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# Presence as Resistance: Connecting service learning with global change

Images provided by the **Comite Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA)**

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*“Fair trade solidarity networks and organizations are pivotal in supporting economic equality for small scale producers whose livelihoods are vulnerable to the prices of large producers and market fluctuation,”*

described Justin Goodine, a second year Global Development Studies student at Saint Mary’s University in Halifax Nova Scotia. As part of a service learning opportunity, Justin was able to volunteer with Breaking the Silence (BTS) Solidarity



Network’s Halifax Committee this past winter. The project called for students in a second year Free Trade and Fair Trade class, led by Dr. Gavin Fridell, to participate in three volunteer sessions throughout the term. A final written component reflecting on the hands-on experience, knowledge from Guatemalan partner

organizations, and broader international trade literature, gathered insights from students at the end of the term.

Questions such as, “How did the service learning experience compare to your goals at the beginning of the term?” and “What key lessons will you take with you from this experience?” were answered in their final analysis. This was also an opportunity for students to think about the future of global trade and the plight of small producers in the Global South. Drawing on their final reflections, this piece seeks to illustrate the dynamics at work within the BTS-Just Us! Coffee-Campesino Committee of the Highlands (CCDA) relationship, the impact of this project on students, and how they hope to contribute to a more equitable world after their involvement in the network. “A wide scale cultural shift toward the normalization of fair trade models,” Justin continued, “will only help to promote equality and fairness throughout supply chains.”

## **The Halifax Farmer’s Market Forum**

The Forum was described by students as a space for connection with a deep sense of community. This can be attributed to the local vendors that gather to support one another, meet new friends and reconnect with old ones, and overall enjoy each other’s company on Saturday morning. Many visitors at the Forum have previously connected with BTS or Just Us! in some capacity, whether it’s purchasing a 12oz bag of coffee at their local grocery store or fundraising to support the efforts of Guatemalans struggling for political, social, and economic justice.



One of the student volunteers, Sofo, was impressed by this deep sense of empathy, “This being my first time in Canada as well as volunteering,” Sofo reflects, “I found it really invigorating how people from Halifax are so involved with their community and how they are trying to make the cooperative thrive.” In fact, one of the key takeaways from all the students was the ways in which BTS facilitates connection between Canadian and Guatemalan communities. Sofo’s reflection identifies how volunteering with BTS exposes you to the incorporation of Indigenous values and *campesino* practices, knowledge, and decision-making processes; this allows for a bilateral relation between farmers and consumers, thus offering an alternative to conventional, externally controlled models of trade.

## Transnational Solidarity

Student volunteer Andrew Breen was drawn to the work of the CCDA during the experiential learning opportunity. Specifically their support for Indigenous families involved in subsistence farming, protection for community leaders in recovering their ancestral lands, and women’s rights, education, and political participation through workshops. Formed during the most critical period of the internal armed conflict (IAC) in 1982, the CCDA has prioritized the production and distribution of primary commodities and the resistance against displacement and criminalization of Indigenous and *campesino* authorities in the region.<sup>1</sup> In 2000, BTS became involved with the work of the CCDA, by establishing a fair trade relationship through Just Us!<sup>2</sup>



As noted by student volunteer Nehir Cakir, fair trade attempts to counteract the inequalities of international free trade by requiring democratic governance structures and gender sensitive policies. One of Nehir's key takeaways was that the CCDA's Fair Trade Plus model, in contrast to the depoliticized narratives of free trade advocates, integrates development, cultural survival, and social justice. Fair Trade Plus is an approach that goes beyond market transactions by integrating advocacy for Indigenous rights, gender equity, and youth empowerment within the supply chain.

Wangari Wachira, another student volunteer, describes the model as a way to connect economic justice to a more extensive social change, and in this way, the CCDA demonstrates how fair trade can strengthen small communities. Wangari further examined the relationship between the average consumer and global supply chains,



*“Knowing this, one has to consider their position in the supply chain as a coffee consumer. Are you promoting initiatives like the CCDA that prioritize sustainability and dignity, or are you reinforcing structures that uphold colonial exploitation?”*

## **Roadblocks & Challenges Identified by Students**

**I- Co-optation of Fairtrade narrative to reinforce the status quo.**

**II- Fairtrade's limited reach-- only 3% of the world's coffee farmers are Fair Trade certified.**

**III- Fairtrade strategies diluted into superficial marketing tactics, while neglecting workers and producers.**

## Fair Trade vs. Free Trade

Several students reflected on the international market and liberalized trade market dynamics, whereby labor and the environment are harmed throughout the supply chain, harms small producers and reinforce existing hierarchies. Although fair trade certification systems are a step forward for improving working conditions, students argued, only 3% of the world's coffee farmers are Fair Trade certified. Another growing concern is the corporate involvement and co-optation of progressive language, whereby ethics of fair trade have been diluted into superficial strategies by coffee giants. This diluted narrative limits fair trade's transformative potential.

Upon completing their service learning, students understood BTS as a network that works in solidarity with grassroots organizations to address systemic oppression. As Justin describes, "Fair trade solidarity networks and organizations are pivotal in supporting economic equality for small scale producers whose livelihoods are vulnerable to the prices of large producers and market fluctuations." These groups allow for transnational relationships to manifest in real tangible change, in small farmer communities as well as in local communities as they expand their knowledge of Fairtrade.

Similarly, Sofo viewed BTS as a force that counteracts the historical exclusion of Indigenous people from participating in the global order, by working to elevate their voices and engage in decision-making processes together. Drawing on Hermela Tekie's *More Than A Cup*, it can be said that change does not need to be loud or dramatic, rather it can be deeply relational and consistent, such as presence at the Forum every Saturday. Students recognized that due to the volatile political times we are living in, where the plight of small communities is overlooked by world leaders, just existing is a way of resisting. As Sofo writes,

*"I strongly believe that even if the sales are not as prominent as we expected them to be, the simple act of presence from the BTS coffee fundraiser inside the market has a significant political connotation for the community, since it can be perceived as an act of resistance against any other big transnational coffee company and the neoliberal economy that we live in"*

## Summary

In my brief time working with BTS, at the Forum and at the Meander River Brewery Market, I have met several members from Canadian communities that stand in solidarity with Guatemalan small farmers. While many of them haven't had the opportunity to meet folks at CCDA, they recognize how their mission aligns with personal moral values and opt for BTS' blend of Just Us! Coffee. Whether it is being present at the market as a representative of a solidarity network, such as BTS, or making the active choice of purchasing from a Fair Trade certified group, such as Just Us!, resisting unequal free trade dynamics in North America challenges established systems of oppression.

Although an increasing number of university courses explore the issues and tensions across small producers in the Global South, service learning opportunities present an opening to immerse students in local change with a global vision. Through their volunteer sessions with BTS as well as in their final analysis, students not only supported the Halifax Committee, but also connected their knowledge with broader challenges and solutions. With integrity, humility, and purpose, they demonstrated how local actions can ripple out to make a difference.



# Notes

1 Comité Campesino del Altiplano (CCDA), “Quienes Somos,” not dated: <https://ccdagt.com/quienes-somos/>

2 BTS, “Our Approach,” not dated: <https://breakingthesilenceblog.com/our-approach/>; Just Us! Coffee Roasters Co-Op, “Our Story,” not dated: <https://justuscoffee.com/pages/our-co-op>

3 Jim Hodgson, “Coffee stains with justice,” Breaking the Silence Blog, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2023: <https://breakingthesilenceblog.com/2023/04/18/coffee-stains-with-justice/>