001, p.103). Arguably, public outreach strategies which share close interlinkages with this global network may more easily gain recognition and credibility with consumers. However, the question remains whether this also leads to consumers’ increased acceptance and buying behaviour in favour of Fairtrade.

Finally, Fridell (2010) criticises the Fairtrade ‘network’ of neglecting the ‘movement’s’ far-reaching political objectives. Whereas the latter aimed to provide an alternative to the conventional trading system, the ‘network’ has dismissed this aim by operating *within* it. By establishing links with importers and certification organizations, the Fairtrade ‘network’ is alleged to increasingly operate within conventional market structures (ibid.). On the other hand, it has been argued that only an extension to conventional channels of distribution will contribute to more sales and will therefore have a greater positive impact on Southern producers (Tallontire, 2002). This points to a potential paradox between

⁷ Referring to the initials of the four organizations FLO, IFTA, NEWS and EFTA (FINE, 2001).

⁸ “Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South.” (FINE, 2001)

⁹ “Fairtrade’s strategic intent is: deliberately to work with marginalised producers and workers in order to help them move from a position of vulnerability to security and economic self-sufficiency, to empower producers and workers as stakeholders in their own organisations, actively to play a wider role in the global arena to achieve greater equity in international trade.” (FINE, 2001)

¹⁰ (1) Fair Trade organisations, (2) Trading partnership, (3) Better trading conditions, (4) Securing producers’ and workers’ rights. For a detailed overview, see FINE (2001).

strategies of public outreach and an appeal to political commitment and social values that only a certain *category* of people may identify with. This paradox will be elaborated upon in the following discussion of Fairtrade's recent turn from 'alternative' to 'mainstream'.

2.2 Fairtrade's Move from 'Alternative' to 'Mainstream'

Within recent years, a heated debate has evolved around Fairtrade's move from 'alternative' to 'mainstream' (Low & Davenport, 2005; 2007; Raynolds, 2009; Tallontire, 2006). As shown above, adherents of the Fairtrade *movement* were united by a common political cause and a strong ideological commitment arising from shared values of redistributive justice. This shared, exclusive identity isolated them from the 'mainstream' consumer, arguably contributing to Fairtrade's very limited public outreach. Moreover, main distribution channels included so-called 'Worldshops' and Alternative Trading Organizations (ATOs) specifically designated for the sale of fairly traded produce. These alternative channels of distribution thus *exclusively* relied on the politically-dedicated consumer actively going to these stores while failing to target the 'mainstream' consumer.

In contrast, the Fairtrade *network* provided the basis for increasing links with more 'conventional' retailers such as supermarkets. 'Mainstreaming' denotes Fairtrade's increasing outreach to commercial distribution channels in the aim of increasing Fairtrade consumption and awareness, particularly in the Global North (Low & Davenport, 2005, p.150). On the one hand, 'mainstreaming' – particularly of fair trade *food* products – “has been hailed as a major victory for fair trade” (Low & Davenport, 2005, p.150). As Fairtrade products become more easily available in ordinary venues, consumers will also *buy more* Fairtrade. Furthermore, with an expanding Fairtrade market, a greater variety of products becomes available to consumers (*ibid.*). In fact, Low & Davenport (2007) show that since the late 1980s, the global Fairtrade assortment has grown from one coffee brand to 300 foods and 800 products overall (p.339). Eventually, greater visibility is argued to create greater awareness and knowledge of the Fairtrade concept and principles, and greater Fairtrade sales are claimed to benefit a larger number of Southern producers in the long run (Low & Davenport, 2005, p.150.).

On the other hand, Low and Davenport (2005) regard Fairtrade's 'mainstreaming' as “a slippery slope towards marginalizing fair trade principles” (p.151). Firstly, the scholars (2007) doubt the political commitment by mainstream retailers, as the latter “do not endorse the radical, transformative message of fair trade” (p.339). Johnston (2002) even accuses

‘mainstream’ Fairtrade of promoting ‘(hyper)consumerism’ as its strategies focus on stimulating the supply *of* and demand *for* Fairtrade products (quoted in Low & Davenport, 2007, p.339). By conveying the message that *buying more* is the best way to help our planet, these strategies suggests that bringing about change can be “easy, clean and fun” (ibid., 340). In this context, Fairtrade marketing strategies are criticised as emphasising ‘quality’ and ‘price’ rather than Fairtrade’s political and social characteristics (Raynolds, 2009). There have been a variety of other doubts on Fairtrade’s ethical justice as it increasingly enters mainstream channels which go beyond the scope of this paper (Fisher, 2009, p.990). What should be remembered at this point is that increasing connections with mainstream retailers are argued to “erode” Fairtrade principles and thereby to “depoliticise” Fairtrade (Fisher, 2009, p.990; Low & Davenport, 2007, p.338).

Few authors have discussed Fairtrade Towns in the context of the ‘mainstreaming’ debate. Most explicitly, Low & Davenport (2005) question whether Fairtrade Towns constitute an *alternative* to the usual ‘high street’ mainstreaming or whether they are ‘just’ an alternative high street – but the scholars do not provide an answer themselves (p.151). Hence, in my case study, I will evaluate the Fairtrade Town campaign in light of the above ‘mainstreaming’ features. To investigate its positive features, I will examine the links established to mainstream distribution channels and how this contributes to an increased availability and product range of Fairtrade on a local scale. In order to examine whether the Fairtrade campaign ‘depoliticises’ Fairtrade, I will investigate the agenda of different mainstreaming actors to participate in the campaign, their potential consumerist and market-oriented discourse, and a potential focus on ‘quality’ and ‘price’ rather than Fairtrade’s backgrounds in the campaign’s marketing strategies.

2.3. From ‘individual’ to ‘collective’ Fairtrade consumption

Another criticism of ‘mainstream’ Fairtrade marketing strategies voiced by Low & Davenport’s (2007) is their reliance on *individual* consumer choice (p.338). Due to the complexities and contradictions of ethical consumption, the scholars argue that the individual is *never* an all-time ethical consumer (p.342). Consequently, they consider marketing strategies that rely on the individual actively going to the store and buying Fairtrade insufficient (pp.343-45). As a response, they credit Fairtrade Towns for overcoming a reliance on the individual consumer by uniting consumers into ‘*voluntary* ethical spaces’ of collective

action (pp.343-44). This raises the question which strategies the Fairtrade Town initiative employs to involve citizens into a 'collective' ethical space, thereby overcoming a reliance on the individual. One may also ask what the campaign does to educate consumers 'ethically' and thereby to modify individual consumer choice.

