

Brief History of Fair Trade

North America's oldest Fair Trade Organizations (FTOs) began buying handcrafts from impoverished Puerto Ricans and Europeans after World War II and later shifted their focus to developing nations. Called Alternative Trade Organizations during their first decades, most of today's FTOs began during the 20th century as missionary projects, humanitarian efforts or political/economic action statements. Non-governmental organizations also significantly advanced the Fair Trade movement, often leveraging the marketing expertise of FTOs to aid populations in developing regions. In North America, the church-related organizations are the oldest and among the largest fair traders.



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Economic-development FTOs started in Europe in the 1960s, when the Dutch division of Oxfam opened its first shops selling goods produced by cooperatives in developing regions. By the mid-1980s, more than 1,000 Third World shops were operating in the United Kingdom and Switzerland. Around the same time, the Dutch organization Max Havelaar created the first Fair Trade product certification system (for coffee) and label.

“(Fair Trade is) a very attractive concept, across the political spectrum. People like the idea of helping people, not with handouts but with an opportunity to work hard and decently.”

– Daniel Salcedo, Founder and CEO of www.PEOPLink.org & www.OpenEntry.com.

In North America, the 1970s and 1980s saw a surge in the creation of economic/political FTOs such as Global Exchange and Pueblo to People, often in response to strife in developing nations and a growing awareness that the gap between rich and

poor was widening. North American advocates, who lack the level of government support that Europeans have enjoyed, found their most receptive customers in several populations – university students, co-op shoppers, faith-based organizations, organic and community-farm proponents, environmentalists, and organized labor.

Opposite this page is a timeline of key events in Fair Trade history, with further explanations of pioneering and other major nonprofit organizations afterwards.

Fair Trade Timeline

1946

Edna Ruth Byler imports needlecrafts from low-income women in Puerto Rico, and displaced in Europe, laying groundwork for Ten Thousand Villages, N. America's first Fair Trade organization

1949

Church of the Brethren establish SERRV, N. America's second Fair Trade organization, to import wooden clocks from German refugees of WWII

1968

United Nations Conference on Aid and Development (UNCTAD) embraces "Trade not Aid" concept, bringing Fair Trade into development policy

1969

Oxfam and other European humanitarian organizations open the first World Shop, in the Netherlands, to sell crafts, build awareness, and campaign for trade reform.

1972

Ten Thousand Villages opens store, the first Fair Trade retail outlet in N. America

1986

Equal Exchange established as 1st Fair Trade cooperative in N. America, importing coffee from Nicaragua as a way to make a political statement with a high quality, household item

1988

Farmers and activists launch the first Fair Trade certification system, Max Havelaar, in the Netherlands, to offer third-party recognition and a label of Fair Trade products

1945

2010

1989

International Fair Trade Association (IFAT), (now WFTO), established by Fair Trade pioneers as first global Fair Trade network

1994

Fair Trade Federation formed, as first network of FTOs in N. America

1997

Fair Trade Labeling Organizations formed, which led to a third-party label in the U.S. in 1998 managed by TransFair USA

2004

Producers form national and regional Fair Trade associations across Asia, Latin America and Africa. COFTA, for example, was established by African producers to be the continental voice in lobbying for greater market access and Fair Trade advocacy. COFTA is currently composed of over 70 member organizations from 20 African countries.

2005

750 people participate in Fair Trade Futures, the largest Fair Trade conference in N. America

2007

Fair Trade retail sales in U.S. top \$1 billion, worldwide tops \$2.5 billion

2010

A second Fair Trade certification & label gains wide acceptance in the N. American market, IMO's "Fair for Life".

2011

Small producers in Latin America, under CLAC, launch their own certification & label. FTUSA leaves the FI system.