

SWEETER TREATS

Wake up and smell the fair trade cocoa.

Before you finish eating breakfast in the morning, you've depended on more than half the world.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said that way back in 1967, but it's truer now than ever. Think: What did you have for breakfast? Maybe you poured a bowl of cereal, sweetened with sugar grown in Thailand, Costa Rica, or Malawi. Maybe you sipped a mug of cocoa from Bolivia or Ghana, while your mom or dad drank Nicaraguan, Ethiopian, or Indonesian coffee. Maybe you were in a hurry, so you just grabbed a banana from Jamaica or the Philippines. Or maybe you guzzled down chocolate, coffee,

sugar, and bananas. (Frozen banana mocha cappuccino, anyone?)

We depend on people all around the world for our breakfasts, and much more. That should be good news: They grow or make the stuff. We buy it. Everybody's happy. Right?

But in real life, it's not so simple. Between us stretches the "supply chain"—buyers, processors, and sellers who move products from a tropical plantation to our plate. A typical supply chain has eighteen links! And these middlemen (or middle *companies*—giant name brands like Dole and Nestlé dominate the chain) suck up most of the profits.

To get a rough idea, picture this:

You're sitting at the back of a school bus, your stomach grumbling. Luckily, your friend up at the front has a cranberry orange muffin to pass back to you. But wait! What's happening? Each kid is taking a big bite before handing the muffin on. It gets smaller and smaller. By the time it reaches you, there's nothing left but crumbs.

Now, nobody on the supply chain takes a bite of your banana or a gulp of cocoa. But they do take a bite out of your cash as it makes its way back to the farmer. A big bite. Lots of big, chomping, finger-lickin' bites.

When you pay a dollar for a chocolate bar, the cocoa farmer doesn't even get four cents. Bananas? Out of the supermarket price, producers snag a measly 5 percent. (And hired workers on plantations are paid hardly anything.)

The makers of the movie *Black Gold* filmed a group of African coffee farmers reacting to the news that in America, coffee drinkers often paid as much as \$2.90 a cup. The farmers couldn't believe it. At the prices they were getting for their coffee beans, they would have to sell at least twenty kilos—enough to brew 1600 cups of coffee—before they earned \$2.90.

One farmer imagined how he would feel if the price went up to fifty-seven cents a kilo—less than a penny a cup. "We would soar high above the sky," he said. That price "would change our lives beyond recognition."

So why don't they raise their prices?

Let's say you come from a family of coffee farmers. You've worked hard growing your coffee beans, and now you and your dad are taking them to sell. With the money, he'll buy rice to feed your family. Maybe he'll even buy you a pair of shoes, so you can walk the seven miles to the nearest school.

The buyer weighs your beans and calls a number out. The weight sounds low. You and your dad are pretty sure he's cheating you, but what can you do? He's the one with the scale. Then you hear the price, and your heart sinks. It's even less than what he paid last time. When your dad protests, the buyer shrugs and says, "World prices have gone down."

Maybe he's telling the truth. Maybe he's not. There's no way to be sure, because he is the only buyer who comes to your village.

You could take your coffee to a bigger town—if you had any way to get it there. You could switch over to a better-paying crop—if you had money to buy seeds and tools, and if your worn-out patch of land would grow anything else.

Instead, you swallow hard as your dad takes the small handful of coins, and months of grueling work vanish up the supply chain into someone else's pockets. Someone like the CEO of Starbucks, who earned nearly \$10 million in 2008.

It isn't fair.

But penniless farmers all over the world are banding together to break the chain. They've formed associations, unions, and

cooperatives. They've chipped in to buy their own scales, and chosen somebody they know and trust to do the weighing. And when they sell their products, they look for a special kind of buyer: one committed to fair trade.

What's so fair about fair trade? Partly, of course, the pay. Under fair trade, farmers are guaranteed a decent price that they can count on not to drop all of a sudden. They're also paid ahead of time, so they don't have to borrow money (at a sky-high rate of interest) just to plant their season's crops.

ACT OUT!

People pay attention when you give them chocolate. That's the idea behind "reverse trick-or-treating"—going door to door on Halloween and handing out samples of fair trade chocolate, along with a card explaining all about fair trade. Order your free kit (chocolate included) from www.ReverseTrickorTreating.org.

Fair trade also pays a "social premium." This doesn't go to each separate farmer, but to the whole community. Together, they decide how to use it to improve their lives. They might buy a tractor, or start building a new school. Or they might dig a village well so that girls don't have to keep hauling heavy buckets of water home from a polluted river miles away.

But there's more to fair trade than money. Fair trade groups encourage farmers to

protect the planet and their families by cutting out dangerous chemical pesticides and fertilizers—then help them do the paperwork for the organic seal. On bigger plantations, fair trade requires safe and healthy work conditions and a living wage for hired laborers. (And, duh . . . no kidnapped child slaves.)

