

Journey for Fair Trade

This blog is the story of a journey with a purpose; a journey to present the voices of Fair Trade producers, artisans, weavers, farmers, and craftswomen and men. This blog examines the Fair Trade Organizations, NGOs, and Community-Based Organizations which support producers and introduce social change; it aims to develop local, national and regional Fair Trade networks; it encourages the advocates and supporters of Fair Trade; and it informs conscientious consumers.

Saturday, December 18, 2010

Fair Trade applied as a Business Model in Vietnam

For most people when they think of charity, they think of goodwill towards those less fortunate; those in need of one form of help or another. I believe it is good to be charitable, especially during the holiday season. I encourage those of you who read this blog, be charitable this Christmas. I know of one woman who presented a list of local and international charities to all those on her Christmas list. Instead of purchasing gifts, she allotted them each \$25 to donate in their name to any of the organizations listed. That was truly a memorable gift worth giving!

**"To be charitable is a virtue;
To be empowered is a human right"**

Mitch Teberg, MA
Journey for Fair Trade

Reflecting back over the past week of interviewing and observing the dedicated employees of Reaching Out, I have once again learned that charity is important, but so is empowerment. For those whom society deems as "less fortunate," charity is a reflection of human kindness and recognition of their challenging situation, but what all people truly crave, regardless of physical or mental ability, is *opportunity*.



[Reaching Out](#) is a locally owned and operated business with quality, heart and soul at its center. They provide much more than income opportunities to marginalized craftswomen and men; more than a business, it is a family. Fifty-five craftswomen and men are assiduously working on their crafts with

the support, advice and encouragement of Binh and Quyen. Unlike the usual business, here the employees all have a say in their work environment; together they established their high standards and more often than not they exceed their own expectations.

The official statement of Reaching Out is as follows:

“As a social business adhering to Fair Trade principles we run paid work placement schemes for disadvantaged youth with disabilities from socially deprived communities. We offer real world training and development. Currently we achieve an 85% success rate with graduates going on to meaningful employment and leading independent lives. Our growing team of differently-abled people help us and our customers to demonstrably deliver on Corporate Social Responsibility values.

In addition, Reaching Out is getting involved into the global value chain, our high-end Vietnamese products are sold to the growing number of customers who seek unique quality in responsibly produced gifts and a responsibly delivered shopping experience. As you know, Reaching Out achieves this in part through our Fair Trade practices, so we continue our commitment to Fair Trade through the quality of our products and the social standards of our organisation.”



Many of the employees I spoke with mentioned Binh not only as a manager, but as a mentor held in high regard. He has overcome many of his own challenges and broke through many social barriers in order to be successful in his mission to integrate people with disabilities in his community. I could not help but admire his strength and compassion. On many occasions during this past week I witnessed him take time to work closely with the staff and artisans in his shop, like he does in the photo above.



When I began an inquiry into the origins of Reaching Out as a business rather than a non-profit organization, Mr Binh spoke on behalf of the disabled, *"We want to be employed. Our employees get a salary and they are proud of that. That salary is what they receive from making quality products. They earn it."*

There is much to say about the pride that comes with regular employment, particularly when your community has traditionally been recognized as unemployable. As I spoke with him it became clear that Binh has been confronting many of social barriers over the past decades, directly challenging how Vietnamese society views the disabled. However, just as in the West, he admits there is much more work to be done to overcome the cultural and social barriers that still exists.

He went on to explain his decision to focus on a sustainable business model for empowerment, *"I used to work with NGOs and charities. They rely heavily on donations, but suddenly if the donations stop most of the people that rely on those funds, how can they manage? ...We know well that if we just rely on donations, how can we stand on our own? It is not sustainable."*



"Financial sustainability was an important question when I began to set up Reaching Out. At that time the people said, 'You should become a non-profit organization.' Ten years ago the legal statutes for local NGOs in Vietnam was not easy. Secondly, I was looking for long-term financial sustainability. I believe a business must think to make a living for their staff and about the long-term sustainability."

