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Title: Development Communication in Alternative Food Networks: empowering Indian farmers through global market relations

Abstract

As sustainability is becoming a bigger global concern, sustainable development operations require new partnerships and a multiplicity of communication practices among various stakeholders. Private enterprises with social, ecological and ethical concerns can be among those stakeholders, but their role in development communication has received limited attention. To address this deficit, this article explores the capacity of small private enterprises to empower farming communities, through a dialogical model of communication. Focusing on Alternative Food Networks, the article argues that market exchanges are mediated by social relations that can bring to light an alternative and ethical side of the global market. These relations are examined empirically through a qualitative case study: a community of farmers in South India and their relation with small private enterprises from Europe and North America. The findings reveal significant ways in which these partnerships can prove empowering for farmers, showing there is fertile ground for more active involvement of enterprises in development communication practices.

Keywords: sustainability, development communication, food production, alternative economies

Introduction

Globalization is often seen as the source of many evils and amongst the many challenges it creates, is the threat to sustainable development. Sustainability presupposes a balance between peoples' present and future needs, and environmental and social capacity to meet those needs, while sustainable development has emerged as a prominent development paradigm. Dominant definitions refer to 'three components of sustainable development—economic development, social development and environmental protection—as interdependent pillars (United Nations, 2005). Yet, in today's neoliberal context, which is characterised by a triple crisis – food, energy and financial – concepts of sustainable development are in flux. Issues of well-being are becoming more complex to explain while more emphasis is being placed on the unfeasibility of a universal model for development. In this context, development operations require new types of partnerships and a multiplicity of communication practices among various stakeholders (Servaes, 2013; Van Hamelrijck, 2013).

The aim of this article is to shed more light on the multidimensional nature of development and emphasise the need for the involvement of multiple stakeholders in development communication operations. To that effect, I explore the role that small private enterprises can play in supporting developing communities to take control of their lives. This role is examined in the context of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs), where market exchanges are performed in an ethical manner to create fair and sustainable communities. Alternative Food Networks are mediated by social relations and communication processes through which communities in the developing world could benefit significantly. However, these relations remain undocumented. This article addresses this gap by focusing on the ways farming communities can become empowered through their interactions with private

enterprises. In these interactions, communication is approached as a dialogical model that facilitates empowerment through knowledge sharing and trust building.

First, I propose that relations in the global market can be understood through the notion of alternative economies, where capitalist enterprises share social, ecological and ethical concerns. These theories draw attention to the process through which outcomes are achieved, and they sit easily with new discourses of development where empowerment is understood as an ongoing and multidimensional process. Second, I explore these relations through the case study of a community of Fairtrade, organic farmers in South India - the Indian Organic Farmers Producer Company Limited (IOFPCL) - and their foreign buyers, a group of small private enterprises. These are intermediaries that maintain close and steady contact with food producers, supporting them improve their business practices and develop their communication skills; yet their role as agents of development communication remains understudied. I conducted focus groups with thirty farmers, and individual interviews with two officials from IOFPCL. These were combined with in-depth interviews with five buyers in Europe and North America. The findings demonstrate that these small enterprises can play a pivotal role in trust building and knowledge sharing and can empower farmers through behavioural change. It was also revealed that, despite the lack of effective communication in certain aspects of the relation, the ethical philosophy of these enterprises can pave the way for more effective dialogue that can lead to further empowerment for farming communities.

Development communication and empowerment in alternative economies

In his widely praised work 'Development as Freedom', Amartya Sen makes a case about the role of the economy as a key determinant of human development and freedom. Quoting early defenders of the capitalist system, he asserts that successful markets operate the way they do not just on the basis of exchanges, but also on the solid foundation of values and behavioural ethics (Sen, 1999). This idea finds expression in Gibson-Graham's theory of 'weak economy', where capitalist enterprises share social, ecological and ethical concerns while they incorporate communalism into their structures (Gibson – Graham, 1996; 2006). According to this, a disruption of the association of 'economy' and 'capitalism' allows us to produce a mode of thinking that considers the economy to be 'social' with social relations of economic geographies being inseparable from material outcomes. Neoliberalism should not be approached as a single global economic order with its ability to penetrate all localities, but as a system of relations where alternative economic spaces can be formed (Leyshon and Lee, 2003). By placing the emphasis on social relations, theories of alternative economies draw attention to the process and freedom with which people make decisions and produce outcomes. It is in this process that the capacity of the market system to enable empowerment also lies (Sen, 1999). In terms of its 'means', empowerment is understood as an ongoing process of expanding poor peoples' agency, changing their social institutions and reconfiguring the broader societal relationships. In terms of 'ends', it can be understood as the expansion of an individual's or group's ability to make transformative life changes (Mosendale, 2005; Van Hamelrijk, 2009; Sen, 1999).

