Realizing the Principle of Fairness:
Standards to Bring it to Life throughout the Organic Supply Chain

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Author's Background

Elizabeth Henderson farmed at Peacework Farm in New York State, producing organically grown vegetables for the fresh market for over 30 years. A member of Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York (NOFA-NY) Board, she represents NOFA Interstate Council on Board of Agricultural Justice Project. Awards: 2009: NOFA-NY Lifetime Achievement Award. 2014: Eco-Farm "Advocate of Social Justice Award, the Justie." Writings appear in NOFA's The Natural Farmer. Lead author of Sharing the Harvest: A Citizen's Guide to Community Supported Agriculture (Chelsea Green, 2007), and A Food Book for a Sustainable Harvest, written for the 300 members of Peacework Organic CSA (aka GVOCSA) in its twenty sixth year in 2014.

Summary

Fairness is one of the four foundational principles of organic agriculture, yet few certification programs have implanted the concepts of fairness in their standards. The Agricultural Justice Project (AJP) has created social standards, translating the abstract notions of social justice and fair trade into the concrete terms of pricing for farm products and working conditions on farms and food businesses. For organic agriculture to lead in creating a truly sustainable world food system, organic practice must embody the Principle of Fairness through fair trade, fair pricing and contracts, and socially just conditions on organic farms and food businesses.

Background

The early versions of the principles of the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM), whose standards formed the basis for most of the organic standards around the world, included these comprehensive statements on social justice:

a. To allow everyone involved in organic and sustainable production and processing a quality of life that meets their basic needs and allows an adequate return and satisfaction from their work, including a safe working environment.
b. To progress toward an entire production, processing, and distribution chain that is both socially just and ecologically responsible. (From IFOAM Basic Standards list of Principle Aims.)

The most recent version of IFOAM's Principle of Fairness is even more explicit:

"Organic agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities. Fairness is characterized by equity, respect, justice and stewardship of the shared world, both among people and in their relations to other living beings.

"This principle emphasizes that those involved in organic agriculture should conduct human relationships in a manner that ensures fairness at all levels and to all parties – farmers, workers, processors, distributors, traders and consumers. Organic agriculture should provide everyone involved with a good quality of life, and contribute to food sovereignty and reduction of poverty. It aims to produce a sufficient supply of good quality food and other products. This principle insists that animals should be provided with the conditions and opportunities of life that accord with their physiology, natural behavior and well-being.

"Natural and environmental resources that are used for production and consumption should be managed in a way that is socially and ecologically just and should be held in trust for future generations. Fairness requires systems of production, distribution and trade that are open and equitable and account for real environmental and social costs." (IFOAM Principles 2005)

In the United States, organic agriculture developed in the 1970's as movement with a wholistic approach to land and livelihood. The farmers who were attracted to organic practices and their loyal customers agreed that decent prices, fair treatment of workers and animals, and care for mother earth all went together. In the 1980's, the Northeast Organic Farming Association endorsed these principles that can be found in our Program Manual to this day:

