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Essays

Faith communities and Fair Trade Towns in the UK: Raising awareness of sustainable development

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Abstract

Drawing on my research of Luton Fair Trade Town, in this article I argue that faith communities, working in partnership with Fair Trade Towns, are well-placed to raise awareness of sustainable development. I will discuss the ability of faith communities to raise awareness and bring about change towards sustainable development, utilizing both social and spiritual capital. An analysis focusing on social capital highlights the ability of faith communities to bridge different sections of society, issues and geographies. Spiritual capital concentrates on the motivation to action and this can provide a challenge to the status quo and a vision of how society can work differently, offering a necessary contribution to working towards a sustainable future.

Keywords

Fair Trade; Fair Trade towns; faith communities; sustainable development; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); social capital; spiritual capital

Introduction

In this article I will discuss the potential of faith communities to raise awareness of sustainable development through their work with Fair Trade Towns (FTTs). I will draw on my research of religious FTT activists and also research on FTTs

conducted by others. In my recent research of the FTT campaign in Luton, it is evident that the individuals and organizations involved view their work on Fair Trade as part of a much wider agenda that embraces multiple interrelated aspects of the sustainability agenda. This includes a focus on sustainable communities, issues of poverty, inequality and marginalization and also concern for the environment. As [Discetti, Anderson and Gardner \(2020\)](#), p. 14) state, although the Fairtrade Foundation has identified Sustainable Development Goal 12 (on sustainable consumption and production) for particular focus, Fair Trade Town campaigns have not emphasized any single goal over and above the others. I will argue that the wide range of networks which FTT campaigners are engaged with encourages them to adopt a holistic view of sustainable development, one which sees the different facets of sustainability as closely interrelated. Both faith communities and FTTs constitute significant repositories of social capital and this makes them well-placed to promote trade issues and sustainability to a wide public. However, as I shall go on to discuss, for faith communities working in the public arena, it is important to see their contribution as more than the provision of willing people and resources. Spiritual capital, which takes into account why faith communities carry out the actions they do ([Baker, 2009](#)), can play a vital role in raising awareness of sustainable development.

Faith Communities and Fair Trade

In the UK, faith communities, and particularly grassroots churchgoers, have played a significant role in the establishment of Fair Trade and the shaping of the Fair Trade movement ([Anderson, 2015](#), pp. 44–66; [Dawson, 2019, 2020](#)). [Clope, Barnett, Clarke and Malpass \(2011\)](#), pp. 100–103) identify the importance of social networks that churchgoers are able to access to support Fair Trade and the part played by enthusiastic church-based activists, who they term ‘evangelists’ for the Fair Trade movement (*ibid.*, p. 100). Much of the grassroots support for Fair Trade takes place as part of the FTTs scheme ([Nicholls & Opal, 2005](#), pp. 172–177), which in the UK is administered by the Fairtrade Foundation. Research that has been conducted on FTTs has commented on the significant contribution made by churchgoers ([Malpass, Clope, Barnett & Clarke, 2007](#); [Peattie & Samuel, 2018](#)). Although the Christian Church has played a large role in the development of Fair Trade in the UK, the Fairtrade Foundation has encouraged faiths other than Christianity in their support of Fair Trade ([Anderson, 2015](#), p. 64).

Research Context: Luton Fair Trade Town

My research on Luton FTT has highlighted the ability of different faith communities to work closely together to promote Fair Trade through the FTT scheme. The research was conducted in the Spring of 2023 and included the analysis of documentary and online evidence and four in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Fair Trade activists who are part of religious

communities. The participants are given pseudonyms in the research data. Luton is a largely working-class town that is characterized as super-diverse; the majority of the population has an ethnic minority background and the town is diverse in terms of religion, with sizeable Christian, Hindu and Muslim communities (Luton.gov.uk, 2022). The Luton FTT campaign is unusual in that it was established as a social cohesion project, with a clear aim to bring the different communities within Luton together. The organizations that provide leadership for the project do not view the FTT as a discrete initiative, rather it is seen as an integral part of wider work for social justice. The values that underpin support for Fair Trade, and other social justice and community cohesion projects, are seen by the participants as values shared by all faith communities.