The notion of alternative economies proposed by these theories describes an economy that rests on ethical social relations that sit easily with new traditions of discourse in the study of communication for development and social change. As Servaes (2013) explains, the growing interdependencies between regions in the globalised world render traditional paradigms – modernization and dependency perspectives – more difficult to support. Instead, new discourses see development as a multidimensional and dialectic process where people's ability to make conscious decisions to sustain their well-being cannot be separated from social interaction. It is through social interaction that people can activate social networks, build alliances, discover new solutions and behaviours and eventually influence powerful

elites (Van Hamelrijck, 2013:33-34). This can be achieved through different types of partnerships and different types of communication including interpersonal relationships and sharing of information and knowledge (Servaes and Malikhao, 2007). In fact, communication practices should not be limited to the use of media and dissemination of messages. Emphasis should also be given to the establishment of ongoing dialogues that will facilitate trust building, knowledge and experience sharing and will lead to more solutions and empowerment for developing communities (Mefalopoulos, 2005). Alternative food networks are spaces that operate on similar types of relations and processes and where outcomes happen through dialogic and interactive relations (Hassan, 2013).

Alternative Food Networks: interrogating notions of ‘alterity’ in market relations

Alternative food networks (AFNs) represent a critique of globalization and the neoliberal relations that conventional markets are normally associated with (Goodman, 2003; Kneafsey et al., 2008). They are widely seen as a response to growing concerns about the negative sustainability impacts of the current food system, not only from an environmental point of view but also in terms of producers’ and consumers’ well-being (Kloppenburger et al. 1996; Anderson 2008). The underlying characteristics of such networks are as much about environmentally benign and artisanal production processes as about reduced distance between producers and consumers, in terms of network and distribution arrangements (Forssell and Lankoski, 2014). Traditionally, AFNs are characterised by relational chains that are based on transparency and traceability and rely on consumers’ willingness to pay a premium price in return for products that were grown in an environmentally friendly and ethical manner, which can also allow farmers to stay in business (Stamm, 2008). These arrangements enable new forms of market governance in food networks that are supported by and enabled through the ‘strong relationships exemplified by notions of trust and social embeddedness’ (Forssell and Lankoski, 2014:67).

Nevertheless, the original remit of AFNs is believed to be undermined by the move to a more corporate model, underpinned by capitalist relations that emphasise accumulation of capital (Guthman 2004; Hassan, 2013). Both Fairtrade and organics have been criticised for allowing low entry barriers and a minimum set of production standards that have brought big corporations into the market, undermining the credibility of the movements (Eden et al., 2008; Guthman, 2007; Johnston et al., 2009). Moreover, processes of regulation and certification have encouraged production conditions that resemble those of conventional food – grown in industrial farms and distributed through trans-continental commodity chains and supermarkets. One of the consequences of this institutionalization is the commodification and fetishization of farmers’ livelihoods. Often packaged into marketable stories, narratives that focus on specific geographical places and humble origins tend to fetishize corporate ownership structures, ending up antithetical to sustainability and social justice (Goodman et al., 2014; Johnston et al., 2009).

Such criticisms are entrenched in a binary mode of thinking that encourages mutually exclusive definitions of alternative and conventional markets and agro-food networks. These binary oppositions emphasise market relations as the main forces that invalidate the alterity of food networks. However, considering the complexity that characterises today’s neoliberal context, this approach offers a rather skewed and narrow picture of alterity. It neglects the fact that alternative ways of doing things can indeed coexist with the powerful capitalist system, and food enterprises can successfully combine elements of alternative and conventional supply chains (Goodman et al., 2014; Ilbery and Maye, 2005). Yet, most studies of AFNs tend to neglect the fact that there is a variety of values involved in economic exchanges, and they can create conditions for different types of empowerment. These values are often hidden in the social relations through which economic geographies take place

(Goodman et al, 2014; Leyshon and Lee, 2003). To this end, the work of Hassler and Franz (2012) and Franz and Hassler (2010) offers some insight into the non-conventional relations embedded in a partnership between the producers of organic pepper in South Indian tribal villages and the buyer that marketed the product in Germany. The buyer's ecological responsibility created space for the tribal producers' active participation in shaping the narratives through which they and their products were represented to the foreign consumer. In fact these types of intermediaries are in close and steady contact with food producers and often support them improve their business practices and develop their communication skills while also educating them regarding foreign market preferences and international standards for quality (Gereffi, 1999; Lyon, 2006). Nevertheless, their role as empowering agents remains understudied. In this article, I aim to delve deeper into this role, through the prism of development communication.

