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Exploring the implications of the Fair Trade USA certification for farmworker health and well-being at the first certified farm in the U.S.

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Abstract

Decades of interdisciplinary research suggest that fair trade certification may have significant implications for the development of more equitable and sustainable agricultural practices. The certification was originally established to support smallholder farming cooperatives in developing countries. However, a recent organizational division separating Fairtrade International from Fair Trade USA has created a bifurcation in certification standards.[1] Under the new Fair Trade USA program, the first domestic certification standard for U.S.-based farms is now being implemented. The aim of this study is to understand the impact of the new certification on farm operations and farmworker well-being at the first U.S. fair trade-certified farm, from the perspectives of farmworkers, farm management, and the supply chain. The initial findings

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Declarations

This study was approved by the Internal Review Board of the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki..

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, fair trade is used to refer generally to the concept, whereas in the case of specific organizations and/or their certifications, other spelling is used. For example, Fair Trade USA and Fair Trade Certification, versus Fairtrade International and Fairtrade Certification.

from this limited exploratory study indicate that the certification can be used as a tool to improve farmworker empowerment while also providing material benefits and resources. More research is needed to determine the long-term impact and feasibility of more widespread implementation.

Keywords
fair trade, farmworkers, sustainable agriculture, agricultural justice, certification

Introduction

Since the first fair trade certification was implemented, 1.6 million farmers and workers have participated in the fair trade system and global sales have reached US$8.95 billion (Fairtrade International, 2023). Decades of organizing culminated in the creation of certification systems in the late 1990s with corresponding consumer-facing labels (Raynolds et al., 2004). However, from its inception in the early 20th century, the fair trade movement was conceived more broadly as a means to provide a market for small producers and artisans in developing countries (Kituyi, 2014; Redfern & Snedker, 2002). The creation of a fair trade certification was envisioned more radically, to serve as a development mechanism to address the structural inequalities of modern agriculture in the developing world. Unjust land tenure policies, inhumane working conditions, child labor practices, gender inequality, and poor environmental standards were just a few of the issues that were meant to be addressed through certification (Becchetti & Costantino, 2008; Raynolds, 2002; Thomas & Oliver, 2020).

Initially, only farmer organizations composed of small holders, such as agricultural cooperatives, associations, and federations, were eligible to certify their commodities as fair trade (Nicholls & Opal, 2005; Sandro et al., 2008). Through the various certification systems that have developed, these producer organizations have been guaranteed a fair trade minimum price as a protection against the uncertainties of the market economy. In addition, fair trade certifications provide producer organizations an annual social premium that is reimbursed to fund democratically determined projects. Social premiums have helped to support initiatives such as community health projects, education scholarships, and reinvestment back in their production processes (Castaldo et al., 2008; Nicholls & Opal, 2005).

Between 2011 and 2012 the main fair trade organization, Fairtrade International, officially split, and a separate organization, Fair Trade USA emerged with divergent standards. This split was emblematic of prior issues in the fair trade movement that had already led to the establishment of several different fair trade labels, with their own varied approaches to supporting their visions of fair trade through certification. The rift within Fairtrade International occurred over a philosophical difference regarding who should be certified. Fairtrade International wanted to continue to certify only small-holder organizations, which are cooperative associations whose members are farmers with small parcels of land, usually 2–5 hectares, thus providing market access to small-holder farmers in developing countries. Fair Trade USA, however, was open to certifying large-scale operations that predominantly employ farmworkers, supporting a philosophy they branded as "Fair Trade for All." Both organizations maintain a commitment to the original standards, but Fair Trade USA believed that while supporting small-holder farmers is an important mission, a large number of agricultural wage workers remained unprotected that could benefit from the support of the fair trade model (Jaffee & Howard, 2015; Fair Trade USA, 2023b).

This difference of approach caused a fundamental bifurcation of the fair trade movement, with changes in the landscape of fair trade certifications. The global group viewed the inclusion of large-scale commercial farms as incompatible with the core values and goals of fair trade, which had been to support and provide markets for small-holder farmers (Jaffee & Howard, 2015). Fair Trade USA cited three major reasons for shifting to "Fair Trade for All." The first was to reduce inconsistencies that already existed in certification of plantation-grown products such as bananas and tea that had been eligible for the certification process (Jaffee, 2018). The move to include plantation-grown coffee was arguably the most controversial, since it had been excluded until the bifurcation (Cater et al., 2016). Second, by expanding the fair

trade market a greater number of farmers and farmworkers would benefit through improved labor laws, access to health care, and better living conditions. Third, Fair Trade USA further asserted that fair trade was just scratching the surface of inequity in the agricultural labor market; by broadening the certification to cover agricultural wage workers, whether they were working on plantations or on small-holder land, more expansive humanitarian improvements could be realized (Bilfield, 2020; Walske & Tyson, 2015).

As the fair trade movement has evolved, market-based incentives have been combined with infrastructure and governance processes to undergird the certification process (Raynolds et al, 2004). This framework varies between fair trade organizations, yet retains the consistent goal of reforming global agricultural markets. In the case of Fair Trade USA, a certification process exists for producers, processors, and retailers. Once certified, farms receive the fair trade "sustainable cost of production" premium, in addition to social premiums that are redistributed back to the farmer or farmworker organization. In the case of a Fair Trade USA–certified farmers cooperative composed of smallholders, the cooperative organization facilitates the process of allocating the social premiums to collectively designated projects and programs. In the U.S. this is the exception, and a new protocol has been established to create a democratically elected fair trade committee composed of peer farmworkers to fill in this governance gap (Fair Trade USA, 2023a). Democratically elected by the farmworkers to represent them and to communicate to farm management and outside stakeholders, the fair trade committee convenes the workers on a regular basis to discuss work-related issues, and organizes and facilitates the process for collectively deciding how to use the annual fair trade premiums allocated to the farmworkers.