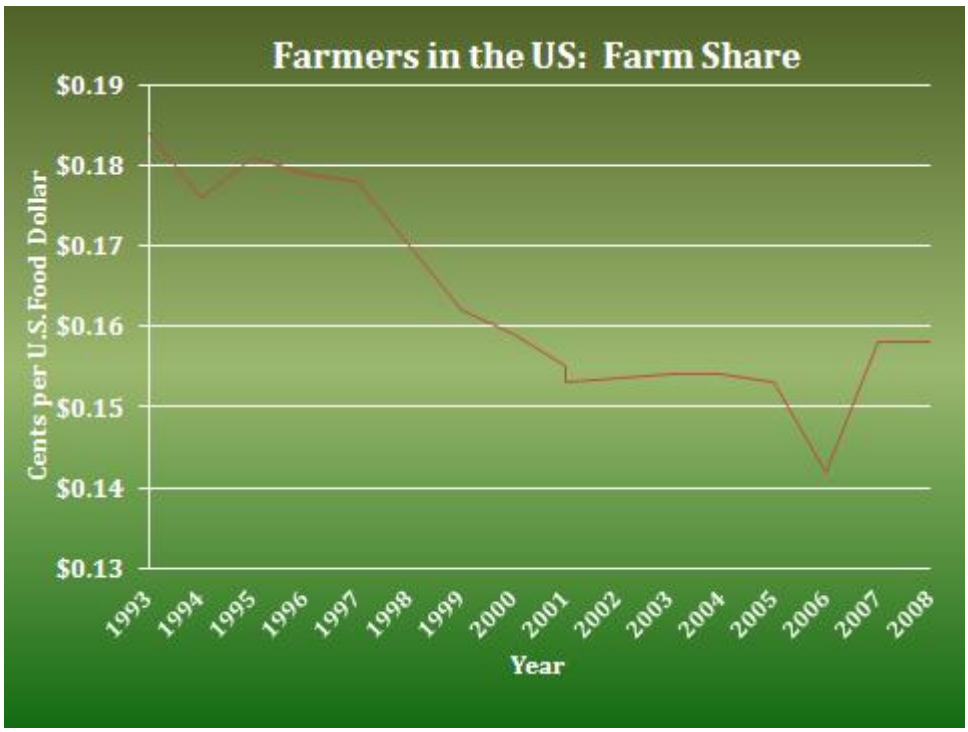
- To encourage non-exploitive treatment of farm workers.
- To create conditions for livestock that ensures them a life free of undue stress, pain and/or suffering.
- To maximize farmers' monetary returns and satisfaction for their work.
- To maintain the land in healthy condition for future generations.

Organic food enthusiasts were willing to pay a small premium for organic products to sustain the farms economically. They understood that the prices had to cover the true costs of production and they trusted their farmers to charge fairly and treat their workers with respect.

That all started to change as larger entities became involved and organic began to enter the mainstream. The initial family-scale farms and small independent processors faced overwhelming competition from an "organic industry" and large-scale farms that converted to organic purely as a marketing decision. The "American Organic Standards" developed by the Organic Trade Association (OTA) did not touch pricing and labor issues and then the Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, which established the National Organic Program (NOP) under USDA, followed suit. When commenters criticized the national organic regulations for leaving out the social component, the NOP responded, that is "not in our purview."

As a consequence, in the US today, social relations in organic agriculture mimic those of the dominant industrial food system, and organic farmers, even farmers who sell direct in local markets, have a hard time making ends meet. While farmers may be building equity in their farm businesses, many farmers are in debt and the farm family that lives entirely on farm earnings is rare. Farmers who want to provide a middle-class income for their families, depend on the off-farm earnings and health insurance from a family member's job. Few farmers pay living wages to the people who work on their farms.

In 2013, the NOFA Domestic Fair Trade committee surveyed organic farmers in the NE states. Six hundred farmers – mostly certified organic – filled out some part of the survey and 350 completed it. PhD candidate Becca Berkey has analyzed the surveys. (Her report is available using this link: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1kiXT0o8Ts-I3Yi2MjN_B5yD4E0I4fCdn5qtQzAYS7Jo/edit?usp=sharing
In their comments, farmers said they aspire to pay fair wages – but cannot earn enough from sales to cover the living wages and package of benefits they would have preferred and that would help retain good workers, reduce training costs and make their farms more resilient. A typical comment from the survey: "Unable to provide well-paid year-round work." The survey shows that hired labor only makes up 20% of the workforce on organic farms. Most of the work is done by the farmers themselves and their families. Despite lots of good intentions to live up to the Principle of Fairness, most of the farmers who hire workers pay just over minimum wage, and the only benefit they provide is workers compensation which is required by law.



Just like farmers in developing countries, the family-scale farmers in developed countries and the people who work on their farms need to return to the principle of fairness in organic agriculture.

Main chapter

This failure of organic standards to embrace the principle of fairness inspired the creation of what evolved into the Agricultural Justice Project (AJP). In 1999, Michael Sligh of Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI-USA), Richard Mandelbaum and Nelson Carasquillo of the Farmworker Support Committee (CATA), Marty Mesh of Florida Organic Growers (FOG) and I, Elizabeth Henderson representing the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA), decided to go "beyond" the OTA and NOP definitions of organic as a marketing label to develop standards for the fair and just treatment of the people who work in organic and sustainable agriculture. The success of international fair trade with the steady climb in numbers of people willing to spend a little more money to support family farms in developing countries has provided an encouraging model. As a small-scale organic farmer, I feel strongly that it is not enough to treat earthworms with respect. For our farms to thrive, we need prices that cover our costs of production, including living wages for ourselves and everyone who works on our farms, plus a surplus to invest in the farm's future. We need to make agricultural work a respected career with appropriate benefits.