For Binh, starting a business which trained and hired highly skilled craftswomen and men with disabilities was the best way forward. *"When we*

set up our business in the beginning we were searching for a good model or good way to work with our disabled producers. We established two core objectives when we set up Reaching Out.”

1. **Integration**; help more local disabled to integrate into society through open employment
2. **Financial independence**; we don’t want to rely on donations, but we want our organization to attain long-term financial independence.

In short, Binh sought a means to empower the disabled community through Reaching Out. It is estimated that 10% of the world population is disabled. In Vietnam, the percentage is estimated to be 15% following consecutive decades of crippling wars and disease. The [UN Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) was signed by 147 nations to include Vietnam, the United States, and Japan since 2007. However only 90 nations have ratified the convention assuring national adherence and enforcement of its principles. For those who have never read the convention, click on the link above. The general principles are as follows:

- a. Respect for inherent dignity, individual autonomy including the freedom to make one’s own choices, and independence of persons;
- b. Non-discrimination;
- c. Full and effective participation and inclusion in society;
- d. Respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity;
- e. Equality of opportunity;
- f. Accessibility;
- g. Equality between men and women;
- h. Respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities and respect for the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities.



Binh explained about his views on the prevalent business models in Vietnam. *“A normal business just focuses on maximizing profits. As usual, the employers don’t want to employ disabled people. The disabled people here have low education; they don’t have life skills. A normal business asks, ‘how to deal with them, how they can become a good worker?’ They don’t believe the disabled worker is a good worker. The normal business model does not work for us. So, with this we try to look for a new model... It was so difficult*

for us to find a new way.”

I had to agree with Binh about the “normal business model” as it is applied in Vietnam. Businesses here are more interested in profits than providing opportunities for disadvantaged people. As for the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), it has only been introduced recently, and to say the least there are not many takers, even if it is more about public relations than social responsibility.



However there is an interesting point to be made here. I asked Binh how he came to learn about Fair Trade and the principles it encompasses.

“I got the Fair Trade information from foreign tourists when they visit us. At the beginning when we setup this business we didn’t have any products... We were at least a year away from starting a shop, so we focused on training and finding a suitable job for our workers. We didn’t have a business and didn’t go to business school, so we spent more time to learn about customer needs and how to meet expectations of foreign tourists. So the idea of Fair Trade came from the tourists. Then I looked on the internet where I found everything related to Fair Trade. I was very happy to see that most of the principles met our expectations.”



What he said next caught me off guard: *“And we learn from you. You meet us; share with me the Vietnamese booklet about Fair Trade principles. I share it with all of our staff. Only I read about Fair Trade in English. So you can talk with anyone about Fair Trade because of your booklet. We still have several copies. We are very lucky to meet you. Some of our staff can read in English, but it is very important to share with everyone.”*

In 2007, I first heard of Reaching out and made a trip to visit this shop promoting Fair Trade. That same year I wrote a booklet on the principles and standards of Fair Trade and had it translated to Vietnamese. When I conducted the training for survivors of human trafficking and domestic violence in 2009, I sent several to Binh. It was refreshing to hear that my

booklet made an impact here.



Binh listed out the principles and how he applied them:

“Fair Trade supports and values businesses that work with disadvantaged people like disabled people. That meets with our expectations.”

*“And fairly; **trade fairly is a good approach**, it means sustainable for the long-term. To deal fairly, I believe it means dealing with people fairly so you can build a good relationship for the long-term with any stakeholder. Dealing fairly will ensure a good, long relationship.”*

*“Also, about Vietnamese culture, when we sell our products we really want to maintain the Vietnamese cultural values. We are proud of our traditional Vietnamese handicrafts. We don’t want to sell the Chinese products. You can see here the local workmanship and most of the Vietnamese materials. **Fair Trade promotes maintaining local traditional and cultural values”***



*“Women with disabilities they are the **“Hidden Sisters”** in the Asia Pacific Region. It means they are the most vulnerable. In a normal family they are hidden, they hide girls with disabilities behind them. They cover their physical disabilities and often cannot access public services, particularly in the rural area where most disabled women live. They cannot get married and just rely on their family. So we think **equality between men and women is a very, very good principle.**”*

Binh went on to show me his contract with his suppliers and home-based producers. It detailed each of the principles and he pointed out the provision on not using child labor. He explained, *“In many traditional handicraft villages*

the kids work with their parents and their family is a supplier to many export companies.”