The modern agricultural labor market in the United States is rooted in the exploitative colonial plantation model of agriculture (Koreishi & Donohoe, 2010), built on slavery and relying on free and then indentured labor to generate dehumanized agricultural production in favor of volume-oriented economies of scale (Wright, 2003). The last century has witnessed significant shifts in this model, but labor practices remain a challenge for systemic reform because most forms of agriculture still rely on large-scale industrial production methods dependent on abundant and cheap labor. As a result, by far most agricultural work in the U.S. is composed of seasonal or wage work by a predominantly migratory population. While significant regulatory infrastructure has been established to protect farmworkers, evidence demonstrates that their employment remains precarious (Areguin & Stewart, 2022; Keim-Malpass et al.2015).

The purpose of this study is to understand the dynamics of the new domestic fair trade certification administered by Fair Trade USA as it impacts farm operations and farmworker well-being at the first certified U.S. farm. This research applies the theoretical framework of sustainable supply chain management in combination with the capabilities approach of Amartya Sen (1999). At the systems level, sustainable supply chain management conceptualizes the relationship among environmental, social, and economic performances within a supply chain management context (Carter & Rogers, 2008; Montgomery et al., 2012). At the individual level, the capabilities approach provides a more robust understanding of human development outcomes, beyond simple measurement of economic benefits. In addition to assets and resources, the capabilities approach also characterizes a person's autonomy, agency, and abilities as crucial to health and well-being (Sen, 1999).

This research has three specific aims. First is to understand how farm management and other farm stakeholders perceive the fair trade certification and to discover how the new certification practices may affect farm operations related to labor. Second is to explore the experience of farmworkers on the first fair trade-certified farm in the U.S. and to understand how certification has shaped their labor-related experiences and impacted their livelihoods. The third aim is to explore the labor policy implications of the fair trade certification program for the agricultural sector in the U.S. and beyond.

Methods

This mixed-methods research study was approved by the IRB at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona. Data collection and analysis occurred

between March 2020 and July 2021. Multiple research methods were used to enhance the depth, accuracy, and rigor of the findings (Johnson et al., 2020). Each method used a different approach for data generation, e.g., drawing on responses from surveys, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis (Creswell, 2013). Two distinct populations were involved in the study: farm administrators and value chain actors connected to the farm, and farmworkers. The first population included value chain actors and institutional representatives associated with the fair trade-certified farm. Value chain actors included processors, distributors, wholesalers and retailers that work with the farm. Institutional representatives include farm employees involved in human resources, corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and management. specific individuals in farm management are involved in the fair trade certification process, purposive sampling was employed in collaboration with the farm leadership team to identify and select these individuals.

The second population included farmworkers. The survey instrument was based on a previously validated capabilities approach tool, translated into Spanish and distributed to all farmworkers for their voluntary participation (Lorgelly et al., 2015). The interviews employed purposive sampling to identify those farmworkers already nominated by their peers to serve on the fair trade committee. Document analysis included content from the digital records of the farm, Fair Trade USA, and other value chain actors involved in the study. Insights were triangulated from analysis of the data,

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, in English, with the first population to better understand how farm management and value chain stakeholders view Fair Trade USA and their observations as to how the new domestic model is being implemented at the farm. These interviews also elicited insights concerning value chain stakeholder perspectives on the dimensions of ethical consumerism. The interview questions further yielded insight into what motivates different value chain stakeholders to support the fair trade system through their business transactions. Interviews with institutional representatives from the farm, including management personnel and fair trade committee members, focused on the dynamics of how the certification has been implemented within the operational structure of the farm.

In addition to gathering basic demographic data, interviews consisted of four content areas: (1) demographics and general association with the farm, (2) perception of the fair trade certification program, (3) perception of the benefits of the program for farmworkers, (4) perception of the role of value chain actors in supporting certification. In the first content area, interviewee demographics and standard questions about residency, language, identity and the nature of and business history with the farm were asked. In the second area**,** interviewees were asked about how they and their institution view the certification program. In the third area, interviewees were asked about their perception of how they think the program benefits farmworkers. In the fourth content area, interviewees were asked about how they view their organization's role in the value chain, supporting the Fair Trade USA certification program. Per semi-structured interviewing methods, which emphasize an evolving series of questions, certain topics were explored in more detail, and questions were tailored to individual participant expertise, knowledge, and interest.

The second population consisted of farmworkers. To select workers for participation, maximum variation purposive sampling was used, which selects cases from different subgroups to examine variations in the manifestation of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Participant selection strived to achieve diversity amongst respondent characteristics with relation to gender, age, education level, marital status, and time employed at the farm. This sampling provided variation in perspectives through recruiting participants with different demographic characteristics. When sampling challenges were encountered due to the COVID-19 pandemic, although the original research design included onsite recruitment and survey facilitation, new methods were integrated into the research process. The farm management had implemented the mobile communication tool GANAS, which allowed for the dissemination of updates via text message as well as polling and survey functionality. This system was deployed for the survey distribution on a voluntary basis. The

opportunity to participate in the survey was communicated in Spanish and English via text with a corresponding link three times over several months.

