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Living Wages as a Lifeboat to Rescue Fairtrade's Values for Hired Labor? The Case of Indian Tea Plantations

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Abstract

Fair Trade is a normative concept for creating more "just" trading relations between producers in the Global South and consumers in the Global North. It aims to foster the sustainable development of producers through instruments like minimum prices, long-term partnerships, and labor and environmental standards. However, as a market-based instrument, Fair Trade cannot fully escape capitalist logics like price competition. This is especially true of "Fairtrade"-certified products that compete with conventional products in supermarkets. Furthermore, as more large-scale enterprises like plantations are certified, questions emerge about how much workers actually benefit from certification. We understand Fairtrade's recent living wages policy as a response to this critique and examine how Fairtrade attempts to address the contradictions between its alternative, moral mission and conventional market logic through the instrument of living wages play out in the hired labor context. We draw on moral geography to frame our understanding of fairness as the outcome of a contested process in which different actors assume responsibility. We combine this process-oriented approach to fairness with an understanding of shared responsibility derived from differently situated actors' capacity to generate change. We illustrate the practical challenges of implementing universal concepts like fairness in the arena of wage setting at certified Indian tea plantations. The case reveals Fairtrade's limited capacity to make a difference, especially pertaining to workers' representation. The question of who is responsible for establishing fairness and on what level it should be done remains unsolved.

Keywords fairness, responsibility, living wages, hired labor, Indian tea plantations

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1. Introduction

On August 13, 2022, around 7,000 workers from one of the largest tea-producing companies in Darjeeling, India—the Darjeeling Organic Tea Estate Private Ltd (DOTEPL), also known as Amootia—stopped production in its 10 Darjeeling district estates. This came after six weeks of not paying worker wages (to a sum of INR 35,082,290 [around 1.69 million Euro]) in a clear violation of Indian law (The Statesman, 2022). While such "lock-outs" are unfortunately a regular occurrence in the North Indian tea industry, the DOTEPL lock-out was remarkable since it was a large, internationally-known company that had, until recently, successfully bought and revived "sick" estates from other companies. Furthermore, the DOTEPL Darjeeling plantations were certified by sustainability standard organizations, namely "Naturland Fair", "Demeter", "Fairtrade"[1] (two estates), and the "Rainforest Alliance" (one estate; DOTEPL, 2021, p. 37). These organizations require certified companies to follow strict standards that were clearly violated by the non-payment of wages. These certifications are also thought to guarantee stable sales, even during crises, because they target moral consumers who are prepared to pay a higher price. Nevertheless, it seems even multiple certifications could not ensure the payment of wages or the viability of the business. The DOTEPL example illustrates the difficulties and contradictions for sustainability standards in negotiating fairness for hired labor (HL) in the plantation economy.

Fairtrade is a long-standing, global business-to-consumer certification system[2]. The Fairtrade certification scheme emerged from a global social movement that criticized poverty and working conditions of producers in the Global South and former colonies. It promotes a "fair" alternative trading scheme that aims to create more just and equitable trading relations between producers in the Global South and consumers in the Global North. Fairness for Fairtrade primarily stands for producer empowerment and a redistributive vision of justice characterized by a bundle of social, economic, and environmental values (Kister, 2019).

However, Fair Trade[3] is a market-based instrument, and cannot fully escape conventional capitalist market logics like price competition and flexibility (Kister, 2020). This is especially true of Fairtrade-certified products, as these compete against conventional products on supermarket shelves (other Fair Trade organizations exclusively sell products online or in so-called "Worldshops"). To meet a growing demand for certified agrarian produce (Murray & Raynolds, 2007) in the Global North, Fairtrade products are increasingly sourced from larger producer enterprises, such as plantations, to complement production from small-scale producers in organized cooperatives. This deepens Fairtrade's problematic involvement with the conventional capitalist market economy and sharpens the organization's perceived responsibility to enable workers, in addition to farmers, to benefit through higher wages.

The choice to include products from HL and certify large businesses (often part of buyer-driven value chains) has been criticized for exposing Fair Trade and its values of justice and empowerment to capitalist market logics. It also creates price pressures on small-scale farmer cooperatives who fear being pushed out of the Fairtrade market in a race to the bottom for the same certificate (Renard & Pérez-Grovas, 2007). Questions also exist about how to deal with multi-estate companies (that hold certified and non-certified plantations) and the limited effectiveness of Fairtrade instruments for improving workers' living conditions (Lyon, 2015). Overall, this market expansion sharpened Fairtrade's balancing act "in and against the market," between economic demands and social values (Raynolds, 2000, p. 299). This paper explores how Fairtrade, as a labelling organization, attempts to address the contradictions of being a morally-motivated, alternative niche within conventional markets. More precisely, we ask how Fairtrade attempts to address the contradiction by promoting moral values of fairness, global justice, and solidarity through the instrument of living wages (LW) in the (plantation) HL context. Can LW function as a lifeboat to rescue Fairtrade's moral values for workers?

