

Can Fair Trade be Culturally Sustainable?

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Introduction

Although the Fair Trade system and the growing discourse on Cultural Sustainability are both concerned with crafts and the local and Indigenous communities that produce them, the underlying systemic thinking and the approach that guides the idea of equitable interaction with the communities diverge greatly. Fair Trade as a system, with its origins in development aid, promotes a colonial image of humanity [see Lawson Jaramillo's chapter in this volume] whilst Cultural Sustainability addresses the root causes of unequal power dynamics, from an anti-colonial perspective, through systemic change. Cultural Sustainability relates to Indigenous Peoples, ethnic groups and local communities nurturing, sustaining and protecting their traditional cultural expressions and associated knowledge systems. Interdependence, interconnectedness, kin and care are multidimensional values of a culturally sustainable worldview.¹ In this sense Fair Trade as a trade system, stemming from a Eurocentric worldview and colonial logic, is virtually the antithesis of Cultural Sustainability as a value system. In a recent article, the World Fair Trade Organisation (2024) suggests that Fair Trade is implicitly culturally sustainable, a perspective criticised by the authors for oversimplifying Cultural Sustainability and failing to address the complex dynamic between the two terms. The Fair Trade system in its current configuration is not culturally sustainable, but Cultural Sustainability, when applied as a value system, could 'heal' the Fair Trade system from its colonial logic. It is precisely when the values of Cultural Sustainability take on a contractual dimension – because they become the basis of economic agreements – that a framework could emerge that would usher in a whole new era for the Fair Trade system.

1 This statement, authored by Monica Boța Moisin, is reproduced from the concept note for the World Hope Forum on Cultural Sustainability curated by the author. See: <https://www.worldhopeforum.com/world-hope-forum-cultural-sustainability>.

Who Decides What is Fair? Power Dynamics in the Fair Trade System

In order to understand the relationship between Fair Trade and the concept of Cultural Sustainability, it is first necessary to identify who the actors of the Fair Trade system are and how they relate to one another. For the purpose of this article, when the authors refer to 'Fair Trade' they mean Fair Trade as a system of socioeconomic relationships involving the sale and purchase of goods, centred around "collective responsibility and evaluations of societal benefits" (Raynolds 2002: 411), in a context of unequal power dynamics (Cohen 2014) between buyers in the so-called Global North and producers in the so-called Global South [see Anderson et al.'s chapter in this volume].

The authors take Redfern and Snedker's (2002) summary of fairness-generating characteristics of this trading system as reference in this analysis (2002: 11).² Accordingly, 'fairness' in the Fair Trade system is characterised by socio-economic wellbeing, with a strong focus on the functional principle of trade, i.e. relating primarily to operational variables such as pricing, quantities, production conditions and favourable contractual terms. A critique of these fairness qualifiers is that they stem from the Global North and reflect Western ideals of fairness, with controversial impact on the lives, value systems and worldviews of individual producers [see Lawson Jaramillo's chapter in this volume]. Their stories and their lived realities are used to inform marketing campaigns and create an idealised image conforming to Western expectations. Nature is green and pristine, people are smiling and seem to live in a paradise of some sort. To consumers of the Global North the commercialisation of Fair Trade products is disconnected from the real struggles and challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples, ethnic groups and local communities and there is little to no awareness of the diverse worldviews and value systems of these people. In the worst of cases this has led to what Ashley Overbeek (2019) calls "Fair Trade Edenization" (2019: 167), meaning the creation of an image in the mind of the consumer that is inconsistent with the ground realities and insensitive to the predicament of smallholder farmers or Indigenous Peoples, ethnic groups and local communities whose interests are often conflicting to those of large producers, e.g., issues

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- 2 1) improving the livelihoods and well-being of producers by improving market access, strengthening producer organizations, paying a better price and providing continuity in the trading relationship; 2) promoting development opportunities for disadvantaged producers, especially women and Indigenous Peoples, and protecting children from exploitation in the production process; 3) raising awareness among consumers of the negative effects on producers of international trade so that they exercise their purchasing power positively; 4) setting an example of trade partnership through dialogue, transparency and respect; 5) campaigning for changes in the rules and practice of conventional international trade; 6) protecting human rights by promoting social justice, sound environmental practices and economic security (Redfern/Snedker 2002: 11).

related to self-determination, ownership, property rights, or overcommercialisation of cultural products. In contrast, according to Overbeek, the Fair Trade system does not systematically address the systemic problems in the local contexts, serving as a band-aid and not a cure, and failing to create systemic change. Paradoxically, through the approach of community-based funding that gives premiums to co-operative farmers, the Fair Trade system seems to ignore the fact that it contributes to the perpetuation of systemic issues at ground level in the communities, such as government corruption and exploitation of people and resources by the wealthy elite, and is inherently biased towards organisations of producers and more developed cooperative farms incentivising large scale production (2019: 162–163).

