

A little Divine intervention

Anna Hutchens
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POLITICIANS' peccadilloes are never far from the spotlight but in the run-up to Fair Trade Fortnight, which begins on Saturday, local organisers are urging Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to substitute his enthusiasm for Iced Vo Vos. They would like him to opt for an indulgence enjoyed by many of his British counterparts, including Prime Minister Gordon Brown: chocolate.

But not any ordinary chocolate. The Brits are sinking their teeth into their leading fair trade brand, Divine Chocolate. It's now popular enough to compete directly with Cadbury and Nestle, yet is made and co-owned by 45,000 small-scale cocoa growers from the Kuapa Kokoo co-operative, spread across 1200 villages in Ghana.

The British Government has good reason to promote Divine and be proud of its success. In 1999 its department for international development gave the company a £400,000 loan guarantee as seed capital to establish the brand. That loan has been paid in full.

Fair trade is a business relationship that provides better trading conditions and recognises the rights of producers in developing countries. It works in many commodity sectors other than chocolate including coffee, tea, sugar, rice and cotton.

The Fairtrade product label (which spells fair trade as one word) guarantees that a product has met its production and trade requirements including minimum prices for producers, a social premium for community development projects and direct long-term trading relationships between traders and democratic producer organisations.

It's a relationship that encourages shoppers worldwide to buy fairly traded goods and is helping producers in many of the poorest nations break free from aid-based support and establish strong businesses.

Australian consumers, like those in other parts of the developed world, have quickly acquired an appetite for fair trade. Since 2004 the value of fair-trade sales in Australia and New Zealand has risen by 440 per cent; in the 2006-07 financial year combined retail sales in the two countries topped \$12 million.

Governments, too, have seen the value of supporting the movement. The British Government has invested more than \$25 million in the fair-trade market during the past 10 years. Across the Tasman, the New Zealand Government has supported a range of fair-trade programs aimed at helping the country's regional neighbours. The former British secretary of state for international development Hilary Benn has said the start-up capital provided for Divine, and its subsequent success in the British market, has helped more than 100,000 people in Ghana through the services provided by the co-operative: essentials such as health, education, water and sanitation.

In New Zealand, the government funds awareness campaigns and programs to help boost fair trade. It also provides ongoing financial support for the country's leading fair-trade shop, Trade Aid, and in 2003 provided capital to set up the Fair Trade Association of Australia and New Zealand. Even government departments are in on the act, with the ministries of education and the environment registering themselves as fair-trade workplaces, procuring and promoting products.

Association executive director Steve Knapp says with all this activity in his country he's perplexed it hasn't even registered on the Australian Government's aid radar.

"Australia could increase demand for fair trade through government procurement policies, purchasing fair-trade products where possible through all departments and, by setting the example, encourage other organisations to do the same," he says.

However, Australian Government support shouldn't be based solely on buying fair-trade products, he says. "Australia could support increases through development support for producer organisations in the Asia-Pacific region, which should be part of their support for Aid for Trade."

That may not happen any time soon. The parliamentary secretary for international development assistance, Bob McMullan, says the Rudd Government's approach is a model that others should follow.

"The Centre for Global Development has ranked Australia's trade policies as among the best in the world, in terms of serving the interests of developing countries, because of the openness of our markets and our leadership of the global

campaign to have other developed countries open their markets for the agricultural products of developing countries," he says. "We advocate that others should do the same."

Time will tell whether the Rudd Government gets a taste for fair trade and catches up with consumers here and around the world. Meanwhile, fair-trade products, always available from Oxfam shops, are making the transition to the mainstream, appearing in Coles, Woolworths, IGA and Macro Wholefoods.

Dr Anna Hutchens is an associate fellow of the Regulatory Institutions Network (RegNet) at the Australian National University and has co-convened the ACT Fair Trade Group.

FAIR TASTE

A fair trade fiesta will be held at Paddington Town Hall on May 6 (6pm-9pm). Chef-restaurateur Kylie Kwong will be cooking. Entry, \$15. Other fair trade fortnight events include fairs at Northmead and Leichhardt and a coffee break in Gosford. Award-winning documentary *Black Gold*, about an Ethiopian coffee unionist's fight for fair prices for farmers, shows at Castle Hill on Saturday and Belrose on May 10. See www.fairtrade.com.au.

How they've made the trade schemes work

Colombian-born Jacqueline Arias began Republica Coffee, selling fair trade produce, a couple of years ago and now supplies two national supermarkets.

Last year she opened her first cafe in Broadway Shopping Centre.

A trip to Colombia prompted Arias to begin the business. There, talking to farmers who were drinking instant coffee, she found they had no concept of the value of their produce to the Western world. She began her wholly fair trade, organic coffee business to help.

At Lawson in the Blue Mountains, Grant and Mignonne Murray were at a loose end. After five years working with youth and women's groups in Tanzania, they returned to Australia but wanted to help the poor in the developing world.

When someone mentioned the grassroots fair trade movement in Britain, the couple realised this was what they had been looking for. In 2004, they made contact with businesses in Asia through aid organisation TEAR Australia, liked the samples they were sent and "took a chance and made an order", Grant Murray says. The initial focus was accessories and clothing but it wasn't long before tea, locally roasted coffee, chocolate, cocoa and edible coconut oil joined the list of products being sold by the fledgling company, Tribes and Nations.

"People seemed to be longing for something like this," Murray says. "They'd heard a bit about fair trade and people getting ripped off so when they saw the opportunity to buy the tea or the coffee they just jumped at it."

Natasha Lewis admits she was very idealistic when she and her brother launched grocery wholesale business Organic Trader seven years ago. In addition to organic foods, they soon began to deal with fair trade lines.

Today, she is chairwoman of the Fair Trade Association of Australia and New Zealand and says: "Australia was a late starter compared to the rest of the world with fair trade but in the last year there has been much more interest across the board."

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2008/04/28/1209234737090.html>