Drawing on insights from moral geography, we understand fairness as the outcome of a contested process, in which different actors assume or reject the responsibility to make a difference. We argue that the question of who is responsible for establishing fairness, and on which level (i.e., locally or in global trade), remains unsolved. It points to issues with power relations and the scope for action in societal negotiation arenas. International certification organizations like Fairtrade (actively) take on responsibility, using their power and scope to improve global workers' living conditions by spelling out value-related certification frameworks. However, these activities may not always

be welcomed in regional contexts since some of this work should remain under local organizations. Even though the LW approach is meant to address (and ultimately solve) the tensions between Fairtrade's moral values and the capitalist world trade system, serious obstacles prevent this approach from being a universal solution. Conceptually, we apply a moral geography perspective to discuss the concepts of fairness, responsibility, and justice in ongoing debates around intragenerational justice in world trade. We use the case of certified tea plantations in North India to illustrate how fairness is negotiated in the domain of wages.

Certainly, our findings are conditioned by our positionality as white female researchers from the Global North in the Global South. We follow calls to include perspectives and insights of marginalized and underprivileged persons and groups and try to be reflective on our experiential and cultural background to better elucidate how power and privileges shape their reality. Nevertheless, we know that we see the research subject from the outside and interpret the research data respectively. Acknowledging our positionality helps "illuminate" situated knowledge production in geography (Katz, 1994; Kinkaid, 2021; Rose, 1997).

This paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we offer an overview of fairness, responsibility, and justice in geography and related subjects, especially as it applies to global trade relations. We contextualize these insights using the field of moral geography. Section three explains Fairtrade's vision and operational approach, identifies the difficulties of improving HL working conditions and introduces the LW approach. After describing our methods in section four, section five presents the case study—negotiations over the implementation of raising wages on Fairtrade-certified plantation sites in Darjeeling, India. We analyze aspects of fairness and illustrate how power relations enable and hinder Fairtrade in taking responsibility for workers' living conditions. In section six, we put the case study into dialogue with wider insights on how Fairtrade balances its contradictory role as an alternative trade approach within the capitalist paradigm of global trade. We consider how this contradiction plays out on Indian tea plantations. We conclude by questioning whether LW makes a difference in securing fairness for HL on Fairtrade-certified plantations.

2. Geographical Perspectives on Fairness in Global Trade Relations

2.1 Moral Geography and Care for Distant Others

David Smith's (1997) call for a moral turn in geography subsumed many topics relevant to "the moral and the spatial" (Philo, 1991, p. 26, as cited in Smith, 1997), including human-nature relationships, social awareness, exclusion, and marginalization (Smith, 1997). In the 90s, the moral turn tied geographic work to philosophy to make engagement with normative theories in spatial research more explicit. The normativity of geographical research became apparent in critical accounts of globalization, poverty and inequality, and the effects of international market deregulation on Global South countries. Moreover, scholars began investigating social movements' social, political, and environmental concerns (Raynolds, 2000) and discussed the relations between space and aspects of justice (e.g., Affolderbach & Métard de Chardon 2021; Baasch, 2020; Dünckmann et al., 2022).

Some of these discussions dealt with the ethics of care for others. For instance, Smith (2009, p. 206) pointed at the morality of at times "paradoxical" everyday practices. She identified an ethic of care for close or distant others that revealed aspects of everyday life that tend towards "what is good, fair and care-ful" (Smith, 2009, p. 206). Campaigning for ethical consumption could also be understood as an expression of the moral claim to care for distant others by connecting locally embedded everyday life consumption to a range of "global concerns" (Barnett et al., 2011). Consumers and producers relationally re-connect with a "transnational moral economy" (Goodman, 2004, p. 891). Fair Trade seeks to reveal global economic inequalities and construct a "solidarity in difference" between producers and consumers (Goodman, 2004, p. 905). It presumably enables consumers to address global concerns about trade injustice by consuming a fairly traded commodity. As Goodman (2004) argues, this ethics of care is based on the commodification of products and their semiotic meaning to Northern consumers (see also Cook & Crang, 1996).

However, questions remain about Fairtrade's global approach to transnational justice—embodied by universal policies, values, and standards—and the local level of application. Local experiences and interpretations of "global moral discourses of Fairtrade" (McEwan et al., 2017, p. 572) by the "subjects

of transnational justice" (Sen, 2014, p. 445) must be positioned against the backdrop of specific gendered, political, and moral discourses within larger historical, social, and legal trajectories (Besky, 2008; Dolan, 2010; Herman, 2018). These contextual conditions render Fair Trade's approach of "governing at a distance" (Rose, 1993, p. 292) difficult. Most abstractly, we must ask how a "thin" or "universal" morality (representing grand values like justice) relates to "thick" or "particular" morality (situated and locally embedded in culture and a "network of meanings"; Smith, 1997, p. 586–587; Walzer, 1994, p. xi). How does "the contextual thickening of moral concepts in the particular (local) circumstances of differentiated human being" (Smith 1997, p. 587) occur, especially as it pertains to fairness?

2.2 Fairness

The idea and objective of fairness can connect distant places and people in presumably solidary relationships and create justice. However, the meaning of fairness and how exactly to establish it remains unclear. For Fair Trade, the global economic system is unfair because it privileges northern buyers while engaging southern producers in uneven forms of exchange, fostering a "race to the bottom" by exploiting low prices and wages and maintaining dependency and global inequality (Murray & Raynolds, 2007, p. 6). In response, Fair Trade is a form of direct solidary marketing between the selling initiatives (Worldshops) and producers in the Global South to enable a "fair" price. Fairness involves transferring a high proportion of the price to the producers and contributing to social justice.

