

YOU'VE HEARD OF AID BUT WHAT ABOUT TRADE?

What did you do this morning? Did you have a mug of coffee, or perhaps a banana? The chances are that in these few hours you have affected the lives of thousands of people from all over the globe, by simply picking a particular brand of food or drink, in other words, by consuming goods that have been sold by all those people in all those countries, often for a price that barely covers production, if it does at all.



But why do farmers and other producers in poorer nations get such a bad deal? Unfortunately, the problem is with the basic rules that govern the trade between countries. The World Trade Organisation, a place where all 144 member countries (rich or poor) are supposed to have an equal say, decides these. However, rich countries, namely the European Union and the USA, have repeatedly used blackmail and arm-twisting in order to maintain control over the global economy. This has resulted in unfair rules, such as those allowing countries like the UK to give out payments called subsidies to farmers, which are often linked to land size. This has caused farmers such as those producing sugar beet in East Anglia to over-produce and dump their cheap products in poor countries economies.

The consequences are devastating; for example, Africa lost \$301,000,000 as a result of US cotton subsidies from 2001 to 2002. At the same time, rich countries protect their own economies by imposing a tax on imported goods, called tariffs, whilst denying poorer countries the right to do this.

It was the fact that poorer countries, in an act of solidarity, all refused to bow down to rich countries over issues like these that caused WTO negotiations in Cancun, Mexico to collapse this September.

Some companies are trying to reduce this imbalance by selling products that have been bought for an amount that ensures that producers can at least afford food, clothes, medicine and a decent education for their children. Oxfam is one of the many organisations that promote fair trade. Previously, they bought goods directly from producers, however this has become so difficult for them that they can now only sell products made by fair trade companies such as Traidcraft in their shops. "The price we had to pay, even as a charity, in customs and excise and duty and all sorts – we felt that we were in massive losses," says Swati, manager of Oxfam in Wrexham. A large part of Oxfam's campaign is now the pressurising of governments, companies and supermarkets through means such as letter writing campaigns.

So what can we, ordinary people, do to help? Aside from buying products with the fair trade logo from places like Oxfam, Co-op and Sainsbury's, participating in campaigns such as the Big Noise can mean making a large contribution is as simple as signing a petition. According to Swati, it's all about spreading the word – "Let people know what it's all about, and then it's up to people if they want to follow".

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