

Global ethical supply chains: The organic label doesn't tell the full story

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A farmer in India plows his organic cotton field to destroy weeds. Credit: Andrew Flachs

The label on organic, fair-trade coffee and clothing doesn't always tell

the full story.

In some cases, companies are working behind the scenes to provide more than just higher earnings by helping marginalized farmers secure land and protect it from logging, mining and large-scale agriculture operations. This is true with organic coffee and [cotton production](#) in three villages in India, home to more organic producers than any other country, said Andrew Flachs, an assistant professor of anthropology at Purdue University.

"Organic farming helps to make a new kind of rural wealth available to Adivasi, or scheduled tribe farmers in these villages," Flachs said.

"These are not people who could own land before, and now they're part of this first generation since independence and new laws to really have these rights to land, this resource that can keep producing wealth and status. It's a big deal to pass that forward year after year, and [organic farming](#) is one way to really protect and preserve that."

During the summer of 2018, Flachs and Sreenu Panuganti, a [graduate student](#) at the University of Hyderabad, led surveys, interviews and [focus groups](#), attended planning meetings and visited farms in two South Indian villages in the Adilabad district in northern Telangana, as well as one village near Araku in Andhra Pradesh. They asked how farmers and their families imagined their products and the place of agricultural work for their children. The findings are published online in the journal *Economic Anthropology*.

The researchers found that farmers decided to produce organic commodities like coffee and cotton not only to add value, but to safeguard their land from corporate interests and extraction operations, which are favored by banks and the local government, Flachs said. Many organic producers in India, for example, have a social justice wing that provides assistance to farmers seeking loans and organic certification.

The study focused primarily on Adivasi farmers, members of scheduled tribes that have been targets of discrimination since the days of British colonization.

"These people have been historically kicked off land but now are seeing a bright future in agriculture, which is a good thing if we're talking about sustainable farming," he said. "You have to have young farmers adopting this way of life. Since the 1950s, development all around the world has meant getting off the farm and going to the cities, but now we're starting to question that all around the world."

Farming is an important way of life in India, an occupation comprising 60 percent of the country's workforce, Flachs said. The researchers found that farmers' dreams of passing down their land to their children played an important role in their decision to go organic. As a result, there are booming opportunities for rural white-collar jobs surrounding the burgeoning industry.

"You've got this class of rural professionals that could be making a lot more money doing the same kind of exploitation that everybody else is doing, but now they see themselves as part of this industry," he said.

More information: Andrew Flachs et al. Organic aspirations in South India, *Economic Anthropology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1002/sea2.12158](https://doi.org/10.1002/sea2.12158)

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