Fair Trade Towns and Social Capital

FTT status is awarded based on a series of criteria and these urge engagement between the FTT Steering Group and a variety of sectors, including local government, media and businesses (Nicholls & Opal, 2005, p. 173). Peattie and Samuel (2018, pp. 269–273) discuss the contribution made by steering groups in organizing and motivating Fair Trade activism, finding that ‘many group members had professional links to international development, education, sustainability policy or churches’ and that groups went out of their way to recruit members who had access to strong community networks (ibid., p. 271). Diversity within a Steering Group is seen as important, not least to reach out to a wider audience (ibid., p. 273). There is resonance here with my research in Luton. From the outset, it was seen as vital that the Steering Group reflected the diverse ethnic and religious mix of the town. Indeed, the decision for local community activists to work on Fair Trade was based on its potential to unite diverse groups with the aims of a shared project. As one of the members of the Luton FTT Steering Group explains, support for Fair Trade in the town ‘brought the communities together, and what started as an interfaith project, overflowed into making Luton a Fair Trade Town’. The concept of social capital, as it is described by Robert Putnam (2000), is relevant to an analysis of the activities of FTTs. There is a close relationship between the coming together in action that Peattie and Samuel (2018) describe, or that is evident in my research of Luton FTT, and Putnam’s bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000, pp. 22–24). This is characterized by the strengthening of ties between different people and groups within society and is outward-looking, valuing diversity.

Raising Awareness of Sustainable Development

FTT activists can draw on a depth of experience of raising awareness for sustainable development, because they possess multiple allegiances. Many are supporters of development charities and campaigning organizations, environmental groups and local action for social justice. In my research of

churchgoing activists in Skipton FTT, I found that the activists did not view their work on Fair Trade as distinct but as part of wider work for social justice (Dawson, 2017, pp. 134–135). Many carried out work for development charities and campaigning organizations and several of the participants in my study were also involved with the local food bank, and in their interviews, they connected their work for this project with their support for Fair Trade. There were strong links between the churchgoing activists and schools and youth groups, enabling the message of fairness in trade to be communicated to the younger generation (Dawson, 2017, pp. 87–89). In Skipton, the FTT group works closely with local schools through the [Craven Development Education Centre \(2024\)](#). Its work on Fair Trade is embedded within learning on global citizenship, sustainable development and environmental issues. It was also evident in the interviews I conducted in Skipton that churchgoing activists were linking their support for Fair Trade with environmental concerns (Dawson, 2019, p. 59). They spoke of the ways in which the Fair Trade movement can assist producers to work more sustainably and adapt to the changing climate. However, they are also engaged with environmental action groups and ecochurches. [Discetti et al. \(2020, pp. 17–18\)](#) identify an increasing propensity for FTT groups to connect with organizations working on environmental activism, particularly issues that involve challenging the unsustainable nature of production and consumption. They cite Bristol Fair Trade City as an example, indicating that these connections have contributed to the vitality of the Fair Trade campaign (*ibid.*, p. 18). Indeed, from a practical perspective, forming broad alliances can serve to bring in the number of enthusiastic individuals needed to raise awareness and bring about change.

The connections that FTTs possess with groups working on a range of sustainability issues may go beyond the level of broad alliance. My research in Luton reveals that from the outset, the FTT was embedded within a wider network, with its own resources and priorities. Previous research on FTTs, including my own, has focused on their ability to network with other organizations in order to achieve scale. In the case of Luton, rather than the FTT reaching out to partners, an established network chose to initiate the FTT campaign as an integral part of its aims and actions. Key players in Luton FTT are the social cohesion organization, Grassroots and the interfaith, Luton Council of Faiths, and they continue to provide the resources to oversee its work. These groups view the FTT as part of a much wider agenda. Through a range of initiatives, [Grassroots \(2024\)](#) seeks to promote community cohesion, peace, justice and equality in Luton. These initiatives include interfaith work, local environmental projects and working with marginalized and disadvantaged sectors of the community.