Fairtrade also brings fairness to marginalized producers and workers in the Global South through instruments like guaranteed prices above the conventional market, support in organizational capacity building, representing small-scale producers via cooperatives and workers via unions, enhancing production and marketing skills, and a social premium to finance community projects (Murray & Raynolds, 2007, p. 5). Fairtrade codifies this universal understanding of fairness through globally enforced standards that require producers and buyers to follow specific rules (e.g., contracts, prices, working conditions, payment, occupational health and safety). Compliance with these standards is controlled through the FLOCERT organization.

However, following Smith (2009), fairness cannot be absolute—it is always contextual, reflecting changing needs, perceptions of importance, financial means, and institutional and organizational structures. Additionally, how things ought to be and what exactly people perceive as fair is a matter of negotiation. For Broome (1990), fairness depends on negotiations that lead to agreement between what is needed and what is deserved. Accordingly, fairness can be both a normative and descriptive approach. Normatively, fairness describes an ideal situation to aim for. Researchers can use it to unearth situations and conditions that are identified as unfair (both global and local levels).

As a descriptive approach, we can investigate fairness by analyzing actors' practices and moral beliefs, how they (un)intentionally achieve fairness, and how they articulate what they need and think they deserve. Interpreting fairness as an outcome of a negotiated process enables us to determine who actively participates, who is represented or excluded, the scope of spatiality affected by these moral negotiations, and to distinguish between fairness as a global and local concern. Fairness as a negotiated, processual outcome sheds light on power relations and actors' capabilities. This brings us to the question of responsibility.

2.3 Responsibility

Ethical trading initiatives attempting to assert their version of fairness into the world rely on the moral basis of "caring for distant others." Such initiatives see themselves as part of the solution and, as such, *responsible* for the well-being of producers. This model of collective responsibility, as performed by civil society initiatives, is based on a relational understanding of space and place (McEwan & Goodman, 2010). It extends the ethics of care for distant others by situating the relationship with southern producers as equal rather than dependent (Lee & Smith, 2004). However, like fairness and justice, care and responsibility are not absolute normative criteria. Instead, Barnett et al. (2011) suggest understanding "responsibility and justice … as *normative modalities* [emphasis added] through which practices unfold in the world" (p. 4) [to ask] "where effective agency for changing consumption lies" (p. 6). They point to the importance of scope (global or domestic) and site (coercive institutions or non-coercive fields of personal conduct) in egalitarian justice (Barnett et al., 2011). On the global level (scope), the Fair Trade movement's claim that world

trade is unjust with unequally distributed gains is expressed in its campaigning work (site). On the local level, Fairtrade uses standards to control and implement its normative vision of fairness and justice (Kister, 2020).

Barnett et al. (2011) enhance their conceptualization of responsibility with Young's "social connection model of political responsibility" (Barnett et al., 2011, p. 7; see Young 2006a). Young assumes that responsibility arises "from the ways in which different actors are implicated in structural social processes" (Barnett et al., 2011, p. 7) to highlight the conditions that enable or disable actors' capacity to make a change (Young, 2006b). Young suggests that responsibility is "shared" (Barnett et al., 2011, p. 8) by differently positioned individuals since power and capacity to make a difference are distributed differently amongst persons and organizations. Responsibility, in this understanding, is relational, "distributed across complex networks of causality and agency" (Barnett et al., p. 8). The capacity to act is determined by power, privilege, and degree of influence; actors with greater capacity to act bear more responsibility (Barnett et al., p. 9). Understanding responsibility as a normative modality helps situate fair trading organizations' attempts to make a difference. Young's conceptualization of responsibility—as related to questions of capacity and power—is useful in dissecting the arenas in which fairness (i.e., in terms of wages) is negotiated. It is difficult to establish fairness on the local level since it is negotiated among involved parties and subject to a dynamic context-related situation. Yet, Fairtrade, as an organization, sees the pursuit of fairness as a mandate for engaging in local negotiations.

3. Fairtrade, Living Wages, and Hired Labor

3.1 Fairtrade's Hired Labor Problem

From the 1990s, some national Fairtrade organizations argued that HL also deserved support. Furthermore, the longstanding solidary partnerships with small farmers were insufficient to satisfy production demand (Raynolds, 2017). In 1994, tea was the first plantation-produced crop to receive a Fairtrade certification, followed by bananas (Raynolds, 2017). Fairtrade developed the "Hired Labour Standards" to justify its certification in this contested domain and account for the differences between democratic cooperatives and HL organizations with no formal democratic worker representation (Fairtrade International, 2014). Companies were required to meet standards in occupational health and safety, working hours, contracts, paid and sick leave, and child labor. Fairtrade also specified how to implement plantation-level workers' representation and utilize the Fairtrade premium.

Evaluations of the HL certification differ. Some studies identify improvements in occupational health and safety, working conditions, and workers' representation (van Rijn et al., 2020, bananas)—even if Fairtrade has had limited effects on worker incomes. However, several studies found that Fairtrade reinforces existing power relations (Kuiper & Gemählich, 2017, flowers; Makita, 2012; Siegmann, 2022, tea). Workers may even misinterpret Fairtrade as a reward for workers' compliance and commitment (Brugger & Wenner, 2020; Siegmann, 2022). Similar depoliticizing effects also occurred in Fairtrade Premium Committees (FPCs), the main representation body on certified plantations. FPCs consist of elected worker representatives (including field supervisors and office staff) and management (in advisory function). They receive training on Fairtrade and decide how to utilize the Fairtrade premium. However, committees may become tools for company governance as they often lack worker representation, fail to discuss political issues like wages and work conditions, and are influenced by the management (Brugger & Wenner, 2020; Kuiper & Gemählich, 2017, p. 45; Siegmann, 2022). Workers are given the responsibility of aligning with standards, reflecting a neoliberal individualization that does not question local power relations or the distribution of value along the commodity chain (Besky 2013; Dolan, 2010).