Researching relations in Alternative Food Networks: a case study of the Indian Organic Farmers Producer Company Limited (IOFPCL)

This is a qualitative exploratory case study, focusing on the Indian Organic Farmers Producer Company Limited (IOFPCL) - headquartered in Aluva, Kerala - and their interactions with foreign buyers. Through interviews with representatives from the farmers and buyers' groups, I was able to explore the informal reality of these relations, which can only be perceived from the inside; and see them from the perspective of those involved (Gillham, 2010). Although the data and findings drawn from this case study are not generalizable, they can offer an alternative view of the market relations that mediate production and consumption in agro-food networks, and raise new assumptions about the role of different stakeholders in communication for sustainable development.

IOFPCL is a marketing and procurement body that acts as a liaison between organic farmers and foreign buyers, and with over 600 organic farming shareholders from South India, it is practically owned by farmers. The company follows cooperative and Fairtrade principles and their main crops, all organic, include black pepper, ginger, turmeric, vanilla, coffee, cocoa, coconut oil and cashew nuts. I am focusing particularly on the IOFPCL shareholders based in the Wayanad District, where Kerala's organic export movement and organic certification institutions have their roots (Thottathill, 2014). Set on the Western Ghats mountain range of Kerala, Wayanad is a biodiversity hotspot, famous for its climate and geography that provide ideal conditions for the cultivation of spices, including the Tellicherry Garbled Special Extra Bold, a variety local to Wayanad.

The case of IOFPCL exemplifies the political and social culture in Kerala that has supported development innovation through years of mobilization, government reforms and educational programmes. It is also the result of the long-term efforts made by food producers, local activists and religious leaders in South India to address the numerous agricultural hardships and distress faced by farmers - mainly due to dependence on cash crops and chemicals - which led to a number of farmer suicides in Wayanad, in the beginning of the century. Since then, a number of bodies have been established, including the 'Indian Farmers' Movement' (INFAM), the first historically significant certified organic entity; and 'Organic Wayanad', an internal control system that assists farmers with the process of gaining organic certification. Of decisive importance was the establishment of 'Indocert', the first indigenous organic certification body in India that facilitated farmers' introduction to certified organic agriculture and their access to European and North American markets (Thottathill, 2014).

Through the support of INFAM and Organic Wayanad, the IOFPCL group have managed to create a more bottom-up system where farmers are able to actively communicate their needs and discuss how they can improve their farming practices and livelihoods. To a

certain extent, their case presents variations to the traditional North/South relationships promoted through the corporate organic and Fairtrade discourses. It also reflects the heterogeneity of global food networks and the diverse spatially locatable values and practices through which networks emerge (Murdoch and Miele, 2004). This heterogeneity implies that more analytical attention needs to be paid to the particularities of the different smaller networks that compose the global food network, which can shed light on more nuanced types of empowerment, through farmers' interactions with foreign markets.

Method

The data was collected in two phases. The first phase took place in the district of Wayanad, Kerala between 17 and 25 February 2014 and comprised focus groups with thirty organic farmers that were also shareholders in IOFPCL. The interviews were conducted in groups of four and three, depending on the farmers' location and availability. Six groups of four and two groups of three were conducted in total. Individual interviews were also conducted with two officials, the Chairman of IOFPCL and the Coordinator of Organic Wayanad. The majority of interviews took place in the participants' local language, Malayalam, with the aid of a local interpreter. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The second phase of the research included interviews with five of the buyers that collaborate with IOFPCL in Europe and North America. These are small-medium enterprises, wholesalers and retailers, that import a number of crops – including coffee, coconut oil, pepper and other spices - from Wayanad into Europe and North America. With the exception of one European buyer, all others are certified to comply with Fairtrade and organic quality standards. The interviews were conducted through skype from August 2014 to January 2015.

The interview design aimed to capture a combination of the participants' subjective viewpoints and objective information about their material and social conditions. It aimed to measure the different perspectives about their collaboration and understand their relationships and communication beyond the strictly market exchanges. The interviews with farmers aimed to capture their subjective viewpoints regarding the value of their products and their feelings and perceptions about their relationships with each other and with the foreign buyers, as well as their perceptions about the local and foreign markets and consumers. They also aimed to collect information about their farming practices. The buyers' interviews were designed to capture information about their position in the global market and their philosophy and ethos, their perceptions about their interactions and collaboration with IOFPCL and about the support they offer to the farmers as well as their perceptions about the connection between producers and consumers.

