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► To cite this version:

Hanitra Randrianasolo-Rakotobe, Ion Lucian Ceapraz. Un unexpected aspect of equity: how the institutional proximity born within ‘North-South fair trade’ contributed to help French agriculture to cope with major contingent crises?. 2024. <hal-04939102>

HAL Id: hal-04939102

<https://hal.science/hal-04939102v1>

Preprint submitted on 10 Feb 2025

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**Un unexpected aspect of equity: how the institutional proximity born within
'North-South fair trade' contributed to help French agriculture to cope with
major contingent crises?**

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Abstract. Consumers worldwide are increasingly becoming aware of social, economic, and environmental consequences of their consumption and are modifying their preferences, attitudes, and behaviors accordingly. One significant movement that has influenced consumption patterns globally is that of fair trade (Gillani et al. 2021). In this article, in examining a French case study, we demonstrate that institutional proximity is crucial for empowering relationships between consumers and producers in a fair trade framework. North-North fair trade has recently developed by applying the same principles as those of traditional North-South fair trade by reinventing not only the unbalanced relationship between consumers and producers but also by creating a space that is shared to varying degrees: institutional proximity.

Keywords: fair trade; North-North fair trade; North-South fair trade; fairness; institutional proximity; fair price

I. Introduction

According to Dubois and Randrianasolo-Rakotobe (2014), the solidarity-based economy challenges major social and environmental problems by seeking innovative solutions at economic, social, cultural, political and technological levels. It represents an area in which new and responsible ways of behaving and interacting with others are proposed to achieve shared goals that are considered fundamental, such as sustainability. Among all emerging initiatives in the solidarity economy, fair trade is the best known. In this article, we focus on fair trade consumption, which is considered to be solidarity-based. Sustainability refers to its main impact: improving producers' living conditions mainly by paying them a fair price. This socio-economic improvement gives them freedom to choose to remain farmers and helps them weather shocks and crises. The research was inspired by a weak signal resulting from our monitoring in 2016 and later became a strong signal in 2021, related to the 'consumer power' philosophy debated within the French Ministry of Agriculture and Food since the early 2000s. It also benefits from long-term non-participant observation and a conceptual study of dynamics of fair trade in France since 2003.

French agri-food value chains are driven and built by industries, as they have been for centuries. That is history! However, things have changed since 2016, thanks to 7800 French consumers who decided to found and launch a fair-value cow-milk chain under the brand ‘Who’s the Boss?’. That is historic. In 2019, the brand launched 17 products from 5 agri-food business families (i.e. dairy, processed food, cereal, beverage/alcohol, and confectionary). In 2021, for the first time in the French agri-food world, a fair trade product became the best-selling product in its category. This raises the question: Is the story of a carton of milk a sign that the world is changing?¹

From a research viewpoint, the involvement of French consumers can be considered a weak phenomenon, in the sense that it does not represent the behavior of the majority. Indeed, despite significant changes in the awareness of, anxiety about, and general sensitivity to environmental and social questions, many citizens have not changed their general behavior, lifestyles, or purchasing decisions (Signori and Forno 2016). Nevertheless, this involvement may have conceptual utility. The original common denominator of all 17 products has been the slogan, ‘this product pays its producers a fair price.’ Keeping in mind that this pioneering carton of milk, designed by French consumers, addresses the inability of national and European solutions to reach farmers in need, a basic question arises: ‘Have consumers taken up the power to save producers?’ The results of nearly 20 years of non-participant observation helped us formulate a conceptual question inspired by the field: How did French consumers go from ‘supporting equity’ (i.e. backing fair trade) to ‘founding a fair value chain’ (i.e. designing fair

¹ Question inspired by the statement established by [www.novethic.fr: https://www.novethic.fr/actualite/social/consommation/isr-rse/le-lait-de-c-est-qui-le-patron-devient-le-plus-vendu-en-france-une-premiere-pour-un-produit-equitable-150399.html](https://www.novethic.fr/actualite/social/consommation/isr-rse/le-lait-de-c-est-qui-le-patron-devient-le-plus-vendu-en-france-une-premiere-pour-un-produit-equitable-150399.html), consulted on 15 December 2021.

trade) to improve producers' living conditions and ultimately the social sustainability of agriculture?

