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# “Fair Trade is an artisan’s movement”

An interview study with handicraft producer organisations affiliated  
to World Fair Trade Organisation (WFTO) in the Global South

Miranda Kårelind  
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University of Gothenburg, 15 credits  
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Supervisor: Anna Bohlin  
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## Abstract

Traditional craftsmanship provides a significant source of income for marginalised groups in many parts of the Global South. Simultaneously, the traditional handicraft is a way to remember and maintain a cultural heritage. However, the ability to survive on traditional craftsmanship has worsened around the world. The Fair Trade movement was created in response to the absence of a safe and just marketplace for marginalized artisans and established trade networks based on social and economic justice, and environmental sustainability, in collaborations with producers in the Global South and consumers in the Global North.

This interview study provides an insight into how handicraft producer organisations from five countries in the Global South affiliated to the World Fair Trade Organisation (WFTO) experience the market for traditional handicraft. In the stories of the WFTO members the traditional handicraft is described as ‘having soul’, considering the fact that people are behind it. These persons emphasized the importance of the culture that surrounds the traditional handicraft in their countries and further expressed a gratitude towards their trading partners in the Fair Trade market. However, there are challenges related to the practice of Fair Trade which can be seen in the informants struggle of operating in a surrounding world that is dominated by a neoliberal trading system. The theoretical understanding of the sociality of markets can show how different logics have shaped the actors within the movement over the years. Moreover, the prevailing circumstances concerning the covid-19 pandemic during the conduct of this study might have affected the results, yet, it also shed interesting light on the meaning of the Fair Trade practice for the viability of traditional handicraft.

**Keywords:** *Traditional handicraft, Craftsmanship, Artisans, Fair Trade, Global South*

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# 1. Introduction

## Introduction and problem formulation

The Fair Trade movement was established in order to improve conditions for small-scale artisans and producers in the Global South. The idea was to build an alternative trade network, free from capitalist norms and objectives (Doherty, Smith & Parker, 2015). Yet, given that practitioners of Fair Trade nevertheless are part of a broader global capitalist market system, how do they experience this organisation today?

The ability to survive on traditional craftsmanship has worsened for artisans around the world. Today, the majority of the world's artisans are living in poverty due to several global phenomena, not least the global trade in mass-produced goods. Additionally, the efficiency and profit-driven neoliberal trade order has been a driving force behind the limitations to work with traditional handicraft. Many of these artisans are forced to leave their homes and families, and abandon their businesses in order to move to the cities where the wage labour exists (Littrell, 2016, p. 458). The urbanization in the Global South has massively increased in the recent decades and one reason is the employment offered in the factories located in the cities (UN, 2018). While some point to the vital job creation facilitated within these industries, others emphasize serious violations of working conditions and human rights (Sherif-Trask, 2014). In addition, the production within these factories is that which compete with the handicraft sector (Littrell, 2016, p. 457). Yet, traditional craftsmanship constitutes both socially and environmentally sustainable alternatives and include valuable knowledge for sustainable development (Walker et al., 2019).

The need for economic development is crucial for survival in today's globalized society and the situation for traditional artisans is no exception (Murray, 2010). Note that *economic development* in this case refers to the economic income that is needed in order to make a living for the artisans and their families. In light of the reality of globalization, the evolution of traditional craftsmanship has been required to go from, initially, an unquestioned part of a way of life, and then second, a phase of active preservation, to the contemporary need of market adaptation in order to generate economic income for the artisans (ibid). However, simultaneously there is a problem of the viability of traditional handicraft when it becomes capitalized (ibid; Littrell, 2016, p. 460).

The Fair Trade movement realized the importance of creating a space for handicraft without capitalistic objectives (Doherty et al., 2015). The intention of an alternative trade network between producers in the Global South and consumers in the Global North was to establish social trade relations rather than finding the right products (ibid). The movement has strived to empower marginalized producers, including artisans, to enter the world market and consequently achieve the required economic income for survival on their own production (Keahy, Littrell & Murray, 2015, p. 266). Fair Trade aims to work in opposition to the logics of the conventional trade, which they consider prioritize price, quality and volume over social and environmental aspects. Instead, the objective of the movement is to establish stable and just trade relations. However, actors of Fair Trade need to use the conventional market for distribution of their products (Raynolds & Greenfield, 2016, p. 25). That said, Fair Trade is no longer a unitary movement since there has been a division into two different ways of organisation with different business strategies. Fairtrade International (FLO) and World Fair Trade Organisation (WFTO) are the two main organisations driven by contrasting ways of practicing Fair Trade, where the trade in handicraft is covered by the framework of WFTO, and not FLO (ibid, p. 26).