Data collected through surveying, in Spanish and English, focused on the capabilities theoretical framework and was intended to generate information on the impact of fair trade in employment, health, and community for farmworkers. The survey questions addressed the dynamics of farmworker roles and their perception of the impact of certification for their health, well-being, and livelihood sustainability. In addition to eliciting basic demographic data, the survey gathered information in three main areas: farmworker roles, worker personal/professional development, and worker livelihood and sustainability.

Data analysis was conducted separately, using qualitative and quantitative methods, on the semi-structured interview data, data gathered from document analysis, and survey data. Data was uploaded to Dedoose, a mixed-methods cloud-based research platform. The analysis approach for each method was selected based on the type of data generated. Data-driven coding was conducted for the semi-structured interviews to provide background and a broader context to perspectives of farmworkers on the fair trade committee and their survey responses. For the semi-structured interviews with committee farmworkers, interpretive analysis was conducted in order to more rigorously understand phenomena of interest through the perspectives of the farmworkers themselves. The visual and written data generated from document analysis was coded and informed both by a data-driven approach and by theory from the literature, including the capabilities concept, which focuses on agency, empowerment, and livelihood sustainability.

Three rounds of coding were conducted for the data generated. For the interviews, there was a first round of informal coding during the transcription and translation stage, conducted by the primary investigators. Formal digital coding was conducted on the text from interviews, and on the images and text from the documents. (In Dedoose, components of visual data can be coded using the same coding system as text; an entire photograph can be coded thematically, while subsections—images within the photograph—can also be coded.) Excerpts from the text and images of significance during coding were highlighted and tagged thematically, mainly data-driven but also informed by the major concepts from the interview guide. Once the initial round of coding was complete, the codes that emerged were reviewed, refined, and merged where necessary to account for gaps or redundancies. In some instances, more comprehensive codes were expanded to include subcategories. In other instances, codes that were very similar were merged to create larger categories, with the similar codes then becoming subcategories.

This process of iterative coding, followed by multiple rounds of code refining, has been categorized as open, axial, and selective coding, stages characteristic of qualitative analysis through which the relationship among codes is distilled, forging deeper understanding of the underlying patterns (Birks & Mills, 2015; Saldaña, 2016). When this process was complete, a coding scheme was created to describe the approach that the primary investigator took, based on the original analytic questions, literature reviews, and data-driven concepts that emerged through the original coding.

Results

Farmworker Survey

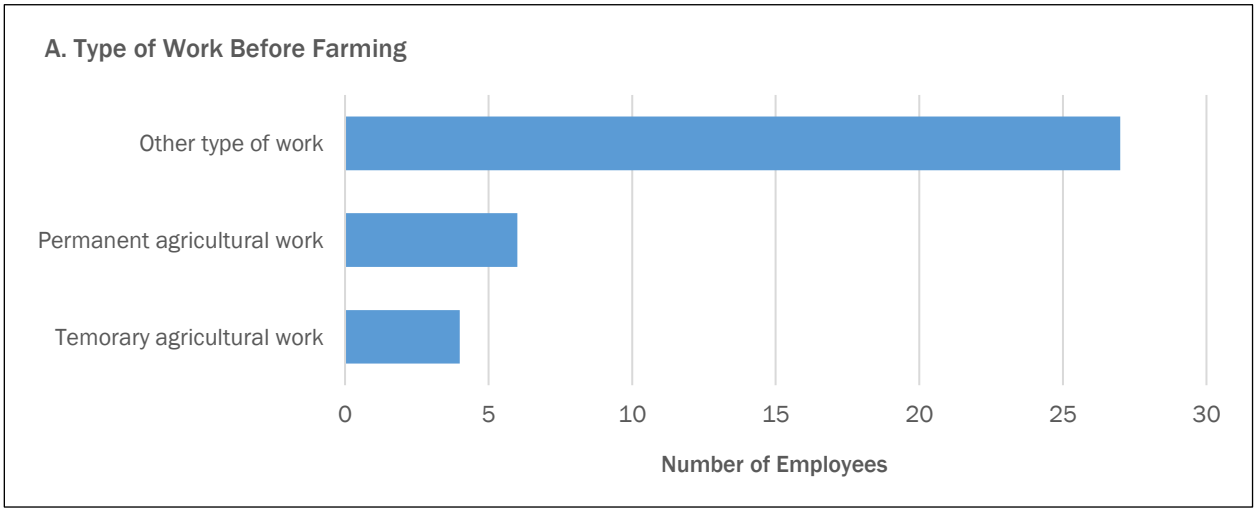
Thirty-seven farmworkers responded to the survey of 196 that were polled to voluntarily participate, an overall response rate of 19%. Multiple requests and follow-ups were attempted to achieve a higher response rate, but given the extreme challenges that many farm operators and farmworkers were facing during the pandemic period, this response rate has been sufficient to gain initial insights appropriate for this exploratory study. However, the sample size is a major limitation of the study. Nevertheless, the data provided an initial foundation for understanding farmworkers' perspectives about their work in general, and how the fair trade program has impacted their situations.