In addition, at the start of 2024, an agricultural crisis of unprecedented scale affects France. French agricultural unions are strongly questioning European Union free trade agreements. And in a more “down-to-earth” way, in connection with everyday life, with the meaning that the French farmers are personally devoted to their profession and passion, and thus demand a fairer remuneration.

In this communication, we will demonstrate that this crisis of 2024 was preceded by many others. They were less spectacular, but from a conceptual point of view, they were the cradle of a successful recovery of the lessons learned from the deployment of the “idea of North-South fair trade” over half a century. It appears that a broad consensus around the demand for a fairer remuneration for all farmers, during the 2024 crisis, is anything but a surprise.

We argue that recent agricultural crises in France, but also in Europe, give rise to two invitations:

- First, revisit the link between trade and poverty and the concept of equity (first part).

And then, by focusing on the ‘How’: “How did the deployment of the idea of North-South fair trade has helped developed countries deal with agricultural crises?” :

- secondly, we submit to debate the scope of the voluntary or “mechanical” construction of institutional proximity (second part).

II. Trade, poverty, and the concept of equity

Trade has been considered as a major determinant of economic growth and poverty reduction in 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. According to World Bank (2018), the international trade has positive effects on poverty reduction. As producers, the poor – basically southern producers – can gain by selling their output in overseas markets – basically northern markets – where they can get a better return. International trade made enormous progress in improving the eradication of poverty in developing countries. But these advantages came also with some disadvantages concerning the rules and regulation of the global trade including North-South trade (Bernhardt 2014). The growing importance of North-South trade and its benefits towards developing countries was also accompanied by an increase on inequalities and even an unequal distribution of benefits (Ricci 2018).

III. An unexpected strong need: reducing poverty amid northern producers

The World Trade Organization-World Bank joint Publication: *The Role for Trade in Ending Poverty* published in 2015, emphasized the role of trade in alleviating poverty, mainly located in developing countries. Following major contingent crises, poverty – especially among producers – is no longer limited to southern countries.

We respond first in relation to the changing scope of fair trade, which seemed unbreakable from 1945-2014. A scope that went only from North-South now includes North-North as well, and has led to changes in the role of consumers. We then detail stages of the maturing of ‘institutional proximity’ in the fair trade world and its influence on the status of consumers. This observation is the basis of the emphasis, we place firstly on the study of fairness at the heart of international trade; and secondly on North-South fair trade becomingly North-North fair trade.

IV. Three institutional forms of trade and seeking greater equity

Ensuring a fair standard of living for farmers is one of the most important axes of the European Unions' (EU) new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the 21st century (Europarl 2022), and it dates back to the Treaty of Rome in 1958. Fairness towards the agricultural community has always been a major objective of the CAP, in which France plays a major role.

Seeking greater equity for farmers is not new, and fairness remains relevant. Thus, we present the three forms of fair trade and focus on one of them: sectorial. Considering the weak signal related to the cow-milk sector – observed during our monitoring – at the source of this research, we focus on the relationship between the sectorial form and agriculture. We then consider insights from a case study: the launching of the first carton of fair milk by consumers in France in favor of farmers trapped in poverty. This case study helps us explain how the need for social sustainability and the potential of digital technology have contributed to removing fair trade boundaries, which has supported the changing role of consumers in fair trade.

Chanteau (2008) was the first to postulate that trade, which considers itself to be fair, is constructed as a collective form which institutes social justice rules, in the sense of prioritising improvement of the poorest within the commercial relationship. Using comparative institutional analysis, he distinguished three main institutional forms in which European countries and farmers have played a role, strategized or even pioneered: fair trade organizations; interstate fair trade; sectoral fair trade, later called 'North-South'.