The interview data was analysed through a deductive and an inductive process. The deductive process involved the use of the broader interview topics as codes, under which the data was organised. For the interviews with the IOFPCL group, these codes included the following topics: experience of working with IOFPCL; material conditions of the farmers' work; benefits and challenges of organic farming; the material conditions of the local - soil, topography, and microclimate; collaboration and communication with the foreign buyers; knowledge and perceptions about the domestic and foreign consumer. For the interviews with the buyers' groups, the following topics were coded: position in the domestic and global market; company philosophy; collaboration and communication with IOFPCL; marketing practices; communication with consumers. After the first coding, the data was coded inductively, though iterated detailed readings of the interview material, and additional key themes were derived that captured core messages, based on which further interpretations were made. Such themes included the societal pressures and constraints that farmers had to deal with; provenance and uniqueness of certain products like pepper; natural and ancient farming practices; environmental protection. Additional themes that derived from the

interviews with the buyers' group included: marketing support to farmers; ethical and environmental concerns; consumers' awareness and interest in farmers' lives/stories. The interaction of data, codes and themes was scrutinised several times before the analysis moved to the interpretation process (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Interpretive rigor was achieved with information and quotations from the raw data. In this case, allowing the reflections and voices of the participants to be heard through their own words can strengthen the validity of the research (Rice and Ezzy, 1999; Patton, 2002). To establish the credibility of the findings, I employed stakeholder checks: subsequent informal conversations that allowed participants to offer clarifications and verify interpretations that were made through the interviews. Such checks can enhance credibility by allowing participants to comment on or assess the research findings (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Moreover, all participants have been anonymised pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Empowerment against social constraints and psychological barriers

Production practices and market relations do not develop in a vacuum but are mediated by social norms and institutions, especially on a local level where the boundaries of the social context remain more concrete. The significance of this context in the case of Wayanad lies particularly in the way it shapes the farmers' relationships with local and global networks and extends to the sustainable development of their community. The farmers that were interviewed expressed their explicit dismay and frustration for the lack of support they received from the state, for organic agriculture. At the same time, they explained how the low social status associated with the organic farmers' work and lifestyle constrains their decisions regarding farming practices and the varieties they choose to grow. One of the farmers explained that, 'It's almost impossible to even get a loan. If you are an employee, the salary you get is a guarantee that you will repay the loan, which is not the case for the farmers' (Farmer A, Group Interview 1, February 20, 2014).

Sociocultural structures take the form of a particularly fierce pressure among the farming community with a growing number of farmers resorting to excessive use of fertilisers and pesticides to increase their yield and their income. Such practices are further encouraged by an institutional structure where bank loans become more easily available for the purchase of chemicals than for agricultural machinery. For organic farmers, who strive to protect the biodiversity of the area, their environmental concerns are met with social pressure. By choosing to return to ancient methods of cultivation, organic farmers often become marginalised and even ridiculed by their peers. One of the interviewees explained how 'the local community thinks that organic farmers are crazy, because they are not making as much money as the others. They think we are not progressing because we are not becoming wealthier and there is no change in our lifestyle ...' (Farmer A, Group Interview 2, February 18, 2014). Another farmer from the same group, who had recently converted into organic farming, added: 'My own brother thinks I am crazy because of the low yield I get, compared to non-organic farming. He grows coffee in tons while mine comes only in kilos. They [the family] wonder why I even bother...' (Farmer B, Group Interview 2, February 18, 2014).

Several of the farmers were concerned that this kind of social pressure would soon cause certain local varieties to disappear since very few farmers were willing to cultivate them, preferring cash crops instead. Being a minority, compared to the non-organic farmers, a lot of them feel they have to fight a difficult battle to convince society about the benefits of organic farming and change the mentality of those farmers who are destroying the soil. As one of the farmers put it, they were very concerned that 'non-organic farmers use excessive amounts of chemicals. It is actually easier to get the chemicals than it is to get a prescription for sleeping pills' (Farmer A, Group Interview 1, February, 17 2014). Changing the mentality of these farmers is proving more challenging considering the significantly higher yields and

profit they make from non-organic cultivation. According to one of the farmers, it all comes down to profit: 'I think a lot of farmers expect quick, high profit. This cannot happen with organic cultivation. A lot of people are just after the money – even if they are killing themselves' (Farmer A, Group Interview, February 25, 2014). Another farmer in the same group suggested this is also about the different philosophies: 'We don't think that way. Even if six kilos of bananas are not hugely profitable, it's enough. It is about our philosophy and ethics' (Farmer B, Group Interview, February, 25 2014).