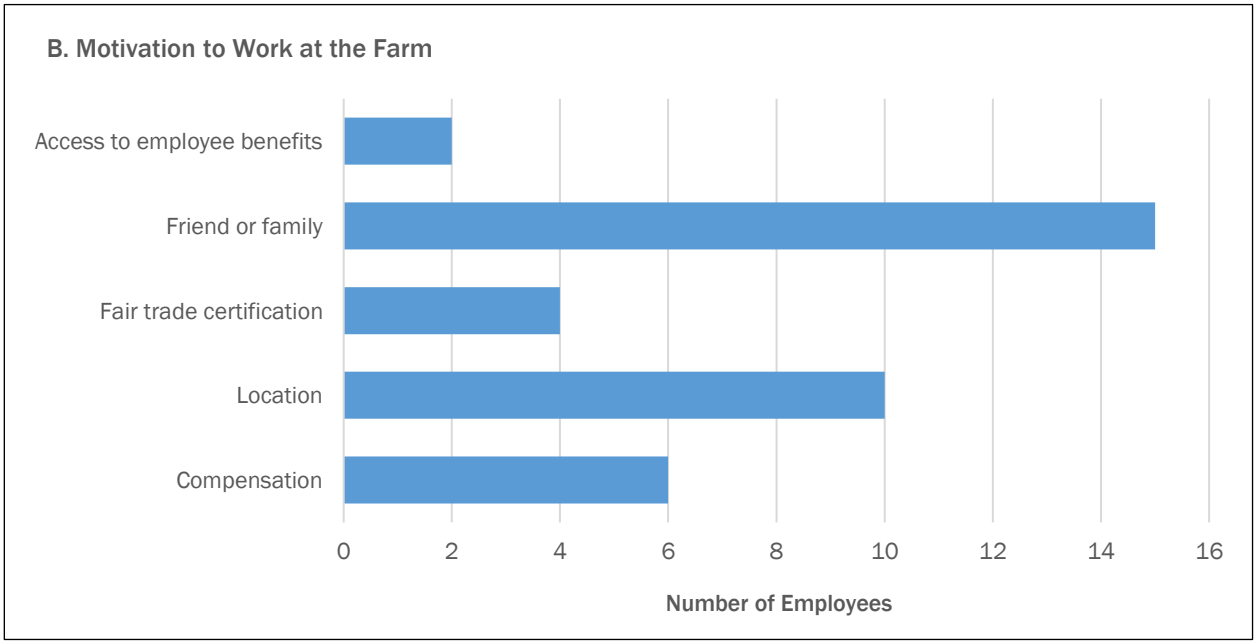
The first part of the survey sought to determine the employment backgrounds of farmworkers and what motivated them to join the farm. Before working on the farm, 75% of respondents were

involved in other types of work, and 25% were involved in either temporary or permanent agricultural jobs. Most respondents were motivated to join the farm because of the convenience of its location, and at the referral of family or friends. Figure 1 displays farmer responses to the initial background questions.

The second part of the survey explored the impact on farm employment related to benefits from the Fair Trade USA certification. In addition, this section sought to broadly understand the extent to which farmworkers connected certification to the benefits. The results demonstrate that while only 10% of respondents were motivated to join the farm due to the certification, 70% responded that certification made a difference in their livelihoods and in their well-being. Related to this observation was that almost 50% of respondents shared that they have benefitted most from the trainings offered through the farm, followed by the independence and respect they have gained as employees. Most respondents also stated that their

Figure 1. Farmworker Labor Background





income has become more stable. In addition, close to 80% stated that this improvement in their livelihood has made it easier to cover the costs associated with basic household necessities, healthcare, and transportation. Table 1 presents the breakdown of the responses related to perceived benefits and fair trade impact.

Interviews

The interviews were conducted with institutional representatives including farm management, supply chain stakeholders, and the fair trade committee composed of peer-nominated farmworker leaders. Sixteen interviews were conducted, ten with institutional representatives and six with the committee members. The institutional representatives included farm employees involved in administration and management, and personnel from supply chain companies associated with the farm. The interviews covered three distinct areas of inquiry: the history and dynamics of how the fair trade program was adopted and then implemented in the U.S., the specific impact of fair trade certification on the farm, focusing on farmworker well-being, and the role of the supply chain in supporting value chain sustainability, including an exploration of consumer perception. Table 2 provides an overview of the major results of the coding analysis.

Implementing Fair Trade in the U.S.

The first part of the interview process was focused on exploring the broader context and history related to the implementation of fair trade in the United States.

Origins of the Fair Trade Program in the U.S.

To better understand the origins of the domestic Fair Trade Program in the U.S., institutional representatives were asked about their perspectives on how the program evolved from the original international model through Fairtrade International. They were also probed to consider the contextual role of the program in U.S. agriculture. One farm manager reflected on the history of fair trade and why a new approach was required to address U.S. agriculture needs:

> More traditional fair trade was based on smallholders and cooperatives [sic] in Central and South America, farmers with a few acres of coffee bushes, and that was the focus and how

Table 1. Farmworker Responses on Livelihood Sustainability

Main Benefit of Farm Employment	Percentage (%)		
Friendship	3		
Independence	10		
Respect	22		
Confidence	16		
Training or Occupational Knowledge	49		
Categorical Improvement (Y/N)	**Yes (%)**	**No (%)**	**Uncertain (%)**
Overall Income Improvement	70	11	19
Benefit from Fair Trade Premium	76	13	11
Improvement in Household Financial Security	81	3	13
Improvement in Healthcare Access	76	11	13
Improvement in Transportation Access	78	8	14