The first form, called: 'cooperation against the market,' was born in France and England around 1835. Its initiators wanted to solve the problem of consumption remaining inaccessible to the poorest households by regulating companies collectively, with the aim of associating industrial suppliers and then farmers in the long term. In this way, cooperation of the market economy was replaced by cooperation of production associations. The second form was built by interstate agreements, within the international trade regime, in the 1970s as a 'a search for

social justice by the market.’ It was no longer a question of breaking with the market, but of directing its effects, always by using rules and public mechanisms at the international level. According to Chanteau (2008), it was inspired largely by the work of the British economist J.M. Keynes. The third form, which we focus on, is the best known. Its economic history is closely related to an agri-food product, the coffee. It is presented as a movement that negotiates the powers in the commercial relationship, invested by associative practices, of which the most important are federated internationally by FINE² and in which Europe is strongly involved. Chanteau (2008) notes that this third form, does not have a unified practice, but instead has common commitments to vulnerable producers, especially small producers in the South. Thus, the North-South boundary has become a sort of blueprint.

Besides being the best known, North-South fair trade has two institutionalizations:

The first is the relationship between consumers and producers in the institutional forms. The first form (i.e. fair trade organizations) connected only producers and industrial suppliers, while the second form (i.e., interstate fair trade) proposed public action. The informal but widespread definition of the third form (i.e. sectoral) since 2001 has institutionalized consumers’ role within this commitment:

Fair trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect that seek greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers, especially in the South. Fair trade organizations backed by consumers are actively engaged in supporting producers through awareness raising and in campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade. (Moore 2004, 74)

² FINE was created in 1998 as an informal association of the four main fair trade networks which includes: F for Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO), I for International Fair-trade Association (now the World Fair-trade Organization WFTO), N for Network of European World Shops (NEWS) and E for European Fair-trade Association (EFTA).

The epitome of this support is for consumers to purchase fair trade products, because doing so indicates a desire to maintain fair market prices, care about the living conditions of marginalized producers, and help secure regular and fair incomes for poor people (Doherty et al. 2013; cited in Gillani et al. 2021)

The second is the relationship among fair trade, sustainability, and consumption, which has grown stronger, as Ribeiro-Duthie et al. (2021) state: ‘The fair trade...movement significant rise in the last three decades draws attention to sustainability values and ethical consumption in society.’

By focusing on the relationship between consumers and producers, a parallel can be drawn between implementing greater equity and efforts to reduce the ‘distance’ between consumers and producers. As mentioned, development of this form of fair trade is strongly related to changes in the coffee value chain. Nobel Prize Laureat D. North (2003) considers what happened to be the most dramatic and traumatic shift that human beings ever experienced: the shift from personal to impersonal exchanges. For the coffee sector, impersonal transactions began when wholesalers replaced producers in interactions with distributors and consumers. This replacement was accompanied by the growth of trading on New York Mercantile Exchange. More generally, conventional food systems have become industrialized and globalized, leading to vast geographical and social distances between consumers and producers (Krausmann and Langthaler 2019; cited in Edelman et al. 2020).

North’s insights help understand the scope of the activities performed to make consumers aware of the living conditions of those behind the food they buy and consume daily. Fridell (2004) reminds us that this desire to strengthen connections between consumers and producers is not new. As he points out, the creation of ‘Christian-mission-driven’ NGOs in Europe and North America since the 1940s and 1950s gave rise to alternative trade organizations, established to help create a fair trade market which connected Southern

producers directly to Northern consumers through a new type of merchandise contract. This transformation of the relationship between consumers and producers became a hallmark of North-South fair trade. As Nicholls and Opal (2005) describe, fair trade economics ‘offers a new model of the producer-consumer relationship that reconnects production and consumption via an innovative supply-chain model that distributes its economic benefits more fairly between all stakeholders.’ ‘Fair’ is described as offering consumers a production price which provides not only a minimum standard of living for producers but also a basis for further development. In other words, ‘the first priority of fair trade movement is to create a window through which producers can see buyers at least as well as buyers can see them’ (Linton and Rosty 2012). As Naylor (2018) state, fair trade exchanges may go beyond the sale of a commodity, the creation of surplus value, and the connecting of consumers and producers.

