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Research Proposal

Abstract

Coffee is one of the second biggest imports that the United States brings into the country. Americans consume this product more than any other nation and we therefore bear the responsibility of making sure that the people who produce it are treated well. The price of coffee has fallen by almost fifty percent and is currently at the lowest it has been in the past thirty years. This has caused a vast amount of problems for the people who reside within these coffee producing communities. Huge multinational corporations lower coffee prices (.52/lb) and this causes small scale farmers in developing nations to lose their farms and work under the oppressive regime of these corporations. These lowered prices cause farmers to not be able to cover the cost of production, feed the members of their family, send their children to schools, or purchase the medicine needed to stay alive and healthy. Fair trade coffee is bought at around \$1.26 per pound and this offers the small scale farmers enough revenue to meet the cost of production, feed their families, send their children to school, and buy medicine. The research project I am proposing will take place in Chiapas, Mexico. The State of Chiapas produces the largest amount of coffee that comes out of the country of Mexico. In this research project, I will be observing the effect that fair trade coffee cooperatives are having on the coffee growing communities. It will consist of empirical observations and also several questionnaires/interviews which would be administered at several different social institutions. These institutions will consist of cooperatives, schools, union meetings, members of the community, and health care facilities. After studying these communities which participate in fair trade practices, I will look at a community which does not participate in these practices. My hypothesis is that fair trade cooperative communities will have better health care systems, better schools, a greater sense of community, and safer ecological practices.

Objectives

The main objective of this research is to see how beneficial fair trade is to the farmers that produce coffee, as well as the communities in which they reside. I expect this research to be part of the continuing research I will do in graduate school. I plan to

go to graduate school and focus on Latin American studies, this project will help me obtain more experience in conducting field research. It will contribute to the knowledge I have obtained during the Sociology 420 seminar class, which focuses on research methods and surveying techniques. This opportunity will further enhance my gained knowledge and apply it in a different manner. This will give me the opportunity to do qualitative research and also in an off-campus environment. I also plan that this research experience will give me an opportunity to apply several of the different skills I have learned throughout my undergraduate experience. Latin American culture and civilization classes have provided me with an excellent background with knowledge regarding the social problems that afflict countries like Mexico. Social Theory classes have provided me with knowledge about how social conflicts arise and the stratification of specific populations due to their socio-economic status. The case in Chiapas would be a prime example of the combined knowledge I have gained throughout my undergraduate career, as well as an excellent opportunity to apply both of my fields (Sociology and Spanish) to real-world applications. I am also hoping that this project will help develop a connection between Augustana College and the coffee producing communities of Chiapas. The proposed project would probably take about one month of research, minimum in Mexico.

Description of Objectives

This project is going to consist of qualitative field research, therefore contact with individuals will be necessary. I have experience doing this type of research through the REU program (Research Enhancement Opportunity) that I participated in last summer in Mérida, Yucatan (2004). I am very confident in my Spanish speaking skills and I am also Mexican, which I believe will give me an advantage in gaining the trust of the people I am interviewing. All interviews will be confidential and I can also guarantee anonymity to the individuals who participate in the project, so as to protect the rights of human subjects. The first objective is to test the hypothesis that 'fair trade communities' have a better standard of living than the coffee producing communities that do not participate in fair trade practices. This will be accomplished through several techniques which involve both empirical observations, as well as questionnaires and oral interviews.

The initial interviews will take place with several organization leaders, which Dr. Loustaunau and I will identify as stakeholders in the fair trade communities. These people will be identified using the connections which Dr. Loustaunau has made through the Latin American term program, as well as through his involvement in the Mexico Solidarity Network. Several organizations that we have already identified as contacts are, Centro de Investigaciones Economicas y Politicas de Accion Comunitaria (ciepac.org), Red de Defensores Comunitarios (defensorescomunitarios.org), and the Mexico Solidarity Network (mexicosolidarity.org). Establishing solid connections with these organizations will provide access to interviews with the leaders of coffee cooperatives, as well as the farmers themselves. The snow-ball technique will then be utilized to find other people in the community who might be of interest for this project. I will ask them questions with regards to what they do, as well as how much of an impact they have made in the communities they are working with.