Forging local–global connections is something that both faith communities and FTTs are well-placed to do. The place of worship serves as a local resource, and is one of few examples of place-based service that is present in the vast majority of communities across the globe. Although embedded within local communities, they are linked to a global network of places of worship and religious organizations, serving as a local–global interface (see [Davey, 2001](#)).

Faith communities can raise awareness of sustainable development, informing and mobilizing a local public of global issues and joining with transnational networks to call for change in the global economy. With their place-based presence, places of worship carry out action for sustainable development in their own neighbourhoods and then link the principles involved with action at a global level, or in places on the far side of the globe. Luton FTT has highlighted issues regarding injustice and poverty for producers in the countries of origin for immigrant communities in Luton. Their focus on promoting Fair Trade products, draws attention to unfair practices in the global trading system. Examples of the products chosen for focus include cotton production in Gujarat, the manufacture of footballs in Pakistan and banana farming in the Caribbean. Gopal, a founding member of the FTT campaign, admits that asking relatively poor communities to pay more for their products has brought challenges, however, speaking of the sizeable South Asian population in Luton, he states that ‘they have seen the suffering of people, especially in ... rural communities when the farming communities, where they produce, and they cannot earn enough money’.

The rich networks that faith communities can access, working through FTTs, constitute considerable social capital, serving to bring different sections of the population in a locality together. They enable faith communities to promote Fair Trade in an impactful manner but also broaden concerns and encourage connections to be made across a range of sustainability issues. It is not surprising therefore that [Discetti et al. \(2020, p. 14\)](#) find that FTTs focus their attention more widely than sustainable consumption, to embrace a wide range of interrelated issues that are covered by the Sustainable Development Goals. In the quest to raise awareness of sustainable development, I suggest that this is a key strength for FTTs and the religious communities that work in partnership within them. Rather than view the particular aspects of sustainable development (or individual Sustainable Development Goals) in isolation, a range of interconnected issues of social justice, education, economic development, building sustainable communities and environmental issues are considered. Crucially, the connections between them are understood and communicated.

Fair Trade Towns and Spiritual Capital

Having acknowledged that the work of religious communities in Fair Trade Towns can be described in terms of the generation of social capital, and that this social capital can facilitate raising awareness of sustainable development, this still does not provide us with the full picture. There is disquiet amongst theologians regarding the analysis of social capital. For example, [Gill \(2013, pp. 125–173\)](#) welcomes Putnam’s acknowledgement of the contribution made by places of worship in generating social capital. However, he critiques Putnam for ignoring the role played by belief in constructing the nature of the religious adherents’ social action. Such concern led the theologian Christopher Baker to develop the concept of spiritual capital, which values belief and religious insight as a potential contributor to the public good. Spiritual capital can be

understood as the values that motivate people of faith to make the contribution that they make (Baker, 2009, pp. 111–112).