In a similar vein, Malpass, Cloke, Barnett and Clark (2007) credit the campaign's "emphasis on *collective* rather than *individual* espousal of fairtrade" (p.3). They consider Fairtrade Towns as practicing "placed rather than seemingly placeless consumption" as people collectively decide to espouse Fairtrade within a particular locality (p.4). The scholars also emphasise Fairtrade Towns' bottom-up political nature by characterising them as "unique people's movement[s]" and an example of "fairtrade activism" (p.3). In their analysis of Fairtrade Towns as the 'place'-oriented phase of ethical marketing,¹¹ Alexander and Nicholls (2006) similarly define Fairtrade Towns as "grass-roots movements" (p.1247). Low & Davenport (2005) further praise Fairtrade Towns for "engaging with people as both citizens and consumers" (p.151). Finally, Nicholls and Opal (2005) stress the campaign's "commercial and educative aims", its "aims to generate mass-market interest...through local organic growth", and its "community dimension" (p.173).

From the above, it appears that academics writing on Fairtrade Towns have credited their 'collective', bottom-up nature. Fairtrade towns supposedly bring back the 'political' into Fairtrade by involving citizens and by educating them about Fairtrade. The Fairtrade Town campaign is thus argued to contribute to Fairtrade's public outreach in unique ways. A scholarly emphasis on 'place' denotes that the campaign may actually manage to establish certain durable structures which contribute to Fairtrade's public outreach in the long run. Hence, the following case study will examine the strategies of outreach pursued by the Groningen Fairtrade Town campaign. It will also consider to what extent the campaign has involved local citizens as consumer activists, thereby qualifying it as a 'grass-roots movement'. Before introducing my case study, I will elaborate on actor-network theory as a central analytical framework guiding my data collection and analysis.

¹¹ Followed by an emphasis on process, product and price (Alexander & Nicholls, 2006)

3. Analytical Framework: Actor-Network Theory

Overall, actor-network theory has a variety of approaches and applications throughout its evolution within the last decades. An explanation of the comprehensive theory is beyond the scope of this paper. Particularly useful for the following case analysis is actor-network theory's emphasis on the interrelationship between *structure* and people's *relations* in constituting a network (Dicken, Kelly, Olds & Yeung, 2001, p.94). According to Dicken et al. (2001), *networks* are "hybrid collectifs of humans and non-humans...enable[ing] actors to maintain social relations, spanning across space and all scales" (p.102). *Actors* can be people or any kinds of tools and objects, while *relations* "can exist in the forms of rules, conventions, values, regulations and so on" (ibid.). To analyse these two elements, actor-network theory takes a particular look at the *intentions* or *agenda* of key actors and the *power relations* among them (ibid., p.94).

The above definition emphasises that networks can operate on varying *geographical* and *functional scales*. Varying *geographical* scales mean that networks on a local, national or international scale are of equal importance, since "a network is never any bigger than another one; it is simply longer or more intensely connected" (p.103). In the context of the Fairtrade Town campaign, this may refer to the local, national and international network of Fairtrade Towns and of global Fairtrade norms and principles. An analysis of the *local* Fairtrade (town) network in relation to the (*inter*)*national* level will thus help to assess how the campaign was initiated and how it is potentially sustained in the long term.

Varying *functional* scales imply that structures which may seem functionally separate are indeed interconnected through unique nodes or links created. In my case study, this perspective will be useful in analysing the campaign's strategies of public outreach. If the campaign manages to extend Fairtrade's scope to various local actors from different fields, it may be considered 'successful' in contributing to Fairtrade's greater public outreach. Particularly salient in this context will be the *agenda*, i.e. motivation or vision of actors participating in the campaign. This will shed light on the contribution of certain actors in sustaining the local network and their degree of political or ideological commitment. The latter will be useful in evaluating whether the campaign 'depoliticises' Fairtrade.

Another crucial aspect raised in actor-network analysis is a distinction between *human* and *non-human actors* in constituting a network. A consideration of their interplay will be used to assess the quality and effectiveness of the campaign's marketing strategies. This includes the campaign's contributions to local awareness and knowledge about Fairtrade

through various channels of communication. If, for instance, it employs a variety of public channels to disseminate in-depth information about Fairtrade, one may argue that it fulfils the function of a socially integrative and politically participatory initiative. If little information is disseminated about Fairtrade's backgrounds, but the emphasis is on Fairtrade's 'hip' character, this may be more effective in targeting a wider audience.

Finally, an analysis of the (*power*) *relations* between different local actors will shed light on the degree of citizen participation and inclusion within the campaign. A closer examination of the *driving* actors during its initiation and implementation will help to evaluate whether the campaign qualifies as a 'grass-roots movement' as suggested earlier. If, for instance, the local population initiated the Fairtrade Town campaign and had an active stake during its implementation, the campaign rather worked 'bottom-up'. If, however, the driving forces have constituted more formalised or institutionalised actors, for instance from politics and business, the Fairtrade Town campaign may rather be considered a 'top-down' process.

Overall, within current urban studies literature, there has been a renewed interest in participatory decision-making as it is considered a deeper, more transparent and partly even more effective form of democracy (Silver, Scott & Kazepov, 2010; Cohen, 1996). Decisions arising from direct or deliberate democratic mechanisms are considered more legitimate as they are less likely to represent the elites' interests (Silver et al., 2010). Citizen inclusion and participation have also been argued to make governance more efficient as they take into account practical, hands-on problems (p.459). On the other hand, Briggs (2008) points to a potential "trade-off between inclusiveness and effectiveness", as top-down processes benefit from a broader overview and can internalise external influences (p.315, quoted in Silver et al., 2010, p.459). Thus, evaluating the Fairtrade town campaign as 'bottom-up' or 'top-down' will testify of its efficiency, democratic quality and potential sustainability in the long run.

After an outline of the general analytical framework, this paper will now apply actor-network theory in a specific case study. The structure used in this part will guide the subsequent analysis which will evaluate the Fairtrade Town campaign Groningen in light of the broader Fairtrade debate. Yet, before delving into my findings, I will give a short case introduction and explain methodological considerations.

4. Case Study: Fair Trade Town Groningen

4.1 Case Introduction



Groningen is a ‘typically Dutch’ medium-sized student town in the north of the Netherlands. It hosts about 190,000 inhabitants, making it the urban and economic centre of the northern Netherlands (Hanze Hogeschool, n.d., *25 Facts*). One-fifth of its citizens (40,000) are students¹² and according to a Dutch survey

conducted in 2007, it is the second best student city after Amsterdam (Dream Foundation, n.d.). In fact, Groningen is the youngest and the safest¹³ town of the Netherlands with a vibrant night life and bikes constituting the main means of transportation (ibid.).

Source picture: Wattferien (n.d.).