Admittedly, not all children working on crafts with their parents are viewed as child laborers. There is a fine line between passing on of cultural traditions and outright exploitation. To clarify where that line is in relation to Fair Trade principles, refer to the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#). I will go more into that in a future post, but this is why I can believe in Fair Trade – it follows the human rights conventions and integrates [International Labour Organization \(ILO\) standards](#).

As consumerism peaks in the West this holiday season, be charitable. When you make your purchases, at least make an effort to ensure that no one was exploited in the name of corporate profit through your gift giving, or better yet, [shop at your local Fair Trade store in the US](#) or [internationally](#). Learn more about the positive impacts you can make in your purchase.

Happy Holidays,

Mitch Teberg

Sunday, December 12, 2010

People with Different Abilities

Fair Trade principles begin with creating opportunities for economically disadvantaged producers. Why this is important should be self-evident, but all too often people forget or don't understand what it is to be disadvantaged. This term is quite applicable in a multitude of communities. It applies to socially marginalized ethnic minorities in distant lands where the serviceable roads and public transportation is a low priority; it applies to young women who were trafficked across borders to serve in a ravenous sex industry that dehumanizes their very existence and upon escape from their captors, they return to their communities only to face insurmountable discrimination as they try to reintegrate and reclaim what was stolen; and it can be those members of every community, rural and urban, who are disabled and viewed as a family burden forever dependent on the goodwill and charity of others.



Since Thursday we have been here in Hoi An, Vietnam to visit Reaching Out, a craft shop in this quaint little tourist town best known for its deep roots as a historic trading post along the coast. There are no disabilities here when it

comes to craftsmanship, rather the craftswomen and men have “different” and readily recognizable abilities. I have known about Reaching Out since 2007 when I came to meet the founder and manager, Mr. Binh. Before I go into the story of Reaching Out and its founder, I want to share with you the experience of the shop itself.

When you enter the store you immediately sense a very positive energy. Customers are greeted by courteous salesmen and women who welcome you to the shop, and don’t interfere with your browsing. Every item has a fixed price – a store policy that averts the usual haggling over a few cents which occurs in the vast majority of craft shops.



This is how I met Dung, a young man with an inviting smile and gentle character. He is one of those with a “different ability.” His confidence is revealed in his composure and comfort in speaking English with multitudes of international customers that enter the shop on a daily basis. He is not only knowledgeable in the crafts and the process on how each one is made, but he will gladly introduce you to the person who made it in the workshop at the rear of the store.



All around the store I recognized the signage pointing out the business application of Fair Trade principles. Here workers are paid a fair wage which they earn by applying their trade; just ask any of them as they diligently and happily go about their labors. A further inquiry will lead you to discover that not only do they produce the high-quality crafts on the shelves, but they are directly involved in the design. Everyone I meet here exhibits a pride of ownership in their craftsmanship with a keen eye for detail. The fact that 80% of the staff and producers in Reaching Out are “disabled” is a side note. As they see themselves, this is an ordinary company going about their business in training and employing people with different abilities.



What does *Fair Trade* mean to the craftswomen and men of Reaching Out?