A key value that motivates the Luton research participants in their support of Fair Trade, is justice. All the participants describe Fair Trade as a work for justice. For Ursula, a Christian, the key purpose of discussing Fair Trade was not to promote Fair Trade schemes in isolation but to see their role in highlighting injustice and mobilizing action to do something about it. She comments that what she has been working on 'wasn't so much as Fair Trade. But I kept pushing for trade justice. You know justice, justice for these people, for their working conditions and their possibilities for a future'. The emphasis on justice tallies with my Skipton FTT research, in which the churchgoing activists understand Fair Trade as part of their wider work for justice (Dawson, 2020). Their concept of justice is drawn from the Bible and is associated with God being on the side of the poor and oppressed. Two implications of this are that the churchgoers do not view their work on Fair Trade as distinct from other acts for justice, and crucially, their support for Fair Trade is not seen as an act of charity. Rather it is about the righting of wrongs, an attempt to include the marginalized and bring them what they deserve, not out of pity, but out of fairness. References to justice were also expressed by Muslim and Hindu participants in my Luton research project. In answer to the question 'why is the Fair Trade Town a suitable project for Luton Council of Faiths to support?', Amir, a Muslim and key activist in the FTT campaign, answers: 'the suitability is the ethics. Every religion is bound by ethics. Every religion is bound by certain key principles, the principles of fairness, the principles of justice and we don't want to exploit people'. For Gopal, a Hindu, he identifies shared values of justice as a means for bringing together people from different religious groups despite religious differences, stating that 'they can talk comfortably about Fair Trade and the social injustices as well on the same level'. Indeed, Gopal goes on to talk of this sense of justice at the heart of the world's religions as 'spiritual justice' commenting that 'spiritual justice is something which, we can, we have got all in common'. The participants in the Luton research all emphasize the spiritual capital that lies behind their actions and, far from viewing this as unique to their own religion, they identify a unity behind the basic religious principles which motivate those working for Fair Trade and other forms of social justice.

Applying principles of justice and fairness to the global economy will result in an outcome that offers a challenge to the status quo and confronts views that are prevalent in society. In my Skipton research project, the churchgoers view the values of justice as central to what they do, and they see these values as uniting all those who wish to see change, whether their background is religious or not (Dawson, 2017, pp. 185–187). However, they do describe encountering opposition and perceive their views on justice as running contrary to mainstream thinking in society. For raising awareness of sustainable development, I suggest that a willingness to offer a challenge to the status quo and confront prevalent paradigms is essential to the task. The worldviews of faith communities can provide an alternative to market logic and play their role in motivating individuals and organizations to make the changes necessary for a sustainable

future. Discetti et al. (2020, p. 16) view FTTs as spaces where grassroots activists and NGOs can come together to discuss change around a sustainability agenda. They see this in terms of challenge, stating 'FTTs mobilize local power to challenge global power imbalances' (ibid.). Luke from the Grassroots organization reflects on the aim of Grassroots to bring together the different sections of the population in Luton to coexist in harmony. He calls for a broader outlook on issues of sustainability and social justice that reach beyond the boundaries of the town, stating that real harmony cannot exist 'without actually addressing issues and concerns that are affecting, not just us in our town, but also brothers and sisters around the world, and particularly countries that we have all come from'. He goes on to explain the rationale for Grassroots support of Fair Trade and it is one that has justice at its heart, he asks

And how is it that we can translate ... such an intelligent rhetoric around economic justice at the grassroots level? So that people can actually latch on to it, and lock on to it, and do something about it in their own way; and that is when I learned about Fair Trade.

For Grassroots, Fair Trade provides a means to link together community cohesion in Luton with global economic justice. Without justice, there can be no sustainability, and for the participants in my research, the centrality of justice can be understood as the spiritual capital behind the FTT.

Conclusion

I have argued that religious communities, working in partnership through FTTs, are well-placed to raise awareness of sustainable development. Both religious communities and FTTs serve as repositories of social capital, possessing the ability to bring diverse sections of a community together. The individuals and groups involved in FTTs have multiple allegiances and are well-networked with a diversity of partners. Religious actors in FTTs are able to raise awareness of sustainable development by utilizing the web of networks they have access to. They act across a range of issues and highlight their interconnection. It is tempting to view faith communities as useful providers of personnel and resources for FTT campaigns. However, in addition to the social capital that religious groups provide, spiritual capital must be acknowledged. Spiritual capital is the motivation behind the action, taking the form of religious insight, particularly the centrality of justice. My research in Luton has demonstrated that this spiritual capital can be shared across different faith communities and can serve to bring them together. Spiritual capital offers an alternative paradigm, challenging the status quo and, I argue, this is necessary in order to make the changes needed to achieve sustainable development.

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