The town was selected for a case study as it – together with Goes – became the first Dutch ‘Fairtrade Gemeente’ on 9 March 2009 and as it has been able to keep its title during the last two years (Ode Magazine, 2009). Consequently, it potentially represents a best-practice case for Fairtrade Towns in the Netherlands and, to a certain extent, Fairtrade Towns in general. This makes Groningen a particularly interesting case to investigate.



Source picture: Groninger Gezinsbode (2009).

¹² Students are mainly distributed among two main higher education institutions. The *Rijksuniversiteit Groningen* is the main university and the *Hanze Hogeschool* is a school of applied sciences.

¹³ According to a voting in 2004 (Hanze Hogeschool, n.d., *25 Facts*)

4.2 Methodology

My data collection has comprised a variety of secondary literature, including the Dutch and international websites of Fairtrade Towns¹⁴, local and national newspaper articles, the council's press releases¹⁵, policy documents¹⁶, and websites of local and regional organizations and businesses involved. The council's project manager and members of the local steering group soon evolved as crucial actors within the local campaign, so they were contacted for personal interviews. I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with 9 actors, distributed over two on-site interview rounds and two telephone interviews. The council's project manager of the Fairtrade Town campaign was interviewed twice due to her central role during the campaign's implementation and her comprehensive overview over different actors and processes involved. Interviews with economic and social actors from the local steering group aimed at incorporating as many views as possible in order to arrive at a nuanced picture of similarities and divergences in aims, strategies and opinions on the campaign. As membership of the local steering group was subject to many changes, I made a selection of present members from most involved organizations.¹⁷ Finally, an interview with the former chairman of the green-leftist party *GroenLinks Groningen* helped to gain an insight into the political processes guiding the campaign.

An important tool for the evaluation of my interviews was interviewee's *discourse*. Discourse analysis presupposes the importance of language as social interaction (Tonkiss, 2000, p.246). One of its important tenets is therefore that language rarely *reflects* but is used as a tool to *construct* reality (ibid.). In my analysis, I particularly paid attention to recurrent keywords and themes; variation (including internal contradictions and inconsistencies); emphasis and repetition; and silences (p.254-260). I slightly included verbal and non-verbal indicators like pauses indicating hesitation, filling words, verbal emphasis on certain words etc. Discourse analysis thus helped to find out which factors interviewees specifically deemed important over others. Due to the richness of material gained from interviews, I mostly included arguments made by *various* actors to increase the reliability of my research.

¹⁴ <http://www.fairtradegemeenten.nl>; www.fairtradetowns.org

¹⁵ www.gemeente-groningen.nl

¹⁶ The council's project manager provided me with the completed Application Forms to become Fairtrade Town for all three years, the national jury's judgments, the initial project plan drafted by the COS, and the council's 2010 Annual Report.

¹⁷ My interview partners included representatives from: Rabobank (major international, cooperative-based financial service provider), PMOG [Platform of Socially Responsible Businesses], KvK [Chamber of Commerce], Horeca (Dutch association of businesses involved in Hotels, Restaurants and Catering), Hanze Hogeschool (School of Applied Sciences), the local Worldshop and the COS [Centre for International Cooperation]. The steering group members not contacted for an interview include the GCC [Groninger City Club] and MKB Noord [Small- and Medium-sized Businesses].

4.3 Findings

4.3.1 Creating 'trust': Local embeddedness in the (inter)national Fairtrade (town) network



Groningen's declaration as a 'Fairtrade Gemeente' was not an event in isolation. In fact, it is currently one out of over 1000 towns¹⁸ in 23 countries calling themselves 'Fairtrade Town' in their particular language (Fairtradetowns.org, n.d., *About*).¹⁹

Source: Fairtrade Foundation (2011).

Its beginnings can be traced back to a public town meeting in the English town Garstang in April 2000, when citizens almost unanimously voted to become the world's first Fairtrade Town (GarstangFairtrade.org, 2011). A month earlier, representatives from the council, businesses, schools, churches and other community organisations had been asked by the local Oxfam group to attend a meal comprising mainly Fairtrade products, where they signed a pledge agreeing to use or sell Fairtrade products (Fairtradetowns.org, n.d., *Garstang*). The initiative was soon taken up by the UK's *Fairtrade Foundation*²⁰ which elaborated five criteria in order to become a Fairtrade Town. These include:

1. *"Local council passes a resolution supporting Fairtrade, and agrees to serve Fairtrade products (for example, in meetings, offices and canteens).*
2. *A range of Fairtrade products are available locally (targets vary from country to country).*
3. *Schools, workplaces, places of worship and community organisations support Fairtrade and use Fairtrade products whenever possible.*
4. *Media coverage and events raise awareness and understanding of Fairtrade across the community.*
5. *A Fairtrade steering group representing different sectors is formed to co-ordinate action around the goals and develop them over the years."*

(Fairtradetowns.org, n.d., *About, The five goals*)

¹⁸ On June 4, 2011, the movement celebrated its 1000th Fairtrade town (Fairtradetowns.org, n.d., *Home*).

¹⁹ For a detailed overview of the number of cities per country, see

https://spreadsheets.google.com/pub?key=tpVc-rN3plsE_QoaOUpqRjw&single=true&gid=0&output=html

²⁰ The UK's main Fairtrade labelling initiative and member of FLO (FLO, 2011, *Labelling initiatives*).

The *Fairtrade Foundation* promoted the campaign which soon spread across the country²¹, Europe²² and the globe.²³ In the Netherlands, there have been 16 towns declaring themselves ‘Fairtrade Town’ and there are currently 77 towns in the process of application (Fairtrade Gemeente, 2011, *Home*).²⁴ Hence, Groningen is inextricably linked to the international Fairtrade Town movement through a set of internationally-agreed principles of what constitutes a Fairtrade Town.

While guided by these principles, each national campaign has a separate website, sponsors and project managers, and the criteria can be slightly modified according to national preferences. The Dutch campaign was introduced on 7th July 2007 by *Max Havelaar Foundation*, the *Dutch Association of Worldshops (DAWS)* and the *Dutch Centre for International Cooperation (COS)* (van Duuren, 2010, p.1). The *Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO)* soon joined as a partner (ibid.). The latter are responsible for the campaign’s coordination and monitoring on a national level. The national coordination has agreed on a set of six criteria including the ones mentioned above and a sixth criterion to stimulate corporate social responsibility (CSR). Another modification includes a transferral of criterion 5 as the first criterion (ibid.). The national campaign’s website lists the criteria in the following way:

1. *“Local working group*
2. *The local government*
3. *Stores and ‘horeca’*²⁵
4. *Businesses and organizations*
5. *Media attention*
6. *Corporate social responsibility”*

(Fairtrade Gemeente, n.d., *Home*).



Source: Max Havelaar (2010).