With reference to the organisational architecture of sustainability – with its general emphasis on three pillars – environmental, social, economic and, as a new addition, cultural – the Fair Trade system takes a more holistic approach that subordinates fairness to the general concept of justice and incorporates questions of environmental responsibility [see Anderson et al.'s as well as Hock and Kenel's chapter in this volume]. Nevertheless, it remains in the context of contractually regulated exchange of goods and services. For the prospect of 'clear consciousness' consumers pay a premium on Fair Trade products but consistent with the capitalist worldview that prevails in the Fair Trade system, a large amount of revenue is invested in marketing of the *Fairtrade* label (trademark) in order to gain brand recognition and improve market access, as Overbeek (2019) observes, and does not translate into mutually agreed terms and benefit-sharing agreements for the producers.³

The image of humanity that is thus drawn follows the social structure as established from a Western worldview. Fair Trade refers to institutional standards and reference frameworks, such as the labour standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO), or the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and others. The concept formulates goals that go beyond those of free trade and, in accordance with the International Fair Trade Charter, integrates the spirit of development aid as a legacy of the early founding years of Fair Trade organisations. Charities and Christian communities began importing products from the poorest regions of the world in the 1940s to sell to their supporters and members. This form of development aid, which is also described as 'Goodwill Phase' continued to expand in Europe and the USA in the following years until the first world store was opened in the Netherlands in 1969.

3 In UN agreed language, mutually agreed terms (MAT) refer to terms and conditions jointly negotiated and agreed by the parties to an agreement and can be subject to the Free Prior and Informed Consent of Indigenous Peoples, ethnic groups and local communities. Benefit-sharing refers to fair and equitable sharing of benefits resulting from the activity that forms the object of mutually agreed terms. See the applicability of MAT and benefit-sharing mechanisms for genetic resources and associated Traditional Knowledge under the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity. Available at: <https://www.cbd.int/doc/programmes/abs/factsheets/abs-factsheet-faqs-en.pdf>

As the movement grew, the approach of Fair Trade shifted in the 1970s from pure charity to 'solidarity trade' with professional logistics and a basic economic structure. Under the motto 'Trade not Aid', direct trade partnerships were seen as a way of helping people to help themselves. By the 1980s, numerous Fair Trade Organizations had formed worldwide, so that the largest representatives decided in 1989 to establish an umbrella organization, the World Fair Trade Organization. With the expansion of the trade network, the approach shifted further towards 'Mutually Beneficial Trade', in the belief that the main task of the movement was now to expand trade as much as possible. In the course of and to support this expansion, it was decided in the 1990s to create a Fair Trade label, Fairtrade, in order to better implement and communicate jointly defined standards to the outside world and to give conventional retailers the opportunity to easily include fairly traded products in their portfolios (Tallontire 2000). Even though development as a value remains the cornerstone of the Fair Trade agenda, the definition of the term has evolved, in line with the general discourse, away from a post-colonial idea with a focus on growth and the industrialised countries as a role model, with an attempt at a globally valid idea of social progress.

If one follows Amartya Sen's (1999) concept of development as the realisation of freedom, which demands the active combating of everything that makes people unfree – such as poverty, a lack of political voice and discrimination – a different dynamic emerges, which describes an exchange that is beneficial for all parties involved at all times (1999: 35). Accordingly, in many Fair Trade organisations (FTOs), the term "good change" (Le Mare 2007: 6) has come up instead of development, which has a greater cultural component but is also more difficult to grasp.