These critiques point to the general difficulties of promoting an agenda of worker empowerment and socioeconomic uplift in (generally postcolonial) plantation economies. Power relations and dependencies are historically entrenched between workers and companies, and certification appears to have little impact on buyer-driven value chains (Kister, 2020). Fairtrade needs to show that it can have a positive impact on plantation workers' lives: the instrument of LW is one such attempt.

3.2 Fairtrade's Living Wages Approach

At its core, the LW concept assumes that workers' wages should do more than cover their basic needs; they should enable workers to achieve a decent standard of life, sustain their livelihoods, and enhance their capabilities (Werner & Lim, 2016). This is reflected in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the original ILO Constitution (1919; Parker et al., 2016). While this principle was initially mobilized for labor discussions in the Global North, it soon gained relevance in debates over wages and labor rights in the Global South.

Fairtrade introduced the LW instrument following a recommendation from the Workers' Rights Advisory Council (WRAC), which—for the first time—included labor representatives and made recommendations for addressing labor issues in the HL domain (Raynolds, 2018, p. 197). The new HL standards, including LW, came into effect in 2015 (Raynolds, 2018). As part of the Global Living Wage Coalition, Fairtrade defines LW as: "a wage that covers the basic needs of workers and their families, including food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, education, transport to work and a little extra for unforeseen circumstances" (Fairtrade International, 2022b, subtitles section). Companies now "must ensure that real wages are increased annually to continuously close the gap [to living wage]" (Fairtrade International, 2014, p. 31). The timeframe is to be negotiated between workers and employers. While Fairtrade's ideological commitment to LW is underlined in its standards, questions of *how* to achieve LW, *who* is responsible for negotiating them, and *who* bears the cost remain unclear. Furthermore, we must ask who defines the LW amount and who has the power to fairly negotiate a living wage (since HL workers may not have such power).

These vagaries are reflected in Fairtrade's different approaches to LW implementation. On the one hand, Fairtrade uses a "formula" approach (Miller & Williams, 2009, p. 113) that mandates wage levels in standards (Bennett 2018, p. 67). Fairtrade orients itself around LW benchmarks, as defined by the Living Wage Coalition, and draws on the Anker method to define them (Fairtrade International, 2022b). Accordingly, Fairtrade has introduced a floor wage requirement for some countries and products (flowers, fresh fruits, bananas; Fairtrade International, 2022a).

On the other hand, Fairtrade draws on a "negotiated approach" (see Miller & Williams, 2009, p. 113) that ties LW to worker empowerment: "Our ambition is that workers have the power to improve their own livelihoods and negotiate their wages and terms of work" (Fairtrade International, 2022b, subtitles section). Unlike the "formula" approach's pre-defined benchmarks, the "negotiated approach" ties the LW to the specific local circumstances and workers' perceived needs. This circumvents difficult questions about how to estimate LW (given regional differences and changing factors like inflation), but assigns workers the responsibility of negotiating higher wages. It is predicated on the existence of "process rights" (Bennett, 2018, p. 67) enacted by an empowered and well-represented workforce. It also requires transparency from companies, and an ability and willingness to pay more against the backdrop of increasing market competition (Miller & Williams, 2009). Fairtrade also uses minimum pricing and premiums to improve social and economic development and bolster progress towards higher incomes. For example, they secure producers from market price shocks, enable investments for productivity, and allow part of the premium to be distributed amongst producers (Fairtrade International, 2022b).

While LW is likely the "most important change in Fairtrade's standards promoting decent work" (Raynolds 2018, p. 199), there remain questions about who should pay the higher costs of LW and tensions between LW and companies' economic viability. LW must negotiate moral alterity (i.e., Fairtrade's aim to uplift workers based on universal standards), the business reality of global trade, and local contextual conditions. We now turn to how these tensions are reflected in Fairtrade's negotiations over higher wages on certified Indian tea plantations, and what these negotiations teach us about how fairness is negotiated in the contested wage arena.

4. Methods

This case study is based on a review of Indian legal documents, secondary literature, and Fairtrade documents. We particularly draw on Fairtrade's "Tea Standards and Pricing Review" (Fairtrade International, 2019, 2021a), which presents a synopsis of Fairtrade's proposals on wages in tea plantations and different stakeholders' responses (e.g., tea companies, tea traders, and workers). We also collected qualita-

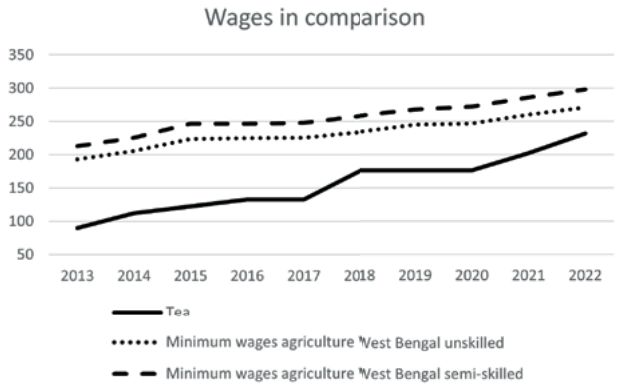
tive data during stays on four different tea plantations in Darjeeling, two of which were Fairtrade-certified. These data consist of 26 informal interviews, nine group discussions with male and female plantation workers and supervisors, and participatory observation of different groups of men and women during their work. The interviews and group discussions covered topics pertaining to labor and living conditions on the plantation, including questions about workers' joys, sorrows, and aspirations. Most of the interviews were conducted in 2012 and 2013, though two of the plantations were revisited in 2015 and 2017. Handwritten notes during the interviews and participatory observation were later coded inductively and deductively. This study focuses on statements about unions, labor mobilization, and labor hierarchies.