## Purpose and research questions

Considering the history of traditional handicraft within the Fair Trade movement and furthermore the contemporary division between FLO and WFTO, this study aims to provide an insight into how members of WFTO in the Global South experience the market for traditional handicraft. The ambition is to highlight the possibilities and challenges as the members perceive them, and further investigate how they experience the difference between Fair Trade and the conventional market. To examine this, the following research questions have been formulated:

- How do members of WFTO perceive the possibilities, challenges and obstacles associated with their activities within the Fair Trade market?
- How do they reflect on the differences of trade in the Fair Trade market and the conventional market?
- How can the above questions be understood in relation to theories on the sociality of markets and commodities?

## Delimitations

The intention behind this study is not to investigate the artisans' standard of living even though it touches on the subject and could accordingly give such indications. Furthermore, there is no ambition to provide an assessment of the capacity of the Fair Trade movement, or to give any recommendations regarding how the movement should be developed. That said, it might give a comprehension of the movements future potentials.

Considering the narrow time frame of the conduct of this study, the sampling was limited to five informants. Additionally, the collection of material focused on selected informants who had manager positions of their organisations. These are people who, due to the prevailing circumstances of the covid-19 pandemic when conducting this study, have become accustomed to communicating through video calls, which facilitated the conduct of the interviews via link. During the process, it occurred that it would have been desirable with an additional interview with each informant, to really give an in-depth understanding of their experiences of trade in traditional handicraft. Unfortunately, this was not achievable, partly due to the limitation in time, but also since I did not want to impose further on them given the particularly pressing situation of the pandemic.

## Background

The Fair Trade movement can be traced back to the 1940s, but, as often described in the literature, began to seriously take shape in the 1980s (Raynolds & Bennett, 2016, p. 7). It is a movement sprung out of a critique against what is regarded as the mainstream, or the conventional trade system (Raynolds & Greenfield, 2016, p. 24). The movement has a specific focus on marginalized groups in the Global South who have limited access to the world market (Keahy, et al., 2015, p. 267; WFTO, n.d.a). In the early history of Fair Trade, these networks were mainly working with artisans and less with farmers. Consequently, the Fair Trade handicraft sector was larger than the food sector, whereas the situation of today is the opposite (McDowall, Humphreys & Conlon, 2011).

To understand the development for traditional handicraft in the Fair Trade market, one has to look at the development within the movement. The paradox of Fair Trade is that it operates both 'within and against the market'. In other words, it works in opposition to the logics of the conventional trade but still uses the mainstream market for distribution. Within the

movement, this paradox has been dealt with in different ways, which has resulted in two different types of business models; the original Fair Trade organisation model and the newer Fairtrade certification model (Raynolds & Greenfield, 2016, pp. 25-26). Nowadays, the umbrella organisation Fairtrade International (FLO) is probably the most known part of the movement and has shown great success in general recognition (Fridell, 2006). FLO is a result of the newer certification model that certifies products, primarily raw materials as cocoa, coffee, tea, cotton, etcetera, in order to be able to cooperate with commercial companies. This serves as a means to increase sales and production opportunities for producers in the Global South (Raynolds & Greenfield, 2016, p. 27; FLO, n.d.).

By contrast, World Fair Trade Organisation (WFTO) works in the former organisation model and seeks to manage the entire supply chain in the framework of their '10 Principals of Fair Trade' (WFTO, 2017; Raynolds & Greenfield, 2016, p. 26). In 2013, WFTO launched their 'Guarantee System' which certifies entire organisations as Fair Trade. The purpose is to distinguish Fair Trade enterprises from commercial companies in order "to verify that an enterprise is mission-led, focused on the interests of its producers, and this is in the structure, systems and practices of the enterprise." (WFTO, n.d.b). Additionally, the Guarantee System works to provide the opportunity of certifying more complex products such as handicraft (ibid; Littrell, 2016, p. 470).