However, to find out what role the Fair Trade system plays in relation with Cultural Sustainability, it is necessary to break down this frame of reference and examine it in the context of other worldviews. Can Fair Trade enable Cultural Sustainability or rather, can Cultural Sustainability 'heal' the Fair Trade system and ensure its viability? In this context, 'healing' would include, amongst others, eradicating saviourism from the Fair Trade system, implementing measures to ensure producers have decision-making power in defining what fairness means to them, in their particular cultural context, and creating new contractual standards for Fair Trade personalised by categories of products, in alignment with international and national frameworks with relevance to commercialisation of intangible cultural heritage, cultural products and associated Traditional Knowledge.

What does 'fair' mean once all definitions of all stakeholders are included and power imbalances addressed? What does 'free' (in reference to Sen's concept) mean in this new context? Different phases of the Fair Trade movement show the narrative of underprivileged (Jarosz 2011; Chouliraki 2006) educationally disadvantaged communities in structurally weak, i.e. rural regions in countries of the so-called Global South, are essentially *assigned* to the producing partners in order to establish that

development aid or solidarity work must be carried out. That narrative hence envisages supporting these communities in participating in global societal life, especially in societal prosperity, i.e., being able to afford a life based on the Western model. After centuries of overexploitation of resources, labour as well as material and immaterial goods by their colonisers, the regions described above are often in a destroyed or distorted state and global-community concepts are needed to support their healing process, but from the point of view of Cultural Sustainability, aid would not be an adequate means, but rather reparation (Gulati 2023; Moyo 2009).

Already in 1994 Mervin Claxton's study 'Culture and Development' for UNESCO condemned the concept of development to failure due to its incompatibility with local cultures and structures. (1994: 8) He explains how the principle of economic growth and the universal idea of progress, on which the idea of development is based, was once legitimised by European Protestantism, according to which every person sees themselves as an individual and is obliged to God, and was elevated to a virtue by Calvinism, because wealth is now God-given – values that are alien to cultures outside the West which are generally based on the idea of community and consensus and not on conflict and competition (Claxton 1994: 9). Structural necessities associated with capitalism, such as the division of labour with its organisational requirements, as well as the focus on urban areas, would also weaken or destroy important local economic networks in production countries, where a large part of the population lives in rural areas and whose productivity is deeply connected to the needs of the community. Two years before Claxton's study for UNESCO, Wolfgang Sachs stated in his introduction to 'The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power' (1992) that "the idea of development stands like a ruin in the intellectual landscape" (1992: 1). By this, he emphasised that the paradigms of development and progress, which promote economic growth as a universal, one-size-fits-all solution, have failed because they disregard local realities, traditions and diverse knowledge systems.

Anti-colonial thought (Carlson 2016) is imperative for the Fair Trade system, which by its very nature is based on colonial structures and thinking. The core principle is driven by the Western world's interest in the products, labour and cultural expressions of communities from the so-called Global South. At the same time, aid and development programs are often framed as ways to mitigate the damage caused by these same Western countries in those regions, reflecting their own interests in addressing the harm they have contributed to. In numerous academic papers and discourses around Fair Trade, the producer is only observed and not integrated as an equal knowledge carrier or provider in the sense of collaborative research. Their expertise, expressed by the authors, hardly goes beyond the mere ability to produce. Peter Utting (2015) accordingly criticises the common portrayal of producers in Fair Trade literature, noting that they are often viewed merely as beneficiaries

or subjects rather than as knowledgeable agents. He argues for recognising their expertise and integrating their perspectives into the regulatory framework.

“This is a powerful reminder of the dangers of Northern organisations seeing themselves as ‘agents of empowerment’ but being too preoccupied with their own agendas to recognise that empowerment is, by definition, not something that can be imposed” (Moore 2004: 10).

This critique is further substantiated by Modelo as what he calls “the Paradox of Fair Trade” (2013: 42). This, corroborated with Geoff Moore’s reflection of the Fair Trade system which cannot sufficiently detach itself from the capitalist idea of development, brings us back to the significance of power dynamics in the Fair Trade system characterised by saviourism, interventionism, subordination (i.e. little to no decision-making power of producers) and inequitable benefit-sharing.

In the following section, the authors break down the question of whether Fair Trade can be culturally sustainable or if its embeddedness in colonial thinking make the two systems incompatible. The authors do this by analysing claims of Fair Trade in relation to the commercialisation of cultural goods (i.e. craft products) and Cultural Sustainability as a worldview and emerging value system.

Intangible Cultural Heritage and Fair Trade

Cultural Heritage commercialisation has been a sensitive and challenging topic in multilateralism since the 1960s. Of particular relevance to the Fair Trade system is Intangible Cultural Heritage which, according to the 2003 ‘UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage’ (the ICH Convention), means

“the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO 2003: 5).

