



Ethical Consumption

Ethical consumption is about making the connection between the products before you, where those products come from and in what context they have been produced. It is about taking the time to look beyond the clean, glossy packaging to the background of what is presented and making choices and purchases based on that knowledge.

The smallest of actions – such as buying Fair Trade tea, coffee or chocolate - is still an action, and has ripple effects. Individuals can make positive changes by thinking about the everyday choices they make - where they shop, recycling more, conserving energy, how and where they invest and so on.

What ethical consumption is not about is depriving yourself, or a competition to see who has the most pious shopping list. Harnessing your purchasing power means you can influence business to be more sustainable, ethical and accountable.



'Ethical shopping - and ethical consumerism in general - is about taking responsibility for your day-to-day impact upon the world. ... It means taking the time to learn a little about how your lifestyle affects people, planet and animals, and making your own decisions about what constitutes an ethical or unethical purchase'

- Clark 2004, p. vii in 80:20 Development in an Unequal World, page 291

Why ethical consumption?

Most commentators identify four key arguments in favour of ethical consumption:

1. Eventually 'you reap what you sow'—in time, all unethical practices will have negative consequences at a variety of levels and, thus, there are personal and self-centred reasons for supporting an ethical and sustainable approach. As individuals, we are not just consumers but have many other roles and responsibilities.
2. There are economic reasons—everyone lives 'in community' and those communities need viable and sustainable employment to sustain them. If, for example, we support a textile industry that pays 'slave wages' in Asia, the repercussions will eventually be felt here at home in the form of job losses and industrial relocation.
3. There are justice reasons—tolerance of injustice anywhere in the world can help fuel and feed further injustice, so exploitation of peoples a world a way affects us through contributing to the general undermining of hard won standards.
4. There are strong moral and environmental reasons—we are all citizens and caretakers of this planet and the way we are currently living is unsustainable in the long term. It has been estimated that if all inhabitants of this planet lived the lifestyle and consumption patterns of the now 'developed world', we would need five additional planets to sustain it.



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So what should we consider when buying a product?

Being an ethical consumer demands not just considering a product in terms of what it costs financially, but looking at its true cost. There are three main areas to consider:

- **Environmental costs**
- **Social costs**
- **Political costs**

The environmental impact

When considering the environmental impact of a product we have to factor in how the product was produced or grown, transported, packaged and stored. These factors determine whether a product is ethically and ecologically fit to consume.

How a product is produced means looking at the impact the production has on the surrounding environment. Hardwood furniture, for instance, while beautiful to look at, often contributes to the destruction of important ecosystems like rainforests. When buying food, we need to examine how it is grown - is it doused in chemical fertilisers and pesticides, which poison the water table? Or is the food genetically engineered, contributing to less and less biodiversity? Is the packaging superfluous and contributing to mountains of waste.

How can we be more environmentally conscious?

There are thousands of ways to be environmentally conscious, and many of them are very practical:

- Conserve water by using less
- Conserve energy by using energy conserving appliances, or switching off when not in use
- Reducing the temperature of your heating or cooling by one degree will save on the cost of your heating or cooling bill

- Unplugging your phone charger when not in use, or turning off appliances at the power source saves energy.

These are all small things but, when combined, make a difference.

The social impact

The social impact of consumption looks at how the production of a product affects the people in the community where it is made. For example, many textile and clothing manufacturers have outsourced production to developing countries and, faced with constant reports of sweatshop conditions, the questions arise:

- Is this product produced under unacceptable conditions?
- Are workers systematically exploited?
- Is buying goods produced in such conditions beneficial to those people and countries in the long term?
- What sort of impact does it have at home?

On average, about 80 per cent of garment workers in Eastern and Southern Africa are women, often facing high levels of exploitation, irregular pay, wages of as little as 10 cents an hour, impossibly long working weeks, sometimes with forced overtime, adding up to 120 hours. Often, workplaces are very unhealthy - health and safety regulations are routinely ignored, with verbal, physical or sexual abuse; unions face restrictive labour legislation, the right to free association is denied and, with no job security, only 5 per cent of garment workers are unionised.

The social impact of our consumerism is often hard to research, so



people need to be determined when trying to learn about where and how their products are produced.

The political impact

Politics surrounds us – what we say or don't say, and how we act and react can all be construed as political statements. Likewise, what we consume has a political impact – it says something about ourselves, but also has a wider, more far-reaching impact.

Every purchase we make is a vote of support for the company producing or selling the product or service bought. Sometimes, to create influence, corporations channel money towards third parties. Sometimes money is given to charities and other philanthropic causes; on other occasions, companies indulge in massive political donations in order to win favour. In the most unethical cases, corporations do business with oppressive regimes, turning a blind eye towards human rights records or labour standards.

We need to make an effort to learn about the companies we support and the governments that support them!

Adapted from 80:20 Development in an Unequal World





What Does Fair Trade Mean?

Many farmers in developing countries sell products that are also produced in the developed world but farmers in better-off countries often receive subsidies and other forms of government assistance, which allows them to sell these products at an artificially cheap price.

Farmers in developing countries, forced to compete, must drop their prices to match their richer competition – at times to loss-making levels.

This is the essence of ‘fair trade’ – ensuring that producers in developing countries sell their wares at a price that covers the cost of production, regardless of the world price of that commodity. This often means that fair trade products are somewhat more expensive than their ‘unfair’ equivalents.

‘Fair Trade’, however, has also grown to encompass a number of other justice-based principles. The major ones are listed below:

Democratic organisation

Producers must be able to exercise control, by owning the land on which they work, by being organised into co-operative or democratic associations or in other ways appropriate to particular settings.

Price that covers the cost of production

This usually means providing a minimum-price guarantee, regardless of world commodity prices.

Recognised trade unions

Where ownership is vested in others, then workers producing for fair trade must have the right to organise and negotiate through free trade unions.



No child labour

Child labour is a complex issue but it is now increasingly accepted that it is incompatible with fair trade principles.

Environmental sustainability

Fair trade is becoming increasingly ‘green’, in part because prices for greener products (like organic food) are generally better, but primarily because producers themselves prefer it.

Social premiums to improve conditions

Fair trade is a different kind of transaction, and so in many cases a premium is paid that doesn’t go directly to individual producers but to their organisations for collective projects.

Long-term relationships

Relationships that extend beyond specific contracts to purchase and may involve a much longer-term commitment if mutually agreed conditions are met. This matters both to producers (so that they can have some certainty for the future) and to fair-trade purchasers, so that supplies are available even in the rare ‘boom’ years when prices are high and the need for fair trade seems less pressing.

Decent working conditions

The above measures help to create good working conditions and pay, but there is a need to ensure them in any event.

- Source: The No-Nonsense Guide to Fair Trade, David Ransom, New Internationalist Publications, 2001, updated 2010.