The annual application form is formulated and distributed by Melinda Choo, the main national coordinator from *DAWS* (Council, 2011). Furthermore, a national jury composed of former politicians and intellectuals from different fields evaluates a town’s compliance and gives a ruling every year (Council, 2009-11). Hence, while linked to the international movement, Groningen maintains considerably closer ties with the *national* Fairtrade Town

²¹ The UK currently hosts over 500 Fairtrade Towns (with the number constantly increasing).

²² The first European countries to take up the campaign included Belgium, France, Italy and Sweden (Fairtradetowns.org, n.d.).

²³ For instance, campaigns are running in the US, Canada, Australia, Japan and Ghana (Fairtradetowns.org, n.d.).

²⁴ This number may be inaccurate at the time of publication as it is constantly increasing.

²⁵ Referring to the hotel/restaurant/catering sector

network. These durable structures arguably contribute to the campaign's continuity and 'professional' character on a local scale.

In addition, Groningen's campaign is inextricably linked to the broader national and international Fairtrade network. This is because each campaign prescribes the sale of Fairtrade-labelled and certified products, i.e., products labelled by any of FLO's 23 members.²⁶ As a result, any town initiative is automatically connected to its country's particular labelling initiative – and the internationally prescribed FLO norms and principles. The Dutch associate to the FLO is *Stichting Max Havelaar Netherlands* – which is also one of the main sponsors of the campaign (FLO, 2011, *Fairtrade Labelling*). Furthermore, Dutch imports of Fairtrade-labelled and certified products mainly occur through *Fairtrade Original*, the single Dutch importing company recognized by EFTA. The Groningen campaign is thus inevitably tied to the overall national and international Fairtrade network through its direct or indirect connections with *Max Havelaar*, FLO and EFTA. In particular, referring to Fisher (2009), the internationally recognized *Max Havelaar* label arguably provides the campaign with a certain 'trust' with consumers.

Overall, it has become clear that the Fairtrade Town initiative is an example of the Fairtrade network – as opposed to the Fairtrade movement – due to its alliances with internationally recognized Fairtrade labelling, certification and importing organizations. A question that arises is whether embeddedness in the network inevitably means a distancing from the movement's political and ideological objectives. Indeed, almost all interviewees emphasised the imperative to “get rid of” Fairtrade's ‘hippie’²⁷ image in order to make it more receptive with consumers (interviews van den Bosch, 22-04-2011; de Vries, 20-04-2011; Joosse, 06-05-2011). The campaign's outreach strategy thus appears to imply a distancing from the rather radical, ideological edge of the 1960s Fairtrade movement.

Instead, most interviewees stressed the imperative of making Fairtrade “common”, “normal”, or “logical” (van den Bosch, interview, 22-04-2011). Most explicitly, van den Bosch would like to see Fairtrade become what is now the ‘Latte Macchiato’ in Dutch cafés – hip, trendy, and an integral part of each cafés menu (ibid.). Broersma was even more optimistic when stating that “Fairtrade will be the future...in 5 to 10 years...every product will be Fairtrade” (interview, 26-04-2011). This discourse goes to the core of Fairtrade's mainstreaming debate mentioned above. Hence, the following part will examine how the

²⁶ See http://www.fairtrade.net/labelling_initiatives1.0.html for an overview of all labelling initiatives per country recognized by FLO.

²⁷ The term used by most interviewees was ‘geitenwollensokken’, a uniquely Dutch term referring to “the Greens, the big beards, thick pullovers, people with long hair, Jesus sandals, socks out of goat wool” (de Vries, interview, 20-04-2011).

Fairtrade Town campaign contributes to Fairtrade's greater public outreach by applying a variety of mainstreaming strategies. Simultaneously, I will consider to what extent Fairtrade's political principles may become marginalized in the process. I will claim that the local Fairtrade network is an example of broader 'mainstreaming' practices, and that ideological commitment is overshadowed by strategic, market-oriented considerations of participating (business) actors.

4.3.2 'Depoliticising' Fairtrade? 'Mainstreaming' strategies in the Fairtrade campaign

Mainstream channels

In order to investigate the Fairtrade Town campaign's outreach practices, I considered the various *functional* scales at which local actors promote Fairtrade. The (inter)national Fairtrade Town criteria stipulate a variety of strategies for the spread of Fairtrade products in the local community. In particular, the third criterion²⁸ aims at spreading the use and sale of Fairtrade-labelled and certified products in local businesses. The criteria set by the national campaign were adapted to the local level, with specific requirements set per population and for each year.²⁹ The campaign further gives 'bonus points' for every local Worldshop compensating for an insufficient number in other sectors.

Overall, Groningen has been easily complying with the national criteria, partly even surpassing them in 2009.³⁰ Within subsequent years, the town has managed to particularly extend Fairtrade products in supermarkets³¹, the 'horeca', and 'other sectors' (Council 2009; 2011). Most prominently, the local *Jumbo* supermarket won the municipality's *Fairtrade Award* for its biggest assortment of Fairtrade products³² in Europe during all three years (Gezinsbode, 2009). In fact, most interview partners referred to *Jumbo* as the campaign's main driver³³ (interviews de Vries, 20-04-2011; van Duuren, 20-04-2011; Dijk, 19-04-2011).

²⁸ "A range of Fairtrade products are available locally (targets vary from country to country)." (see p.16)

²⁹ For 2009, the targets for Groningen's population of 184,500 included 17 clothing stores, 15 supermarkets, 3 gift shops / household supply stores, 2 "recreation enterprises" (e.g. tourism, cinema), 10 cafés / restaurants, and 10 "other sectors" incorporating Fairtrade products in their assortment (Council, 2008).

³⁰ With 19 supermarkets, 4 gift shops and 11 'other' (Council, 2009).

³¹ Including the biggest supermarkets *Lidl*, *Albert Heijn*, *Plus*, *Super de Boer* and *Jumbo* (Council, 2009).

³² 489 different products in 2009 (Council, 2009)

³³ Van Duuren used the word "trekker" (magnet, engine) (interview, 20-04-2011).



Left: During an onsite visit of the Jumbo supermarket, I reassured myself of the variety of products available on a Fairtrade ‘island’, but also of single items in each foods category.

Right: Entering the Jumbo, consumers are informed about the Fairtrade Award, but also about Fairtrade?

Source: Own photography (2011).