The Convention also mentions that ICH is

“transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity” (UNESCO 2003: 5).

The same Convention states that ICH is manifested in traditional craftsmanship. This means that certain craft products are regarded as ICH (i.e., living heritage)

when recognised as cultural heritage by the individuals who create them. This results in an inextricable interweaving of the object with its collective meaning. Through trade, however, these objects are removed from their cultural context. The object itself takes the role of the social relationship, which Karl Marx described as commodity fetishisation (Marx 1976). By separating the object from the genesis, it transitions from content to pure form. This process simultaneously demonstrates the dichotomy of tradition and modernity constructed by the industrialised West as the manual production method (commonly summarised as ‘craft’) is historically portrayed as the antithesis of design as a collective term for all industrial creation. Yet the term ‘design’ comprises both the creation (verb ‘to design’) and the totality of the things created (noun ‘design’), but not the production process, which puts the form in the driver’s seat. So, if handcrafted objects are placed in an industrial context through the trade in goods, the identity aspects of the manufacturing process with its social relevance are automatically lost.

This raises the question of the compatibility of ICH and the Fair Trade system, since the system is not designed nor controlled by Indigenous Peoples, ethnic groups and local communities. The Fair Trade system must distinguish agricultural products from cultural products. In general, the commercialisation of agricultural products, such as coffee beans, tea, or cocoa powder, spices and other raw materials and value added products produced with them, seems compatible with the Fair Trade system. The commercialisation of cultural products, however, is a matter where the decision-making power should be left to the communities, groups and individuals who are creators and re-creators of living heritage, and it is critical for the Fair Trade system to acknowledge that the interests and worldviews of these creators are often contradictory to those of nation-states and international organisations. This has also been acknowledged in the draft guidance note on economic dimensions of ICH safeguarding presented to the Intergovernmental Committee at its eighteenth session in 2023 by a group of experts convened by the Secretariat of the ICH Convention⁴. Addressing the economic dimensions of safeguarding ICH has been catalysed by the negative consequences of increased economic globalisation and cultural commodification of ICH and associated cultural practices, which as emphasised by Vadi can lead to “homogenisation, and even to cultural hegemony” (Vadi 2018: 3). As the Fair Trade system in its current configuration has a universal standard for commercialisation of all types of products, both agricultural products and cultural products and cultural expressions based on Traditional Knowledge, it does not provide the necessary measures to mitigate these risks as it incentivises cultural commodification and contractually transfers product ownership to the Fair Trade organisations

4 Official information on UNESCO meeting of experts (category VI) on Economic dimensions of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding and list of experts is available here: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/expert-meeting-on-economic-dimensions-01316>

without balancing power dynamics. What these mitigation measures should look like is yet to be researched. Lixinski, a supporter of the contractual approach as a means to protect ICH whilst promoting a ‘fair’ commodification of such elements (e.g., craft products that are part of a community’s living heritage), considers contractual frameworks

“the ones which empower communities the most, without necessarily creating property interests that may in the long run stifle cultural development, and without necessarily imposing a large legal framework that is foreign to many indigenous and traditional communities” (Lixinski 2020: 11).

The Oma Traditional Textile Design Database© (2021)⁵ is an example of a soft law contractual framework, the 3C Rule Consent. Credit. Compensation© (2017) being used successfully to regulate aspects of commercialisation of textile craft products created by the Oma Community in Laos. This contractual framework is designed to allow local and Indigenous community decision-making, representation and control over the way in which elements of their ICH are commercialised. The three C’s correspond to three different processes: 1) the process of Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC), 2) Credit, the process of acknowledgement and recognition of the community history, worldview and cultural significance of their traditional cultural expressions (i.e. handcrafted cultural goods), and 3) agreement on benefit-sharing mechanisms that ensure the forms of compensation for the community, groups or individuals respond to their needs and reflect their own view on what is ‘fair’. Use of this contractual framework mitigates risks of cultural misappropriation, with the prospect of completely reducing its occurrence and stimulating knowledge partnerships with Indigenous people, ethnic groups and local communities beyond an exchange of capital (Boța-Moisin 2023).