Table 2. Coding Scheme

Major Categories and Subcategories	Themes
Implementing Fair Trade in the U.S.	• Historical origins • Need to reform large U.S. farms • U.S. farmworker rights • Business benefits
Farmworker Benefits	• Community development through projects • Farmworker voice • Empowerment
Support Through the Value Chain	• Risk management • Rising awareness in the supply chain • Consumer purchasing power

> it started. If you look at who is working in ag and who is doing the labor in the U.S., that model does not fit. The majority of farmworkers work for a farmer, so the model for the U.S. had to evolve to be able to bring these key stakeholders into the conversation. (P5)

Most farm staff interviewed claimed that adoption of the fair trade model in the U.S. was a natural evolution of the business, which straddled the U.S.–Mexico border with farm operations on both sides. Becoming the first Fair Trade USA-certified farm in the U.S. was deemed a natural extension of the farm management team's approach on their farms in Mexico. However, most interview participants noted significant differences in needs between farmworkers in Mexico and farmworkers in the U.S. One farm manager shared:

> Domestic fair trade was a real different beast than what we had established in Mexico, and everything in fair trade starts with a needs assessment. The needs that were outlined here really surprised us. We were expecting what we saw in Mexico, a need for education and transportation and a lot of these basic services that we didn't realize we pretty much have in the U.S. But the workers needs were others and they really pointed out to us what they needed. Hey, healthcare is really expensive, can you help us with fair trade to offset some of those costs for us and our families. I brought this up with our group, hey, this is really different. They are not looking for a school, they are looking for the help to get through some of these high cost parts of living in the U.S., and healthcare is obviously a huge part of this. That was one of our first experiences working with domestic fair trade. We also have a farm in California, and their needs are even different than here in Arizona. They are looking at things like housing, which is so expensive in California. The idea that they can own their home is like a pipedream. So that group has been pooling their funds over several years to buy land to purchase where they can build their own houses. (P10)

Another theme that emerged from interviews with institutional stakeholders was the need for a fair trade system on large farms, a need inherently tied to the benefits of the Fair Trade USA system for farmworkers. A human resources representative from the farm shared their perspective on why fair trade is just as important for large farms:

> I will give you an example of why a large farm needs this as much as a small farm. Our very first farm to be certified was in Sinaloa, and the second was in Sonora. We now have nine green houses in Sonora and it's one of our largest employers because they ship year round, they have the benefit of accumulating premiums over the whole year. They were just starting fair trade eight years ago, and one of our first initiatives was the scholarship program. It started very simple, if we can help parents getting school supplies and shoes and uniforms, then their kids will go to school. That added in a transportation component, and that has helped this community flourish in an incredible way. We had students barely going to high school, and now we have students going to college, and a masters student on fair trade scholarship. We help them with housing, with books, with living expenses, all through air trade scholarship program. It has created now a generation of children of farmworkers who are university graduates. And that is amazing to see. In just eight years, to see this turnaround from kids barely going to high school to now having university degrees and becoming teachers and engineers. We have one kid who came back who now runs the library. Just because we were a large farm didn't mean that we didn't need the extra help to propel these families forward. (P1)

In addition to sharing perspectives on the importance of the Fair Trade USA certification for large farms, a variety of supply chain stakeholders advocated for the need to focus on farmworker rights and working conditions, which many considered to be minimized in the U. S. One farm manager observed:

> I think the U.S. gets a pass when it comes to thinking that everything here is perfect and great and farmworkers live the life, but there are still a lot of inconsistencies in how farmworkers are treated in terms of safety practices, what is available to them to in terms of a system to air grievances. It might not look like poverty, but it definitely looks like a group of workers who could definitely be taken advantage of very easily, most of them being grievances. There is a little bit of an immigrant mentality: if things are going wrong, you don't say much because you don't want to rock the boat. I think our generation is trying to break that: and this is where we want to say if something isn't right then it isn't right. That's where Fair Trade USA's domestic program has come in and say look, we do work in the U.S., and there are a lot of laws that we do need to abide by, but this is going the extra mile to prove to our consumers that just because we grow in the US doesn't mean these laws and practices are perfect and we are trying to go beyond that to give a better life to these farmworkers. (P1)

These observations point to the tenuous environment and circumstance in which farmworkers continue to labor, and the opportunity for the Fair Trade USA system to provide enhanced protection, security, and transparency.

Business Benefits

An unanticipated set of benefits for obtaining Fair Trade USA certification was shared by farm management, who stated that the system did not just benefit farmworkers, but also overall enhanced the sustainability of their business. They stated that the system did this in two ways, which both aid in farmworker retention: building a culture of empowerment through the development of agency and leadership, and opening access to material benefits,. One sales manager shared:

> The biggest benefit for the farm is to make the sale and how it reinforces the culture in the company. I see the farm as a vehicle for people to improve themselves. And that we are part of creating agriculture in a different way. It is very rewarding to see these [fair trade] projects come to light. … The fair trade program does that: it engages people in a different way. It does give meaning to the work that we are doing. (P5)

A human resources manager emphasized this theme, and discussed how the fair trade program enhanced material benefits for employees, improving retention for the farm business:

> Another benefit to employers to being fair trade-certified is retention rate improvement. Employees do understand how fair trade works and what the standards are, and when we are audited, they will interview employees. They understand that this is a pretty good place to work with a lot of great benefits if they want to take advantage of those. It really helps with our retention rates. As far as other benefits, I think knowing that FT standards are fairly tight on employers for safety. Some farms just don't care about safety. That was one of the first things I did was implement an OSHA certification program, which is part of the fair trade program as well. We have done that not just in Arizona but in Mexico as well. Now our sites are having a friendly competition to see which can be the safest. Work rules, schedules, overtime, pay practices, those are all benefits for the workers. The terms and conditions of employment overall are much better. (P3)