The variety of mainstream distribution channels addressed by the third criterion makes the Fairtrade Town campaign a clear example of broader ‘mainstreaming’ processes. Particularly striking is the fact that Worldshops are *not* part of the minimum criteria, but can serve as ‘bonus points’. This suggests a shifting emphasis in Fairtrade distribution channels from Worldshops to supermarkets, or from ‘alternative’ to ‘mainstream’. The example of *Jumbo* and other supermarkets shows that a great variety of Fairtrade products has become more easily accessible and available to Groningen’s citizens. The council’s project manager van Duuren confirms this: “Wholesalers have increased their supply [of Fairtrade products], because demand is higher...And you see that the supply of Fairtrade products has grown within recent years, since businesses ask for it” (interview, 20-4-2011). Furthermore, most interviewees emphasised that greater Fairtrade sales would also have a greater positive impact on producers in the global South (interviews Dijk, 19-04-2011; de Vries 20-04-2011).³⁴

³⁴ “[Fairtrade’s] turnover has to go up” (Dijk, interview, 19-04-2011). De Vries refers to “the farmers in the third world who in this manner [Fairtrade] also get a fair cent for the products they grow and the labour they are doing for that” (interview, 20-04-2011).

Mainstream actors

A bias towards mainstream *actors* is also evident in the membership of the local steering group, stipulated by the first criterion.³⁵ Despite various changes in membership within the last three years, at least half of the members have included representatives from the area of business and finance.³⁶ *MKB Noord* is an association of small- and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) for the northern Netherlands, *GCC* is an association of local businesses in Groningen's city centre, the *KvK* supports people owning or wanting to start a business, the *PMOG* helps businesses interested in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, the *Koninklijke Horeca Nederland* is an association of businesses in the hotel, restaurant and catering sector, and *Rabobank* is a major international financial service provider and cooperative based in the Netherlands (MKB Noord, 2011; GCC, 2011; KvK, 2011; PMOG, 2011; Horeca, 2011; Rabobank, 2011). Other steering group members have mainly constituted the local council, *COS Nederland* and the local Worldshop.³⁷

The role of the above mainstream actors has mainly been to approach local businesses and organizations that may potentially include Fairtrade products in their assortment. In order to extend the local network as broadly as possible, each individual's activity and respective network has been crucial. For instance, the representatives from the *GCC* and *MKB* have used their personal business network to be present at members' meetings (van Duuren, interview, 20-04-2011). Their task has been to tell entrepreneurs about the Fairtrade campaign and potentially ask them to 'join in'. The *KvK*'s role has been similar in communicating to business-starters the possibility of making Fairtrade part of their business strategy and in providing practical information on the use of Fairtrade (Broersma, interview, 26-04-2011). The *PMOG* has mainly encouraged businesses wanting to get involved in CSR to make use of Fairtrade (de Vries, interview, 20-04-2011). Finally, *Rabobank*'s representative has used a variety of contacts to different social organizations to promote Fairtrade's outreach (Dijk, interview, 19-04-2011).

Interviewees referred to the steering group as extremely important in stretching out the local Fairtrade network. According to the project manager, the current representatives from the *Horeca*, *Rabobank* and *PMOG* have been particularly active (interview, 20-04-2011). In

³⁵ "A Fairtrade steering group representing different sectors is formed to co-ordinate action around the goals and develop them over the years." (see p.16)

³⁶ Membership shrank overall from 10 members in 2008 to 8 members in 2009 (Council, 2008; 2009; 2011). MKB, KvK and COS left the steering group in 2010 due to national subsidy cuts and a resulting focus of activities on the regional level. COS ceased to exist and is now a regional association called 'Noordbaak' (van Duuren, interview, 20-04-2011). Still, all three remain up-to-date about the campaign and available for assistance (ibid.).

³⁷ A representative from the *Hanze Hogeschool* was added to the steering group in 2010 (Council, 2011).

contrast, the former Worldshop representative “was more away than present” (ibid.). When interviewing the current Worldshop representative, Cruys described her role in the campaign as “rather passive” and acting “in the backgrounds” (interview, 04-05-2011). Overall, she knew strikingly little about the campaign compared to other interview partners. The Worldshop’s passive role compared to a bank’s and a business association’s active role is thus indicative of broader mainstreaming processes within the Fairtrade Town campaign.

Participants’ agenda: ‘Depoliticising’ Fairtrade?

Drawing on the above ‘mainstreaming’ debate, the question arises what *drives* ‘mainstream’ actors to participate in the campaign and whether they endorse Fairtrade’s political principles. The active role of steering group members in ‘approaching’ local businesses and organizations already suggests that the latter may not use Fairtrade out of ideological commitment. In fact, Broersma indicated that local businesses had “not [been] enthusiastic at all”, but “they had to be convinced” (interview, 26-04-2011). For instance, the *KvK*’s stressed that Groningen constitutes the “shopping centre for the larger northern part of the Netherlands”, thus providing a large market for businesses to provide something ‘different’ like Fairtrade (ibid.). De Vries used a similar discourse when talking about Fairtrade’s “spin-off” as businesses can position and distinguish themselves on the market (interview, 20-04-2011). According to van den Bosch, right now is the perfect timing to step in, as Fairtrade is becoming ‘hip’ and cafés can set themselves apart (interview, 22-04-2011). She explicitly argued for a strategy that “commercialises” Fairtrade, as entrepreneurs need to earn a profit. She admitted that “you’re missing the ideological aspect then”, but an emphasis on ideology would radiate a ‘hippie’ image that would put people off (interview, 22-04-2011).

Hence, businesses appear united by considerations of a better corporate or organizational image which will benefit them (financially) in the long term. While financial considerations may be limited for bigger organisations and businesses³⁸, they are more salient for SMBs. Particularly in the ‘horeca’, the campaign was initially met with substantial scepticism, since owning a café is a “one-task thing” and includes a substantial financial risk (interviews van Duuren, 20-04-2011; van den Bosch, 22-04-2011). To tackle this risk, van den Bosch stated that she convinced most ‘horeca’-businesses via “financial advantages” (interview, 22-04-2011). First, she repeatedly mentioned that Fairtrade coffee and tea are not more expensive than regular coffee and tea due to a currently high world market price.

³⁸ Dijk emphasised that the Fairtrade campaign doesn’t have a negative financial impact on the bank (interview, 19-04-2011). Little financial impact was mentioned for supermarkets due to their big economies of scale (de Vries, interview, 19-04-2011).

Second, participants can extend their target group, and third, they receive free promotion from the council (ibid.). Many interviewees further stressed the importance of “best-practice stories” by businesses *already* using Fairtrade as a good means to convince others (van Duuren, interview, 20-04-2011). This is because they can share their experiences and show that they have not been harmed financially (ibid.).

From the above, one can clearly see a departure from the ideological commitment of the Fairtrade movement to very practical, market-based considerations. Interviewees were united by considerations of short-term financial benefits and a long-term spin-off in terms of a better corporate image. The discourse employed by interview partners clearly shows that the actors participating in the Fairtrade campaign are guided by a motivation to set themselves apart, to improve their Public Relations and to jump on the ‘CSR bandwagon’. This indicates a clear departure from original ideological commitment and shared values of global justice towards a certain ‘depoliticisation’ of Fairtrade.