I sat down with Dung on Saturday to ask him a series of questions on my long list of indicators related to Fair Trade principles. Rather than diving right in, I started with, “What makes Reaching Out different from other companies?” He replied with a smile, *“I like working here. Almost everyone is disabled and there is an understanding amongst all of us here. I make a living wage and I have a long-term contract with insurance. I work eight hours per day, six days per week.”*

When he mentioned a ‘**living wage**’, I perked up. Europeans generally understand this concept, but most people in the US have not heard of a living wage; much less understand the difference between that and a minimum wage. I asked him what it meant to him. He smiled and said, *“I have an independent life! I have money to spend, to eat and drink. I can support my family and I can save money too.”*

Listening to him, I could sense a feeling of pride in his voice that comes with a sense of responsibility and belonging. He continued to explain, *“To give you a local context, most people in other companies work ten-to-twelve hours per day and they only get one or two days off per month. Work outside is without a long-term contract and they do not offer insurance. Most companies only hire during the busy season, but in Reaching Out, I have steady work and I can plan ahead.”*

Until recently, disabled people have been discouraged from marriage or having a family of their own. Dung is dating another saleswoman here, Lan Anh, and the two of them are planning to marry in the near future. To observe them interacting is to savor a period of genuine innocence. Their ability to make a living wage has encouraged them to do what had been taboo a generation ago. In this way Reaching Out has been successful in their approach to integrate the disabled into society.

There have been many advances in the past decade in Vietnam in regards to the integration of the disabled population. The group leader for the jewelry and pottery section, Luu Van Hoa, explained that the state has been proactive in the integration of people with physical and mental disabilities. This recent development has put disabled people as a top priority in the eyes of the state. Hearing this I am relieved to see state efforts to include the disadvantaged, it gives me hope that governments can recognize the unique

capabilities of all of their citizens.

Hoa added, *“Before there was no place for the disabled to work. Now they can choose their work. Now disabled people can get training in centers and integrate into society. Before disabled people didn’t have many friends or a job. Now disabled and normal people are the same. We have jobs and friends; we can marry, have children and support a family.”*



On Sunday morning, I met Hoa and his wife, Luu Hong Tram with their 18-month old daughter. Tram also works as a saleswoman in Reaching Out and is amongst the 20% who do not have a disability. Her role started out in sales and her responsibilities increased as the shop grew. I asked her to explain her perception of Fair Trade and she quickly listed off several points that she has personally experienced:

1. A fair wage
2. No discrimination, no violence
3. Protection of women’s rights
4. Equality between men and women
5. The more responsibilities and work you do, the more you are paid
6. Create opportunities to access training programs
7. A steady job and income for everyone

I have worked as a trainer for women’s rights and in the utilization of United Nations Convention to Eliminate All forms of Discrimination Against Women ([UN CEDAW](#)) so I was interested in how Tram viewed the protection of her rights. *“During my pregnancy I only had to work the day shift, so I could go home early and rest. When I had morning sickness I could take days off if I needed and still receive pay. The organization really understands women’s needs during pregnancy. After giving birth, I had 4 months paid maternity leave. From the 4th to 12th month, they let me work a split shift so I could go home at noon to feed the baby.”*



In the afternoon I was invited to Nguyen Duy Nguyen's newly built home to visit him and his wife, Van. Building a new house is a strong indicator in Vietnam of holding a respectable position and having a reliable income. With room to grow they are planning to have a baby next year, and both hope it will be a girl. I was curious and asked why he wanted a girl, Nguyen beamed when he replied in English, *"Because girls are lovely!"*



Van told me, *"Like Tram, I will be supported during the pregnancy because we have health insurance. Normal people can take 4 months maternity leave, but as a disabled mother, I can take a 6 month paid maternity leave."*

When I asked about the biggest changes in his life since working for Reaching Out, Nguyen proudly told me, *"I started working here as a craftsman. Since that time I have been promoted to group leader of lacquer ware and handmade paper products. I have had a chance to take training courses in management skills. Now I have a deeper understanding of management."*

He went on to share about the personal impact it has had on him, *"Because I have a stable income I feel more confident. I am more respected by people around me. Now I can help my family and the relationship with them is much warmer."*

To this Van added, *"When I go out I feel much more confident and happy because I am the same as everyone else now; I have my own job and steady income."*

Over the past few days I see that Reaching Out is empowering the disabled to lead normal, self-sufficient lives. However, the reality is much deeper. The impact the organization has had is in making them extraordinary. You can learn more about them on their website, <http://www.reachingoutvietnam.com/> or better yet, you can visit them directly in Hoi An. Their crafts are also available online and they ship internationally.