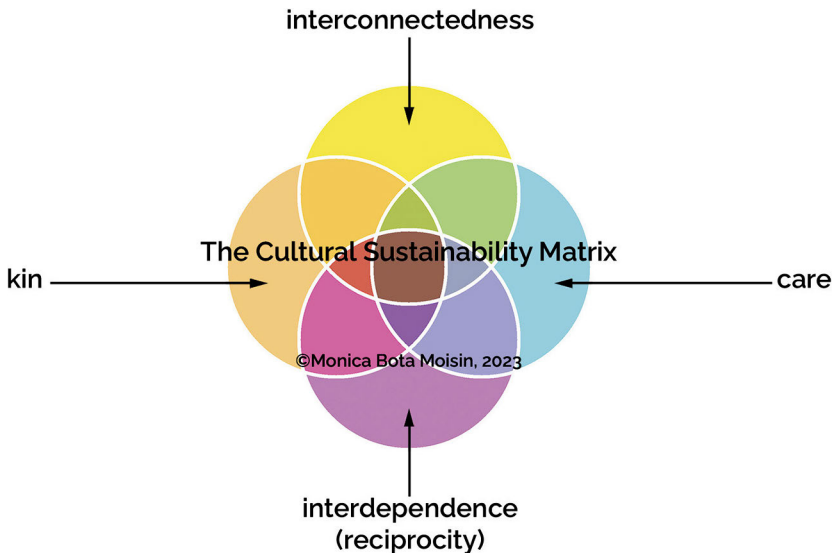
Cultural Sustainability as a Value System

Transitioning from ICH to Cultural Sustainability, it is crucial to emphasise that while greatly interconnected and interdependent, the two concepts are not synonymous. As explored by Boța-Moisin in relation to the value and knowledge system she grew up with in a local community in Țara Beiușului, Romania, “interdependence, interconnectedness, kin and care are the threads that weave Cultural Sustainability systems” (Boța-Moisin 2023: 39). These threads are universally interwoven in local

5 Oma Traditional Textile Design Database© 2021. Available at: <https://oma.traditionaldesigns.la/>.

and Indigenous philosophies like *Comuniunea om-natura*, *Ubuntu*⁶, *Te Ao Māori*⁷, *Buen Vivir*⁸, and other anticolonial ways of being in the world. This Cultural Sustainability Matrix (Figure 1) cannot be linearly defined and separated from living practice, it is a multidimensional network of relationships, values and practices stemming from a worldview that places nature, humanity and the cosmos in symbiosis.

Figure 1: The Cultural Sustainability Matrix. Source: <https://www.moncamoisin.com/>



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Acknowledging this frame of reference, it is important to emphasise the risks of oversimplification and extractivism in approaches that equate Cultural Sustainability to integrating diverse perspectives on sustainability in the wider sustainability

- 6 According to Mugumbate and Nyanguru (2013), *Ubuntu* is an African philosophy and value system. See also University of Pretoria. Ubuntu Research Project.
- 7 Māori worldview, encompassing a deep respect for nature and a holistic understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and the environment. See more at New Zealand Association of Resource Management, <https://nzarm.org.nz/resources/knowledge-hub/te-a-o-maori>.
- 8 *Sumak Kawsay* in the Quechua language, philosophy of Indigenous people in the Andean region. See more in Acosta, Alberto/Abarca, Mateo Martínez. "Buen Vivir: An alternative perspective from The Peoples of the Global South to the crisis of capitalist modernity." *The Climate Crisis: South African and Global Democratic Eco-Socialist Alternatives*, edited by Vishwas Satgar, Wits University Press, 2018, pp. 131–47.

discourse (Ouan 2024), or start from the premise that the Fair Trade system enables Cultural Sustainability by the mere fact that craft products are traded, as claimed by the World Fair Trade Organisation (2024). When craft products are the subject of trade, without questioning the power dynamics and the consequences of commodification of culture, there is no respect for a value system based on interconnectedness, interdependence (reciprocity), kin and care. This is not to say that crafts, when seen as ICH elements or Traditional Cultural Expressions, and in particular the holism of the craft process, cannot be conducive to Cultural Sustainability. “Discussion about cultural sustainability and heritage preservation requires conservation and regeneration of the cultural beliefs and symbolic meanings embedded within the traditional processes and practices of craft” (Brown and Vacca 2022: 590). But who has the responsibility to take measures for putting this requirement into practice? And what does this mean for the Fair Trade system? Can a Eurocentric research lens characterised by detachment and abstractisation (Carlson 2016) lead to conclusive answers?

