

# How is fair trade helping make local food systems in West Africa more sustainable?

Against a backdrop of social and economic inequality and environmental imbalances exacerbated by globalised trade, fair trade has positioned itself as a particularly well-developed model for contract farming. What are the requirements for certification and what dynamics does it create?

Fair Trade (FT) is generally defined as a trading partnership based on dialogue, transparency and respect that seeks greater equity in international trade. It offers better trading conditions and helps secure the rights of farmers in the Global South. Demand for FT on the international market has been growing steadily since the early 2000s. For example, Euromonitor International estimates that FT cocoa bean sales tripled between 2009 and 2015. While it is difficult to characterise FT shea sales trends, many farmers' organisations (FO) in the Sahel became certified during that period. In Burkina Faso, Union de Léo was able to double the average annual income of its farmers, from 26,000 FCFA (2005) to 52,000 FCFA (2006), after it became certified in 2006. That trend can be seen in markets in the Global North. In France, for instance, sales of FT products rose 450% between 2010 and 2020.

In West Africa, demand for FT products – which is relatively low – previously concerned only cotton and cocoa. It then gradually expanded to include a wide array of products, mainly for export: cashew, shea, sesame, mango, citrus, banana, coconut, hibiscus, etc. The main labels for those products are Fairtrade, Fair For Life (Ecocert), WFTO (World Fair Trade Organisation) and SPP (Symbole des Producteurs Paysans).

## A tool for promoting the ecological transition and fair prices

Agronomically speaking, most family farms grow FT crops in association (on the same farm or in the same field) with crops for their own consumption or to be sold at local markets. Through guaranteed minimum prices calculated based on production costs, and

multi-year commitments (in terms of price and volume) from buyers, FT helps farming families secure and increase their income. As their investment capacity increases over time, they are able to adopt agroecological practices and increase their production of food crops (soil fertility management, more food crops grown as companion crops or in other cultivated fields). In the cocoa sector, for instance, agroforestry techniques involve growing plantains, manioc and vegetables as companion crops. When the trees start creating too much shade, fruit trees are planted as a companion crop. In Mali and Burkina Faso, sesame and moringa are found in the areas where shea is collected.

As demand from consumers in the Global

## Strengthening the economic fabric of communities and local value chains

The many strict requirements of the FT market in terms of collective organisations and agronomic practices mean that certified FOs have a lot to learn and need to strengthen their management capacities in a broad sense: collective planning of crop years; organisation of product collection; accounting and financial management, management of product quality, management of processing procedures, management of packaging and storage; compliance with certification specifications, product marketing, etc. From a commercial standpoint, the FOs that are involved also develop their skills in prospecting, negotiating and contractual arrangements. Often those organisations are not able to sell their entire supply on the FT markets. The marketing skills they acquire on those markets allow them to position their certified products on domestic markets too (from villages to the capital), as well as other products from among their members' companion crops, particularly food crops.

Moreover, the production, collection, processing, marketing and transport activities of the organisations involved in FT mean that it is necessary to develop related services, which are also essential for local sectors. Those services are a source of income for the people who provide them, causing their purchasing power as consumers who buy their goods locally to increase: many shea, cashew and dried-mango processors in Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana are seasonal employees who, thanks to their work, are better able to provide for their family's food needs.

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North becomes increasingly oriented towards products having both FT and organic certification, practices are changing within the sectors in question. Those practices are starting to focus more on the sustainable management of resources (soil, water), which is helping maintain, and even increase, the production of food crops.



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Agroforestry system for cocoa farming, fully set up in 2017 by the fair-trade cooperative CAMAYE (Ivory Coast)

Lastly, the strengthening of FOs – which is strongly facilitated by FT – leads them to take on a socio-political role in which they represent the interests of farming families and rural communities in the many different forums and frameworks for discussing and developing public policies. They also help make sure that those policies are more favourable to family farming and to consumers, by making high-quality family-farming products more accessible. With support from the Équité project, Nununa – a Burkinabe federation of female shea processors in the provinces of Sissili and Ziro – organised activities in conjunction with the traditional chieftdom, local municipalities and forestry services to secure six shea parks located within areas where forestry amenities are being developed. All of those actors have together defined specifications and have drawn up and signed agreements for the exploitation of shea and other non-wood forestry products. The production of high-quality honey in those protected zones has allowed communities to procure goods more easily on local markets.

### Developing fair trade between actors in the Global South

There are situations where FT does not have a big enough impact to significantly increase the income of farmers or transform food systems: sometimes because

the minimum price is not high enough with respect to actual production costs, and other times because there is not enough exploitable agricultural land or because the proportion of sales by organisations is low. Moreover, although many farmers have limited access to chemical inputs and are focused on diversifying their production, FT label standards need to be more ambitious in order to ensure that farmers belonging to certified FOs adopt farming methods – particularly agroecology – that are environmentally friendly and systematically diversified.

Care must also be taken to ensure that, by making certain cash crops more economically attractive, the system does not result in excessive specialisation within production systems, with more land on family farms being reserved for growing cash crops than subsistence crops. Such a scenario would make it harder for those families to produce food for their own consumption and for local markets.

Lastly, low local consumption of these products, which are intended for export and are generally more expensive than lower-quality imported products, is an obstacle for certified FOs when it comes to producing these products.

FT therefore needs to expand its market, as well as the number of actors and types of products involved. It is a tool for transforming agricultural value chains and food systems by transforming their social and commercial relations, and their production practices. The main objective is therefore to develop FT between actors in the Global South, which would undoubtedly make local food systems even more sustainable by promoting high-quality local products for consumers and guaranteeing a decent income for farmers. Initial initiatives in West Africa to date have been timid. They are certainly suffering from the lack of any large-scale study to identify farmers and sectors where such trading partnerships between FOs and consumers could thrive. ■

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#### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

The Équité programme seeks to promote sustainable economic development in low-income countries, combat poverty and strengthen family farming by supporting the development of fair and sustainable value chains in West Africa. It supports projects led by certified FOs that aim to support their own structuring and the structuring of their respective value chains, strengthen their role in the governance of international labels and improve the visibility of FT as a tool for sustainable development.

<http://www.programme-equite.org/>