

## ABSTRACT

MILLS, SARAH KATHRYN. Cultivating a Moral Economy: Perceptions and Realities of Fairtrade in St. Lucia. (Under the direction of Dr. Nora Haenn).

Fairtrade is an alternative trade system challenging the inequities of conventional trade. Producers certified by the Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO) follow certain social and environmental standards, and are democratically organized into cooperative groups. Fairtrade certification is meant to guarantee higher prices and a livable income. This research explores whether the framework, which promotes a direct relationship between consumer and producer, is useful for transforming the trade system. By exploring the case of banana production in the Caribbean island of St. Lucia, this study examines the perspectives that producers hold about the social organization of trade. Further, it investigates important trade processes that may be obscured by Fairtrade's emphasis on producer-consumer connections.

After dealing with a declining industry for years, banana farmers in St. Lucia reached out to Fairtrade in the hopes that it would help secure their industry. While Fairtrade has arguably allowed the industry to continue, it has not brought about the social and economic change promised. By analyzing interviews carried out as part of a larger anthropological project, this study finds that the failure of Fairtrade to provide progress is a result of the different and contradictory ways of conceptualizing the roles and responsibilities of Fairtrade. While Fairtrade aims to act as an outside mediator, producers are concerned with their relationship to the organization, viewing it through the framework of their own moral economy. By failing to understand the importance their own relationships plays with farmers, Fairtrade sits in an awkward position which is neither a partner nor patron. Their ignorance of how producers evaluate the industry and relationships within leads to Fairtrade violating both its own idea of equal partnership and the moral economy of banana producers.

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Cultivating a Moral Economy: Perceptions and Realities of Fairtrade in St. Lucia

by

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

FLO- Fairtrade Labeling Organization

FLO-Cert - Fairtrade Labeling Organization-Certification: Independent Labeling Organization

NFTO - National Fairtrade Organization: St. Lucian Fairtrade Organization

Winfresh: Exporting company of Windward Islands

SLBGA: St. Lucian Banana Growers Association

## Chapter 1: Introduction

During the past several decades people worldwide have become increasingly aware of the negative effects of trade deregulation. Free trade, favored by many governments and corporations has led to increased inequality and insecurity for many people worldwide along with environmental degradation.<sup>1</sup> One effect of capitalism is the disembedding of commodities which removes them from their origins of production: that is, consumers rarely know much about where products come from or how they were made, and are thus unaware of injustices involved in production processes. One response to this is the emergence of the fair trade movement. With roots going back to the 1950s, modern certification programs emerged in the 1980s. Today, the Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO), an umbrella organization, represents over 1.5 million producers worldwide in 1,210 cooperatives,<sup>2</sup> including banana producers on the island of St. Lucia. FLO's mission is to "promote fairer trading conditions and empower producers to combat poverty, strengthen their position and take more control over their lives."<sup>3</sup>

Located in the Caribbean and part of the Windward Islands, St Lucia has relied on banana production as its primary industry since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though the crop's importance in national accounting has declined in recent decades. Formerly a colony of Britain and France, St. Lucia has been part of the British Commonwealth since 1979. The UK is now its main market for bananas. Due to increased trade neoliberalization and a rollback of European tariffs in 1998, the number of banana farmers on the island decreased from 15,000 in 1997 to just 500 in 2014.<sup>4</sup> In response to these trends, St. Lucian farmers began partnering with Fairtrade in 2000 in order to bolster their industry.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the country became the largest producer of Fairtrade bananas of the Windward Islands and, unusually, all commercial banana farmers on the island are Fairtrade certified and producing bananas within FLO guidelines.

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<sup>1</sup> Moberg and Lyon 2010, Dolan 2008

<sup>2</sup> Fairtrade.net

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> O'Connell 2014

<sup>5</sup> Moberg 2008

As anthropological research shows, when banana farmers first reached out to FLO, they were hopeful Fairtrade would bring change to the island in the form of higher and more secure incomes, as well as stronger producer participation in the trade processes. However, as researchers have documented, Fairtrade by and large did not live up to its expectations, and producers were left disillusioned. In looking at reasons for this, the research examines discrepancies between what the Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO) sees their role as being compared to what producers think that role should be. Fairtrade's implied role, as shown by academic scholarship and the way in which it advertises itself, is to be that of an impartial and objective sponsor to facilitate producer groups in gaining economic security. For producers, however, the role of Fairtrade should be to forge relationships with farmers, as partners or supporters. They tend to perceive the organization as a powerful player in the banana industry. This discrepancy is not incidental, but has a real effect on Fairtrade's impact. Michael Dove argues a similar point in his discussion of Indonesian discourses of development. As he writes, the difference between discourses "are not merely the difference between the ideal and the real or the official and the vernacular, but the cohesive, normative, and thus *meaningful* character of this difference..."<sup>6</sup> Thus, this difference in perception, and the failure of Fairtrade to understand the importance of their own relationship to farmers, limited the impact FLO could have had on St. Lucia. What was at first a potential partnership with the possibilities of transforming the industry shifted to become simply a way to provide access to a niche market. Rather than empowering farmers, Fairtrade resembled the same top-down organization of previous institutions. Since Hurricane Tomas, even this relationship has deteriorated as Fairtrade now resembles an impersonal business. This misunderstanding arises in part from the fact that producers perceive Fairtrade through the framework of their own culture and traditions, rather than as an outside mediator. By failing to understand the importance their own relationship plays with farmers, Fairtrade sits in an ambiguous position which is neither partner nor patron. This position, in effect, causes FLO to violate its own promises as well as the notions of moral economy that banana producers employ.

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<sup>6</sup> Dove 2001:621

The following chapters discuss the history and importance of banana production in St. Lucia. Bananas have been important both for the island's economy as the central industry, as well as its national identity. This history helps explain why producers originally reached out to Fairtrade in 2000. The paper then turns to research on the fair trade movement. In particular, by exploring the paradox of how Fairtrade works "both in and against the market", researchers have demonstrated how different ideas of Fairtrade have influenced its effects on producers. The paper then analyzes 30 interviews with farmers on how they conceptualized. These interviews were carried out by O'Connell during a particularly precipitous period in the aftermath of Hurricane Tomas in 2010. For the interviewees, this natural disaster and the failure of Fairtrade to act in its wake exemplified shortcomings in the current Fairtrade model. The paper's conclusion expands on the consequences of this perspective. At a general level, Fairtrade is unable to deliver on its promises as, despite producer understandings of the group, it actually holds relatively limited power within the broader banana industry. The conclusion explores how, in order for Fairtrade to bring positive changes to St. Lucia, it must become more political by recognizing and improving producers' place within the broader social context and working to hold the St. Lucian government and other industry players accountable.

## Chapter Two: Background

### *Background of St. Lucia*

St. Lucia is a small island nation of 238 square-miles. Located in the Caribbean, it has a population of 170,000 people of mostly African descent.<sup>7</sup> St. Lucia exhibits what some researchers call a strong “cultural hybridity”<sup>8</sup> influenced by the various populations who have inhabited the island. The first inhabitants are thought to have settled the island around 600 BC, likely migrating from South America.<sup>9</sup> Early Spanish explorers in the 15th century were less interested in St. Lucia and the rest of the lesser Antilles than in the larger Caribbean islands, although contact between the two cultures still resulted in the decimation of Carib populations due to exposure to European diseases. Most of the surviving St. Lucian Caribs intermarried with subsequent European and African inhabitants, and today the Native population makes up about 1.2% of the population.<sup>10</sup> The next migration to the island was in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by French farmers and their African slaves. Despite its small size, St. Lucia also became attractive to Britain, who control of it for its resources and position in the Caribbean. Britain and France eventually fought for control over the island, which changed hands 14 times during the 1800s. Britain ultimately gained control and administered the island until St. Lucia gained its independence in 1979. Currently, the island nation is part of the British Commonwealth, and Britain’s influence is still evident in the capital city of Castries where the population is typically whiter and more oriented towards the UK/Europe. Despite Britain’s historical efforts to instill its own cultural and institutional practices, the island retained many of its French and African influences, including the unofficial (but most widely spoken) language kwéyòl.

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<sup>7</sup> Moberg 2008

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*:23

<sup>9</sup> Fitzpatrick 2015

<sup>10</sup> Moberg 2008

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, St. Lucia was primarily a producer of sugar for the United Kingdom. A declining sugar trade in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century made way for the burgeoning banana industry, beginning with a contract from the Irish company Geest in 1954.<sup>11</sup> Geest's contract in St. Lucia was supported by Britain since the colonial government considered the company as contributing to political and economic stability and providing an alternative to the American banana trade. In subsequent decades over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, banana production remained crucial to both the economy of St. Lucia and its governance. For example, circumstances surrounding banana production played a major role in the election of John Compton to the office of prime minister in 1979, and from 1982-96 and 2006-07.<sup>12</sup> Compton rose to power by supporting smallholding farmers. However, despite his reputation as a champion of the people, during his rule Compton helped consolidate power in the Saint Lucian Banana Growers Association (SLBGA), the government run farmers group which represented all farmers on the island and existed until the 1990s. The SLBGA quickly gained a reputation for implementing policies which benefited large growers at the expense of small ones.