A look at the history of design in Europe and design theory shows that the separation of craftsmanship and consumer goods (as a collective term for all industrially manufactured products of daily use) is a conflict that also led to the segregation of society in the centres of industrialisation and can therefore be treated as a social issue until today. At the end of the 19th century, movements such as the Arts and Crafts Movement, with William Morris as its central figure, raised the question of how the disconnection of design and production from each other and from everyday culture promoted the division of society into classes and, in particular, the exploitation of the working class (Morris 1879). In contrast, Adolf Loos, as a representative of modernism, stated that ornament, as a summary of elaborate craft production techniques with high decorative standards, was no longer “an expression of our culture” (Loos 1962 [1908]: 283). In his 1908 essay ‘Ornament and Crime’, Loos lists examples of producers who had fallen out of modern times and continued to link craftsmanship with everyday culture of ‘ordinary’ people. He concluded that this activity took too much time and nobody was willing to pay its value, so it did not fit into modern, capitalist life. An assumption that still determines the idea of modern design to this day. In contrast, interconnectedness, as a core dimension of Cultural Sustainability, breaks up dichotomous thinking, promoting intersectionality. It eliminates the binary system of tradition and modernity and inspires a pluralistic view beyond borders and time while recognising everyday life with its vibrant creative practice and community of people as foundation.

The need to ground new assertions on previous research creates a void in critical analysis of industries and practices that claim facets of Cultural Sustainability without subsuming its values and intersectional dimensions as reflected in local and Indigenous worldviews. The authors would therefore like to emphasise that discussions on Cultural Sustainability should not be automatically associated with the

notions of heritage preservation and heritage conservation, tributary to an institutional view on ICH rather than understanding its living nature and in particular its characteristics of being constantly recreated by communities, groups and individuals, providing them with a sense of identity and continuity, and being transmitted from generation to generation as a duty of care and a human right. The authors are circumspect with regards to the concept of “regeneration of the cultural beliefs and symbolic meanings embedded within the traditional processes and practices of craft” (Brown and Vacca 2022: 590), emphasis on regeneration, as it does not reflect a view of heritage communities and craft custodians to whom cultural beliefs and meanings are part of life, hence being ‘alive’. But the authors agree that cultural beliefs and symbolic meanings embedded within the traditional processes and practices of craft are key to a discussion on Cultural Sustainability and craft, and that through the lens of the Cultural Sustainability Matrix and its intersectional dimensions of interconnectedness, interdependence (reciprocity), kin and care, systems based on colonial thinking can undergo a change of optics.

Can Fair Trade be Culturally Sustainable? Next Steps

The answer to this question depends entirely on what happens onwards. To answer a systemic question like this, it is crucial to have a shared understanding of the question in the first place. In what preceded this last section of the article the authors crystalised the *sine qua non* constitutive elements of the discussion: Power dynamics in the Fair Trade system, craft products as Traditional Cultural Expressions and living heritage, and Cultural Sustainability as a value system.

There is a possibility to create a trade system that is culturally sustainable but the Fair Trade system is currently far from being that [see Lawson Jaramillo's chapter in this volume]. And it is dangerous that it makes this claim in relation to the trade of ICH products. To attain the characterisation of a *culturally sustainable trade system*, the four dimensions of the Cultural Sustainability Matrix should be the foundation of the Fair Trade system in itself. The Fair Trade system needs an *introspection* process, analysing its history and ancestry in colonial thinking and formulating its vision for the future. This means readiness for self-criticism and awareness of its limitations and interests.

The Fair Trade system needs systemic change. Thinking in terms of *diagnosing* and *healing*, the Cultural Sustainability Matrix can be a conceptual framework for *healing* the Fair Trade system through systemic change. The power dynamics perpetuated by the Fair Trade system are a root cause of incompatibility with Cultural Sustainability values. Tools like the 3C Rule Consent. Credit. Compensation© (2017) will help shift these power dynamics. Concretely, this tool can guide crucial questions: Is the community acknowledged for its value or is its story and identity used

as a marketing asset? Is the distribution of benefits arising from the commercialisation of the Fair Trade labelled products made based on terms mutually agreed with the producers? Should the Fair Trade system be associated with handcrafted products at all?

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