Mainstream marketing strategies

In order to see whether the Fairtrade campaign indeed ‘depoliticises’ Fairtrade, one also has to consider its actual *strategies* to target consumers. Overall, the mainstreaming channels addressed by the third criterion seem to rely on *individual* consumers to choose Fairtrade over other products. In fact, interviewees stressed that “people have to *ask* for Fairtrade products” (interviews van Duuren, 04-05-2011; Broersma, 26-04-2011). In this context, interviewees admitted that the greatest remaining challenges were Fairtrade’s higher price and people’s prejudice that Fairtrade is “not tasty” (van Duuren, 20-04-2011). Furthermore, Broersma referred to “emotional reasons” and “a certain culture that belongs to Fairtrade products” (interview, 26-04-2011). In this context, most interviewees stressed the imperative to “get rid of” Fairtrade’s ‘alternative, hippie’ image in order to reach more consumers.³⁹ Hence, one can see a clear departure in Fairtrade marketing strategy from its political, ideological aspects towards an image that appeals to the conventional consumer.

Indeed, the campaign’s explicit aim is “to make Fairtrade hip and fashionable” (van Duuren, 2009, p.1). To realise this, the steering group has organised various activities and events to make Fairtrade more visible with businesses and consumers. For instance, this has included tastings for wholesalers, for consumers in the Jumbo supermarket, a beer-cocktail workshop on the central market square, free Ben&Jerries Fairtrade ice-cream for students, free Fairtrade coffee at the central market square and a Restaurant Week where consumers

³⁹ The term ‘geitenwollensokken’ was mentioned in 5 out of 9 interviews (de Vries, van den Bosch, van Duuren, Joesse, Ros).

could try out Fairtrade products in different restaurants (Council, 2009-2011). Obviously, the campaign has organized a variety of other activities over the years, but when asked which strategies they considered most effective, many steering group members cited tastings as “very good means to promote Fairtrade” (interviews Broersma, 26-04-2011; de Vries, 20-04-2011; van Duuren, 20-04-2011). Hence, the campaign’s marketing strategies have concentrated on Fairtrade’s ‘quality’ and ‘taste’ rather than its socio-political characteristics.

In order to tackle Fairtrade’s higher price, some interviewees referred to supply/demand market logic. De Vries and Dijk expressed their hope that more Fairtrade sales would lead to lower prices in the long run, eventually making Fairtrade affordable for more people (interviews 19-04-2011; 20-04-2011).⁴⁰ De Vries even hopes that “eventually, everyone can buy Fairtrade products” (ibid.). The aim of making Fairtrade ‘mainstream’ is thus not only conceived as helping more Southern producers, but also as making Fairtrade more accessible to Northern consumers. Although this may seem logical, the underlying assumption is that *more* consumption will contribute to a better world. Furthermore, marketing strategies such as tastings exploit the market-oriented mechanism of artificially created consumer demand through more product variety. This confirms an earlier mentioned criticism of mainstreaming strategies as not challenging (hyper)consumerism (Johnston, 2002). However, the effect is doubtful as the aim for a more sustainable world should rather be to *reduce* consumption.

So far, it has been argued that the campaign mainly relies on mainstreaming strategies which successfully extend Fairtrade’s visibility and accessibility to consumers, but which neglect its socio-political dimension and mainly rely on the individual consumer to *buy* Fairtrade. The following section will outline a strategy that counters this reliance on individual consumer choice by making Fairtrade part of Groningen’s public procurement.

4.3.3 Public procurement strategies: The creation of a ‘collective ethical space’

In order to counter a reliance on the *individual* consumer to buy Fairtrade, the Fairtrade Town campaign includes criteria to make Fairtrade part of local businesses’ and organizations’ public procurement. This is provided for by criteria 2 and 4 of the national campaign. The 2008 requirements for the second criterion include that:

⁴⁰ Dijk talked of “price elasticity” and the “Maslov pyramid” [hierarchy of needs] to indicate that only people with a certain income are currently buying Fairtrade (interview, 19-04-2011). He repeatedly emphasised that “[Fairtrade’s] turnover has to go up” (ibid.)

- (1) “60% of coffee and / or tea purchased by the council have the Max Havelaar label.
- (2) The council target for these products is 100% Max Havelaar-certified within 5 years.
- (3) The council’s canteens offer at least 4 different products with the Max Havelaar label.
- (4) The council’s ordering department incorporates the Fairtrade norms (FLO/IFAT).”

(Council, 2008, p.6)

The above targets were successfully met for the 2009 title and were extended within subsequent years (ibid.). For instance, in 2009, Fairwear became part of the council’s working clothes, more Fairtrade fruits were added in the council’s canteen, and coffee was upgraded to Fairtrade + EKO in 2010 (Council, 2009, p.4; 2011, p.4). The Fairtrade campaign hence makes Fairtrade an integral part of the council’s public procurement – thus, ‘forcing’ its employees to consume Fairtrade rather than relying on individual consumer choice. Arguably, this is an effective strategy to promote Fairtrade’s outreach to the conventional consumer without the need for aggressive marketing strategy.

The campaign’s fourth criterion tackles public procurement schemes of local businesses and social organizations. The local target provides for at least 20 businesses and 30 social organizations that make at least one Fairtrade product part of their public procurement (Council, 2008, pp.34-56).⁴¹ Furthermore, within subsequent years, steering group members have made intensive efforts to extend Fairtrade to public procurement by investigating the possibilities of its introduction in the main hospital and the two universities (van Duuren, interview, 20-04-2011). While discussions with *UMCG* and *Rijksuniversiteit* are still in progress, *Hanze Hogeschool* has responded quickly and has worked towards becoming ‘The Netherlands’ First Fairtrade Hogeschool’ on 9th May 2011 (Joosse, interview, 06-05-2011). It has thus evolved into a sub-campaign of the Fairtrade Town campaign with a separate working group and separate criteria (ibid.).

Thus, it appears that Groningen has been very ambitious and active within recent years in extending its public procurement strategy. Introducing Fairtrade consumption into the canteens and vending machines of Groningen’s offices and shops has raised the number of Fairtrade consumers substantially as they consume coffee and tea on a daily basis, which arguably benefits more Southern producers. Obviously, targeting big organizations like universities can have a particularly significant impact (de Vries, interview, 20-04-2011). One may thus argue that the campaign provides a successful example of Fairtrade’s ‘collective’ espousal. The Fairtrade Town – or at least certain entities within it – becomes a ‘collective’

⁴¹ For most entities like shops and banks, this has included Fairtrade coffee, often tea, while many schools serve Fairtrade sugar, chocolate milk, wine, and lemonade (Council, 2008, pp.34-56).

space in which it becomes ‘normal’ to consume certain Fairtrade products. This contributes to Fairtrade’s public outreach in an effective and continuous way.

