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Fairtrade : South Africa

This three lesson Topic explores the issue of trading practices, and looks at the work of the Fairtrade organisation, at Neitbegin Farm, which produces grapes and plums near the town of Stellenbosch, in South Africa's Western Cape.

Lesson 1 : Past and Present at Neitbegin Farm

Lesson 2 : School Life

Lesson 3 : Farm Life

South Africa

Until 1994 South Africa was ruled by a white minority government which came to power in 1948 and enforced a separation of races with its policy called *apartheid*. This dictated that black and white communities should live in separate areas, travel in different buses and stand in their own queues. Whilst Whites enjoyed a lifestyle comparable to any in the developed world, Blacks suffered discrimination in every area of life, including housing, education, and life expectancy.



'Apartheid' (pron. "apart-hate") means separation or segregation in the Afrikaans language, which is spoken by about five million white and black South Africans. Several of the children you will hear in this Topic are speaking in Afrikaans.

Under apartheid, working conditions for Blacks ranged from bad to appalling. In Lesson 1 of this Topic we hear about life on Neitbegin Farm during the 1980s. Chandre's mother (Track 1) describe how she worked long hours, and had to "borrow" money from the farm manager when she wanted to pay for her children's school fees, uniform or stationary. Farm worker Dirk (Track 2) talks of his experience of the *Tot* sytem (also known as the 'Dop System' after the Afrikaans word 'dop' meaning an alcoholic drink); during these years workers here, as in many other farms particularly in the wine producing areas of the Western Cape, received part of their payment in the form of a daily measure of cheap alcohol. The *Tot* system served the farmer in two ways; he could use low quality, surplus wine that had little commercial value to pay the workers; also, this

meant that many workers developed an alcohol addiction which made effectively meant that they were held captive on the farm.

The apartheid system became increasingly controversial, attracting extensive international sanctions, and eventually the White government negotiated itself out of power. In 1994 the African National Congress party won the first non-racial election, and Nelson Mandela became President of a Government of National Unity. The new leadership has encouraged reconciliation, and effected many reforms, not least the banning of the *Tot* system. But the cost of the years of conflict and segregation are still being paid for in terms of lawlessness, social disruption and lost education.

Land Ownership

Many South Africans remain poor, unemployment is high, and land redistribution is an ongoing issue. Most farmland is still white-owned, especially in agricultural areas such as the Western Cape. The South African government does offer various schemes to help willing landowners with redistribution, but take up so far has been low. Officials have signalled that large-scale expropriations are on the cards, and the government aims to transfer thirty percent of farmland to black South Africans by 2014.

But Nietbegin Farm is a relatively rare example of good practice; as early as 1998 the farm accepted money from the government which enabled it to put fifty percent of the ownership in the hands of a co-operative, run by the farm's ninety-nine workers. Now, there are plans to increase this share. The novelty of their situation is not lost on the children on the farm, such as Sheraline (Lesson 3 Track 2) who wants to go to agricultural college; "I feel that it's a privilege for us blacks to be able to become farmers" she says. "In the past only the Whites could become farmers."

Fairtrade

In 2006 conditions at Neitbegin Farm improved still further, when the farm was granted recognition by the Fairtrade Organisation. Fairtrade is an organized international social movement that aims to promote sustainability, and help producers in developing and middle income countries in Africa, Asia, South America and the Caribbean obtain better trading conditions. The movement advocates the payment of a higher price to producers as well as social and environmental standards. It focuses in particular on exports from developing countries like South Africa to developed countries like Britain, including products such as coffee, cocoa, and tea, also fresh fruit and wine, as produced at Neitbegin Farm.

Now, fruit and wine from the farm has a Fairtrade logo, and the workers can benefit from the Fairtrade premium. This is a sum of money paid on top of the agreed Fairtrade price for the product, which is designed for investment in social, environmental or economic development projects, decided upon democratically by the workers. At Neitbegin they have opted to spend this money on improving

conditions for children and families; the fund pays for children's school fees, uniforms and stationary, and has also subsidised one child (the sister of Chandre, Lesson 1 Track1) to attend university. Chandre herself has ambitions to become a lawyer, "to help people who are struggling"; and hopes that Fairtrade will also be able to pay for her studies. To keep the Fairtrade status, the farm is subject to a yearly audit, which examines everything from working conditions at the farm, to how the Fairtrade premium is being spent, and also considers environmental issues.

Farm workers and their families on Fairtrade Farms are regarded with some envy by children who live on other farms with less enlightened working practices; "Children that are on Fairtrade farms, they are very happy, they always have their school fees [paid] and school clothes and so on", says 13 year old Deone in Lesson 2 Track 3, whose family is less fortunate. "They go on [school] trips, and attend sports and we don't. I would like our farm to be a Fairtrade farmI think to be a part of Fairtrade farm would give us better opportunities and better chances in life."

The Environment

The Fairtrade movement also encourages environmental protection. Neitbegin Farm is situated in the Cape Floral Region, declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, and an area which is considered to be one of the world's finest examples of plant diversity. It is known as the *Fynbos* which is the name of an ecosystem that is unique to the region. *Fynbos* is Afrikaans for "fine bush" - or "fine bush-land", and the main plant type here is a component of evergreen shrubs and small plants of hardy, thin and tubular leaves and reeds. Tasneen (Lesson 3 Track 3) describes some of the environmental requirements asked of them in the Fairtrade audit, including requests for them to use fewer chemicals, filtering their water, and being careful only to take out "invaders" (weeds) but to preserve the *Fynbos*; as a result, she says, their plums are no longer covered in pesticide; also, people on the farm are much healthier.

How many people does Fairtrade help?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fair_trade

In June 2008, Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International estimated that over 7.5 million producers and their families were benefiting from Fairtrade funded infrastructure, technical assistance and community development projects. However, the response to Fairtrade has been mixed, and the increasing popularity of the concept has drawn criticism from both ends of the political spectrum. The Adam Smith Institute sees "fair trade" as a type of subsidy or marketing ploy that impedes growth. Segments of the left, such as French author Christian Jacquiau, criticize fair trade for not adequately challenging the current trading system.

Links

www.fairtrade.net : website for international Fairtrade labelling organisations

www.fairtrade.org.uk : UK fair-trade foundation