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Who decides what is fair in fair trade? The agri-environmental governance of standards, access, and price

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Abstract

The agri-environmental governance of value chains can favour a Polanyian double movement seeking social protection and control over price setting markets or it can advance a neoliberal logic that strives to overcome the few remaining civic and ecologic obstacles to full market dominance. Coupled with a typology that contrasts corporate social responsibility and social economy Fair Trade models, this theoretical framework elucidates positions in the current policy debates about the minimum coffee price standard. Many Southern smallholders consider Fair Trade's standards, which for coffee include direct market accesses for smallholder cooperatives, minimum prices, and environmental criteria, among the best deals available. The smallholder empowerment benefits are often better than competing eco-labels.

However, this study finds that Fair Trade minimum prices lost 41 percent of their real value from 1988 to 2008. Despite objections from several 'market driven' firms and

national labelling initiatives, smallholders' collective advocacy and this research contributed to the Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International's (FLO) decision to mandate a 7-11 percent minimum price increase. The price debates demonstrate that Fair Trade governance is neither purely neoliberal nor social movement led – it is a highly contested socially embedded practice. Voices without votes, North-South inequalities, and dwindling prices paid to its stated protagonists indicate the need for governance reform, cost of living price adjustments, and additional investment in the innovative alternative trade and hybrid models.

Keywords: fair trade eco-labels environmental and agricultural governance standards sustainability
Karl Polanyi

Additional information

Notes on contributors

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