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## Linking hands

Expensive Fair trade products mean poor consumers have so far been priced out of helping producers, who are reeling from market forces. Now Just Change hopes to benefit both groups. Stan Thekaekara explains

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Stan Thekaekara  
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Twenty years ago, my wife Mari and myself, with a few others, set up a small group aiming to help the tribal people of the Gudalur Valley in the Nilgiri Hills of south India to reclaim their land. The adivasis, the indigenous people of India, were the original "owners" of the land, except they never believed that anybody could own the land. The land for them was like the air we breathe - we do not make it, so we do not own it.

But the people who came after them - the colonial government, the Indian government, the tea companies and the land-hungry farmers - did not share this world vision. The land was taken away and the adivasis were displaced. So we started mobilising them to form village-level organisations to reclaim their lands.

A few years into a successful land rights campaign, we realised that unless they planted the land, they would lose it again. So we launched into more developmental activity, to plant the land with tea. A year or so later in one village, six women, all in their late teens and early 20s, died in childbirth - not because of disease but malnutrition. This was unacceptable, so we started a community health programme. The adivasis now have their own hospital, healthcare, school and education system. They have a tea plantation and tea marketing society.

They are certainly better off. More children go to school, and women do not die in childbirth. Yet if you compare their share of wealth, it has reduced. While they were taking small incremental steps, the rest of the world, especially the Indian economy, took giant leaps.

We realised the global economy was changing so rapidly that wealth no longer lay in production and in the trade of goods, but more in the trade of services. When tea prices crashed, the monthly income of a tea planter family suddenly dropped as they struggled again to make ends meet.

Only a few years ago, if a landlord did not pay them a living wage, it was not a big deal to mobilise 200 families to go to his house and demand the wage be paid. But today, when there isn't enough money from selling tea to buy rice for the evening meal, they are told it is "market forces" - liberalisation and globalisation.

In 1991, we came across what is now called Fair trade for the first time, in the shape of a German group. The concept delighted us. Here at last, we thought, were answers to the issue of "justice". "Fair trade not Aid" sounded revolutionary, but very soon we discovered its limitations.

### **Market forces**

The overall volume of tea being traded under the fair trade banner was very small, and not large enough to have any serious impact. Fair trade, we discovered, was as susceptible to market forces as mainstream trade, and paying a premium price over existing market prices when the market prices themselves were crashing through the floor was not enough.

It really struck home when, in the UK in 1994 to do a study of poverty in Britain, we were appalled to find people on housing estates in Easterhouse, Glasgow, drinking loads of tea but not being able to afford Fair trade tea because it was more expensive. And in 1997, a group of adivasis who visited Germany were equally horrified to find German friends paying "more" for our tea. "They're our friends - they should pay less not more," protested Bomman, one of the adivasi group. This made us think. The "fair" was based on charity from decent westerners, but it did not challenge the power relationships between labour and capita.

Equally, in India, the trade was not fair either. When the adivasis saw the plight of the dalit [class of "untouchables"] women who clean toilets in filthy conditions day in and day out, they said: "Those people are much worse off than us. Let them keep the profits. The fact that we get a fair price for our leaf is more than enough for us." Equally, the women of Kerala state in southern India who watched the Gudalur adivasis pick tea in pouring rain in cold, misty highland weather were similarly affected. "Their work is so difficult," they said. "We must buy this tea and spread the word."

So here were communities at all ends of the market spectrum, "rich" and "poor", in both India and in Britain, who are subjected to forces outside their control. We asked: "Why not link these groups?" And so Just Change was born as a different way to trade between communities.

This is how it works. The Just Change India Producer Company trades in tea, rice, pepper, coconut oil and soap between Orissa farmers, Tamil Nadu adivasis and Kerala women's credit unions. Many other community groups across the country are in the process of becoming members.

The women, who in India mostly buy the food, are delighted to make substantial savings on their budgets - especially with rice, which is the staple food. They have also discovered that traders had been cheating them on weights, which meant less rice on the children's plates. They are furious and determined that they will never go back.

### **Take control**

At the British end, schoolchildren from the Roseberry Sports and Community College in Durham have started a school business project selling Gudalur adivasi tea. In Manchester, our tea is specially recommended in the Unicorn Coop. It is also being sold in other shops, such as 8th Day,

Out of this World and Sound Bites. New Internationalist magazine and Amnesty International catalogues are planning to sell Just Change tea, and we now have committed groups of volunteers all over the UK. Meanwhile, in India it is sent to communities in different parts of the country, and together we are beginning to take control of the way money flows in and out of our economy.

What we have failed to do is get the original communities in Easterhouse, Matson, in Gloucester, and Middlesbrough involved. This upsets us because our keenest desire is to see the community-to-community link take place. We need organisers in the UK that are anchored firmly in the community and are passionate about the idea to take it forward. For a start, they would pay less for their tea and create a few jobs. But, more importantly, they would realise that they and we could be part of a community determined to globalise at the grassroots. It's a case of "Just Change" the world.

If we have learned anything about development in the last 30 years it is that the world has changed drastically and rapidly, and the solutions of yesterday are not the answers for tomorrow. Our solutions have to keep pace with the changes around us.

The challenge is for us to go global. We have grown up on the motto of "think global, act local". I say we need to think local and act global. The factors that cause poverty are no longer local. They are unseen, they are movements of capital, the way markets operate. Unless we find a global response, I do not believe we can bring about fundamental change.

We need to create a network, not of the powerful - we've had that for centuries - and not of the powerless, but a network that cuts across class, nations, religions, colour, to join people who truly believe that a just world is possible. The day we have an economic system and an economic activity that does not benefit the owner of capital but benefits the whole of society is the day we will see a just and a fair society.

• Stan Thekaekara is a trustee of Oxfam UK, and founder of Just Change. He is chairing a session at the Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship on March 29 at the Saeed Business School, Oxford. Details: [www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/skoll/forum](http://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/skoll/forum). More on Just Change: [www.aktivasi.net](http://www.aktivasi.net)

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