Organic farmers are also faced with another challenge: the lack of awareness among the local population, regarding the benefits of organic agriculture for the future of the environment and the community. Lack of awareness means they struggle to justify the higher cost of organic produce to their customers, who prefer the cheaper non-organic products. A farmer explained that '...price is a big problem. A lot of locals cannot afford the good quality products. They are very price conscious and they do not care about the chemicals' (Farmer A, Group Interview 1, February 18, 2014). However, as another farmer added, '...even those who can afford them, they go by the appearance of the products because organic products do not look as impressive as the non-organic ones' (Farmer B, Group Interview 1, February 18, 2014). The issue of 'appearance' was a recurring theme, and as a farmer from a different group also explained, 'We get feedback from market traders that customers prefer the good-looking vegetables and the non-organic ones...especially women, who do most of the shopping... they look for bright colours and nice shapes' (Farmer C, Group Interview 2, February 18, 2014). Some farmers even explained how several shopkeepers sell non-organic products as organic when these do not look good, to get rid of them. The lack of awareness and interest in organic products among the local consumer population also means that a significant volume of the organic food crops are sold in the local market as conventional products at low prices. This creates further financial burden and an even more unfavourable and unsupportive environment for organic and sustainable farming.

Against this backdrop, the farmers' relation and communication with their foreign buyers has given significant boost to their confidence. Their environmental concerns have encouraged a special connection with the buyers, with whom they feel they share a similar philosophy. In them, many farmers see a reflection of the foreign consumer, whom they perceive to be 'very environmentally conscious, like us...and we respect that' (Farmer A, Group Interview 2, February 20, 2014). Another farmer also added he thinks foreign consumers are not just quality conscious, 'they are also sensitive about the working conditions of the farmers in countries like India. This encourages us to keep trying' (Farmer B, Group Interview 2, February 20, 2014). The farmers' perceptions about the environmental responsibility of foreign consumers are shaped primarily through their interactions with the buyers, who often visit the farms.

There are a lot of foreign buyers visiting my farm and I understand that there are a lot of people in the West appreciating chemical-free food. I know not everyone in the West can afford to have organic food. Even in the foreign markets, the premium is not affordable to everyone, but they appreciate our natural and genuine practices (Farmer C, Group Interview 2, February 20, 2014).

These visits offer a significant confidence boost to the farmers, who are made to feel trusted and important by the attention they get from the foreign buyers. This was reflected in the words of a farmer who said:

No one from the local market or the local government ever comes here to find out what we do. When the foreigners come to visit, this makes me feel important...they

are coming from so far away to see my farm, and they tell me they like my farming techniques. They are quite inquisitive, so I'm also doing my best to improve the quality of my products (Farmer C, Group Interview 1, February 18, 2014).

Another farmer also explained how 'even the presence of a foreigner in the area can actually generate interest and curiosity from our local society, about our work' (Farmer A, Group Interview 2, February 17, 2014). The buyers' presence is a proof that they particularly trust their natural cultivation practices. In the words of one farmer, 'All these foreigners who have come here have confirmed that our agricultural methods are amongst the best and thanks to that the soil conditions have remained good. They hold our traditional farming in high esteem' (Farmer A, Group Interview, February 19, 2014).

The issue of trust came up several times in our discussions, with many of them highlighting the importance of the frequent visits of the buyers and their commitment to protecting the trust these buyers show to them, by giving them the best quality products possible. From the perspective of one of the buyers, 'these farmers are actively trying to build a relationship with I appreciate. This relationship building can be a bit more long-term when a company [like mine] is small, as the personnel do not change that rapidly (Buyer A, September 12, 2014). More importantly, this trust building offers farmers a confidence boost that leads to action and behavioural change. It specifically enables them to take risks for the development of their local market and consumer base. The foreign buyers' trust combined with their expectations of quality, incentivises farmers to become more active in conducting research about farming techniques, consumers' preferences and market forecasts. They felt more confident to try new crops in order to meet local demands and establish a more regular local clientele. One of the farmers that challenged the local society's expectations about what crops successful farmers should grow, choosing to focus on organic fruit and vegetables for local consumption, highlighted the wider societal criticism of his decisions, but which he felt confident enough to ignore:

When I decided to dedicate two acres of land for growing vegetables only, they told me I was crazy and that I should focus on rubber, because the tomatoes were selling very cheap. But I was able to get a good price for them, and the local people are also starting to appreciate the better quality (Farmer D, Group Interview 2, February 18, 2014).