However, this division in strategies has led to tensions within the movement. Both researchers on Fair Trade and practitioners of the former Fair Trade model have criticized the strategy of FLO and their newer certification system (Raynolds & Greenfield, 2016, p. 27). They argue that the practice of FLO is prioritizing market goals over the movements' core values and further threatens one of the founding ideologies of Fair Trade; to work against the logics of the conventional trade (ibid).

The increasing development of a more socially and environmentally conscious trade and production as outlined in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs, forced the Fair Trade movement to ensure their accountability approach to the consumers (McDowall, et al., 2011). The certification processes within the Fair Trade movement were results of this competition, and a way to expand the market for Fair Trade products (ibid). FLO has been in the front edge of this growth since they developed their certification system in the late 1980s, which consequently led to the market increase of Fair Trade agro-food products (Raynolds & Greenfield, 2016, p. 26). As the handicraft sector took another path and continued the former

model of Fair Trade, the consumer demand did not follow. While struggling to expand the market for Fair Trade handicraft, the risk of undermining the core values of the movement are always present (McDowall, et al., 2011).

## **2. Previous research**

The sociologists Laura T. Raynolds and Elizabeth Bennett (2016) have compiled a 'Handbook of research on Fair Trade' which has been of great importance for this study and especially for the comprehension of the complex movement that Fair Trade has come to be. Raynolds (2000; 2002) has mainly investigated the potentials and challenges for the movement. Among other things, she has examined the outcomes of Fair Trade's entry into the conventional market and is one of several researchers presented in this study who argue that it has led to an undermining of the movement's original purpose; to practice a different way of trade that works in contrast to the neoliberal logic (Raynolds & Greenfield, 2016; Low & Eileen Davenport, 2006; VanderHoff Boersma, 2008).

Raynolds and Bennett (2016) have identified several key themes in the research field on Fair Trade, where the complexity of operating 'within and against the market' is one, which is also included in the analysis of this study. This issue is also mentioned in the literature as 'the mainstreaming of Fair Trade' and the authors of the handbook position themselves in conflict with this development:

While some authors see this trend as a symptom of fair trade's success in regulating the global economy, others argue that it is indicative of fair washing. Handbook authors agree that fair trade mainstreaming facilitates market growth but disagree about the nature of the related costs and whether the benefits derived from market growth outweigh these costs (Raynolds & Bennett, 2016, p. 19).

They suggest that further research is needed on "[...] whether conventional market actors can bring more to fair trade than expanding markets." (Raynolds & Bennett, 2016, p. 19). The sociologist Peter Leigh Taylor (2004) continues this discussion and argue that one of the most important challenges for certification initiatives as Fair Trade "is to be 'in the market but not of it,' that is, to be able to pursue alternative values and objectives such as social justice and

environmental sustainability without being captured by the market's conventional logic, practices and dominant actors.” (Leigh Taylor, 2004). Moreover, the business scientists Manush McConway and Geoff Moore (2016, p. 247) specifically request more research on the effects of ‘the mainstreaming of Fair Trade’ from the perspectives of local Fair Trade organisations in the Global South. This research has inspired the purpose of this study and further given directions for the thematic analysis.

Gavin Fridell (2006), professor in political science, has studied the tensions within the movement and shows an internal debate concerning the understanding of the main purpose of Fair Trade, where poverty reduction has become the current objective for some actors, primarily within FLO. Fransisco VanderHoff Boersma (2008), who is one of the pioneers of the Fair Trade movement and with a PhD in political economy, has argued that the risk of limiting the purpose to poverty reduction might disregard the ‘real problems’. Referring to the views of VanderHoff Boersma, the real problems would be the neoliberal structure of global trade, and poverty should be understood as a symptom of the problems, thus, poverty is not a problem in itself. Instead, he argues that Fair Trade could contribute to a shift in perspectives where producers in the Global South should be perceived as actors of their own development.