Gender was particularly important for research on tea plantations, where most workers are women. Both men and women plantation workers sometimes believed that Miriam—a white female researcher—was a representative from foreign tea companies. Miriam was able to create a sense of reciprocity and trust by working and living together with families on plantations and by speaking their native language. Of course, we acknowledge that a fully transparent reflexivity is impossible to achieve (Rose, 1997).

5. Living Wages on Certified Darjeeling Tea Plantations

India is the second largest producer of tea in the world. Around 1.1 million workers are directly employed by the tea economy (plus seasonal workers), making it the second largest organized sector employer. Women, often from distinct ethnic backgrounds, make up the largest share of workers, reflecting a colonial legacy of labor migration and indentured labor that ensures social reproduction and control in this enclave economy (Makita, 2012, p. 90; Sarkar, 2015). Darjeeling accounts for less than one percent of tea produced in India (TBI, 2023). Yet, in 2022, around half (The Wire, 2023) of the 6.93 million kg (TBI, 2023) of tea produced was exported, underscoring the region's place in the global economy. After independence in 1947, company proprietorship transferred from Europeans to businessmen from the Indian plains. Ethnic Nepalis—descendants of those who had been enticed as workers from present-day Nepal—continued to be employed as laborers. Indian legislation (e.g., the Plantations Labour Act (PLA), 1951) requires companies to provide employees with drinking water, sanitary and medical facilities, creches for children, recreational and educational facilities, and housing; however, the provision of these in-kind benefits is often inadequate or incomplete (Banerji et al., 2022)[4]. In the worst cases, workers are not paid or plantations close due to the difficult conditions of the tea economy. In 2022, a parliamentary Panel on Commerce condemned inhumane living and working conditions, and described wages as "insufficient" to meet workers' basic needs (Parliamentary Standing Committee on Commerce, 2022, p. 8). Indeed, wages in the North Indian tea economy remain below the state-administered minimum wages for agriculture (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Wages in Comparison



Note. Daily wages paid to tea plantation workers in northern West Bengal compared to daily minimum (agriculture) wages in West Bengal. Since 2017, wages in the tea industry have been announced by the West Bengal government through memoranda. All amounts are in INR. Source: Own Elaboration based on Labour Department (2011, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2022); Department of Labour (2013); Daijiworld.com (2018); The Telegraph (2022); Banerjee (2022).

TransFair Germany (today: Fairtrade) began working with tea plantations in Darjeeling in 1993 (Brugger & Wenner, 2020) and, by 2022, 30 of the 87 plantations were certified (communication with Fairtrade International, 2022). Unlike other products (e.g., coffee), Fairtrade does not set minimum prices for the orthodox tea produced in Darjeeling (commercial prices prevail); it also does not affect the wages paid to workers. To understand how and by whom fairness is negotiated in this challenging context, the following sections review stakeholders' discussions within Fairtrade's "Tea Standards and Pricing Review" (hereafter: Review; Fairtrade International, 2019, 2021a) and highlight concerns about their (and others') perceived ability to increase the wages of tea plantation workers. First, we offer a brief account of the legal context of wage setting in India.

5.1 Wage-Setting in the Indian Tea Industry

In South India, tea plantation workers are formally entitled to minimum wages determined by Labour Committees appointed by respective state governments under the Minimum Wages Act, 1948. By contrast, in West Bengal until 2015, wages and fringe benefits (e.g., firewood, tea, rations) were determined through tripartite negotiations between labor unions, companies, and state actors. Companies were represented by the Indian and Darjeeling Tea Association, while workers had as many as 26 different labor unions, many of which were affiliated with competing political parties. Agreements lasted for three years (the last from 2014 to 2016) and were often preceded by protests and strikes. In 2019, instead of including tea within the purview of minimum wages, as demanded by unions and an advisory board, the West Bengal government announced "interim wage hikes", thereby rendering fairness a state subject. This authority is likely to be bolstered by the new Code on Wages, 2019, that envisages minimum wages for tea. In principle and law, it is impossible for Fairtrade (or any other civil society organization) to directly influence these arenas (see Gurung & Thanga, 2022; Saha et al., 2024 for a discussion of wage setting mechanisms).

5.2 Approaches and Hindrances to Raising Wages on Plantations

Fairtrade created two consultation rounds as alternative arenas to negotiate wages. Different actors were invited to comment on new standards proposals in written consultation documents. These actors included producers, tea importers and exporters, processors, retailers, and Fairtrade staff. The first round was facilitated through workshops that included HL organizations in different regions and an online survey. Plantation workers were represented by FPC delegates, whose participation was facilitated through the regional Fairtrade network. Different workshops were held for workers and management. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the second round of consultations was structured as an online webinar (personal communication with Fairtrade, 26 September 2022). The comments were later compiled in two synopses (Fairtrade International, 2019, 2021a). During this Review process, Fairtrade made two proposals for lifting wages on certified plantations. The first reflects a formula approach aimed at establishing a floor (i.e., minimum wages) and the second was a negotiated approach building on workers' empowerment. The floor wage was described as a "meaningful step towards providing a living wage" (Fairtrade International, 2019, p. 30).

