

Session 2: Empowerment and Capacity Building for the Producers

"I am longing to see you so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." Romans 1:12

Fair Trade is a means to develop producers' independence and self-sufficiency. Fair Trade relationships provide continuity, during which producers and their marketing organizations can improve their management skills and their access to new markets, critical technical assistance and support such as market information, product feedback, and training in financial management.



Electricity just arrived to Huayanay in 2006.

Fifty years ago Huayanay was a typical Andean community. At 13,500 feet the 30 families who lived there farmed, raised llamas and sheep, and wove. The women spun and dyed alpaca and wool into yarn, which the men wove into colorful woolen blankets that were warm but often itchy.

In the 1960s and 70s a Swiss family lived in the region and noticed the weaving talent and economic needs of the local people. They developed a successful business exporting weavings to Europe. The family adapted Andean colors and designs for the weavers to develop woven products for the European market. The business grew to work with hundreds of weavers, including the Quispe and de la Cruz families from Huayanay. In addition to providing substantial income to many weavers, the family business assisted in constructing larger and improved looms. The art of Peruvian weaving continued and expanded.

It sounds successful, and at the time, everyone was happy. However, political upheaval hit the Andes in the 1980s and terrorism reigned. The Swiss family left Peru. The result: hundreds of weavers were left with weaving skills and looms but without business skills, money for buying materials, and connections for selling goods. Twenty years later one sees dilapidated looms throughout the region. The Quispe and de la Cruz families kept at it but had trouble selling even 10 bedspreads a year, yet this was their princi-



pal source of income.

When staff from Bridge of Hope (a Fair Trade project originating from the Joining Hands Peru Network) visited the area to explain Fair Trade, these families did not need to be convinced. They understood that learning business skills, working with others, investing in a cooperative, and paying taxes were essential for a sustainable market for their products. They remembered too well what had happened when the Swiss family left. Peru produces some of the softest cotton in the world, so Bridge of Hope suggested switching from wool to cotton, and weaving baby blankets with their beautiful designs as their initial Fair Trade product.

The families in Huayanay formed a cooperative, Huayanay Weavers, and went to Lima where Bridge of Hope staff introduced them to places to buy materials. They made some samples and priced them to include the cost of materials, a fair wage for their labor, 10% for indirect costs (like internet communication), and 10% to further invest in their business (i.e., build up an inventory of materials). Bridge of Hope placed an order for 20 blan-



Members of Huayanay with a cotten blanket they wove as a gift to Bridge of Hope.



kets, financing 50% up-front, so the Huayanay Weavers could buy materials themselves. The rest is history—they have created additional products like *ruanas* (ponchos), scarves, and shawls. Last year their sales totaled more than \$13,000. The weavers see weaving as a worthwhile profession to pass down to their children—and not just the boys. One young woman is now a member of the cooperative, and the weavers’ wives add the products’ finishing touches, making this a true family affair.

Fair Trade encourages artisans to work together rather than compete with one another. Groups have to do their own quality control. When one helps another become more skilled, one strengthens the group. Being transparent means being completely honest with each other, learning how to “tell the truth in love,” and how to disagree and still be together. Huayanay Weavers meet with other artisan cooperatives in the area for business training and networking.

The Fair Trade partnership empowers artisans to learn more about design, technique, and marketing. They increase their capacity to provide marketable products while buyers learn about the producers’ lives, culture, and the Fair Trade movement. The communication flow among producers and buyers creates an atmosphere of listening and sharing across continents.

Read Isaiah 58:6-12. God clearly defines a just society in God’s own terms, and they are quite different from human terms. God is preparing the people for the coming of the Messiah who will deliver God’s intention.

- What does this passage say about sharing?
- What does it say about empowering others?
- What creates a climate for hope, confidence, autonomy, dignity?
- Take time to discuss this important passage.⁹ What words or phrases speak particularly strongly to you? Why?
- Is there one area where you see yourself especially participating?

Read II Corinthians 9:6-15. Paul writes about the relationship between the worker and the business person.

- How does this passage correspond with God’s vision in Isaiah 65 (Refer to p. 10.)?

9. For more information and discussion points, refer to *Sojourner’s Magazine*, “The Fast I Choose,” May 2007, pp. 40-44. The entire issue is “Trade Justice.”



- The early Christians lived out the vision in Acts 4:32-35 (Refer to p. 8.). How does this passage relate to their actions?
- Is God using us as God’s hands in equalizing the world economy?
- List some key words that define the concepts of Fair Trade (e.g. sharing). How do these words help empower and develop self-sufficiency and independence for producers?
- Who benefits from Fair Trade?
- Write down your vision for a whole and just world.

Fair Trade is not about give and take; it’s not about handouts. It is about mutuality and respect, because we all need each other. It’s a new way of being and buying for some of us. The buyer seeks out and occasionally pays a bit more, knowing that the profit from the sale goes directly to the producer, not through multiple layers of people who each skim off a bit of the profit.

CHALLENGE

Learning how your purchase can directly impact someone’s life is very exciting. Tell one person you know about Fair Trade and what you’ve learned so far in this Bible Study. Discuss with him or her the importance and the challenges of Fair Trade, and how you see it spreading God’s work in your consumption patterns.

Creator God, when you gave life to humans, you gave it to whole communities of people around the world. How is it, then, that we dwell on differences rather than commonalities among us? Forgive us for our judgmental tunnel vision. Open us to both the giving and receiving of ideas, resources, art, and health. May we live as a global family that loves and supports one another in every way. We pray that every person empowers every other person to be his or her most creative, loving, and prosperous self, that all may enjoy living the life you have given us to the fullest.

With thanks we pray, Amen.