In addition to the more standard employment benefits, the fair trade social premium was noted as a mechanism for not just giving back to the farmworker community, but providing them with a tool for improving their lives. Another human resources manager commented:

> Fair trade is important because farmworkers matter and they deserve to benefit from a program like this. It is a super important program for them because they are working hard, so it is like a compensation for them to be a part of the something big. It impacts their lives, and it impacts their families. It also impacts the com-

> munity as well. It is something very important for our farm labor, and we work hard to make sure the impact spreads. It makes their job important as well, because they know the premium will come back to them as a team. (P4)

While material benefits may have been a more obvious indication to farm management of how the fair trade system could improve farm operations through worker safety and more rigorous labor standards on the operations side, equally, and perhaps more important, has been the creation of culture and infrastructure to support the development of farmworkers' individual agency and collective empowerment through shared governance and mechanisms for community improvement via the fair trade premium.

Farmworker Benefits

Farm management and the fair trade committee observed several forms of farmworker benefits: access to healthcare and health insurance, housing, transportation, community infrastructure, and farmworker-initiated voice and collective empowerment. Primarily, material benefits of health, housing, transportation, and community were at the forefront of what both farm managers and the committee discussed when they reflected on the benefits of fair trade certification.

Healthcare and access to health insurance is a complex issue for farmworkers, depending on their immigration and employment status. Most farmworkers would prefer to access healthcare in Mexico in a familiar system that is much less costly. When the American Care Act (ACA) was first implemented, it carried a requirement that incentivized farmworkers to carry health insurance. With the downgrading of the requirement, enrollment has not reached previous levels, but is still higher than before ACA. A fair trade committee member discussed how the fair trade program has contributed to supporting health insurance and healthcare costs:

> As a worker, here in the U.S., we have access to healthcare, which I pay for as an individual and I have the biggest plan. For this plan I pay for 20% of the total cost, fair trade pays for another 20% of the total cost, and the company pays for the remaining 60%. It's a huge help that the company provides for us, as well as the fair trade committee, such that we only have to pay 20% of our health insurance costs. In this moment I'm talking to you as a farmworker, not as part of the committee, right? So, paying only 20% of health insurance costs is super economical. I have access to dental care, vision care, and whatever happens to me, well I have a general health insurance too. And this is a benefit that extends to the entire family! (P2)

Another committee member described several housing and transportation projects that have benefitted farmworkers. Due to the rural location of the farm and the dispersed housing of farmworkers, reliable and affordable transportation was a significant need. Representatives from farm management and fair trade committee members discussed how the fair trade premium has been used to support improved transportation for farmworkers, recognizing the benefits for farm operations as well as for workers . A committee member stated:

> One project is home improvement. Almost 100 employees have benefited with that project, where they get $1000. You have to meet the needs and the requirements to qualify for the project, but it is amazing to see the before and after pictures of the home improvements. The other project is transportation. The farm is 20–30 miles away from Nogales and Tucson, and so instead of struggling to get to work they contract with a. transportation service that brings them to work and takes them back home. They pay less for gas and can put that towards grocery shopping. The shuttles transport them back and forth. (P14)

Another committee member said about the transportation project:

> An economic benefit that I have witnessed for farmworkers at large, which was in place before I joined the committee. This was the transport project. The majority of people who

> work here live in Mexico or closer to Tucson, so in order to save on transportation costs to Amado we started a shuttle. The fair trade committee pays for half of the costs, and the company covers the rest. (P3)

A broader area of improvement was the community projects supported through the fair trade premium. As with cooperatives outside the U.S., in the U.S. a peer-nominated fair trade committee leads a group in voting on community projects to pursue. Committee members described different health-sensitive projects that the group has collectively implemented, addressing needs related to housing, exercise infrastructure, and food security. A farm institutional representative summarized the variety of projects supported through the premiums:

> The farmworkers choose what kinds of project they want, and many of them benefit the community at large. The soccer field, for example, brought the whole community together around the field: kids use it, adults use it, and it creates community. There is also a push now to support bigger projects like help with home improvements and home ownership. This would be huge, as home ownership creates a real sense of security. The group in Imuris created a food cooperative, kind of like a 'Walmart-cito' [small Walmart], and we have discussed this as well, to provide people with easier access to basic necessities, especially fresh foods. (P5)

In addition to the material benefits that the fair trade program has provided, both farm management and the fair trade committee described the powerful impact that the program has had for the development of agency and empowerment. While farmworker agency and empowerment were discussed in terms of how they have improved business through worker retention, many respondents from management and the farmworker community also described the critical role the standard plays in amplifying the collective farmworker voice through the governance structure of the committee. One farm manger said:

> Farmworker voice is another big benefit of the fair trade system. You have to really make an effort to listen, and fair trade creates the infrastructure for that. Having a formal process that engages people: I am not saying it's perfect, but it's a step in the right direction. … The general manager of the farm was like: you don't live here—everything you are saying is fine but that is top down. You don't see the value because you don't live here. You are not here everyday. … It was a humbling experience. … No one knows what is better for them than the people that are there, and that understanding was like a lightbulb that went off in my head. When I say worker voice is hard to hear—it takes time for them to have buy in to the fair trade system, but when they do they just go go go. So their priorities are primary. It's a huge benefit that doesn't exist up front in the fair trade system. (P5)