Raynolds (2002), VanderHoff Boersma (2008) and Leigh Taylor (2004) have all focused on the agro-food system, which seems to be the primary subject of research on Fair Trade. However, McConway and Moore (2016) have focused on handicraft producer organisations and have explicitly investigated the difference between operating in the Fair Trade market and the conventional market in their case study of a Fair Trade craft enterprise in Peru. This case study has been useful as a comparison to the findings in this study. Additionally, Mary Littrell (2016, p. 457), professor in Design and Merchandising, has contributed with research on the field of handicraft within Fair Trade and highlights the fact that no traditional handicraft can survive without a market. Based on her case studies, she argues that Fair Trade in its original form can contribute with a more inclusive market that is able meet the commercial difficulties of traditional artisans. By having dialogue and close contact with artisans at grassroots level, the movement has shown great success in creating space for artisans' independence. By interacting at a local level, Fair Trade has realized the daily challenges of artisans in different cultural contexts and strived to understand and value their artistic traditions in both production and design (ibid, p. 471). The research of Littrell has been of great importance to this study. First, in the comprehension of traditional handicraft within Fair Trade, and second, it helped formulate the research questions, the interview guide and to analyse the results.

The social scientist Kevin Murray (2010) examines the risks of traditional handicraft flourishing in a globalized market. He emphasizes the long history of exploitation of cultural artefacts, specifically by the west during the colonial era which has continued until today. However, he further argues that these processes simultaneously have been necessary for the viability of traditional handicraft. The main threat exists in the commodification of the handicraft: “Within capitalist production cultural signs are appropriated, decontextualized, and then sold for maximum profit. When purchasing products, consumers are encouraged to consider brand identity—an abstraction—rather than the maker, as a living agent of culture.” (Murray, 2010). Thus, Murray considers whether ‘cultural exogamy’ (i.e. relationships crossing over different cultures) might be important for strengthening the traditions of handicraft, but only if artisans are able to be in control of their own craft development.

In conclusion, apart from positioning this study in relation to the previous research on Fair Trade, additionally, perspectives drawn from these findings have also been useful in examining the results.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

The sociality of markets

*The logics of the conventional market versus ‘the bazaar economy’*

This study has a theoretical starting point in the sociologist Max Weber’s understanding of the economy as produced by social and moral actions, rather than the view of the economist Adam Smith, who thought of the economy as a mechanism functioning in similarity to the laws of nature (Wilk & Cliggett, 2007, pp. 125; 52). The mainstream idea of markets is related to the view of Smith, that markets operate separately from the society (Conway, 2014, p. 107). Conversely, markets are in this study understood as social constructions, thus, not as inevitable phenomenon unattached to its social actors (Carruthers & Babb, 2013, p. 2).

The actors in a marketplace consist of buyers and sellers who operate in relation to property, money and information. Market exchange, however, is one way of material distribution, but economic activities could also occur through gift giving or by stealing. Anthropologists and historians have shown how many traditional societies were built on gift giving rather than

exchange through markets, and it was only when capitalism occurred that market exchange became the dominant economic activity (Carruthers & Babb, 2013, pp. 2-3). Furthermore, the contemporary global market (referred to as ‘the conventional market’ in this study) is influenced by neoliberalism which favour a market free from government regulation, a so called ‘free market’. This is a development from neoclassical economics, which were influenced by Smith’s understanding that all efforts to govern the market will risk destroying the supposedly natural order of the economy (Conway, 2014, p. 107). Thus, it can be seen that the conventional trade logic is characterized by both capitalism and neoliberalism.

The anthropologist Stephen Gudeman (2008) argues that economic activities can be divided into two forms. The first is the mainstream process of exchange in goods where the consumer is disconnected from the producer, as shown in the conventional market outlined above. He argues that this trade works in a pure competitive form which triggers the dominant economic activity of calculative reason. Conversely, the other is characterized by a cooperation between actors that share norms and practices. He explains this other form of economic activity as a place where “things and services are secured and allocated, through continuing ties” (Gudeman, 2008, p. 5). Similar to this, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1978) observed the organisation and logics of peasant markets, what he calls ‘the bazaar economy’. He demonstrated that what might seem to be spontaneous bargaining is actually a complex system of close relationships between buyers and sellers. In ‘the bazaar’, information is scarce and highly valuable, hence the need of strong ties between the actors. By contrast, close relationships between buyers and sellers are not important in the contemporary capitalistic character of the global trade. Rather, the capitalistic practice is characterized by constant search throughout the market with a determination to find the cheapest and best products (ibid). These anthropological insights of the idea of ‘continuing ties’ in the marketplace and ‘the bazaar economy’ can be comparable to the logics of trade in the Fair Trade market and are useful in the analysis of this study.