Beginning in the 1960s, the SLBGA was restructured to consist of a nine-member board, including three seats appointed by government. Small, medium, and large farmers were represented by two seats each. For the purposes of the BGA, small farms were classified as those covering 10 acres or less. An estimated 85% of landholding in St. Lucia fell under this smallholding category, yet this sector only held 2 of the BGA's 9 seats.<sup>13</sup> The distinction between small and large growers on St. Lucia carries an additional importance to notions of partnership and patronage. Unlike in many parts of Latin America, large plantations never caught on in St Lucia. The island's rocky, mountainous geography makes it difficult to for single entities to manage large expanses of land. Historically, this geography also made it difficult to control sharecroppers; if the terms of sharecropping became too onerous, farmers could simply flee to inland refuge regions.<sup>14</sup> The cost of carrying out inland searches kept landowners' power

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<sup>11</sup> Moberg 2008:32

<sup>12</sup> Ibid:35-37

<sup>13</sup> O'Connell 2014

<sup>14</sup> Moberg 2008

somewhat in check. Another factor limiting the existence of large plantations has to do with the institution of “family land”, which is both a cultural and legal institution. Under the family land system, land is inherited by all children equally, rather than by a single heir. This means small plots of land are owned by many people at once and cannot be sold without the permission of all involved. This collective ownership, of course, makes selling land quite difficult and is a large reason why land in St. Lucia was never really consolidated by large companies the way it was in South America. Instead, smallholders became the norm.

While SLBGA actions weakened small farmers, the strong cultural and historical factors favoring small farms allowed them to continue. While there has historically been tension between the government and farmers, their relationship has not always been oppositional.<sup>15</sup> It has also contained aspects of sociality. In many ways the relationship represented a patronage, characterized by issues of power between government, large farmers, and smallholders, but also containing norms of obligation between the parties involved. That is, until the 1990s, when events within the industry led to growing dissatisfaction with the SLBGA due to lack of representation and charges of corruption, eventually leading to the dissolution of the BGA in the late 1990s.

### *The banana trade*

Through the colonial period, preferential treatment in Britain was crucial to the success of St. Lucian banana production. However, St. Lucian access to U.K. markets began to change in the 1990s with what became known as the “banana wars.”<sup>16</sup> Historically, two main systems dominated the banana trade: “dollar bananas” come from Central and South America and are sold primarily in the US (hence the moniker), and Africa Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) bananas come from previous European colonies and are sold primarily in Europe. Dollar bananas are typically grown on large plantations and tend to be grown in countries often referred to as “banana republics”, so named due to the legacy of weak, corrupt

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<sup>15</sup> Slocum 2006

<sup>16</sup> Slocum 2003

governments dependent on and supporting U.S. banana corporations (such as United Fruit)<sup>17</sup>. As an ACP country St. Lucia was afforded special protection in Britain in the forms of higher quotas and lower tariffs than its Central and South American counterparts. The financial arrangement helped offset significantly higher labor costs associated with banana production in the Windward Islands in comparison to Central and South America. The latter has been characterized by large plantations along with little regulation of corporate practice. As such, corporations were able to use the advantages of economies of scale along with lax labor laws to keep costs low.<sup>18</sup> St. Lucia's preferential treatment began to change when Chiquita Bananas, with the backing of the US, lodged a complaint with the World Trade Organization that ACP arrangements went against free trade rules. The World Trade Organization ruled in favor of the US in these "banana wars" in 1998. Even before then, however, trade neoliberalization was already having a negative effect on St. Lucia. The Single European Market, which removed most trade barriers between EU members, was created in 1993, an event which had an immediate effect on St. Lucia and the other Windward islands. Cheap dollar bananas flooded the European market. Between September 1992 to October 1993, the price of bananas on the global market fell by 70%.<sup>19</sup> For St. Lucians, these prices meant farmers could no longer cover costs of production.

These events were exacerbated by the domestic politics surrounding the SLBGA. St. Lucia's small growers were already frustrated with what they saw as corruption and wastefulness inside the government organization. As banana prices plummeted, senior administrators within the SLBGA continued to enjoy large salaries and even received bonuses. Financial distinctions sat alongside cultural distinctions to further distance growers from the Association. SLBGA representatives, for example, tend to use English rather than Kwéyòl. These gaps in representation which had been tolerated in more favorable economic circumstances, became increasingly hard to sustain, and ultimately small farmers began to carry out general strikes and protests. A major protest in 1992 resulted in two people being

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<sup>17</sup> Raynolds 2003

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Moberg 2008

killed by police. In the midst of these complicated international trade issues, domestic strife, dissatisfaction with the local government and an ailing banana industry, St. Lucia's farmers reached out to Fairtrade in 2000.

In the broadest sense, fair trade organizations endeavor to address disparities within the global trade system. For fair trade, the principal underlying this partnership is the idea that everyone should be properly compensated for their work. While fair trade refers to the movement in general, "Fairtrade" (one word) refers specifically to the Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO), an umbrella association of smaller organizations, which was created in 1997. Fairtrade's stated aim is to produce "an alternative approach to conventional trade and is based on a partnership between producers and consumers."<sup>20</sup> Producers are certified Fairtrade by following certain social and environmental standards and being democratically organized into cooperative groups. Those certified are then able to receive higher prices for their products, which are labelled with the Fairtrade label. The higher prices should cover production costs and provide a guaranteed livable income. In addition, producer groups receive a social premium, which is a percentage of total sales given back to the group to be used on social projects they decide on democratically. In theory, certified producers enjoy better and more long term relations with buyers.

Although there are other fair trade organizations, such as Equal Exchange and Transfair USA, FLO is the largest, representing over 1.5 million producers in 74 countries. In St. Lucia, FLO operates via the national organization, National Fair Trade Organization, or NFTO. Along with officials from Winfresh, the Windward Island exporting company, NFTO officials are the main points of contact for producers. Especially after the organization was restructured in 2005, most of its employees are not full-time farmers. The majority are career industry workers, having worked in the SLGBA or Winfresh previously, a fact which causes resentment with small producers

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<sup>20</sup> Fairtrade.net 2017

## Chapter 3: Literature Review

### *Moral Economies*

As noted above, FLO seek to address the inequalities of today's trade system by bringing in ethical values of justice and fairness. A growing body of academic scholarship has examined how that system has played out in practice. Fridell, drawing on his work on Fairtrade coffee in Mexico, writes that the movement is guided by a mix of Christian and Enlightenment ideas of human rights and justice and, thus, "the concept of a moral economy fits well with the political objectives of the fair trade network..." For Fridell, this "new moral economy" is international and based on the notion that "people's right to live [takes] precedence over the profit driven aims of capital."<sup>21</sup>

By "moral economy", Fridell means an understanding of economic relationships as rooted in cultural norms and ideas about the expected relations between people. This is a different definition than is sometimes meant when using the term to refer to Fairtrade. While it often is used simply to refer to the ethical values at the heart of Fairtrade, a usage which aims to show that the movement is concerned with people over profit, in contrast with a conventional, impersonal economy,<sup>22</sup> as Moberg points out the term was a more specific meaning coming out of peasant studies.<sup>23</sup> "Moral economy" was popularized by the historian E.P. Thompson, who looked at 18<sup>th</sup> century peasants in England and aimed to understand why bread riots occurred at some times but not others.<sup>24</sup> Thompson finds that despite the great privilege elites experienced at the expense of the poor, pre-capitalist English society was still guided by ideas that both peasants and upper classes held certain rights and obligations towards each other, however uneven those might be. Thus, while 18th century England was a highly stratified society, stratification alone was not

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<sup>21</sup> Fridell 2007:285

<sup>22</sup> Goodman 2014

<sup>23</sup> Moberg 2014

<sup>24</sup> Scott 1976:27

enough to incite people to riot. Rather, Thompson found the violation of peasants' "moral right to subsistence" pushed people to protest, and this violation came into view when bread was no longer affordable. This "moral economy" superseded any narrowly defined economic rights and legitimized riots as a way to return society to its proper social arrangements.

James Scott applied Thompson's ideas in his studies of Southeast Asian peasants, in part as a way to understand exploitation and injustice and, again, why peasant uprisings happen when they do. Scott argues that perceptions of inequality are not based on a single universal concept but on "norms of reciprocity," i.e., cultural norms and ideas about the expected relations between people.<sup>25</sup> Differences in status are not illegitimate per se, Scott asserts, but depend on cultural ideas of justice. In the communities he studies, landowners held certain obligations towards their tenants to make sure they were taken care of. This meant, for example, in years of a poor harvest landowners were expected to forego the collection of taxes. Social pressures, such as rumor, gossip and the threat of non-compliance, prevented excess abuses of power. Scott argues that in non-capitalist societies, including pre-industrial England, the legitimacy of elites was based in part on their duties to those below them. Upper classes were able to take advantage of their status but they recognized they could only do so within the confines of a locally constructed moral economy. Of course, people of different classes were not seen as equals, and peasants still faced real struggles. Nonetheless, social norms and expectations of obligation and reciprocity insured that a fundamental right to subsistence was not infringed upon.