Another farm manager affirmed the critical role of shared governance through the committee structure in creating a culture of empowerment amongst the farmworkers:

> Empowerment is huge. They are empowered, they speak fair trade. Especially the fair trade committee, they have been learning different skills, and the whole group takes ownership and speak the fair trade language. It is just awesome to see that they are empowered. They have the right to vote, when they have the general assembly, they are asking questions, they are engaged. This has changed them for sure. There was this one employee that left the company to pursue a better opportunity but came back because they missed being a fair trade member. So that is tremendous, and they are empowered for sure. (P6)

The farm management and fair trade committee sentiments affirmed individual and collective empowerment, established through the transparency and collective decision-making of the assembly of farmworkers gathered under the leadership of the fair trade committee. One committee member observed:

> The funds that we have from the committee belong to everyone in the end, right? Not just the committee, but the assembly in general. We are the ones that administrate, but we make the decisions together and we are very transparent at all times. (P12)

The interviews demonstrated that Fair Trade USA has created space and structure within the farm business to focus on the material well-being of farmworkers, particularly essential necessities such as healthcare and transportation. The governance structure of the committee has created an avenue for the collective farmworker voice and a mechanism for farmworkers to develop leadership skills.

Support Along the Value Chain

The third major theme that emerged from the interviews process was the importance of the value chain in providing support for fair trade by creating market demand, particularly at the retail and consumer level. At the retail level, motivations for purchasing fair trade were described as having started to address risk mitigation. The motivations have evolved to embrace the fair trade system. A farm manager commented on the pivotal role that supply chain wholesalers and retailers play in purchasing and providing access and education for fair trade on the shelf.

> There is also the supply chain itself. The more knowledge the supply chain has, the better they understand it, the more access they give to the consumers. We can produce all the tomatoes we want, but if the Walmarts of the world are not willing to put it on their shelves, it won't be there for consumers. So it's really a key component of the success is how we can access the market which comes from retailers that are the ones that have the shelf space. (P2)

Another manager reflected that many retail buyers first purchase fair trade for risk mitigation purposes, but that they are starting to see less defensive and more offensive purchasing decisions:

> There are people that also do it because of risk mitigation. [Retailers] understand that they don't want to appear irresponsible. They want to have a responsible supply chain. So, it's a risk mitigation strategy to work with fair trade certified-farms. There was an LA times articles criticizing Mexican farms for bad labor practices and it was a watershed moment in our industry. I think that fair trade certification will have the same arc as organic. That was the responsible choice then, this is the responsible choice now. If you build it, they will come. There are some wholesalers and retailers that are still so price driven, I can't change their minds. But I can choose who is most strategic to me as a buyer. I have seen great strides. We are about to embark on a pilot with Fair Trade USA at Walmart. They are committing to a two-year pilot project on fair trade-certified tomatoes from Mexico. We are one of the smaller ones participating. But that brings me a lot of hope. You think Walmart and its everyday low prices and price driven. But to me that is very exciting to see a pilot like that with a company with such a big reach, to bring this message to consumers. They see the logo, and they know it's good and responsible. They might not really understand it, but 65% recognize the logo. A partner like Walmart can bring a lot of people to that message. I brought some buyers from west Texas, I am talking as right of right, red of red, to the farm. Showed them the farm, they loved it. They loved the fair trade project. They don't buy a lot, but everything they buy is fair trade. They see that this is not socialism, that we are making a product and taking it to market and being competitive. This is not a handout, and they got it right away. To me, those are very encouraging signs for sure. (P5)

Consistent with this sentiment, another farm manager expressed optimism about the shift they are seeing in retail to support fair trade:

> I think awareness is catching on more in the wholesale and retail space because you take Costco, Walmart, Whole Foods, I mean, they are just 100% committed. We would have community projects (like a school kitchen),

> and we had Whole Foods volunteers to come and help. So, they are in completely. And Costco, Walmart. We make sure our external growers in Mexico and California are all fair trade certified. We require it because our customers require it. That is where it is really catching on. Getting the products out in front of the consumers so that they have options: how do they want to spend their money. (P3)

Addressing the consumer end, farm management discussed the trends they have seen over time and how consumers may perceive and then support the certification. One farm manager stated:

> I think at the end of the day we all want to make a difference, right. I think consumers respond to a fair trade message because we want our purchase to matter. Consumers respond to the fair trade message because we want to believe that the companies we support, support the values we support. Price is important, but it has been proven its not necessarily the lower price that gets you the sale. People want to be invited to be a part of the solution. One way is to show them how their purchases have an effect. The average consumer does not understand between rainforest and FLO and Utz, that is too much minutia, it is clear that you still have to have great quality, good product, but if you can invite me to be responsible, I am rewarding that. There will never be a short cut. Our produce needs to be awesome, look great, taste great. We can never sell crappy fair trade-certified tomatoes. We still need to get all that right. But if we can give the invitation to make the responsible choice, consumers will reward you. (P5)

Another manager said that they have seen consumer perspectives changing, and noted the role that consumers believe they have through their purchasing power:

> I think there is some information that consumers have but they can't get the full picture. They understand it is something good, and that they are taking care of the people who produce the products, whether its tea, or a tomato, or furniture. Maybe they don't get the full understand of what it is, but they believe they are voting with their dollars for something that is made correctly. That provides opportunities. I don't think they understand how the premium works, but they think it is something that is responsible. Responsible has resonated with consumers: how we treat people, how we treat the environment. With the pandemic, it becomes even more relevant. That we understand how fragile how we live is. So taking care of others becomes even more important. That is how the consumer relates to fair trade. That is my take on it. (P2)

These remarks demonstrate the key role that the supply chain plays in supporting the fair trade movement by purchasing fair trade products, from the retailer and consumer sides.

