Challenges and Opportunities Facing the Fair Trade Movement in Japan

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Abstract

Fair Trade in Japan, after lagging far behind its counterparts in Europe and North America, is at long last gathering momentum and emerging as a vibrant movement. Very recently, over a span of less than a year, three surveys were conducted measuring the extent of Fair Trade penetration in the country. An economic survey found the size of Fair Trade market in Japan mounting to $90 million a year. A social survey revealed rising public recognition of Fair Trade from 3.2% to 17.6% in a year and half. A political survey, carried out by the author, unearthed hitherto unknown political support: 36 Members of Parliament who were newly elected in August 2009 responded favorably to the idea and practice of Fair Trade. All these numbers may be still small compared to those in other developed countries, the surveys, taken together, point to the fact that Fair Trade is gaining ground on all three fronts – economic, social and political – in the country of the Rising Sun.

However, just as it is enjoying growing acceptance and support, the movement has not a few challenges to be dealt with. First among them is, needless to say, the current economic crisis that has belt-tightening effect on consumers. The impact is more telling since Fair Trade products are, by their very nature, priced higher than conventional ones. Second challenge facing Fair Trade in Japan is its relative isolation from other civil movements. While its counterparts in Europe, in particular, benefit from synergetic collaboration with organic, environmental, human rights, peace, cooperative and other movements, it is still operating in a near vacuum. Third is the threat of corporate take-over. The threat may be more of a potential than real. But the very rapid growth of Fair Trade-labeled products poses a risk for the yet adolescent solidarity-oriented movement to get overshadowed and overwhelmed by market-oriented corporate Fair Trade, and, in the process, the spirit and principles of Fair Trade may be diluted or lost. Yet another challenge lies within the Fair Trade movement itself. The movement is fragmented and ill-equipped to speak with one voice and appeal effectively to the general public.

There are opportunities on the other hand. Surveys found the highest recognition and support among the young generation—the Japanese in their high-teens, twenties and thirties. As they grow older and expose their children to Fair Trade from the early stage of life, Fair Trade should be able to attract more enthusiastic support from a larger population. Corporations not only pose a threat but also provide opportunities that Fair Trade organizations can capitalize on. A certain proportion of citizens who first come across with Fair Trade through labeled products are expected to become conscious and interested enough to seek more information and closer relationship with producers that only Fair Trade organizations are able to provide. The central and local governments are showing interest as well. Fair Trade coffee was served at the G8 summit held at Toyako in
2008. And 36 Members of Parliament (mostly Democrats) are there waiting to be approached.

It is, therefore, up to the Fair Trade movement to turn itself into a truly vibrant movement capable of transforming the current trade and economic system to a fair and sustainable one. It is much advised, in the first instance, the movement bury small differences for a greater cause and get united to become a force to be reckoned with. It would then need to break out of isolation and enter into strategic coalition with other civil movements. It is also advised to seek constructive engagement with businesses. The Japanese firms have been less “greedy” than their American counterparts and rather known for their “caring” nature. While the movement needs to remain vigilant against the tricky behavior of businesses, the opportunity may be ripe for collaboration for the benefit of both and of the disadvantaged producers in developing countries. The political environment is also favorable with the Democratic Party seizing power in the last election.

The current economic climate does cast a long shadow over the prospect of Fair Trade in economic terms, but there do exist distinct social and political opportunities for the movement’s transformation into a dynamic catalyst of change, which can be materialized only if it chooses to do so.