It needs to be mentioned that not all farmers were explicit about the support or confidence they felt they were gaining through foreign export and their interactions with the buyers. Nevertheless, through our discussions, it became obvious that being involved in these interactions did make them think about their practices more carefully, motivating them to use methods they had not tried before, such as zero-budget farming. More importantly, they acknowledged the improvement that these practices had on the taste of the products, which made their farms more profitable, as local demand for organic products also began to increase. Despite their disappointment regarding societal preconceptions, a sense of optimism was evident in the words of one farmer: '...we are not losing hope – we are sure there is future for organic products and the local market will grow. People will realise the benefits of organic products and will consume them more' (Farmer B, Group Interview, February 19, 2014). The same optimism was echoed in another group, where some of the farmers explained how they had started researching and experimenting with new organic methods. The general feeling was that people just need to be educated. As one of them explained:

Our attitude and way of communicating with our local consumers matters – we need to make them aware about the benefits of these products, just like the foreigners are aware. When I talk to them [the local consumers] they come back and keep asking me more questions, and they want to try more of my organic products (Farmer C, Group Interview, February 25, 2014).

Seen in the context of the farmers' social reality, the role of the foreign buyer is not limited to market access, economic transactions and material outcomes. Instead, the farmers' increased self-esteem and confidence shows a behavioural change that develops through their personal interactions with the buyers. Farmers' empowerment happens through the development of fundamental but often overlooked interpersonal communication skills, including value reaffirmation and problem-solving skills (Cadiz, 2005). Confidence becomes empowering especially when it can 'steamroll the objections and doubts and hesitation of others in its way' (Anholt, 2005: 101). As North (1990) observes, deeply entrenched social norms and informal constraints can often prove much more resistant than deliberate policies (Petesch et al., 2005:45). In light of the socio-cultural context within which the Wayanad farmers operate, their interactions with the foreign buyers proves empowering in a subtle, yet significant manner, and reveal an aspect of AFNs that has remained obscured so far.

Empowerment through knowledge sharing

The sharing of ideas and knowledge is integral to development communication theories and practices, as a process that empowers communities to take actions to improve their lives. For the farmers in Wayanad, their close relation with the foreign buyers is a source of two types of knowledge: knowledge they gain through training and information about consumer preferences; and knowledge about aspects of provenance and product biography. Although the farmers' benefit from the first type appears straightforward, there is a lack of communication between the two groups, suggesting that the benefits the farmers can reap from the second type of knowledge exchange has not been fully realised.

Knowledge through training and information exchange

Following the interviews with the farmers, I turned to the buyers in order to understand their aspirations and philosophy, which enabled the building of trusted relations. It became obvious that their small-scale capacity is crucial, as it dictates the size of their orders, which are realistic for small farmers' establishments, enabling farmers to remain in the global network without having to adjust to commercial monoculture cultivations. More importantly, their size also explains their willingness to invest money and time to provide the necessary training and equipment in order to reach their preferred levels of processing and output. This is succinctly reflected in the words of one buyer:

We paid for all of their boxes to be wrapped with plastic, which was costing us so much money; and, to be honest, we were not sure whether it was worth it. But that was the only way for the boxes to travel all these miles...and these are the kind of things that, when you come with a big-company attitude, you are not able to deal with (Buyer B, August 11, 2014).

In fact, all five buyers work closely with the farmers' group, providing training such as for pulping and drying coffee beans. The significance of the small-scale of these companies was also verified through discussions with the chairman of the farmers' group. He explained how the closer and more personal relations he developed with some of these buyers was possible because of their small size and the more direct and frequent interactions he had with them.

Through this, they also gained knowledge about foreign consumers and their preferences. As he said to me during our discussion: 'These are small companies that work without intermediaries. They talk to us and to their customers directly; and they also share their customers' feedback with us directly' (Chairman, February 25, 2014). This information and feedback is crucial for the group, as it informs their decisions. One of the farmers explained that, 'Sometimes we would not even know if there was demand for certain crops that we could cultivate, unless the buyers told us. We also try to get an understanding of what the consumers want' (Farmer B, Group Interview 1, February 20, 2014).

The significant role of the buyers in the sharing of knowledge is evident also when relationships do not go smoothly. Organizational challenges, that the farmers' group often had to face, and their rigid negotiation stance in the pricing proved damaging for their relationship with one of their first and biggest buyers in Europe. Similar to the other buyers interviewed, the company offered regular training and were willing to pre-finance big quantities of cocoa and chilli, which the farmers were not able to produce in the end. The representative of the specific company explained what went wrong:

The price they were asking was simply too high for the quantities we needed; and despite paying in advance, we never really received the quantity we asked for. I understand that they had to deal with weather issues that had damaged some of their crops, but this was not the only problem. In the end we had to look for a different supplier group in India, and they were better businessmen (Buyer C, November 13, 2014).