4.3.4 Bottom-up or top-down? Citizen inclusion in the Fairtrade town campaign

However, the question remains whether Fairtrade is also ‘collectively’ espoused by Groningen’s citizens. As suggested earlier, significant citizen involvement during the campaign’s initiation and implementation may indicate its democratic and sustainable quality as there is broad commitment at multiple levels to continue extending Fairtrade’s public outreach. In contrast, limited citizen involvement may have contributed to the campaign’s quick and efficient implementation, yet with limited sustainability prospects. I will argue that the latter seems the case, as the campaign has been a top-down process steered by the municipality from the start and thus relies greatly on its continued (financial) support.

Effectively, the Groningen campaign developed *before* the national campaign, making it a national ‘pioneer’. Already in the early 2000s, a member of the local Worldshop and a member of the local *COS* had heard about the British Fairtrade Town campaign and had tried to promote it within the green party (Ros, interview, 10-05-2011). The latter had also launched a ‘clean clothes’ campaign in the context of the UN’s *Agenda 21*⁴² which however failed to gain broader support (de Haan, interview, 21-04-2011). It was only in 2006 when the council organized a public meeting to give input into its 2006-10 political programme that the idea gained wider attention (van Duuren, interview, 20-04-2011). In the context of the council’s commitment to the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), the green party decided to make the Fairtrade Town campaign officially part of its electoral programme (de Haan, interview, 21-04-2011). As the party traditionally co-forms the local government, the Fairtrade Town campaign became an integral part of the council’s 2006-10 political programme, and again in 2010-14 (*ibid.*).

When evaluating the campaign’s initiation process, it is striking that the idea was *not* substantiated *until* the council’s public meeting. Although the initial stimulus came from two committed members of the Worldshop and the *COS* – simultaneously members of the green party – it seems that the campaign ‘needed’ the council’s support in order to be realised. In fact, de Haan conceded that the green party’s earlier Fairtrade campaign had been “rather theoretical”, while the Fairtrade Town campaign was “more practical” and therefore achieved

⁴² The UN’s Agenda 21 is the outcome of the UN’s Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It entails a 700 page action plan in the aim of global sustainable development (UN, 2009).

broader support (ibid.). Overall, the campaign's initiation can be traced back to the green party's and the council's steering role rather than to the broader population's involvement.

After the local government ratified the campaign⁴³, the *COS* was assigned to set up a steering group representing different sectors from local society and to make a project plan. The latter specified vision, aims and an action plan for the six criteria and the Groningen-specific targets set by the national campaign (COS, 2008). After the council agreed to the plan, it assigned three students⁴⁴ to carry out a baseline measurement investigating which businesses were already using Fairtrade and which ones would be interested (van Duuren, interview, 20-04-2011). Finally, a communication agency was hired to develop a communication plan (ibid.). Considering that all steps were coordinated and financed⁴⁵ by the council, one may argue that it already assumed a large role in the campaign's early stages.

Yet, specifically during the campaign's implementation, the council has been a driving force. In particular, the council's the project manager Anke van Duuren assumes *the* central position within the local Fairtrade network. She described her role in the campaign as "project manager, ambassador, but also advisor" (van Duuren, interview, 20-04-2011). On the one hand, van Duuren chairs the steering group's meetings where new ideas for the campaign's continuation are discussed.⁴⁶ She constitutes a main contact person for and facilitator between the other steering group members and takes care that the group remains active. She has been a main initiator and implementer of activities and events and supports other steering group members' activities. For the activities, the council provides her with a "small budget" annually. A steeply decreasing budget⁴⁷ paralleled with fewer activities every year clearly indicates the campaign's dependence on the council (Council, 2009-11).

On the other hand, van Duuren is a main networker with businesses and the media. She regularly updates the council's Fairtrade Town website which lists local businesses already part of the campaign or wanting to become part. Her role as ambassador implies that she may organise a public event where she joins the mayor or other members of the local government, writes speaking notes, contacts the media for press releases, give interviews etc.

⁴³ According to former *GroenLinks* Chairman de Haan, convincing other parties was not difficult: The Social Democrats (*PvdA*) had the majority (12 seats), the green party had 6 seats, the Liberals (*VVD*, 6 seats) were in government for the first time in a long time, so "they agreed to everything", and the Conservatives (*CDA*, 4 seats) were considerably liberal for national standards and interested in pushing issues of international cooperation forward (interview, 21-04-2011).

⁴⁴ The students pursued the *DaVinci* Minor at the Hanze Hogeschool and were from the fields of business, marketing and communication (van Duuren, interview, 20-04-2011).

⁴⁵ The campaign cost about 100,000 Euros in the first year, with most costs accruing to project management and communication (COS, 2008).

⁴⁶ The steering group's meetings take place once a month or every two months depending on the amount of workload (van Duuren, interview, 04-06-2011).

⁴⁷ For 2010, the budget has been 10,000€; for 2011, it has been 5,000€ (van Duuren, interview, 04-06-2011).

Finally, she stays in intense contact with the national campaign coordinators when she has questions concerning the national guidelines, but also to exchange ideas for activities (van Duuren, interview, 20-04-2011; 04-05-2011). Van Duuren combines the role of coordinator, facilitator, networker, implementer and – via the council – financier. In fact, most interviewee partners referred to her as a crucial factor in keeping the campaign running.⁴⁸ However, this only counts as long as the council pays her as a project manager for following electoral period(s). In light of a general trend in the Netherlands to cut subsidies for cultural and social initiatives, signs are rather negative for the upcoming 2014-18 electoral period.

In light of the council's driving character, the question arises which *agenda* it pursues with the campaign. It is important to mention that the council's larger aim for the 2006-10 electoral period was to become "The Netherlands' Most Sustainable City" (van Duuren, 2009, p.1). The Fairtrade Town campaign thus became a sub-item of the municipality's sustainability campaign, arguably improving its PR (ibid.). In fact, some interviewees emphasised that the council "was very focused on the title" and "wanted to score quickly" (interviews Dijk, 19-04-2011; Ros, 09-05-2011). The COS' major participant at that time Ros stressed "different expectations" as "the council wanted to get the title as fast as possible", while the COS was "a little more" interested in "the content, informing people" (ibid.). Descriptions of the campaign included a "walking advertisement"⁴⁹ for the council" and a "marketing instrument" (interviews Dijk, 19-04-2011; van den Bosch, 22-04-2011). Indeed, the council set up road signs saying "The Netherlands' first Fairtrade town", provided stickers for every store, café or restaurant using Fairtrade, and profited from considerable media attention (ibid.). The campaign hence served as a PR tool and a chance to make Groningen an attractive destination.