Most important, many fair trade groups work hard to change the rules that make world trade so *unfair*. For instance, they push to end subsidies. Thanks to these extra payments, big growers in the United States and Europe can afford to "dump" their goods at a very low price in poor countries. Then the local farmers, who don't get free money from their own government, can't sell their cotton or cocoa for a fair price at home. Meanwhile, rich countries place high import taxes on processed goods such as jeans and chocolate bars (taxes that are *higher* for goods from the poorest countries). That drives local factories out of business, leaving the farmers just one choice: to sell their raw materials to powerful multinational companies at a low price.

"Free trade agreements" are a major problem, too. The word *free* makes them sound nice. Who doesn't want more freedom? But in reality, these deals only make huge corporations free. Free to go into poor countries and suck up all their natural resources. Free to hire workers at low wages and then drive them till they drop. Free to leave behind a terrible environmental mess. The

local people, and their governments, are less free. They can't even pass laws to protect themselves and their environment—that would get in the way of “free” trade.

Some people say that's just the way it is. But the growth of fair trade proves there is another way. And the more shoppers switch over to fair trade, the more people it helps. Already, fair trade businesses have changed the lives of more than five million producers and their families.

HOW LOW CAN THEY GO?

Fair trade chocolate and bananas cost more, but is all that money going to poor farmers? British researchers caught supermarket chains charging higher markups on fair trade items. So they were buying them for a little more, but selling them for a lot more—and keeping the extra cash.

Asked about fair trade, thirteen-year-old Raphael Agyapong said enthusiastically, “Fair trade has helped me a lot and a lot!” Raphael's family belongs to Kuapa Kokoo, a cocoa farmers' union in Ghana. Their motto is “Pa Pa Paa,” which means “the best of the best of the best.”

Kuapa Kokoo teamed up with a fair trade group, Twin Trading, to create a company called Divine Chocolate. The farmers don't just sell their cocoa to Divine—they own nearly half the company. So, instead of tiny crumbs of the chocolate dollar, they receive a nice big chunk.

Working with Comic Relief (a famous British charity started by comedians), Divine launched Dubble, the first fair trade chocolate bar for kids. The Dubble Web site urges kids to join up as “Dubble agents” and use “positive pester power” to get stores to “stock the choc.” Visitors to the site can also sign the Chocolate Challenge Manifesto, aimed at making the entire chocolate industry switch over to fair trade.

With a little digging, you can find all kinds of things fair trade, from soccer balls to sneakers to shampoo. But how can you be sure the folks who make this stuff really are getting a fair deal? One way is to look for a label showing that the product is certified by a fair trade group. (In North America, it's TransFair Canada or TransFair USA.) Or a company or store may display the seal of the Fair Trade Federation or the World Fair Trade Organization, meaning that *all* the goods it sells are fair trade.

Online, many fair trade companies post photos of people who make the products, along with their stories. The Web site of the Thanksgiving Coffee Company, for instance, explains how its coffee comes from Jewish, Muslim, and Christian farmers in Uganda, who formed a co-op called Mirembe Kawomera, or “Delicious Peace.” And at Fairtradeproof.org, customers can type in the lot number from a bag of coffee beans and see the actual paperwork signed by farmers, showing what they have been paid.

But fair trade can go even farther.

Imagine a dark, moonless night, deep in the forests of Brazil. A creaky pickup truck bumps up a dirt trail to a mountaintop. Several men jump out. They look around. Then one of them pulls out . . . a laptop?

The mountain gets the strongest signal. That's why they've come up here late at night, when wireless rates are lowest. They're uploading a new online store to sell their co-op's hand-embroidered clothes.

Using a program called OpenEntry, artisans around the world can cut out the middleman completely. The free software lets them set up a Web site, sell directly to

customers, and keep every penny for themselves. OpenEntry is designed to make it easy for people without a lot of computer skills to handle tasks like creating a catalog and taking payments by credit card.

These people may live in places that don't even have paved roads or electricity. But thanks to satellites and solar cells, they can skip over what they've missed and jump straight into the twenty-first century. That's known as “leapfrogging.”

Cool, huh?

If high-tech solutions make you happy, hang on to your hard drive. 'Cause you ain't seen nothing yet. . . .

MORE

- To get the buzz on coffee, don't ask that chipper barista with the high-caf smile. The movie *Black Gold* reveals what's really going on.
- Want to get to know a cocoa farmer's kid? Equal Exchange can hook you up. Sign up for a pen pal at equalexchange.coop/fair-trade-fundraiser-program-pen-pals.
- You may not be old enough to vote, but it's never too soon to fight for justice. Check out United Students for Fair Trade (usft.org) or the Student Trade Justice Campaign (tradejusticecampaign.org).