Despite this development, the chairman of the farmers' group admitted that IOFPCL benefited significantly from this relationship, gaining knowledge and credibility that did make them 'better businessmen'. More importantly, it paved the way for future collaborations with other buyers that are willing to maintain a more horizontal interaction and refrain from exercising power in a strictly top-down manner. This was confirmed by one of the other buyers that were interviewed: 'We knew the farmers had worked with [Buyer C] and that gave us confidence that they had worked through to process things properly' (Buyer B, August 11, 2014). In effect, the size of these companies determines the amount of involvement they are willing to have with the farmers' group, and the knowledge that farmers can gain on the technical as well as the negotiation front. Such knowledge exchanges allow farmers to gain a better understanding of how the market works and have more control over their negotiations with new companies.

Knowledge sharing and product biographies: challenges and opportunities

The Wayanadan TGSEB or Tellicherry Garbled Special Extra Bold pepper, one of the products Wayanad is famous for, has been known for centuries, for its taste and texture and for drawing traders from across the globe, including Vasco Da Gama. Farmers had some interesting stories to tell regarding the provenance of products like the pepper. Yet, they were unaware of the value that these stories carried for their own representation to the local and foreign consumers. Although foreign buyers function as a useful link to the consumers, this is an area where the communication between farmers and buyers has proved less effective.

During the interviews, farmers proudly explained how the special flavour and taste of the pepper is owed to the composition of the soil and the monsoon rains that create ideal conditions for pollination. Farmers across all groups talked about the different qualities of Wayanad. For instance, one of them explained: 'The colour and the composition of the soil, in particular, are very crucial in giving the special flavour and taste to the products' (Farmer B, Group Interview 1, February 17, 2014). Another one added: 'There is a lot of greenery

compared to other parts of Kerala, there are a lot of mountains, and this makes a big difference' (Farmer B, Group Interview 2, February 17, 2014). There is also a shared perception about the importance of the medicinal plants growing in the area, which are believed to affect the taste of the products, although there is no scientific evidence.

When asked if and how they promoted these qualities to buyers and consumers, farmers admitted not having thought about the marketing side of it. I queried the chairman of the group, about the reasons why they would not invest in the promotion of these valuable attributes of products like the pepper. His response suggested the main barrier was the financial cost of marketing strategies. Yet, it also became obvious from the farmers' responses that the group had not been involved in discussions regarding promoting their products' provenance. The farmer's inability to recognise the value of their natural farming practices was another recurring theme, since to them organic farming is a way of life and a natural mode of survival. This is aptly manifested in the very short distance that separated the farms from their own houses, as in most cases the farms were literally an extension of the back yard. One of the farmers compared his plants to his family, saying that: 'I literally live with my farm, I look after my plants like my children and I let them grow as naturally as possible; this is my whole life...but I never thought that would be interesting for any consumer to know' (Farmer C, Group Interview 1, February 20, 2014). This lack of awareness is partly explained by the fact that farmers were not given the space or opportunity to think about provenance and product biographies. As another farmer from the same group also explained: 'No one has asked these questions before. We are so involved in these practices on daily basis, we don't have the time to think in this way' (Farmer D, Group Interview 1, February 20, 2014).

The buyers' responses in relation to issues of provenance, traceability and product heritage were quite revealing in terms of the crucial role they can play in communicating these values to the consumer. At the same time though, this is an area where the communication gap between farmers and buyers becomes obvious. Some of these buyers are actually making a conscious effort to create a profile and an identity for these farmers, and educate the consumers about the biography of their products. They highlight the farmers' passion for the cultivation of their farms and the unique quality added to the products through natural processes that range from allowing plants to grow on trees - rather than pillars - to using local medicinal plants and urine from local cows as fertilisers. One of the European buyers, and owner of a coffee shop, explained his desire to highlight the special characteristics of the area where the coffee comes from, and also give a face and identity to the coffee growers. His philosophy is also reflected in the special effort and attention he gives to the roasting process, so as to accentuate the quality of the coffee, despite the apparent lack of interest that his customers show to these details.

We have many customers who appreciate the flavour and they do not care much where it [coffee] comes from or how it is roasted. I am always very enthusiastic and want to tell them about our work with those farmers, but often I do not get very far. If people are interested, they will ask, but most of them are happy just to hear that it is Fairtrade' (Buyer D, September 2, 2014).

A similar philosophy is reflected in one of the group's other European partners, a small speciality food company. His enthusiasm for the famous Tellicherry pepper – currently threatened with extinction - is driven less by the customers' demand and more by the product's origins and unique cultivation process. He explained how he is actively trying to educate consumers about these issues:

Low yield and lack of demand means that the Wayanadan variety [of pepper] has almost become extinct, and farmers are replacing it with higher yielding hybrid varieties, without realising this is something unique; if we don't help them, there may be no future not just for the product but for the entire community (Buyer E, January 12, 2015).