Discussion

The exploratory results from this research describe the impact of implementation of Fair Trade USA certification on the first U.S. certified farm, grounded in the perspectives of farmworkers, fair trade committee members, and key stakeholders at the farm and within the farm's supply chain. The data shows that implementation has resulted in multiple levels of benefit at the farm level. Perhaps most importantly, these results shed light on how the organizational structure of the fair trade committee and the assembly of farmworkers provides a safety net of support and a source of individual and collective empowerment. Through the opportunities supported by the fair trade premium, farmworkers acquired ability to enhance the stability of their health and livelihoods.

Two major themes characterize the dynamics of implementing the Fair Trade USA certification. The first, at the individual level, involves the important role of the unique institutional arrangement created through certification the fair trade program not only improves labor standards when compared to the basic OSHA requirements, but the social premium provides an additional benefit that supports farmworker access to health insurance, safe and secure housing, food access, trans-

portation, and community infrastructure for socialization and physical activity. At the collective level, the farmworker-elected fair trade committee represents an important innovation for the farm labor landscape, serving several essential functions. As a leadership and governance structure for farmworkers, the committee guides collective decision-making about the fair trade premium funds. The committee helps steer this process, while providing training and professional development opportunities for committee members. In addition to serving a unique role in supporting internal organizing of farmworkers, the committee also serves as a leadership body to be consulted by farm management. As such, the committee provides workers with a direct communication channel to farm leadership.

In sum, the many benefits provided to farmworkers by implementation of Fair Trade USA standards begin close to the farmworker and further develop downstream into efficiencies and value for farm management, farms, produce retailers, and ultimately the consumers of Fair Trade USA-certified products. Although additional research is needed, the first U.S. fair trade certified-farm offers evidence of the impact of farmworker governance at the farm level, promoting improvements for farmworker health and well-being.

While the integration of Fair Trade USA certification into the agricultural landscape offers more equitable and sustainable agricultural practices, there are challenges and barriers to consider. The most salient challenge is that the system is voluntary, and therefore relies on early adopters and forward thinking innovators whose values and market orientation align with the fair trade movement. Until there are state or federal requirements and/or incentives to adopt this type of certification, fully scaling the benefits will rely on a combination of early adopters and the pressure of consumer and supply chain demand. Acquiring certification requires buy-in from the farm management, and the administrative resources to comply with the rigorous paperwork, auditing, and implementation process. For value chain supporters, the added cost of purchasing fair trade-certified products remains the main barrier, in addition to supply issues. In many instances, farms certified by Fair Trade USA are still in the process of scaling up to meet such demand for larger retailers that want to commit to fair trade purchasing.

Limitations

The limitations of this research are primarily related to the study design, language, and the respondent selection process. As with all research, the positionality of the primary investigator and the interviewers, has had an unavoidable influence on relationships with study participants and community members. Respondents may have felt pressure due to loyalty to positively portray the institutions by which they are employed, which should also be considered when considering the data. These limitations were addressed through data triangulation, which included multiple avenues of data generation and analysis. Challenges with language may have also been a challenge as the research with farmworkers and fair trade committee members was primarily conducted in Spanish, and the data translated into English for analysis. The relatively small sample size also has clearly limited the depth of understanding.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to explore the dynamics of implementing the Fair Trade USA certification through the perspectives of farm managers and farmworkers on the first certified farm in the U.S. Farmworker survey results were triangulated with the perspectives of farm managers and farmworkers from the fair trade committee to better understand implementation and benefits that may stem from the program. These findings have highlighted ways in which the Fair Trade USA program has benefited farm operations, improved farmworker access to key necessities, and created the space and organizational structure for farmworker voice and empowerment through the fair trade committee. These findings demonstrate that certification has been able to provide significant worker benefits of healthcare, housing, transportation, and community development that have otherwise been difficult or impossible to access for farmworkers. In addition, the research demonstrates the importance of the coordinated role across the value chain in supporting fair trade, from the retail to consumer levels. Although

initially motivated by risk mitigation, as business practices have shifted to embrace the importance of leadership in environmental and social governance more corporate behemoths have begun to integrate certification requirements into their purchasing practices. In addition, growing consumer desire for production transparency and values-based purchasing has increased demand for products with certifications like fair trade. The research contributes to a better understanding of the dynamics of implementing fair trade in the U.S., and the benefits that the program has created for farm operations, farmworker well-being, and improvements in the value chain around social and environmental impact.

Understanding the dynamics of how the Fair Trade USA program has been adapted and tailored can inform the success of programs and policies aimed at supporting broad program diffusion. However, further research is necessary to establish more robust evaluations of the longer-term impact of Fair Trade USA. Based on the future potential for success of this program, it is possible that the standards of Fair Trade USA could be operationalized at the state and then federal government level, following the same pathway as the USDA organic certification program. This type of approach could lead to substantial improvements in farm management, farmworker well-being, and value chain sustainability.

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