V. Digital technology and the solidarity-based consumption

In this global movement to rebuild connections between the two ends of the agri-food value chain through solidarity and sustainability, the potential of digital technology has been strongly noted. According to Mouzon (2014), a few consumers were always interested in the living conditions of the producers behind their purchases. This ethical trade dates back to the early 19th century, when activist shops against slavery appeared in the United States. An initial wave of responsible consumption increased from the 19th century to the 1930s. However, something changed after the Internet arrived, starting in the early 2000s.

According to Randrianasolo-Rakotobe and Ledjou (2016), referring to North-South fair trade, the Internet has provided new opportunities to consumers who want to improve living conditions for the poorest producers. Thanks to it, purchasing fair trade products is no longer solely related to a militant approach, which previously required joining an organization, paying

dues, and attending meetings. With access to dedicated websites, blogs, and forums, consumers can learn about the living conditions of small producers in the South.

In some cases, they can even interact with the producers themselves. Consumers can find information about organizations, labels (e.g., Fairtrade, Ecocert Fair for Life), voluntary codes of conduct, codes of ethics (e.g., hourly wages, opening hours, days off, but also gender (especially women)) and much more. The authors stressed the ability of apps and websites to reduce the distance, as well as impersonal exchanges. Posting videos on a website in which producers testified about the positive impacts of fair trade was a novelty. The videos also revealed producers' faces and voices, which removed anonymity.

Finally, some apps enable consumers to visualize consequences of their purchases using sustainability ratings. The decision to scan a barcode to visualize positive or negative impacts of their purchases demonstrates that consumers are not merely passive and manipulated by the media, but potential agents for political change. They can use their freedom to purchase products in harmony with their own values. Here, responsibility and solidarity mean identifying the products, complying with the rules of the fair trade chain, and buying the products so that targeted producers can benefit from this transaction.

It is a changing era in which 'the vulnerability of the persons whom we influence becomes the source of our responsibility. It is because their fate depends on us, because they need us to live, or because they may be threatened by some of our actions that we have to feel responsible for them before we act' (Métayer 1997). As far as North-South fair trade is concerned, 'consumers of the global North have a prospective responsibility related to the vulnerability of the poor producers of the global South' (Dubois and Randrianasolo-Rakotobe 2014).

VI. Insights from the French consumers' initiative 'Who's the Boss?'

This combination of seeking greater equity through responsibility and solidarity, the need for sustainability, and digital technology was also new. It gave birth to new opportunities that some key players have seized. In this context, the French consumers' initiative of 2016 became a relevant case study.

In France, Candia, a well-known agri-business company, was the first to promote French producers and their living conditions with the initiative: 'Candia says yes to small producers.' The company attempted to establish a cow-milk value chain that would pay particular attention to 16 small producers in the Massif Central region and revealed that it was inspired by North-South fair trade. Candia started the call for establishing fair trade in France, stating that: 'If the objective...is to restore fair trade with some disadvantaged populations, then small milk producers of the Massif Central certainly deserve to enjoy it' (Candia official website 2008; cited *in* Randrianasolo 2010). This statement is worth highlighting, because in 2008, as mentioned, only products from the South were eligible for the fair trade label, as North-North fair trade was still under debate. The initiative did not last, but the experiment was not useless. In 2016, the first product of the 'Who's the Boss' brand was also a carton of milk: 'milk of consumers, who pay a fair price to its producers.'