This has a few implications for Fairtrade. Sarah Lyon, referencing Besky's work connecting fair trade to ideas of moral economy, makes the point that "moral economies operate on assumptions of unequal relations rather than equal partnerships. They are a way to regulate, though not eliminate, exploitation."<sup>26</sup> If Fairtrade operates as a moral economy in the way understood here, the organization both legitimizes and regulates certain inequalities. Further, Thompson and Scott assert that the social systems they studied were undermined by the spread of capitalism during the Industrial Revolution in

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<sup>25</sup> Scott 1976: 167-180

<sup>26</sup> Lyon 2015: 133

England and during the 20th century in Southeast Asia. As capitalist systems spread, relationships between landowners and tenants weakened, and outside economic pressures on landlords were then passed on to tenants. Social pressures which once were able to help keep relationships in balance became less effective. Thus, moral economies are not resistant to outside pressures but can be broken. Sarah Besky illustrates below how FLO itself can weaken existing moral economies.

### *Moral Economies and the Fairtrade movement*

As Besky points out, the current Fairtrade model grew out of a specific context, the partnership between the Mexican cooperative UCIRI (Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Región del Istmo) and the Dutch organization Solidaridad.<sup>27</sup> UCIRI already had a history as a functioning, relative autonomous, cooperative based on values of mutual aid and group solidarity.<sup>28</sup> Thus, as Besky argues, when fair trade principles were applied elsewhere, a Mexican system which grew largely from the bottom up became implemented in a top-down manner in diverse cultural settings.

Besky's ethnographic account of Darjeeling tea plantations illustrates potential problems of both top-down implementation and a misunderstanding of local moral economies.<sup>29</sup> In Darjeeling, plantation workers are classified as "wage workers" by FLO, but this does not quite explain their reality as they are tied to the land where they work. Darjeeling tea workers are paid both by a stipend and in kind, in the form of housing, education, food rations and health care. This form of patronage is clearly not egalitarian: owners hold the most control over resources and decision making. However, the patronage does provide a base level of security for workers in a situation of interdependence between bosses and workers. Furthermore, in Darjeeling this patronage system is reinforced by the state, which sets minimum wages, thus making this system both a political and moral economy. When tea pickers discuss the changes they would like to see, it is more often about the in-kind benefits they feel they are owed, rather than higher

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<sup>27</sup> Besky 2010:Ch. 1

<sup>28</sup> See Vanderhoff Boersma 2009, Fridell 2007

wages or equal opportunities. In this setting, Besky finds Fairtrade shows a clear lack of understanding of Darjeeling's moral economy. The basic Fairtrade framework bypasses local government, assuming an absence of local social institutions. Instead it relies on a market-based system where enlightened companies and consumers choose to support ethically produced products. In bypassing Darjeeling's patronage system, Besky argues, Fairtrade actually undermined existing protections. Many of the benefits Fairtrade is supposed to provide through social premiums are things which plantation owners must legally provide in the first place. Thus, the premiums effectively subsidized owner expenses. Although FLO does have specific provisions in place that plantation owners are supposed to follow (e.g. democratic decision-making of the Joint Body) they are not easily enforceable, and are easily manipulated by owners, who grew adept at speaking the language of Fairtrade, using the values of stewardship and transparency to gain good publicity and access to niche markets through Fairtrade, while using the appearance of transparency to hide what is really going on.

In the case of Darjeeling, FLO's inability to recognize the current moral economy has ended up undermining it, making tea workers' conditions more precarious. The organization has been more successful elsewhere. Dolan discusses the Kenyan flower industry, which was hit hard by neoliberal deregulation.<sup>30</sup> Fairtrade has brought very clear financial benefits to these workers. At the same time, it has not involved workers in the process. Dolan shows that the way farmers understand changes due to Fairtrade is very different than how they would be explained by FLO to consumers. Most farmers she talked to either did not know what Fairtrade is, or saw the relationship as a patronage, with the social premium seen as a gift from their patron, rather than their rightful share.<sup>31</sup> Dolan argues that the talk of gifts would be "anathema" to the Western values of Fairtrade, which is not only about financial benefits but about changing the very process of trade by increasing dialogue and producer participation in the trade process.

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<sup>30</sup> Dolan 2008

<sup>31</sup> Ibid: 280-282

Dolan may be right that notions of patronage make Western liberals wary: Ferguson argues that the issue of paternalism has become a “bogey...haunting the liberal imagination...”<sup>32</sup> which prevents Western liberals from fully understanding or appreciating social relationships which fall outside the bounds of what we are used to thinking of as just or equal. However, this is perhaps more true in discourse than in practice, as Fairtrade increasingly aims to regulate rather than eliminate inequality.<sup>33</sup> In this way, then, Fairtrade could be seen to fit into a moral economy framework, where the organization cares for dependent farmers in exchange for certification. However, there is a major characteristic of moral economies as discussed by scholars that is missing in the Fairtrade system, in that lower classes have a mechanism to directly pressure those in power to keep the elite within the bounds of what is considered morally acceptable.<sup>34</sup> While Fairtrade works to pressure corporations and supermarkets to carry goods grown by certified producers, this pressure is not coming from the producers affected, but by consumers whose stake in the outcome is different from that of producers. This is an important distinction. In fair trade arrangements producers rely on consumers, who have little to lose or gain, to put the right pressure on companies. Consumers and producers operate within different moral frameworks and are motivated by other factors such as their own economic interests and challenges, which may not line up with each other.

This is a particularly severe example, but it brings up questions of compatibility with diverse conceptions of societal norms. In the case of Caribbean banana producers the situation is a bit more ambiguous. Edelman, for example, discusses the moral right of Caribbean farmers to “continue being agriculturalists”.<sup>35</sup> This refers to belief of Caribbean peasants that they have the right to both subsistence and independence: to be able to provide for themselves on their own land, without having to rely on a wage. Especially for older generations, the ability to work one’s own land is hugely important, which Moberg argues stems from the fact that their ancestors, who were enslaved for generations, were denied

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<sup>32</sup> Ferguson 2015:161

<sup>33</sup> Vanderhoff Boersma 2009, fairtrade.com 2017

<sup>34</sup> Scott 1976

<sup>35</sup> Edelman 2005:2

their humanity for so long<sup>36</sup>. For this reason many farmers are skeptical of wage work that they liken to slavery, instead preferring to be self-reliant. This is true even as farmers worry about a dwindling industry and complain about lack of money and compensation for their work. While farmers have seen their representation in governmental organizations shrink and requirements from supermarkets and Winfresh grow, these difficulties are largely tolerated until it reaches the point that farmers moral economy is violated, such as what happened in the strike in the 1990s. Fairtrade fits into this framework in much the same way. Despite its overarching goals, it is not radically different from Winfresh or SLBGA in the eyes of producers, especially as the basic system of banana exportation has not changed under Fairtrade. Thus, to the extent that farmers are allowed their moral rights, they will tolerate the rules of the larger banana industry, whether represented by SLBGA, Winfresh, or Fairtrade.

### *Fairtrade Relationships: direct, real or imagined?*

Even if Fairtrade is not a moral economy in a traditional sense, it still operates from the assumption that all actors in the trade network are connected. Fairtrade discourse, especially, focuses on the “direct partnership”<sup>37</sup> between consumers and producers. By creating these connections, Fairtrade aims to re-embed commodities into the global commodity trade, recreating and rearranging the relationships involved to become less impersonal. However, scholars such as Lyon have pointed out that this relationship is an imaginary one, as producers know little about the people who end up buying their products, aside from what they see on TV or from tourists,<sup>38</sup> and in general do not seem terribly interested in that relationship anyway. Much more important to them are the myriad other relationships and connections in their personal and work lives: other farmers, government, roasters, shippers, family, and, importantly, FLO itself.

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<sup>36</sup> Moberg 2014

<sup>37</sup> Fairtrade.net 2017

<sup>38</sup> Lyon 2015

For some researchers, the imaginary “direct link” purported by FLO obscures all these other relations which stand between producers and consumers.<sup>39</sup> Naylor points out the simplicity of the producer-consumer narrative. It contributes to a “naturalized divide between a ‘consuming north’ and a ‘producing south’”, a binary which obscures the fact that many producers live in the “global North” while ignoring the existence of southern consumers.<sup>40</sup> As well, this binary leads consumers and activists to overlook important and more complex dynamics of the world trade system. From this perspective it can be argued that the Fairtrade framework is more beneficial to Northern consumers, who are able to become informed about commodity production while feeling good about their ethical decisions.