5.2.1 Formula Approach: Floor and Minimum Wages

In the first round of consultation, Fairtrade proposed a floor wage requirement for certification. The floor wage would only include cash payments (no in-kind benefits) and would be anchored to the World Bank's international poverty line (Fairtrade International, 2019, p. 18). For India, this wage was set at $3.20 (or 204 INR) per day (below the prevailing minimum wage in agriculture, see Figure 1)[5].

In the second consultation round, Fairtrade supported labor unions' demands to use existing minimum wages for unskilled labor in agriculture as a benchmark (Fairtrade International, 2021a, p. 19). While worker and company representatives supposedly welcomed higher wages, the two consultation rounds revealed conditions that impeded their (and others') ability to do so, namely the i) calculation of wages, ii) legal context, iii) political context, and iv) economic constraints.

Indian tea companies disagreed with both of Fairtrade's wage proposals. First, companies wanted minimum wages to reflect in-kind and other payments made to workers. Indeed, cash wages only accounted for about 50 percent of companies' wage calculations (as estimated by Saha et al. 2019, p. 41 in Assam). Statutory benefits (e.g., provident fund, bonus, gratuity) made up about 18 percent, benefits under the PLA were 21 percent, and non-statutory benefits (e.g., food grains, firewood, tea) around 12 percent. However, companies do not always fully cover these in-kind benefits (Banerji et al., 2022).

Second, companies noted contradictions with the Indian legal system of collective bargaining that obliges all companies in a region to agree on the same wages (Fairtrade International, 2021a, p. 21). Fairtrade's intervention would create wage differentials between certified and non-certified plantations (Fairtrade International, 2019, p. 31), and was seen as an "encroach[ment] on the domain of the government authorities" (Fairtrade International, 2021a, p. 22). Companies clearly did not consider Fairtrade as party to the wage negotiations. Third, companies expressed

fears that Fairtrade-mandated wages would disable trade unions and "lead to civil unrest" in local politics (Fairtrade International, 2019, p. 31).

Finally, companies felt that economic constraints impeded their ability to raise wages. They cited lower productivity on Indian plantations, economic disadvantages due to price differentials with Fairtrade tea from other countries, Northern consumers' presumed unwillingness to pay higher prices (Fairtrade International, 2021a, pp. 21, 22, 57), and the fact that low Fairtrade sales cannot cover the higher cost of production (Fairtrade International, 2019, p. 31, Fairtrade International 2021a, p. 21)[6]. Therefore, any increase in the cash-payments would have to affect the provision of in-kind benefits (Fairtrade International, 2019, p. 31). These concerns reflect the challenging Indian tea economy landscape that struggles with low prices, relatively high production costs, low productivity, outmigration, value capture by Northern retailers and brands, and increasing price pressure from small-tea-growers (Luig 2019; D. Saha et al., 2020; Siegmann, 2022). In Darjeeling, cheaper tea from Nepal and regular strikes due to an ongoing regional autonomy movement result in huge losses for companies (S. Saha, 2019). In the Review, Indian companies linked expectations for higher wages to increased productivity, enhanced revenues, and a fairer distribution of value along the chain (Fairtrade International, 2021a, p. 20–21). The tea companies' concerns assign responsibility for low wages to international buyers, the government, and allegedly less productive workers. However, these companies do not transparently display the terms of their tea sales (beyond auction centers)[7]. Furthermore, despite fetching lower prices, South Indian tea workers receive higher salaries than those in North India[8].

Ultimately, Fairtrade's floor wage did not succeed. There is still no LW benchmark for Darjeeling or northern West Bengal. Instead, the current HL standard (3.5.4) asks companies to "ensure that real wages are increased annually to continuously close the gap with [the] living wage" (Fairtrade International, 2014, p. 31); the timeline is to be "negotiated with trade union/elected worker representatives" (Fairtrade International, 2014, p. 31).

5.2.2 The Negotiated Approach and Workers' Empowerment

Fairtrade's second attempt at influencing wage levels opted to enable workers to negotiate for better terms of employment. Yet, the revised tea HL standards only partially strengthened worker empowerment. This standard—which was supported by workers and opposed by management—requires companies to provide training (on topics like labor legislation, participation in Fairtrade, and Fairtrade labor standards) to trade union or elected worker representatives from year one (2.2.2; Fairtrade International, 2021b, p. 10). Audit results must also be shared with workers (1.1.1), and Fairtrade Compliance Committees (FCC) need to be established (Fairtrade International, 2021b, p. 6).

Fairtrade's reasonable proposal for tea companies to grant human rights and labor rights NGOs access to plantations did not make it into the new standards. Fairtrade argued that such NGOs "could help to educate workers on how to best organize themselves in trade unions, … engage in social dialogue and negotiate with their employer on terms and conditions of employment and housing" (Fairtrade International, 2021a, p. 30). Indian tea companies opposed this, claiming that workers were already well represented by unions, which NGOs could undermine. This could lead to security issues, political unrest, and less compliance with local rules (Fairtrade International, 2021a, p. 5). Even some workers felt like external agencies "publish negative news which brings organizations to potential risks of de-certification" (Fairtrade International, 2019, p. 45).