We argue that the popularity of North-South fair trade in France, the democratization of its products, and the experiments and learning processes of French consumers prepared the community to launch an initiative which highlighted the need for social sustainability and the need to improve conditions of producers' lives. Moreover, in the midst of an agricultural crisis, when national newspapers were reporting on the poverty of farmers ('one in three farmers lives on less than 350€ a month when the poverty threshold in France is set at 950€' (Echos 2016), initiatives in favor of milk producers notably increased and were justified.

However, reconnecting consumers with producers through digital technology has gone beyond videos or the use of apps that give social ratings. For ‘Who’s the Boss,’ consumers can use a website or app to check and choose several production criteria, such as sustainability and/or solidarity, and to express commitment with a simple digital click. For all five agri-food chains launched under this brand in the mid-2019s, improving the living conditions of producers was presented to consumers mainly through three criteria:

- Payment that ensures that farmers do not lose money
- Guaranteed payment that pays farmers the right price
- Payment so they can invest/enjoy free time (e.g. go on holiday).

Regarding consumers’ behavior, we follow Anderson (2018), who comprehensively describes changes in fair trade principles, and thus emphasizes historical changes in ethical consumption since the creation of the EU and its CAP in the 1960s. He presents four ‘narratives’ attached to the fair trade movement and its ‘ethical consumer’ from 1960-2000:

- Simpler living and moral action (1960s – mid-1970s)
- Co-operation and solidarity (mid-1970s – late 1980s)
- Consumer demand and choice (late 1980s – early 2000s)
- Citizen-consumers (early 2000s – present)

‘Citizen-consumers’ (or ‘responsible consumers’) refers to prospective consumers: ‘it is the responsibility towards the producer who ordered the action, i.e. the commitment, from the status of “backed by consumers” to “designed by consumers”’ (Anderson 2018).

VII. Scope of institutional proximity

From 2005-2016, before the ‘Who’s the Boss?’ brand existed, the French cow-milk sector was characterized by two main features (Randriamarolo 2017):

- a considerable decrease in the number of dairy farms (by 34% from 2005-2015) (Confédération Nationale d’Elevage 2016)
- a widening gap between the mean income of dairy farmers (22,600€ per annual work unit) and that of all farmers (28,300€) (CCAN 2014)

Consequently, socio-economic sustainability was severely threatened. The search for greater equity for dairy farmers has returned strongly to the agenda of socio-economic entrepreneurs in the French agri-food sector. One of them, touched by the fate of approximately 50 dairy farmers in the Ain department of northern France, had the idea to seek a solution with the help of 7800 consumers by creating the ‘Who’s the Boss?’ initiative.

Development of North-South fair trade was marked in 2014 by institutionalization of the change in scope. The depth of European agricultural crises in the early 2010s emphasized the vulnerability of French farmers and helped legitimize promulgation of the Hamon Law in 2014 by the French Parliament, which established local (i.e. North-North) fair trade.

Using data on these changes in North-South and North-North fair trade, combined with data on the French dairy sector, we submit two hypotheses for verification and debate:

- Institutional proximity has multiple degrees. We characterize three of them conceptually in the context of a continual search for sustainability and greater equity.
- Reaching the third degree (i.e. ‘mature’) allows institutional proximity to serve as a pillar of the transformation of consumer status

Thus, we first present reasons for choosing ‘institutional proximity’ and then the degrees of its maturity up to the third degree, which can support the consumers’ initiative of the ‘Who’s the Boss?’ brand.

VII. What can using the concept of ‘institutional proximity’ contribute to?

Institutional proximity describes the closeness of actors’ institutions. According to Kirat and Lung (1999), these interactions between actors ‘are influenced, shaped and constrained by the institutional environment’ (cited in Boschma 2005). Institutions in this context are formal (e.g., laws, regulations) or informal (e.g., customs, traditions, taboos, norms) rules that structure human interactions (North 1991; cited in Edelman et al. 2020). In Francophone literature, Talbot (2008) was the first to highlight the contribution of institutionalism – co- founded by Veblen (1898) and Commons (1934), followed by Bush (1987) and Hamilton (1993) – in featuring, first, the ‘Institution’ and ultimately ‘Institutional proximity.’