While the idea of a direct relationship may not be real, that does not necessary lessen the impact of Fairtrade. The image is a useful image for attracting consumers with a desire to live a more ethical life and connect the trade system. Those consumers, in turn, support Fairtrade producers. While this imagined relationship can be beneficial, some scholars argue that it can run the risk of obscuring some of the relationships of the international commodity systems that Fairtrade aims to make transparent. Carrier in particular expands on Marx’s ideas of commodity fetishism, that items become commodities once people begin to see them as having value inherent to themselves, separate from the labor that went into them.<sup>41</sup> Carrier argues that the Fairtrade process fetishizes ethical consumption. By being advertised as ethical, objects and their consumption are presented in ways which emphasize certain ethical values, while obscuring others. In the Western context these refer to a view of independent smallholders working together in democratic ways while protecting the environment. Fairtrade coffee in the US and Europe, for example, is often packaged with pictures of a smiling co-operative member, usually in specific ethnic clothing, working their land. The image is one of a self-reliant farmer. However, many coffee producers use hired labor to help with the labor intensive harvest period. The use of wage labor is obscured in Fairtrade, however; as Carrier notes, “images of migrant workers living in barracks would be seen as

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<sup>39</sup> Carrier 2010:680

<sup>40</sup> Naylor 2014

<sup>41</sup> Carrier 2010

indicating an unethical state of affairs, even though they are a part of Fairtrade coffee production.”<sup>42</sup> Because Fairtrade emphasizes certain aspects of production which fit into a Western image of “ethical”, many important dynamics of the commodity trade are obscured/brushed over. The outcome of this is that many complex aspects of global commodity production and trade cannot be discussed or improved since they do not fit into the accepted framework. Fairtrade products sold in a capitalist society must be marketed to consumers, as such they tend to rely on certain images which resonate with ethical ideals. This fact has led many fair trade organizations to focus on marketing and growth of Fairtrade sales in order to expand the movement.

An emphasis on growth has led Fairtrade to work “both in and against the market”, a paradox discussed by several scholars.<sup>43</sup> Much of the driving force behind the movement is recognition of the harmful and unsustainable practices of neoliberal trade. Growing awareness of the problems associated with neoliberalism is what drove the creation of fair trade organizations in the first place. At the same time, the Fairtrade system itself is not necessarily at odds with market capitalism. After all, ethical consumption at the heart of Fairtrade relies on the assumption that individuals, through their voluntary ethical purchases, can “affect the larger world, by putting pressure on firms in a competitive market.”<sup>44</sup> In bypassing local government the system assumes that trade itself is capable of addressing the problems of inequality, that it is markets, not governments or policy that can best help create sustainable, lasting change.

Because of this Fairtrade is often promoted by the WTO as an alternative to governmental regulation.<sup>45</sup> Fairtrade’s status as a “voluntarist, non-statist program”, argues Fridell, makes it “fundamentally compatible with neoliberal reforms”.<sup>46</sup> Despite early resistance, many corporations who were originally hostile to the idea, such as Nestle and Proctor & Gamble have actually embraced

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid: 678

<sup>43</sup> Murray & Reynolds 2007, Naylor 2014

<sup>44</sup> Carrier 2010:672

<sup>45</sup> Moberg and Lyon 2010

<sup>46</sup> Fridell 2007:21

Fairtrade, to a very limited extent. Nestle, a longtime opponent to fair trade initiatives, now has its own fair trade brand of coffee, though it is the only one of 8500 Nestlé products to carry a fair trade logo.<sup>47</sup> As Murray and Raynolds point out, as “ethical consumption” has become more popular in Europe and the US, corporations have seen this as an opportunity to improve their public image and cash in on what they see as a profitable trend; by labeling a small percent of their products fair trade they are able to reap the benefits, but without having to radically alter their own corporate structure.<sup>48</sup>

Fridell discusses different perspectives within the fair trade movement, which vary from moderate to radical interpretations of social justice. The more radical version seeks to construct an alternative model to the current neoliberal trade system. This vision of Fairtrade “remains a concept that is central to the collective identity of fair traders”.<sup>49</sup> However, this vision has eroded over time as it has shifted to align more with neoliberal reforms. As it is now, FLO resembles more of what he calls a “shaped advantage”, which aims to help protect producers from the worst impacts of global trade while helping some enter the market on favorable terms. Francisco Vanderhoff Boersma is a Dutch priest associated with the UCIRI cooperative, who helped form Max Havelaar. In revisiting the developments in fair trade since the creation of Max Havelaar, Vanderhoff Boersma argues that alternative markets are not (or should not) be simply a niche market, or a “training ground” for producers to compete in the free market (the “shaped advantage” as Fridell describes).<sup>50</sup> Rather than aim to reduce poverty, which is the symptom and not the problem, alternative trade in his view must seek to change the “unjust and irrational system of trade” which is the cause of poverty.

The growth of FTOs and desire to reach a wider number of consumers and producers has made it necessary to systematize the process by creating general standards that could, with adjustments, be used everywhere. In order for producers to become certified, they must pass certain requirements relating to gender equality, democratic decision-making, and good environmental practices. FLO-CERT, an

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<sup>47</sup> Grant 2007

<sup>48</sup> Murray & Raynolds 2007

<sup>49</sup> Fridell 2007:279

<sup>50</sup> Vanderhoff Boersma 2009

independent Fairtrade certification body, evaluates producers and cooperatives to insure they are following protocol and correct practices. Evaluation and auditing are meant to insure everything is working as it should and providing transparency about the process. While this is perhaps an inevitable step, it also brings up new complications. Standards, as Dolan points out, govern at a distance.<sup>51</sup> While FLO-CERT, as an independent 3<sup>rd</sup> party, is seen as objective and the auditing process as neutral, they rely on certain implicit, unspoken values. These values are then placed upon producers. Through standards, certain forms of value and morality are codified while others are merged/others are made less important. This is not to say that Fairtrade standards are always necessarily incompatible with local values. Indeed, as I show later, sometimes these formal standards can complement local ideas of justice, strengthening, rather than negating, local institutions. Standards and evaluation are necessarily value-laden, and it is important to understand how values of Fairtrade interact with those of producers. Given this, it is important to ask who defines the criteria? Who establishes good practices? What happens when standards are not written in a participatory way?

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<sup>51</sup> Dolan 2008

## Chapter 4: Research Methods

In order to explain the discrepancy in how St. Lucian banana farmers locate their relationship to Fairtrade, this paper utilizes data gathered by Caela O’Connell as part of a larger study carried out in St. Lucia over an 18 month period in 2010-12. The data consists primarily of 30 semi-structured interviews with producers from two farmers groups; Plas Hòtè and Lawivyè Tounen.<sup>52</sup> The interviews questioned respondents on their personal histories of farming, histories with FLO, their environmental perceptions, and experiences with Hurricane Tomas, among other points. In addition to the interviews, this paper employs data from a quantitative survey with approximately 60 households. The survey was applied in Spring 2011 and 2012 to the same two communities where the interviews were carried out.

After a preliminary reading of several interviews to get a sense of recurrent themes and relationships, I began to code and analyze the interviews in MAXQDA software. Important themes had to do largely with different connections to others and identity. The ones used most were about relationships with several groups which were: Fairtrade, the government, the banana industry in general, other St. Lucians (mainly other farmers and labor), and relation with the land. Along with these relationships several main themes emerged: the allocation system, communication, support, disaster (mainly Black Sigatoka and Tomas), financial logistics, and identity-both as farmers and Fairtrade members. The first three of these became sub-themes of the relationship categories. So, for example, I created a code for Fairtrade relationships, and under that places allocation, support, and communication. I did the same for government relationships and banana industry relationships. Although “disaster” was one of my codes, there was a clear section in each interview where issues relating to Tomas and Black Sigatoka were discussed. Because of this I was less consistent in applying that code to interviews.

I did not set out expecting to look for environmental relationships, as I was focused originally on the specific relationship with Fairtrade. However, I kept coming across quotes that showed a link between environmental and human wellbeing, leading to the idea that the environment is an important part of the

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<sup>52</sup> pseudonyms

moral economy. Identity, too, emerged as an important theme, especially as I wondered why producers put up with so many challenges. Statements such as *“I feel proud to be a Fairtrade farmer you know, I thought it was something special...”* or *“...because I love my bananas and I love to work for myself”* helped to show how ideas of farming and the image of Fairtrade influenced people’s actions and perceptions.

<b>Main Codes</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Relationship-Fairtrade/NFTO	170
-communication	35
-assistance	61
-field support	30
Relationship-Government	30
-communication	2
-assistance	23
Relationship-Banana Industry	63
-allocation	37
-assistance	14
-communication	9
Relationship-Land	73
Relationship-others	
-other farmers	63
-labor	33
Identity	
-as banana farmers	38
-as Fairtrade farmers	20

My analysis was done primarily on the farmer interviews, but I utilized the quantitative survey as well. This was helpful for getting an overall view of producer’s financial situations, by questions concerned with how well they can afford certain necessities. The survey also questioned producers on the level of assistance from various entities such as government, NFTO, FLO, churches, neighbors, as well as their level of satisfaction.

