

Ethical trade: 'Good intentions go to waste'

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Swedish consumers are increasingly buying fair trade, vegetarian and ecological products, but is it really making the world a better place? In their new book about ethical trade, Gothenburg researchers Bengt Brülde and Joakim Sandberg are not so sure. Although it might help ease people's bad conscience, it does nothing to change the root of the problem, they say. Instead, fixing the problem will require collective solutions, such as legislation at a global level.

The development and globalisation of trade in recent decades has not only implied welfare gains for many people, it has also led to a number of difficult ethical challenges: increasing inequalities between rich and poor countries, global environmental decay and climate change, and what many people would call a growing disrespect for other people, animals and our natural environment. What are the responsibilities of consumers in this context? For example, is it morally wrong not to buy fair trade and ecological products? What are the responsibilities of businesses? And of politicians?

The authors of the new book *Hur bör vi handla? Filosofiska tankar om rättvisemärkt, vegetariskt och ekologiskt* (in Swedish, published by Bokförlaget Thales) explore the seriousness and extent of the above global problem. The authors mix empirical facts with philosophical discussions about people's moral responsibilities for fellow human beings, animals and the environment. They also discuss possible solutions, for example at the individual level.

'Many consumers do want to contribute to a better world,' says Joakim

Sandberg. 'But you really don't change anything by choosing fair trade coffee or ecological bananas at the store. Due to the way trade works, our good intentions risk going to waste.'

The book explains how single individuals can maximise their influence, for example by choosing the most effective charity organisation or participating in collective actions and movements. However, in the end the problem must be approached at a higher level, the authors say: businesses and politicians must show more responsibility. And Sweden alone cannot make it happen – other countries must join in.

'Global problems require global solutions,' says Bengt Brülde. 'We need more and deeper international agreements, such as the Kyoto Protocol.'

Yet the prospects look gloomy at best. The Kyoto Protocol is about to expire, the global animal industry keeps growing and so does the already great divide between rich and poor countries.

'A lot remains to be done,' says Brülde. 'And our book may offer some help not only to individual consumers but also to business leaders and decision makers.'

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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