AJP has drafted social stewardship standards, translating the abstract notion of social justice into the concrete terms of pricing for farm products and working conditions on farms. The basic premise of this project is that supportive relations of mutual respect and cooperation among the people who grow and sell food will result in a triple win for farmers, food workers and ultimately the people who eat the food. You can read about AJP standards, their history, and policies at www.agriculturaljusticeproject.org. The Domestic Fair Trade Association has evaluated AJP, along with other fair trade programs. You will find the very positive evaluation at www.thedfta.org.

The AJP standards were developed over four years of meetings with workers, small-scale farmers, fair trade companies and organizations, indigenous peoples, consumers, and organic certifiers. Hundreds of people from over sixty countries participated. The standards address

the following issues:

• farmer and all food system workers' rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining
• fair wages and benefits for workers
• fair and equitable contracts for farmers and buyers
• fair pricing for farmers
• clear conflict resolution policies for farmers, workers and buyers
• the rights of indigenous peoples
• workplace health and safety
• farmworker housing
• high quality training with learning contracts for farm interns and apprentices
• the rights and protection of children on farms: no full-time child labor, but carefully supervised participation of children on farms.

In August, 2010, AJP posted a revised and expanded version of these standards on the website – www.agriculturaljusticeproject.org. Four years of pilot projects where we tested the draft standards against the reality of actual farms and food businesses and then two years of experience with social justice certifying shaped the revisions. During this time, AJP also developed the policies that govern the program, training modules for certifiers and auditors, and materials to help farms and businesses comply with the standards. Starting in 2015, AJP will conduct a public revision process for the Food Justice Certification standards; all interested parties are welcome to provide comments.

AJP took the time to build the movement from the ground up by ensuring input from stakeholders in the food system over the last decade. This work has resulted in a comprehensive set of standards that set the gold standard for social justice in the food system by ensuring fair food system practices in the U.S. that really address the priorities and needs of those who work to bring food to the table. An important part of the program is to distribute the tools across the country and build capacity of regional certifiers and worker organizations and community groups to carry the certification and education models forward in their local communities. AJP has been offering training to regional U.S. organic certifiers so they can better serve their clients by offering social justice certification as an add-on to organic.

AJP was the first food label to have a farmworker advocacy organization working alongside farmer advocacy organizations to found and run the program. The verification system is also the only one to include active participation by worker representatives during the audit. In addition to the full staff of CATA, AJP has also trained five farmworker organizations: Central Campesino, MN, the Farmworkers Association of Florida, FL, Community to Community Development, WA, Lideres Campesinas, CA, and Agricultural Workers Alliance, Canada.

In 2013, lentils and grains with AJP's Food Justice Certified label from the Farmer Direct Coop in Saskachewan began appearing in food coops in the Pacific NW and in Whole Foods stores across the country and in 2014, The Family Garden in Gainesville, Florida, and the first farms and food businesses in California and New York have completed AJP certification.

Core messages and conclusions

The urgency of reuniting the principles of fairness and organic is underlined in the concluding report of the National Organic Action Plan, From the Margins to the Mainstream – Advancing Organic Agriculture in the US (January 2010). As Lynn Coody summarized in *The Organic Standard* of June, 2010, "At their beginning organic regulations set a high bar for advancing cultural and social values in agricultural production. It is proposed that this foundation be restored by rededicating organic practice to an ethical food and agriculture system that honors the values of fairness and basic rights. Fairness includes fair trade; fair pricing (and contracts); fair access to land

(and credit); and fair access to quality, organic food and seeds. These basic rights also encompass the rights of all people to follow their own cultural and traditional knowledge systems and the rights of farmers and farmworkers to have an empowered voice in the continued improvement of an ethical food system. This should apply directly to both domestic and foreign agricultural policies with the recognition of organic agriculture's contributions to local food security and the alleviation of hunger both nationally and internationally." (p. 7)

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