Overall, the coding showed those farmers interviewed were frustrated with Fairtrade over financial and decision-making processes. Although not against the idea of a certification system per se, they expressed frustration over the specific ways it has played out. Views about the proper relationship to Fairtrade also contrasted with the ways in which Fairtrade advertises itself to consumers, as it was the

connections to Fairtrade and NFTO more than shippers, supermarkets, or consumers that farmers emphasized.

## Chapter 5: Analysis

### *The Anticipated Partner*

The initial group of St. Lucian farmers who first reached out to Fairtrade were optimistic that it would be their “way out” from the problems of the previous decade and corruption of the SLBGA, providing them with economic support that the government had not. This early vision of Fairtrade is depicted by farmers as having been truly fair and run by farmers themselves (although the details on exactly how are vague), with Fairtrade providing support by strengthening of social values.<sup>53</sup> The reality fell short of this ideal, however, as initial optimism of the original certified farmers had worn off long before O’Connell’s research.<sup>54</sup> Fairtrade did provide some help, but it was mainly in the form of access to a niche market, allowing the industry to continue a little longer. The overall structures that enabled power imbalances remained in place. Despite its shortcomings, interviewees seem largely satisfied with Fairtrade for the first several years. While Fairtrade was not revolutionary, it fit within existing conceptions of moral economy, supporting farmers in exchange for the social and environmental practices required.

Moberg discusses an unexpected, positive effect of Fairtrade, in the formation of farmer’s groups. One of the stipulations of Fairtrade is that producers be organized into cooperative groups. There is not a big tradition of cooperatives in St. Lucia; they have existed but most have not been terribly successful or lasted long.<sup>55</sup> formation of farmers groups provided a way and a place for farmers to get together to discuss issues relevant to the industry at monthly meetings, or just to get together to socialize. “*The little socials does be good at the end of the year, to everybody come together.*” These meetings were also where farmers decided on how to spend the social premiums, at least in earlier years. Farmers’ satisfaction with their individual groups lasted much longer than the original optimism about Fairtrade.

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<sup>54</sup> Moberg 2008

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

At the time of the interviews, Fairtrade's ecological standards still resonated with farmers, who saw a clear link between a healthy environment and healthy people. Respondents voiced a desire to be able to farm in environmentally friendly ways. As one farmer, Eleanor said, *“yes it does matter to me, if the environment is healthy than everybody will be healthy. If the environment is polluted then we will not be healthy. It matters a lot to me cause at the end of the day you have to be healthy.”* Interviewees saw new ecological practices as especially important as a way to undo some of the damage done by decades of conventional banana production, which relies heavily on chemical inputs. Since switching to Fairtrade, respondents said they have noticed their farms healing—rivers were healthier (although not everyone trusts the water enough to drink) and many animals which had disappeared due to chemical use were returning to the farms. George explained how he left parts of his farm alone because he enjoyed the sound of the birds. Even before Fairtrade he was taking care of the environment.

*“when I doing my thing I always protecting the birds...I have the black bird, the red chest, the yellow chest, I have the Toutwel, I have the Zantola, I have one I don't know the name too well, it look like a Pipirit or something like that, they have some blue eggs [laughter]...they a little shy, you cannot go near them, but I see the nest already.”*

A healthy environment was important both for the health of humans as well as animals. Not only was it necessary for survival, but it was a source of joy.

Interestingly, while nearly all farmers expressed the importance of a clean environment and stressed their own actions to take care of it, many complained that others lacked a similar sense of responsibility. St. Lucians “are very indiscreet”, according to Clement; *“they don't use their discretion, they drink soft drink and they just throw the thing... it's a bad habit that we as St. Lucians have, we are very nasty as a people...”* To Clement, and some other interviewees, St. Lucians are lazy and indiscreet, because they are worried only about money. Clement explained this in part as ignorance, that people don't know better. Partly, though, interviewees believed that people do know better but *“thinking about money more than the environment...they know better but they doesn't do so.”* Lacking trust in their neighbors, many producers welcomed Fairtrade regulations, because *“if you look at the culture of the people in St. Lucia, we don't adhere, you have to be at them you have to monitor them.”* For St. Lucia's banana

farmers, Fairtrade brought a kind of environmental justice to St. Lucia, as other citizens were not acting responsibly and the government was too focused on the needs of the wealthy to do its job. Thus, FLO as an outsider was able to exert influence that aligned with these producers' own values.

As a consequence, interviewees were ambivalent about Fairtrade's audit system. On the one hand, they did not object to the idea of audits per se. A majority of the farmers interviewed had positive feelings towards audits, viewing them, as one farmer explains, as "*a good system, because farmers did not know what to do... [it] helps you with your health, you learning how to use chemical*". Through audits, farmers were able to learn better environmental practices and have support while switching from chemical-intensive practices to more sustainable ones. Auditing and evaluation were also important for farmers to be able to meet the exacting quality standards required of them by European supermarkets and shipping companies. "*the audit serves as a good purpose to ensure that the farmers adhere to the protocol cause the UK has certain requirements in order to receive bananas up there.*" Outsider standards of quality have grown progressively more rigorous in the past decades, making it difficult for farmers to follow. In this way audits may not have been strengthening St. Lucian values, but were necessary as a means to enable producers to participate in the international market. This last point hints at some of the inherent limitations of the Fairtrade model; that it works within the market means Fairtrade must navigate within an already existing commodity system which restricts its ability to create change and provide real benefits.

Farmers were frustrated by several things: the ways in which environmental requirements were carried out, the lack of financial gains promised to them, and their lack of voice within Fairtrade decision-making process. Although many respondents had expressed support for new environmental standards, some of these requirements did not make sense to them, and the additional costs were not always made up for in the Fairtrade price. The FLO governing board was instituting top-down decisions, which undermined the notion that the relationship was a partnership. By 2010 most original Fairtrade certified producers were fed up and disillusioned with the system. Eleanor, who has been farming since 1990 stated, when asked about future plans, "*no, no I've never considered [leaving farming], I love what I do.*"

However, she is thinking about leaving Fairtrade. When certification started farmers had a say in decision-making and were doing well, “*but it change in 2005...I’ve seriously thinking about leaving because I don’t like people dictating things to me, that’s why I went to FT...*” Charles is even more blunt. “*when we thought NFTO will do better for us...it make things worse. NFTO kill everything they were the worst mistake that farmers could have made.*” So what happened? How did Fairtrade go from being a way out to “the worst mistake” that farmers have made?

### ***Outside Mandates and Environmental Justice***

Due to the outside pressures imposed by supermarkets and Winfresh (the Windward Islands shipping company), combined with the lack of support by their government, certified farmers did not necessarily object to the idea of environmental regulations in theory. However, they did object to the specific ways these standards were carried out in practice. One of the most contested regulations was the mandate of weed eaters.<sup>56</sup> Conventional banana farming uses heavy amounts of chemicals—fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides—all of which are damaging to the environment and have major health risks for farmers, especially when used incorrectly. Part of becoming Fairtrade certified required an end to the use of many of these chemicals, especially the herbicide Gramoxone.<sup>57</sup> As a replacement for herbicides, FLO suggested using weed eaters. These are heavy machines weighing over 40 pounds and difficult to operate. Using Weed eaters is also time consuming and generally necessitated an increase of labor costs as farmers had to hire younger laborers to do the job. Weed eaters and cutlasses, which were also permitted, required use more often in part because watergrass, a particularly noxious weed prevalent in St. Lucia, grows new shoots from the broken stems, meaning the work of keeping them in check is never-ending.<sup>58</sup> Weed eaters do not kill the plant but only cut them back. Even worse, the use of these machines has led to an unforeseen rise in nematodes, which live in the grass and kill banana plants. Because of the nematode problem, farmers were eventually allowed to petition to use limited amount of herbicides. But due to the

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<sup>56</sup> Moberg 2008, Moberg 2014

<sup>57</sup> Moberg 2010

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

top-down system Fairtrade employs, they had to go through a long, bureaucratic process to do so, which is little help for someone trying to deal with an existing outbreak.

Weed eaters were contentious because they increased both time and cost of farming, costs which were not necessarily made up for in the higher Fairtrade price. In a similar vein, the mandate to create buffer zones was yet another area of contention. One of the Fairtrade requirements is that farmers put a 20 meter wide buffer zone around rivers to prevent erosion, although the rates of compliance seemed to vary.<sup>59</sup> These would not be too much of a burden in South America, where banana plantations are often hundreds of acres. In St. Lucia, though, the average size of a farm is 3.5 acres, and many farmers have at least one river going through their property, which can mean a large percentage of one's land is taken out of production, as Clement pointed out.