Initial interviews will be with the different organizations and they will be comprised of questions regarding the cultivation of coffee and the impact that fair trade has had on both the farmers as well as the community. The questions will try to determine the price that different farms sell their coffee for, as well as how much of that money stays in the community in which they preside. I will also try to gain access to one of these farms to observe the techniques they utilize and see how much of an impact they have to the environment and compare it to the practices that non-traditional farmers use. Fair trade certified coffee is for the most part also organic, and therefore there should be less of an impact on the environment where they use these methods for cultivation.

The people/cooperatives in charge of the educational programs in the communities studied will also be identified and interviewed. They will be asked questions with regards to the institutions they are working with and how these educational institutions have improved since the fair trade initiatives have been implemented. I will also observe the rate of enrollment into these schools, my theory is that enrollment will be up since the increase of income based on fair trade prices. It takes money to send children to school and with more money, farmers will be able to send their children to school so they can receive an education. It would also be interesting to see if the techniques that instructors use for teaching are different from those of other more industrialized/modernized communities. That is to say, are instructors still teaching traditional cultural ideologies, along with the basics skills that a student would learn in any other school? Is there a greater sense of ecological concern? The logic behind this would be that they rely off the land and therefore must maintain it in order to live. I hope to find answers to these questions while doing the proposed research project.

Health care facilities will also be identified and will be both observed and interviewed. The interviews will consist of questions regarding the quality of their facilities. I will ask how they were before fair trade initiatives were implemented and how they have improved since. A Likert-type scale will be utilized for this part of the interview so we can acquire a better sense of the improvements based on numerical data. Questions will also ask if foreign aid has increased since the implementation of these programs. For the observational part, I will compare the facilities with those of the more modernized areas of the state, so as to make comparisons. The rationale here is that greater income would equal better health care facilities and more of an emphasis on overall community well being.

I believe that these interviews, as well as empirical observations will help me in coming to a conclusion of my proposed hypothesis. However, I also hope to make connections with these communities and Augustana College. The Latin American term travels to the state of Chiapas and I believe that making a connection to some of these coffee farms would be an excellent example to show students how the things they consume in the United States have an impact all over the world. People in the U.S. are detached from the means of production and therefore are willing to buy cheaper products without thinking of the impact they have. Going to Wal-Mart and buying Foldgers coffee might be cheaper than going to a health food store and purchasing a fair trade product. However, people don't realize that in doing so, they are lowering world prices and

damaging the environment. Making this connection would also help with the fair trade activism campaign that I am currently getting under way here at Augustana. The awareness campaign was a success, however I think more needs to be done. My proposal is that once the connection is made, Augustana College purchase directly from one of the cooperatives that I have made a connection with and therefore give students on-campus a direct relationship with the products they are consuming. Giving Latin American term students the opportunity to see where the coffee they drink in the college center comes from, as well as to see the faces whom cultivate it would really be a life changing experience and would definitely contribute to the Augustana objective of learning and growing. I would also like to make connections with the Latinos Unidos student organization (which I am currently president of) and with the NGO's (non-governmental organizations) to see what students in the United States can do to help. I am also co-director for the Multicultural Programming Board (MPB) and would hopefully be able to bring some of the people I meet on-campus to give lectures and spread their message.

Future Projects

This project would be reported at several undergraduate Latin American studies conferences. Dr. Loustana would help me present my research by organizing a panel at a Latin American studies conference the next academic year, in which the project would be presented. This could also become a part of the Latin American term in that students could visit the areas studied and see the methods for cultivation. I also plan to continue studying this topic in graduate school and also continue my activism with regards to this topic. However, the most impressive objective I could accomplish with this research project would be to make a direct connection between the area studied and Augustana College. Having the college serve 'fair trade' only coffee would be a great accomplishment for the school, as well as for the community that I will be studying.

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