Saturday, December 4, 2010

The Second Journey for Fair Trade

I am preparing to conduct a 5-7 month research to write a book on Fair Trade. My purpose is to give voice to the producers, craftswomen and men, artisans and farmers producing Fair Trade products. I have reviewed the current literature on Fair Trade in recent years and I feel there is an important element missing. The Fair Trade movement in the West itself has been well documented, as has the theoretical debates surrounding globalization, neo-liberal economics, etc which have been published by leading economists and others knowledgeable in the field. There are Fair Trade impact studies by development organizations and specialists, and Fair Trade ethnologies documented by anthropologists.

However, I am researching to write a publication that centers on the people and the co-operatives / producer groups in which their lives are entwined; to see Fair Trade from their view point, to capture their story; their narrative.

I found that Fair Trade is comparable to a prism hung in a country kitchen window sending rays of light in a multitude of directions to splash a rainbow of color across the room. Despite having the same origin point, each reflection has a unique size and shape. Fair Trade does the same. When you examine the prism from the West the flat surfaces represent the principles and standards of Fair Trade and depending on what angle you hold the prism, you can focus on one particular issue. A focus can be on areas such as to provide a living wage at the local level free from exploitation; to promote environmental sustainability and longevity through a commitment to organic farming; the empowerment of women and enhancing gender equality through inclusion in decision making processes and equal pay for equal work; to encourage transparency with trade partners and fair dealing when resourcing materials and supplies for the production of crafts; to support grassroots community development projects or social support programs; the

enhancement of cultural traditions and crafts in an era of technological gadgetry and rapid urbanization, and so on. All surfaces are equally important.

In 2005, I committed a year to researching the trade partners of [PeaceCraft](#), a member of the [World Fair Trade Organization](#) and the [US Fair Trade Federation](#). I took my savings, loaded a backpack for a year of travel and headed to SE Asia to meet directly with PeaceCraft's trade partners. In my research I found that when one views the same prism of ideals from the their outlook, Fair Trade looks much like the beautiful spectrum of colors in various shapes and sizes splashed around the room. No two reflected areas are alike despite having the same point of reference. I found that organizations, cooperatives and producer groups work together and benefit in ways that differ from each other according to their particular community needs. Contributing factors to a Fair Trade Organization's uniqueness begins with its origin. As it develops, the influence of predominant social structures and sub-cultures in which they operate, along with the personalities within the group, have a combined effect.

Each Fair Trade Organization is unique, and this is the main theme I propose to follow up on in my research. In this second journey, my inquiry is simple: How do the producers, farmers, weavers, artisans, and craftswomen and men perceive Fair Trade and what is the impact it has on their lives?



My wonderful and adventurous partner Thuy Ha, and I will don our backpacks and commence our journey next week beginning with [Reaching Out](#) in Hoi An, Vietnam, staying with them for a period of a week, or however long it takes to get a good feel for their voices through meetings, recording stories, photographing, learning perceptions, then blogging and writing. From here we head to Cambodia. This blog is to document our journey as we travel across SE Asia listening to the stories and perceptions of those who produce Fair Trade products, from coffee and tea, to handicrafts and textiles. During this Journey for Fair Trade I will contribute stories to the Fair Trade Resource Network newsletter as a way to lift the voices of producers, artisans, craftswomen and men, and small scale local farmers. I am hopeful that in the process of my travels you will have an increased awareness as to why Fair Trade is so important. I am doing this research to present the voice of those people who make fairly traded products so you can see how your purchases really do make an important difference in so many lives.

Thank you for joining me in this journey. Feel free to follow this blog and to add your comments, ideas or suggestions as we go.

Sincerely,

Mitch Teberg, MA