*“That was something [Fairtrade] actually demand that farmers have buffer zones...initially it's supposed to be twenty feet apart, well, the last time I was told they increase it to thirty feet, I don't know, because it was a report that the chairman gave to the executives some time ago and he didn't have his notes with him to give us the details of which you know, they just gave us uh an overview of it you know... you just have to use your common sense, because in some cases you ...may have two rivers traversing through your estate, from the time you take 30 feet on the other side you have nothing left.”*

Clement's statement shows how producers saw the mandate as impractical. It increased the difficulty of farmers to make a living by preventing them from using all of their land. It also hints that not even NFTO officials were as knowledgeable about it as they should be, since the chairman mentioned did not know all the necessary details.

It is clear that both requirements were created in a temperate zone without taking into consideration the specific climate and geography of St. Lucia. This exposes both the implicit assumption within Fairtrade that professional knowledge of Fairtrade workers is more useful than the technical knowledge of local producers, as well as the perils of that assumption. This is not to say that standards regulating chemical use or buffer zones are unimportant, as both address serious issues. Erosion and the harmful effects of chemicals are real problems, especially for an island which experiences extreme

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<sup>59</sup> O'Connell 2014

weather as erosion and soil degradation exacerbate the problems caused by storms.<sup>60</sup> This is particularly salient as weather patterns become more severe and unpredictable due to climate change. However, because the solutions to these problems were created by FLO professionals in Europe, rather than in conjunction with tropical banana farmers, their efficacy is reduced as new problems emerge. Even for the early adopters of Fairtrade who were the most enthusiastic about it, there were reservations/tensions as Fairtrade both provided support for values of environmental justice and limited freedom of producers to run their farms as they thought was best.

### *Partner or patron?*

The two disillusioned farmers mentioned in the previous section, Eleanor and Charles, were two of the early adopters to the Fairtrade certification program, a fact which colored their outlook on Fairtrade. They, and the others who joined Fairtrade at the beginning, did so voluntarily because they had a clear vision of what they wanted the industry to be. To them, Fairtrade was supposed to be a partner who would help change the structure of the industry; as such, the organization's failure to do so was all the more painful. Those who joined later, on the other hand, did so because by that point becoming certified was the only way to stay in the industry in St. Lucia. Few respondents from either group were happy with the state of the banana industry at the time of the interviews, but those who joined later were more inclined to see it as a continuation of the SLBGA process; Fairtrade was the industry they had to be a part of in order to sell bananas internationally. In this way the organization and its requirements were tolerated as long as farmers were allowed to continue what they are doing, that is, being agriculturalists. Those who joined in the earliest days expressed more anger, because Fairtrade gave them hope and then took it away.

Clement exemplified the anger expressed by these early adopters. Born in 1955, he fell in love with gardening as a boy and started growing bananas in 1974. He is also a teacher at a primary school. When Clement first heard about Fairtrade, he embraced it "wholeheartedly", seeing Fairtrade as a way for

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

farmers to be supported and gain better control over their lives. Since then, however, the values of Fairtrade in St. Lucia have shifted. “*Since Fairtrade have gotten into the selling of bananas then they’ve lost sight of their mandate. They too involved in the commercialization of the banana thing and they’ve lost their thing, there seems to be a detachment from farmers.*” Clement voices the sentiments of many of his fellow producers, that Fairtrade has shifted from advocating for a different way of trade, to operating just like any business, caring only for the bottom line.

When did Fairtrade lose sight of their mandate? One interviewee pinned the decline to the year 2005, saying Fairtrade had spread themselves too thin by trying to certify everyone when they just did not have the resources or ability to take on so many people. O’Connell concurs.<sup>61</sup> This is significant considering debates within the movement about how best to grow, and the importance organizations place on reaching more people. The findings from St. Lucia highlight that these debates can obscure the quality of representation. For St. Lucia, the increase in certified farmers came with a decrease in financial stability. Too many farmers have been certified, as shown by an unmet demand for their products in the market.

To deal with the situation caused by an overabundance in certification, an allocation system was put into place in 2005 by NFTO, the national Fairtrade organization, for the current amount for which FLO had sales. Every week or fortnight each farmer was given an allocation, based on their estimates for how much they will have harvested and on the total amount of boxes available. While a very small number of farmers seemed fine with the system as it guaranteed them a market which did not necessarily exist for other crops, most producers were not happy and did not see it as fair. Despite the complicated ribbon system for estimating production,<sup>62</sup> rarely did farmers get the allocation asked for. As Marie explains while relying one time she attempted to get more allocation than given but was denied, “*I lost the time, I lost the boxes, I lost the material and I lost the fruit, you know, and that is the major problem with the allocation that they have...that week you have beautiful fruit and not enough boxes and that is*

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<sup>61</sup> O’Connell 2014

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

*the difficult part of it.*” Since bananas ripen so quickly, this means that any that are not able to be sold one week go to waste before the next market day. Sometimes, though this seemed less common, farmers were not able to fill their allocation. Estimating is not an exact science and sometimes fruit is bruised or there are other issues resulting in a smaller than expected harvest. In this case farmers were penalized for not filling their allocation. Most of the time though, it was the other way, and the allocation allotted to farmers was inadequate for their harvest. Many farmers had stories of asking for a hundred and sixty boxes but getting a hundred, or getting twenty instead of forty, “*and then a whole fortnight bananas would just ripe on the tree and go to waste and this is...after you had placed a lot of effort and hard work...*” Not only did farmers waste time, but they were also required to buy their own packing materials. The necessary boxes are not only expensive but vary according to which type of allocation farmers receive (there are six different packs based on which supermarkets the bananas are going to). They also changed often, meaning that if farmers were unable to use all their boxes one month they likely could not use them the next. At the end of it all was a lot of labor and money gone to waste.

The allocation system was a huge point of frustration against NFTO. Not only was it often inadequate, but the ways in which allocations were assigned is unclear. In past decades, farmers claimed, they were able to sell what they had. “*Before things was very fine...you didn't need nothing like allocation if you want 50 you want 200, 300 you don't have a problem...*” Of course, farmers had major problems and frustrations with the SLBGA, as well, so these statements may say more about the current situation than any perceived benefits of the past. Some respondents blamed Winfresh, the Windward Islands exporting company, who they accused of buying bananas from other countries outside of the Windwards with the result that Windwards farmers were short changed. Most farmers never seemed to get close to what they ask for while a small number consistently received a high allocation. This disparity led to accusations of corruption and favoritism, the consensus being that farmers with “friends” on the inside were taken care of. As one producer explained, “*the bigger farmers are more taken care of, they always get their demand, they always...get allocations in excess because their friendship always plays a role.*” The allocation system brings out tensions and inequalities within communities. Small farmers

complained about the “human part” of the Fairtrade system, suggesting that it is not the Fairtrade model itself that is the problem, but rather that the people in charge were undermining the system. Allocation not only caused resentment against NFTO but highlighted and exacerbated local inequalities that have long existed; as stated earlier producers of small and medium farms had experienced disproportionately low representation in government for several decades. These power differences are not addressed in the FLO label of “small farmer” given to producers, a term which implies a greater similarity than actually exists.<sup>63</sup> This label hides the real differences in power which exist, while preventing farmers from becoming united.

### *Deepening Distrust*

*“They come like boas in the bananas, the more educated, the more wicked they are.”*

This is how Edmund, a 68-year old farmer of Indian descent, described the NFTO. An admirer of the former prime minister John Compton, he was dismissive of the banana industry, seeing Fairtrade as worse than what came before. As he saw it, the decline in the industry has been due to deliberate decisions made by the elite on the backs of poor farmers. The elite have infiltrated the industry, he believed, gaining control and coopting it for their own gain. Edmund was not optimistic about the future of the industry, or indeed the country in general, believing that once the current generation of farmers goes the industry collapse, since younger people are not interested. He himself seemed tempted to leave, fed up with both the industry and state of St Lucian politics in general.

Edmund was particular cynical, but his views about the industry were mirrored in other interviews. Around 2005 NFTO was restructured to become more hierarchical and less transparent; a move which did not go unnoticed by farmers. The organization changed to be run by experienced banana industry workers, and those farmers who only farmed part-time: what some called hobby farmers.<sup>64</sup> Given that SLBGA also had issues with corruption and lack of representation, farmers were troubled by this. In

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<sup>63</sup> Lyon 2015

<sup>64</sup> O’Connell 2014

this light, all the problems that happened since the restructuring could be interpreted as calculated efforts to benefit top officials at the expense of farmers.