Nevertheless, the farmers' group were not aware of the buyers' efforts to highlight their product qualities to their target customers. This is an area where these small enterprises can play a pivotal role in supporting the sustainability and development of the farming community. As the buyers' responses showed, some of them are already using their commercial marketing techniques, mainly through their websites and social media, to educate customers about the environmental and ethical aspects of the farmers' work. Moreover, through the promotion of narratives that emphasise product quality and heritage as well as natural production processes, buyers become instrumental in encouraging a deeper customer understanding of farming communities, beyond the over-used narratives of poverty. As one of the buyers put it: 'We never go down the 'poverty' narrative...we do not touch that in our communication' (Buyer B, August 11, 2014). What is currently missing is a more transparent and effective communication with the farmers' group. Buyers can do more to educate farmers about the marketing value and negotiating power they could draw from their traditional and natural processes, not just in their future negotiations with buyers, but also in their engagement with the local customers. The close relationship that these two groups share provides a unique opportunity for more effective knowledge exchange and a collaborative identification of marketing objectives and actions that will benefit the farming community long term. I was able to have a follow-up interview with the coordinator of the farmers' internal control system almost a year after the initial interviews, who confirmed that progress was being made with training workshops organised at the farmers' facilities, focusing on marketing. He was also quite explicit in acknowledging the input that they had had particularly from two of the European buyers. It remains to be seen whether and how effectively these efforts will continue, to enable farming communities to identify their needs and gather information to carry out actions that could help fulfil those needs (Besette, 2007).

Conclusion

The IOFPCL group of farmers is built on a democratic structure that gives them significant advantage compared to many other food growers in the developing world. Their organizational structure, coupled with the better living conditions and higher educational status is a significant source of empowerment in itself that should not be downplayed. These circumstances are pivotal in their ability to engage with the global market by attracting foreign buyers that are suitable for their capacity and needs. Against this backdrop, the findings from the interviews revealed some significant aspects of the farmer-buyer relationship for the empowerment and sustainability of these farming communities. It goes without saying that the relationship with each buyer is different, depending on the philosophy, size and requirements of these companies; and each relationship creates different opportunities for empowerment. Not all partnerships with foreign buyers are equally beneficial, and several farmers highlighted their struggles with the negotiations for securing good prices for their products. Others admitted they had higher expectations regarding the support they could get. Along similar lines, the five buyers exhibited variations in their philosophies and engagement with the farmers, with some of them inevitably proving to be more empowering than others.

The findings of this case study are not generalizable, and the extraction of more robust observations will require more extensive and in-depth research of this relationship.

Despite that, the interviews have provided useful evidence about the social, ecological and ethical concerns of private enterprises and the close relations they develop with the farming community. These relations are based on a process of trust building and knowledge sharing that arms farmers with confidence to continue their hard work to protect their biodiversity and secure a sustainable future. Farmers are also able to improve their organizational capacity and build more negotiating power. The findings also revealed gaps in the communication between the two groups, specifically in the promotion of product values and biographies. At the same time, these challenges can turn into opportunities for more effective dialogue between farmers and buyers, and a more active role of these small enterprises in empowering communities through participatory and bottom-up processes. The findings of this research support theories that recognise the capacity of private enterprises to play both in and against the global market, with an ethical and ecological philosophy as well as with the knowledge-based practices through which they coordinate their interactions with suppliers (Hughes et al., 2008). This creates a fertile ground for these enterprises to be actively involved in development communication practices. Future research should therefore pay closer attention to the role that these actors can play in development communication operations, in areas such as food production and rural development. They can offer farming communities valuable support in developing new patterns of behaviour and can enhance their potential to make choices to attain economic, social and political well-being (Freire, 1975; Sen, 1999; Van Hemelrijck, 2013). Paying closer attention to these actors will provide a more nuanced understanding of the multidimensional nature of sustainable development; and the role of different stakeholders in supporting developing communities to take control of their lives (Blewitt, 2014). In this study, AFNs offered a valuable platform to demonstrate the different types of partnerships through which sustainable development can be achieved. Development communication theories can also benefit from paying closer attention to the local sociocultural context of communities in the developing world. In the case of IOFPCL, the Wayanad farmers exhibit remarkable determination and commitment to protect their biodiversity and the future of their community, against financial and societal pressures. This paints the image of a community in a developing country that does not just expect to be saved by the North. Instead, it shows a philosophy driven by an increased capacity to aspire to a better life, and a capacity to express voice and a non-fatalistic perception about the possibilities for change (Appadurai, 2004). Their relationship with the buyers shows an alternative view of the North-South market relations that can unsettle the often misleading perceptions about the global market (Hasan, 2013:110). If development is shaped by trends and processes that occur at multiple levels, local and global, then local contexts deserve more attention in the study and practice of the different routes to development.

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