Worker empowerment is limited by different factors. First, workers from different plantations challenged companies' claims that they were already well-represented by labor unions. In interviews, they accused union leaders of corruption, taking personal benefits to maintain peace at the plantation, and only acting along party-political lines (see also Banerji et al., 2022; Siegmann, 2022, p. 6). Despite a high degree of unionization, the union landscape in West Bengal is highly fragmented along political and ideological lines and poorly represents women (Luig, 2019, p. 23; Siegmann, 2022). Workers also identified a lack of unity and trust as a hindrance to collective action, indicating that laborers are not necessarily a unified force. Second, empowerment is clearly impeded by gendered and other forms of discrimination. Women, especially, expressed a lack of self-esteem

and fear of the management, reflecting their subdued positionality in the post-colonial plantation hierarchy. As Besky (2015, p. 1156) notes, this subjectivity is further shaped by ethnic and political forms of discrimination that sustain Darjeeling's (colonial) tea economy.

Third, workers' attempts to challenge management were clearly limited by their dependence on the plantation for health care, shelter, and wages. The land of workers' houses is not formally owned by them; it is leased to companies by the state, leaving workers in a state of continuous insecurity. Makita (2012) aptly described the worker-management relationship in terms of patronage, where the management provides workers with cash and in-kind benefits in turn for their labor and compliance. Importantly, none of the workers connected Fairtrade to plantation working conditions in the interviews (in fact, in 2012 and 2013, most workers had barely heard of Fairtrade). Instead, most workers assigned responsibility for working conditions to the management and to the *malik* (company boss). Those active in the left labor union also demanded the state provide minimum wages. Workers' separation of Fairtrade from labor issues was supported by Siegmann's (2022) study on certified tea plantations in South Asia: Workers believed that the Fairtrade premium was provided for good quality tea, not for management's compliance with labor standards.

Workers on Darjeeling plantations had clear opinions about who was responsible for their wages. However, they had little ability to change the prevailing system of wage setting or negotiate fairness. Although Fairtrade made clear proposals for fairness, none of its approaches could generate the conditions needed to enable higher wages against this backdrop of legal, economic, and post-colonial conditions. Neither workers nor companies felt like Fairtrade could legitimately negotiate wages. Companies pointed to the Indian legal context, while workers did not know about Fairtrade's labor agenda. These observations bring us back to the question of who, in the context of HL, is responsible for negotiating fairness and promoting justice, and what role Fairtrade can possibly play.

6. Discussion

We investigated how fairness as a normative aim is negotiated in the locally embedded arena of wage-setting. Drawing on an understanding of fairness as a context-specific outcome of negotiations, we explored how a thin and universal value thickens in local contexts. Specifically, we asked, "who is negotiating for what aim?" and "who has the power and the respective capabilities to change the unfairness of the situation?" We also accounted for how Fairtrade's "Tea Standards and Pricing Review" was a situated negotiation with different actors in Darjeeling.

Fairtrade attempted to impose its vision of fairness by making a floor wage part of the HL standards in tea, but faced local obstacles in doing so. Fairtrade confirmed its perceived responsibility to act on behalf of workers, claiming that certification in the HL sector should yield more worker benefits. This responsibility emerged from Fairtrade's universal vision to create justice in global trade. Yet, Fairtrade's attempt to influence wages by setting benchmarks (formula approach) faced clear resistance from Indian tea companies, who refused to recognize Fairtrade as a legitimate player in the domain of wage setting. International entities lack power and scope for action in this arena, as these processes are largely considered domestic.

Fairtrade's second approach allocated the responsibility of negotiating higher wages to workers and, again, Fairtrade failed. Companies refused to permit labor-oriented civil society organizations onto plantations, underscoring Fairtrade's insufficient capacity to change local power relations characterized by colonial-type hierarchies and dependencies between workers and management (see Besky, 2015; Makita, 2012; Siegmann, 2022). Fairtrade's emphasis on redistributive justice and recognition (Herman, 2018) needs to be bolstered through an agenda that fosters worker representation while accounting for intersecting forms of discrimination (e.g., gender, caste, and ethnicity [see Besky, 2015]).

Even though Fairtrade took on responsibility for lifting wages, it had limited capacity to put this vision of change into practice. Fairtrade's capacity was thwarted by i) contradictions with the Indian legal context, ii) companies' unwillingness to allow more worker empowerment, and iii) companies' claims that higher wages would impede their economic viability.

This foregrounds difficulties in the market-based approach; Fairtrade must—by principle—consider production costs and international price competition. The case also foregrounds different understandings of fairness in negotiations about wages. While Fairtrade's vision was embodied by living wages, companies connected fair wages to workers' productivity and higher prices paid by foreign companies. They placed responsibility for the wage increase on the workers and other value chain actors, while emphasizing their own limitations.

Fairtrade went into a local negotiation to implement fair trade, empower workers, and foster sustainable livelihoods (Fairtrade International, 2016). However, the organization was forced to step back if it was to bring the negotiations to a successful conclusion. This could be read as a prioritization of market logic over civic values, but it also evidenced a commitment and perceived responsibility to take care of workers in other ways.