One of the effects of the restructuring was the way in which social premiums were distributed.<sup>65</sup> Before, money was given directly to farmers groups to use, where afterwards the decisions on how to use premiums were made primarily by NFTO itself. Previous programs financed by the premiums, such as a refund for doctors visits, disappeared. Instead, money seemed to go into the pockets of NFTO workers, or in wasteful projects such as a controversial \$2 million building in Castries which stayed empty. This caused Eleanor to state that *“The people who manage Fairtrade right now they are all for themselves they not about...principles of Fairtrade.”* While there is ambiguity in how exactly Fairtrade is supposed to behave, there was an expectation of reciprocity in the relationship that farmers believed they are upholding to the best of their abilities, while Fairtrade failed to do the same. As C, one of the earlier farmers put it, *“I doing everything that require of me I doing, and the things that not being done is required from another person and now we have no money to stray, I have credit, the credit is piling up, ... being a farmer in St. Lucia is expensive, it’s difficult and we don’t get the respect we deserve.”* As additional evidence in this regard, NFTO seemed to favor big farmers, and meetings were held in English rather than Kwéyòl, which is the first language of the majority of farmers. The language choice sent the message the institution is not interested in communicating to its constituents. In 2005 one farmer group was restructured and the well-liked chairman was replaced by someone much less educated. This was done, according to one farmer, because: *“the more illiterate that you are the more they like you...they take out I---, he know what’s up, and put another person there...who cannot read and write, so Fairtrade love him. He scared to talk to these guys. He cannot ask no questions, so they selected him....Once you dumb and stupid they love you.”* Farmers who were charismatic and intelligent are seen as a threat. The perception was that Fairtrade favors either big farmers, or those too meek or unprepared to stand up to them.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

The outcome of these complaints is that farmers feel they have no voice in the system which was supposed to be for them. Charles pointed out several things above; the lack of money, lack of respect, and the fact that Fairtrade is breaking their side of the bargain. Growing bananas is expensive. Under NFTO arrangements, farmers pay for expensive packaging materials, fertilizers, labor, as well as yearly audits of \$400 at the time of the interviews. After all that there was not even a guarantee producers could sell everything they harvest. Even the most stalwart banana farmers were finding it difficult to continue. Compounding this issue was the lack of communication from NFTO. Attendance at farmers group meetings began declining, since farmers increasingly felt like they have no voice; some felt like if they complained they would be punished, and others felt like even if they spoke up nothing changed, so there is no point.

### *Aftermath of the hurricane*

What producers viewed as Fairtrade's broken promises and failed partnership, as seen through poor communication, inequitable allocation system, financial insecurity and certain evaluative standards, was becoming increasingly untenable before 2010. However, the situation was intensified by what happened in the wake of Hurricane Tomas, an event which, for the interviewees, epitomized the quality of the relationship between Fairtrade and St. Lucian farmers. Tomas was a category 1 hurricane which hit in the fall of 2010. The aftermath of the hurricane was devastating, with the countryside suffering from massive flooding and landslides, putting 100% of banana farms out of commission.<sup>66</sup> Banana farmers already live on a small margin, and many had no way to recoup losses from the hurricane. As a small Caribbean island, St. Lucia has experienced many storms, but this was one of the worst in recent history, especially as it was completely unexpected. What really turned it into a disaster, though, is the response (or lack thereof) by the government and Fairtrade.

Farmers received very little formal assistance. They received a small amount from the government in the form of some fertilizer and spraying applications, and between \$150-250 in cash

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<sup>66</sup> O'Connell 2014

support. Fairtrade's response was essentially silence, prompting one respondent to state, "*The Saint Lucian government that have nothing to do with bananas, cause banana is privatized, they gave us a hundred and fifty dollars an acre, you know and Fairtrade say they don't have nothing before hurricane Tomas, nothing, what the hell!*" While some farmers received assistance from their farmers groups' limited resources, they got nothing from the national group- "*not even a bag of fertilizer*" as one farmer pointed out. To farmers, this underscored everything they had suspected: Fairtrade cares about no one but themselves, and are certainly not concerned with farmer's wellbeing, all but abandoning them in this crisis.

The disaster did not end with the hurricane, as an outbreak of Black Sigatoka hit several months later, when farmers were finally, against the odds, beginning to replant. Black Sigatoka is a serious fungal disease which now affects 80% of banana-producing regions worldwide. The disease, which attacks the leaves of the plant and leads to reduced yield sizes, flourishes in warm and damp conditions, making post-hurricane St. Lucia conditions perfect. There is no reliable way to contain the disease.

It is unclear how much Fairtrade could have helped financially after Tomas. Even if NFTO wanted to help they did not have the financial ability to do so, as they do not actually have much power within the banana industry. However, monetary help is only one avenue of assistance. V, someone who recognizes that the NFTO probably did not have the financial capability to provide help, states "*we know that don't have the money, but at least if they could send goodwill to farmers, attend the meetings, tell farmers that we are okay and we don't have the financial capacity to help you but we understand your situation.*" There was no communication on the part of Fairtrade: no support, no understanding, and more importantly no information on what was going on or what to do.

As O'Connell explains, this was a deliberate decision on the part of NFTO, which cut down on staff in their offices and directed farmers groups to halt communication with farmers until an official plan was in place. This decision was an unfortunate one as it squandered an opportunity to utilize farmers groups, one of the few advantages Fairtrade had brought to St. Lucia. These groups could have been a logical meeting place for farmers to come together after the hurricane and gain support, but they were not

allowed to do so. This decision completely underscored farmers' lack of trust in Fairtrade. This failure on the part of Fairtrade delegitimizes them. Producers understand Fairtrade within the moral context of their society, which entails different responsibilities and obligations towards one another. By failing to provide assistance, the NFTO fail producers both as partners in a time of crisis, as well as patrons. This shows how a failure to understand its own role in the St. Lucian moral economy is so dangerous. Within this framework Fairtrade was tolerated even after the original hopes faded, because being part of Fairtrade allowed producers to continue to be agriculturalists. The aftermath of Hurricane Tomas and absence of support farmers received has shown that this is no longer the case.

If Fairtrade is violating the moral economy, St. Lucia's banana farmers have little recourse. They cannot leave Fairtrade without leaving the banana industry altogether, as there is no other way to sell bananas internationally. Given the choice between staying with Fairtrade or leaving the banana industry, many chose the latter. But those remaining do not want to leave. Perhaps because of this, many banana farmers were not ready to give up on Fairtrade, despite their anger and frustration. Citing the "human part" of the industry, they said it is not Fairtrade that is the problem, but rather the way the organization had been run and co-opted by people who do not care about the industry. In the household survey from 2012, one of the questions asked farmers what they would like the future of bananas to look like. The majority (40 out of 51) of those who responded answered that they wanted to improve NFTO, as opposed to only 14 who wanted to end Fairtrade completely. Many also wanted the government to play a bigger role in the industry. There is considerable overlap in these two answers, indicating that farmers do not view Fairtrade and government as mutually exclusive. Conceptualizing greater government involvement can also be seen as an attempt to bring greater accountability to Fairtrade. This suggests that there could be the possibility of partnership between the two, if Fairtrade organizations are willing to become more politically oriented and provided there is government support. This means that Fairtrade might still have a place on St Lucia, as farmers want it to work.

### *Limitations Behind Guaranteeing Economic Security*

Fairtrade had the potential to fit into the moral economy of St. Lucian farmers; producers connected to ideas of environmental justice and welcomed an outside source to strengthen and enforce these ideas. Early on, Fairtrade had potential not only to maintain the industry but to strengthen positive social institutions, by providing better communication about important issues within the industry, more power in decision-making for farmers, and helping to unite farmers and stand up to the more powerful players within the industry. However, because Fairtrade was run in such a hierarchical way, as time went on-especially after 2005-their ability to support farmers weakened. From the image created by these interviews, Fairtrade seems to have become more and more focused on sales and the business aspect to the detriment of their other responsibilities.

That Fairtrade works within the market system has been well documented. As researchers point out, this has helped the movement grow by enabling activists to reach more consumers. However, it is also limiting in several ways, as the case of St. Lucia shows. Fairtrade is not unique in this; Klooster discusses conservation models based on neoliberal ideals. As he writes, this model helps organizations such as Fairtrade reach more consumers; however it does not challenge current consumption patterns which may in themselves be unsustainable. Further, it obscures local power structures.<sup>67</sup> Fletcher argues further that market-based approaches not only fail to address the roots of inequality but inadvertently set up a system where environmental or social goals are at odds with economic ones.<sup>68</sup> Fairtrade itself is dependent on the other actors in the commodity trade: how much consumers want to buy, the interest of supermarkets, the actions of exporters. Thus, it has become clearer that the three main things Fairtrade promises to producers-higher prices, social premium, and strengthened connections-are not always goods they can deliver. For the banana industry, there are many factors involved which Fairtrade has little to no control over. One of the biggest factors is that, unlike other crops such as tea or coffee, bananas ripen very quickly. The fruit must be transported over large distances quickly and under certain conditions to ripen

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<sup>67</sup> Klooster 2006

<sup>68</sup> Fletcher 2012

uniformly, which necessitates expensive equipment few farmers groups would be able to afford. This gives shippers significant leverage in setting terms with producers, especially when St. Lucian producers must compete with cheap dollar bananas from South America.