The Institution has been defined not only as an *ex post* mechanism for coordinating actions but as a mechanism that acts upstream of actions, influencing actors’ preferences. As a collective action, the Institution (cognition and action) serves an end. According to Bush (1987), ‘institutions represent structures of behaviors linked by values.’ The pragmatic perspective has helped to formalize that ‘the institution is at the same time the rule and the behavior, the representation and the practices, ...without any of them being reducible to the others. The institution thus becomes a common idea in action’ (Talbot 2008, 299). In 1999, Kirat and Yannick formalized the concept of a ‘common space of collective learning.’

Assuming this pragmatism, Talbot was particularly interested in institutions as creators of social relations, and thus of a form of proximity:

We do not reduce institutional proximity to a single cognitive dimension referring to a shared vision of the world; we add to the definition of institutional proximity a regulatory

political dimension that assigns roles to heterogeneous actors to temporarily regulate conflict. In this sense, this proximity is not only a matter of resemblance based on a relationship between two facts and/or distinct and independent individuals. It is also a matter of a community that connects two facts and/or individuals that are now dependent, considered as a system (...). Based on such institutional proximity, complex, delimited and oriented relationships become possible between multiple individuals. (Talbot 2008, 303)

We hypothesize that Candia's inability to carry out its initiative for small producers in 2008 was related to immature institutional proximity. As a corollary, we argue that the success of consumers in launching an initiative with similar fair and sustainable objectives in 2016 can be explained in part by the maturing of institutional proximity, within a 'fair trade common space.' Regarding maturity, we noted early use of the concept of 'common space.' According to Kirat and Lung (1999), it indicates a group of actors as members of a common space composed of representations, models, and rules applied to thought and action. Torre and Gilly (1999) clarified the definition by highlighting a 'hidden' organizational aspect, in stating that the institutional dimension of proximity, similar to the logic of organizational proximity, expresses actors' membership of a common space. Pragmatically, following Hung et al. (2021), we recall that institutional proximity promotes collective learning by offering knowledge sharing among actors based on common representations, models, and procedures. This collective learning seems to be the main pillar of the maturing process that we are trying to characterize with historical facts.

IX. An unexpected solution: northern producers are benefiting from institutional proximity born within North-South fair trade

For fair trade milk, the first degree of institutional proximity corresponds to the common space, represented by the practices and implementation of the informal definition of fair trade. This informal but widely adopted definition gave rise to the first international fair trade

organizations, which in turn established this definition under the acronym FINE. As mentioned before, it identifies consumers as a medium for fair trade.

The study of coffee, which has become an emblematic product of fair trade, shows this institutional proximity beginning to mature. We place it at the moment when effective involvement of consumers was formalized. This initiative was born in the Andes, launched by the International Centre for Agricultural Development (Durand 2006). The plight of coffee producers after coffee prices collapsed on the New York Mercantile Exchange in the 1990s triggered the desire to hold Northern consumers accountable for the ‘absurd’ situation. The pragmatic question ‘How to appeal to the most coffee consumers?’ led to the involvement of supermarkets and hypermarkets, where 80% of French buy groceries, but which are considered the ‘enemy’ of the original fair trade sector. As time passed, this caused friction between proponents of integrated fair trade in France and the future labelled sector that would involve large and medium-sized retailers.

This friction, which did not ‘kill’ fair trade, was a maturing phase of institutional proximity, illustrated by (i) acceptance of a set of institutions principles (AFNOR X50-340 Agreement (Box 1)), the product of the standardization project requested by approved consumer associations in France in the mid-2000s (Huguet 2008); and (ii) establishment of a support organization for activities of multiple fair trade movements (i.e. the ‘Plateforme du commerce équitable’ (Fair trade Platform)), presented as a national collective for consultation and representation of French fair trade actors. This second degree of institutional proximity reached within the ‘fair trade common space’ is a qualitative leap, but in 2008 it was as yet unable to democratize fair milk in France or encourage consumers to play a new role. However, it strengthens the role of consumers and the duty to inform them, to which apps such as ‘Noteo’ and ‘Mesgouts.fr’ contribute in a new way.

