

The Globalization of Civil Society

Ten Thousand Villages is a program of Mennonite Central Committee. It is one of a growing number of “fair trade” organizations. Such organizations seek to practice a more just alternative to the usual kind of international trade relations. Ten Thousand Villages, and similar networks, show how trade and investment practices and policies can expand options for poorer communities, provide new potential for connections to markets and increase fairness in trade relationships.

Another fair trade network works with small coffee farmers in impoverished countries to help them receive a fair price for their coffee. Coffee is one of the most extensively traded commodities and a vital source of income for developing countries. But for a variety of reasons, including decisions by global economic policy makers, many small coffee producers receive less than their cost of production. Most of the profits go to processors, exporters and the major coffee marketing companies. For several years now, fair trade coffee organizations like Equal Exchange, which supplies Ten Thousand Villages stores with coffee, have ensured that the coffee it sells in North America and Europe returns a fair price to the producer.

Fair trade networks illustrate the new global scope of civil society. Civil society refers to groups of ordinary people who come together to make a better world. Some civil society organizations have direct service programs. Others, like the “fair trade” networks, create alternative institutions. Some exert direct influence on business corporations through consumer campaigns and shareholder resolutions. Still others engage in public policy advocacy, calling for changes in government policy. Most attempt to share their vision of a better world with others and mobilize people to take common action.

The 16th century Anabaptist churches can be viewed as the first civil society groups. They were voluntary associations larger than the individual, but independent of the state. With their world-wide membership, churches today can be a model of solidarity across national borders. Such solidarity is crucial for shaping global business and finance to serve the needs and hopes of ordinary people.

Civil society is rapidly outgrowing national boundaries. Human rights groups, peace activists, workers’ organizations, women’s networks, indigenous organizations, environmental groups and economic justice advocates are communicating and collaborating with their counterparts in other countries. They are learning to work together for social change.

The globalization of civil society is in part a response to global corporate activity. Major corporations have production and assembly operations in developing countries. More often, they subcontract these activities to local businesses. For example, clothing companies and athletic shoe manufacturers rely on assembly shops — often owned by other internationals — in Latin America and Asia. Many of these local operations pay low wages, demand long hours and create onerous working conditions. Some employ and abuse children.

Global civil society is also responding to the power of global institutions like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.



“Ten Thousand Villages provides vital, fair income to Third World people by selling their handicrafts and telling their stories in North America. Ten Thousand Villages works with artisans who would otherwise be unemployed or underemployed. This income helps pay for food, education, health care and housing.”

— from the mission statement of Ten Thousand Villages.

Central American coffee farmers selling through regular channels in 1999 were paid an average of 38 cents per pound by intermediary buyers. That same year, coffee growers commercializing their product via the international fair trade consortium Transfair earned no less than \$1.26 per pound.

— from “Making Fair Trade Work in Mexico” by Citizen Action in the Americas, #1 (July 2002).

Governments of the United States, Canada, Europe and Japan dominate these institutions and impose their economic agendas on countries of the global South.

Elites in the South often benefit from these policies, but Southern governments also feel they lack the resources and power to stand up for their own interests and those of their citizens. In addition, new technologies and other forces driving economic globalization are weakening the power of governments everywhere to regulate business and finance for the benefit of society at large. Because of this, civil society organizations have an important new role.

A growing global civil society is challenging the power of global corporations, international financial institutions and affluent Northern governments, calling all governments to more democratic accountability, and working to strengthen the capacity of democratic governments in the South to be advocates for justice.

People everywhere have a crucial role in ensuring that global business and finance, and their own governments, serve human well being. A vital, global civil society can make a profound contribution. Together people throughout the world can work to create alternatives like Ten Thousand Villages, call global corporations to account, and advocate for national and international public policies and laws that advance economic justice.

What You Can Do: Join the Global Civil Society – It's Easy!

Become active in a social outreach ministry of your congregation. Connect with another congregation in another part of the world.

Volunteer at your local Ten Thousand Villages store. To find a store near you go to www.tenthousandvillages.org.

Join a campaign to help ensure that people who make your clothes, shoes and toys for your children, receive a fair wage. (One contact to make is the National Labor Committee.)

Join the Jubilee USA Network to cancel the debts of poor countries. (Contact Jubilee USA Network.)

Purchase fair trade coffee and learn about how global trade policies harm small coffee producers and what you can do about it. Contact Equal Exchange at info@equalexchange.com or www.equalexchange.com. You can also purchase fair trade coffee at your local Ten Thousand Villages store.

Find other people who share your interest and start a new local effort toward a more just world. Find a counterpart group in another country.