Like all international commodities, bananas are subject to the whims of the global market. Commodity prices rise and fall based on many interconnected factors. If the price of bananas were to plummet again St. Lucia would not be able to survive-especially if prices of inputs (fertilizers, equipment, etc.) stayed the same. Although the point of Fairtrade is to give producers better-than-market prices, they still must be competitive, since while consumers may be willing to pay more for ethically grown fruit, there is a limit to this difference. Thus, the market price still matters a great deal, especially as supermarkets selling Fairtrade products pressure for lower prices. As cheap dollar bananas continue to come out of South America St. Lucia will always be at a disadvantage, as their cost of production in the Windwards is so much higher. Without strong, long-term relationships with producers, shippers and supermarkets will continue to set more stringent demands as much as possible.

Trade disasters could be market-based, or environmental in nature. An interesting dilemma of Fairtrade bananas is that the crop is generally grown as a monocrop. Fairtrade, though not an organic production system strictly speaking, does have environmental requirements. However, for a variety of reasons, monocrops as a rule are unsustainable; biodiversity is important for soil health since plants take different nutrients out of the soil, as well as helping with pest control. Monocrops also risky, since if a crop fails there is no backup to fall back on, adding to the dangers of relying on one main crop for an economy.

This is not simply hypothetical, as these dangers have been seen before in the banana industry. The drawbacks of a monocrop system come starkly into view with the Black Sigatoka blight. The fungus has affected the entire island and is difficult to contain. The vast majority of bananas sold internationally belong to one strain of bananas, the Cavendish. This strain was developed as a replacement for the original export banana, the Gros Michel, which was almost completely wiped out by the Panama Disease by the 1950s. Although it was developed to be immune to the Disease, the Cavendish bananas are now

feared to be under threat of extinction due to a new strain of the disease. On top of the precarious position of the banana, there is also climate change, which all but one respondent identified as an important factor. As one farmer explained, *“I believe we should be concerned about [climate change] cause everything in the world is changing. People used to time their planting, I’m going to plant in June and I’m going to get it in December, but because of climate change, you cannot detect when you going to plant”* The Fairtrade model as it stands is ill-equipped to deal with either the specific challenges of the Cavendish banana, or especially the challenges of climate change.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

While a focus on Fairtrade officials is needed for a more complete picture<sup>69</sup>, this study makes clear that the perception of St. Lucian farmers does not line up with the way in which Fairtrade is advertised. This incongruity helps bring light to why the current Fairtrade model is not helping in St. Lucia. The point is not that Fairtrade is useless or failed, because it has brought real, concrete results to places.<sup>70</sup> It is also important to remember the reasons for Fairtrade; the social and environmental inequities of conventional trade still exist and Fairtrade is one of the most visible attempts to address those inequities. However, Fairtrade is limited by a variety of issues which affect its long-term viability, especially beyond one generation. These limits cannot be overcome by becoming more market friendly, as they tend of certification has been since the 1980s.<sup>71</sup> To have a positive impact, this section considers why Fairtrade should reframe its model and shift focus to work within the framework of St. Lucia's local moral economy? Specifically, how can it insure that banana farmers stay "agriculturalists"? How can it secure and strengthen producers' positions in relation to the government and the rest of the industry?

Even if Fairtrade cannot always guarantee a living wage and stronger connections, the organization can still be beneficial. Francisco Vanderhoff Boersma wrote, several years ago, that "*when the poor are able to organize themselves...then a new social, political, and cultural order begins to emerge. New ways of life and vitality develop.*"<sup>72</sup> He was referring especially to the cooperative style of UCIRI (Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Región del Istmo), one of the first certified producers groups and model for Fairtrade certification more generally.<sup>73</sup> Boersma's argument can be applied more broadly. It serves as a reminder that the original certification programs were significant not necessarily because of a specific model, but because they were a partnership combining the knowledge and abilities

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<sup>69</sup> See Dove 1994 for an argument on the need to study officials

<sup>70</sup> Dolan 2008, Lyon 2015

<sup>71</sup> Bennett 2012

<sup>72</sup> Vanderhoff Boersma 2009:52

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

of indigenous producers and Northern organizers. Equally important, these programs were more politically-oriented, focusing more explicitly on the underlying structures causing inequality

This political orientation seems to have been lost in the NFTO in St. Lucia, and elsewhere according to the literature. Thus, even in places where Fairtrade benefits have improved people's lives, these benefits may not be long-term if not accompanied by structural change. St. Lucia is a very clear example of this; where previously Fairtrade had been able to keep banana producers afloat in the aftermath of the banana wars, at the time these interviews took place there were only 500 left, and not even all of them were currently producing fruit. Thus, attempts to bring positive change through market systems have not worked. While Fairtrade may not have the ability to completely transform the structural system of the banana industry on St. Lucia, though, the organization could still affect change. It could make a stronger attempt to push back against buyers or hold government accountable, and at the very least provide real support to the producers who are left, by taking seriously their desires to form a partnership.

Operating as a partnership would enable NFTO to listen to farmers' criticisms and solutions. Those interviewed have ideas on how to improve the industry, seen in their suggestions of concrete ideas such as a pension system, and more broadly, such as in restructuring the NFTO to make it more directly farmer-oriented, and united farmers to have a stronger voice in the banana industry. Reorienting Fairtrade means looking at the specific situation in St. Lucia as it is now. Many producers wonder about the future of the industry, due to both the recent problems (with Black Sigatoka and Tomas) and because many farmers are in their 60s and 70s, with few young people interested. Regardless of whether the industry continues, though, there are people involved right now who are struggling, and Fairtrade's commitment should be first and foremost to them. Several interviewees brought up one of their ideas of creating a pension for older producers, and most favored a pension and mandatory retirement for everyone over 65. As of now there is no safety net beyond family, so farmers must work as long as they physically can. A pension is something concrete Fairtrade could help push for, as it would give support to producers who have worked for years in their nation's main industry. It may also open up the industry to newer farmers.

A pension system may not solve everything, and may not be applicable outside of St. Lucia, but is a start. More generally, farmers interviewed were frustrated by the restructuring of the NFTO and the fact that it is run by industry professionals rather than farmers themselves. Another part of the issue is that most farmers have had limited schooling and not all are literate, thus making it difficult to do all of the responsibilities involved. This is a challenge, but not an insurmountable one if Fairtrade is committed to it.

The limits of the NFTO brings us back to Fridell's categorizing of the different perspectives within Fairtrade; the radical version aiming for an alternative to neoliberalism and the more modest "shaped advantage", which aims to help some producers within the system. These perspectives are important not simply for looking at activists and Fairtrade discourse. Because FLO has shifted to become more market friendly with the idea that to do so will lead to an expanded market for Fairtrade goods, they focus on making producers more attractive for the market. This has led to an increase in monitoring producer actions, and focusing more on what producers should do rather than on what they need. To stay relevant, Fairtrade should heed the words of Eleanor, who wants the organization "*to be how it was supposed to be, to be fair and run by the farmers...the changes would be to have a say in your business you more in charge...farmers supposed to be in charge of Fairtrade...*". There is precedent for that, too, both in how earlier certification systems were run, and in what Fairtrade had been expected to be early on in St. Lucia.

During their interviews, some producers spoke of the necessity of Fairtrade to unite farmers. There is disparity between small and large farms in terms of who has access to resources, and this creates a fracturing among farmers. who then focus more on other farmers rather than on the other actors in the system. Marie runs a larger farm of 14 acres and has an interesting perspective on the industry. She stresses the importance of farmers being fully aware and informed about the industry.

*"They don't understand that they are Fairtrade. It's their money that keeps Fairtrade there. With every box that they sell Fairtrade does not exist . They know but they don't understand, they think that Fairtrade is away from them and is another entity. I keep telling them no, they can change the operation of Fairtrade . They can change the way Fairtrade operates here in Saint Lucia, you know, but they quarrel amongst themselves."*

As Marie believes, St. Lucian producers have forgotten that Fairtrade exist because of them; without farmers there would be no NFTO, there would be no industry. This fact is one Fairtrade seems to have forgotten, as well. The organization exists for producers, yet appears to act as if the opposite were the case.

To shift focus back to producers means becoming explicitly political. By this I mean recognizing that the broader context within which producers work is relevant to Fairtrade, and working within that context. The example of Darjeeling tea workers illustrates what can happen when Fairtrade fails to recognize the importance of a local moral economy. In St. Lucia, it means understanding the moral economy that exists between producers and other actors in the banana industry such as the government, exporters, and supermarkets. Fairtrade's current strategy of attempting to increase marketability of farmers in order to potentially raise incomes has ceased to be relevant to St. Lucia. Rather than only aim for higher prices by relying on consumers to buy products, FLO should work with farmers to strengthen their position in the industry by applying more pressure directly on supermarkets and shippers.

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