The ideal site and level for Fairtrade is unclear. Its intervention into "domestic" processes of wage setting entailed legal problems. However, we see scope for Fairtrade to change the very conditions under which negotiations in these national, legal arenas of wage setting and working conditions take place. The overall conditions of the negotiation arena should be improved (i.e., more participation and information transparency). Worker participation must be secured in a way that considers power relations and negotiation skills, as well as transparency of data. Fairtrade should not only implement minimum prices for orthodox tea but oblige tea buyers and Indian tea companies to provide transparent prices and *de facto* costs of production to enable fair negotiations that account for both companies' viability and workers' fair share of the value chain benefits.

7. Conclusion

When Barnett et al. (2011) claimed that "research has a moral charge" (p. 2), they meant that research could demonstrate how lifestyles are entangled within global concerns and suggest a sense of global responsibility. Understanding one's own entanglement in the global economy (e.g., through consumption) leads one to acknowledge a personal responsibility for global inequality. However, while various strains of (geographical) knowledge production are morally charged, we feel that the normative assumptions about the meanings of justice or fairness are rarely made explicit. Initiatives like Fairtrade suggest that a more just world can be bought at the supermarket. This moral vision acknowledges responsibility for marginalized producers and implies that Fairtrade has the capacity to improve things. Our study questioned how these abstract, universal values play out in specific localities to highlight Fairtrade's limited capacity to change the contested arena of plantation worker wages.

We used a moral geography perspective to understand Fairtrade's attempt to implement higher wages for plantation workers. Fairtrade—with its goal to make world trade fairer—sought to empower small-scale producers and workers to foster sustainable livelihoods (Fairtrade International, 2016). Fairtrade-labelled products are gaining market share, so certification has turned to plantations in addition to cooperative farms. The organization seeks to enable more equitable, just, and redistributive trading relations for both farmers and HL workers. Their moral mission is to establish fair living conditions for the most vulnerable and marginalized participants in the chain. Yet, as a market-based instrument, Fairtrade must contend with the capital accumulation goals of conventional buyers, who aim to purchase at ever lower prices. Thus, we investigated Fairtrade's attempt to address the contradiction between its moral values of fairness, global justice, and solidary partnerships and its work in the capitalist (world) market through the instrument of living wages in the HL (plantation) context.

We distinguished between a normative and descriptive perspective of fairness, using the concept of thin and thick morality to analyze how moral values unfold in space. While fairness functions as a normative vision (with the promise to increase wages for HL on plantations), the LW concept functions as an instrument to establish fairness on the ground. We analyzed the negotiating arena between the involved parties in Indian Darjeeling tea. Drawing on Young's (2006a, p. 122) "shared responsibility" approach, we operationalized the endeavor to introduce fairness in tea plantations to analyze how differently situated actors negotiate the proposal of higher wages. This understanding of responsibility helpfully situated actors' attempts to justify their (non)actions in the domain of wages. It also allowed us to situate their responsibility in the wider structural context of economic constraints, political marginalization, and post-co-

lonial hierarchies. Young's (2006a) concept also underscores that the responsibility to change the global economy does not rest with individual consumers, as is suggested by "sustainable consumption" perspectives.

In this case, Fairtrade was not recognized as a legitimate local negotiating partner. The worker empowerment agenda did not help workers effectively fight for higher wages. While Fairtrade focuses on redistributive justice and recognition, marginalized workers' representation does not allow for meaningful participation. They lack the capacity to change their conditions. Fairtrade regards the implementation of LW as one of its biggest challenges amidst companies' economic constraints, low prices for resources, and questions over whether consumers will pay more for products (Fairtrade Germany, 2022).

Ultimately, the effort to implement LW keeps farmers and workers in the same certification scheme and averts a price battle between the two forms of production, which could lead to a split. A single conscious consumption label cannot distinguish between raw materials grown on farms and plantations. If HL living conditions and empowerment were too differentiated, the ensuing scandals would shake the label's trustworthiness. Thus, Fairtrade recently renewed its goal to implement living wages (Fairtrade International, 2021c, p. 8).

The approaches outlined here are relevant for other fields (e.g., sustainable global development and socio-ecological transformation) that scrutinize sustainability standards and assess their normative bases and practical application at specific sites.

Notes

[1] According to the Fairtrade website, DOTEPL was decertified in November 2020 (Fairtrade Germany, 2023).

[2] Business-to-consumer certifications are visible on the product and inform the consumer's consumption choice. They differ from business-to-business standards such as GlobalG.A.P. that inform buyers and wholesalers about aspects of production.

[3] We use the notation "Fairtrade" to refer to the institutionalized certification scheme (Fairtrade Labelling Organization) and "Fair Trade" for the social movement. Commodities are traded in both schemes, labelled with Fairtrade or without label via alternative trading initiatives (ATO), for example, World Shops.

[4] The PLA also specifies working hours, resting times, annual leave, sickness and maternity benefits.

[5] This equals 204 INR (exchange rate 1 January 2018), below the minimum wage paid for unskilled workers in agriculture (234 INR/day). During that time, tea workers were paid 176 INR/day (see Figure 1).

[6] In 2021, Fairtrade-certified plantations in India sold about 12 percent of their produce under the label (personal communication with Fairtrade International, 1 March 2022).

[7] About half of the tea produced is sold directly to buyers or through brokers.

[8] In South India, tea workers receive government set minimum wages, indicating that wages are more reflective of institutional frameworks than simple prices (Sarkar, 2015).

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