Box 1. Elements of AFNOR Agreement X50-340, the common-space set of fairness institutions

The content of Agreement X50-340 defines three complementary and indissociable principles of fair trade:

- balance in the commercial relationship between partners or co-contractors
- support of producers and producer organisations engaged in fair trade
- information and awareness-raising about fair trade for consumers, customers, and the general public

X. The degree in which consumers become co-founders of a fair trade chain

The third degree of institutional proximity corresponds to the moment when the common space co-constructed by heterogeneous actors (e.g. actors of the integrated and labelled sector, protesting actors, producer organizations from the South, large and medium-sized retailers, specialized shops, standardization organizations, consumer organizations, the government, socio-economic entrepreneurs) represents more opportunities than constraints for each actor.

This representation gave this space the ability to host debates that might have previously destroyed it, particularly the heated debate on the boundaries of fair trade. The 2014 Hamon Law, which established local (i.e. North-North) fair trade, can be seen as a return to the roots of fair trade principles, which are associated in France with the charismatic figure of Abbé Pierre. History considers his call in 1970 as the first formalization of the more active relationship that was later built between French consumers and Bangladeshi producers. Thus, one can argue that everything developed with a social quality since the first sales of Bangladeshi products – notably a fair price for producers – (i.e. this degree of institutional proximity) can benefit dairy farmers. We suggest that the expansion of the fair trade common space in 2016

helped promote the intentionality and forward-looking responsibility of consumer-actors for empowerment which serves their interests and the collective interest in producers' living conditions.

XI. Conclusion and perspectives

Adopting a historical perspective, Vagneron and Daviron (2012) studied implications of the transition from traditional standards to sustainability standards on commodification/de-commodification in the agricultural sector. They argued that after a brief attempt at de-commodification with early fair trade standards (i.e. North-South), sustainability standards now tend towards re-commodification. Naylor (2018) states that the 'fair trade market is mainstreamed and consumers and third-party certifiers normalize fair trade as capitalist practice, fair trade movement practices are pushed to the margins, while market performances are placed at the center.'

It is useful to study implications of focusing on farmers' living conditions and the desire to reduce the distance between consumers and producers (i.e. North-North standards in the fair trade world). Is it de-re-commodification, diversification, reverse social innovation, or perhaps a combination of all three? Consequently, what might be the conceptual implications for sustainability?

This article emphasized the role of consumers searching for greater equity for farmers. In an agri-food value chain dominated by market distribution, fair trade played a strategic role in empowering the poorest producers. First, the traditional framework of North-South fair trade became a 'hub' of interest in small producers. Secondly, institutionalization of the framework went well beyond the North-South geographical scope of equity in international trade. It recently encompassed North-North consumers and producers. Digital technology and the search

for greater equity also inspired local disadvantaged populations and legitimized the creation of North-North fair trade.

We focused on the fairness of the relationship between consumers and producers, which reached a new status through three degrees of institutional proximity. Institutional proximity was considered effective once fair trade coffee began to develop. Involvement of large and medium-sized retailers helped institutional proximity to mature and to appeal to most consumers. The second degree of maturing was represented through sharing of information and awareness about fair trade for consumers, customers, and the general public. These processes were eased at the institutional level by the creation of agreements and organizations which support activities of fair trade actors. Finally, a market with the third degree of institutional proximity returns to the roots of fair trade principles by adopting the same rules and agreements as those for North-South fair trade. The 2014 Hamon Law on local (i.e. North-North) fair trade is considered a turning point of rebirth of empowering consumer-actors in their own interests and in the collective interest in the living conditions of producers.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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