In view of the local population's rather *passive* role during the campaign's implementation, one may ask how the campaign *targeted* them. The two target groups officially mentioned by the Project Plan are "businesses" and "consumers" (COS, 2008, p.10). However, when asked how the campaign targets consumers directly, van den Bosch stated: "Actually, we don't do that" (interview, 22-04-2011). In fact, the mainstreaming strategies described above have mainly concentrated on the expansion of the local Fairtrade network via *businesses* offering Fairtrade. The only way consumers have been approached is through public events and the media. Yet, both seem to concentrate on Fairtrade's 'quality' aspects rather than background information. Van Duuren further stressed the local and regional

⁴⁸ Dijk described van Duuren as "the drive behind the whole campaign", "very active" and fulfilling her function "tremendously well [ontzettend goed]" (interview, 19-04-2011).

⁴⁹ There is no exact translation of the Dutch term "uithangbord".

media's reluctance to report about Fairtrade (interview, 20-04-2011). Although newspapers are slowly becoming more interested, one cannot rely on them (ibid.).⁵⁰ Consequently, one can also not rely on the campaign informing people about Fairtrade.

Finally, despite their passive role, most interviewees indicated that local citizens perceived the campaign well, and that some were even "proud" to live in a Fairtrade Town (Broersma, interview, 26-04-2011). However, Broersma added: "It's always when you are ahead of the troops that only a *small* population will be enthusiastic about these kinds of initiatives" (ibid.). De Haan further mentioned that in a student town like Groningen where people only come to study, "you don't know who the mayor is, so you also don't know about Fairtrade" (interview, 21-04-2011). This suggests that a considerable part of the population does not know or care about living in a Fairtrade Town.⁵¹ Lastly, van Duuren pointed to a certain remaining resistance by people who still refer to Fairtrade as "not tasty", "too expensive" and "hippie"⁵² (interview, 20-04-2011). She further mentioned the Dutch stingy, down-to earth mentality⁵³ as a stumbling factor to people's investment in quality for a certain price (ibid.). Hence, there seem to be a variety of reactions from the local population, ranging from enthusiasm to ignorance to resistance.

Indeed, many interviewees explicitly characterised the Fairtrade Town campaign as "top-down" (interviews Broersma, Ros, van Duuren, Joosse). They stressed the active role of the council, the campaign's emphasis on businesses rather than consumers, and admitted that more could be done to directly target and involve consumers (ibid.). Van Duuren contrasted the Dutch campaign with the Belgian and UK ones which evolved "more bottom-up from communal life" (interview, 20-04-2011). In her opinion, communities like Groningen are bigger in size, so the council has to facilitate with many actors at different levels (ibid.). Hence, the Fairtrade Town campaign's implementation may differ depending on a country's local and national political structures. In fact, the Netherlands are known for their consensus-based political tradition, evidenced through a close relation between government and the people (Lijphart, 1999). Due to this tradition, the campaign was immediately picked up by the local council before potentially evolving into a people's movement. In contrast, in the UK's more competitive, pluralist system, the campaign could develop more independently before reaching the formal, governmental level (ibid.).

⁵⁰ "Sometimes you get the newspapers with you, sometimes you don't" (van Duuren, interview, 20-04-2011).

⁵¹ This can be confirmed by my personal experience of four (out of four) Dutch friends who have lived in Groningen for 4-5 years and who had not heard of the campaign before I told them.

⁵² "Geitenwollensokken", s.a.

⁵³ "Dutch people...it has to be cheap, a lot and cheap". She used the Dutch expression "Doe maar gewoon".

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Fairtrade Town Groningen has effectively managed to extend Fairtrade's public outreach within the local community. First, the campaign exclusively relies on the distribution of *Max Havelaar*-labelled and certified products, arguably creating recognition and trust with consumers. Second, the campaign has concentrated on the creation of links with 'mainstream' distribution channels, including supermarkets, SMBs and the 'horeca' which have increased Fairtrade's availability and visibility to consumers. These links were mainly created through the active networking activity of the campaign's steering group consisting of the council's project manager and members from industrial and social associations. Third, extending Fairtrade to the council's, businesses' and organizations' public procurement has been argued as a particularly effective and sustainable public outreach strategy as it overcomes a reliance on individual consumer choice.

However, Fairtrade's greater public outreach has occurred at the expense of its 'de-politicisation' and of limited citizen involvement. Participating businesses mainly had to be convinced via corporate image advantages, as Fairtrade conveys to consumers that they care about society. By making Fairtrade part of their CSR strategy, businesses can thus set themselves apart and enlarge their target group. Fairtrade's 'de-politicisation' is also evident in the campaign's marketing strategies which have conveyed the image that consuming *more* (Fairtrade) will contribute to positive change. Furthermore, PR events and activities have mainly focused on Fairtrade's 'quality' aspects rather than informing consumers about its backgrounds. Ridding Fairtrade of its 'hippie' image has constituted a *crucial* strategy to make it more receptive with conventional consumers. This has arguably approached the less politically-minded consumer while alienating the ideologically-committed one.

Hence, there may be an inherent paradox in Fairtrade's outreach strategies between targeting the 'conventional' consumer and emphasising its political dimension. On a more abstract level, this confirms a broader paradox inherent in Fairtrade between serious ideological commitment and the need for greater outreach to have a more substantial impact. Whether public outreach strategies like the Fairtrade Town campaign *indeed* have a positive impact on Southern producers has not been the focus of this paper. Thus, more research needs to be conducted on the positive and adverse effects of strategies to boost sales of Fairtrade-labelled products. For now, it appears that the times of the Fairtrade *movement's* personalised consumer-producer relations are over, as uniformly labelled products increasingly merge with

the free market system and as marketing strategies concentrate on making Fairtrade's 'hip' and 'fashionable'.

Finally, from its initiation, the campaign has been a top-down process steered by the municipality. The latter 'captured' the campaign as a marketing instrument by integrating it into its political programme. Effective implementation has therefore largely depended on the council's project manager rather than active citizen participation. As this refutes British scholars' characterisation of British Fairtrade Towns as 'grass-roots movements', it has been argued that the degree of citizen involvement within the campaign may depend on national political structures. A detailed analysis of the political structures and mechanisms contributing to citizen inclusion within the campaign goes beyond the scope of this paper. Hence, more research needs to be conducted on the various political dynamics operating within Fairtrade Towns in different countries. For now, this paper has shown that within *every* Fairtrade Town, campaigners should be aware of the tension between 'mainstreaming' strategies of public outreach and a need to consider Fairtrade's political dimension.

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