### *The gift-commodity dichotomy*

In addition to the different views of markets, another anthropological contribution to economic research is the gift-commodity dichotomy. A fundamental understanding of the difference between gifts and commodities could be derived from the philosopher Karl Marx and the sociologist Marcell Mauss. Marx observed that in a capitalistic society commodities were only being produced with the commercial purpose to be used by someone else. In this

view of Marx, a commodity is socially and culturally disconnected, thus, highly impersonalized (Wilk & Cliggett, 2007, p. 160). In contrast to the decontextualized commodity, Mauss observed the purpose of gifts, which he argued are always tied to social relations and ‘entail the identity of the giver’ (ibid, p. 159). Gifts mirrors a shared interest, thus, the opposite of the activities in the modern competitive trade (Aspers, 2011, p 46). Among others, Weber claimed that gift-economies were the earlier forms of trade and the logic of a gift-economy was centred on trustful relationships and mysterious beliefs about the gifted objects (ibid). It was a system of a reciprocal obligation, i.e. the mutual understanding of giving back after receiving a gift (Wilk & Cliggett, 2007, p. 159). There seems to be a clear contradiction between the capitalistic system of trade with commoditized products and the high value of creating relationships within gift-economies. However, as noticed by Chris Gregory, this dichotomy of gifts and commodities is not necessarily a clear division of two different systems operating in contrast to one another. Instead, Gregory argues that the reality today entails a blurred line between gifts and commodities (ibid, p. 161). The insight of the gift-commodity dichotomy discussion is relevant when analysing how the practice of Fair Trade differs from practices in the conventional market.

To summarise these different approaches, this study will employ the notion of ‘sociality of the market’ as a short hand for describing the complex social relations that exist between actors in a marketplace, and, additionally, the social context that surrounds the traditional craftsmanship, including its connection to places and cultural heritage.

## Feminist economics

### *Challenging neoliberalism*

In line with feminist economics, this study holds a critical view of the neoliberal logic of trade. The economists Benería, Berik & Floro (2016, p. 107) claim that the neoliberal politics, which favour a free market, has been a driving force of the contemporary polarized global trade. The unequal power relations that underlie the global trade today is a key target of criticism within the feminist economics (Benería et al., 2016; Sherif-Trask, 2014). Benería et al. point to a critical imbalance of power where a few multinational corporations are in control of the global production. Additionally, the sociologist Bahira Sherif-Trask (2014, p. 34) claims that the neoliberal logic within the global trade is exploitative in its nature due to profit and efficiency orientation. In similarity to Geertz (1978), she argues that this logic creates

companies in constant search for cheaper labour. Furthermore, she emphasizes these processes as a precondition for the present cheap consumption of mass-produced goods.

A further insight from feminist scholars relevant to this study is their denouncement of the mainstream economic assumption of ‘the maximizing individual’ as the natural human behaviour within markets. This critique derives from the fundamental feminist criticism of the historical dichotomy of masculine and feminine behaviour, where the behaviour of a woman was understood as the opposite of the maximizing man. Women were seen as dependent and caring and driven by emotions and cooperation, and, most problematically, were not recognized as actors within the market. Thus, the only actors in the market were regarded as operating with a masculine behaviour; ‘the rational economic man’ (Benería et al., 2016, p. 52). Benería et al. (2016, p. 95) argue that neoliberalism has accelerated capitalistic development and spurred the ‘rational economic man model’. Consequently, the feminist critique is particularly useful for reflecting on the differences between the conventional market logic versus the practices of Fair Trade. Furthermore, when referring to the conventional market logic in the following discussion, this understanding is shaped by the notion of neoliberalism and the presumed behaviour of the ‘rational economic man’.

### *Economic development: growth or well-being?*

The capitalistic rationality is present in the contemporary understanding of economic development considering that it is mainly focused on economic growth, which Benería et al. (2016, p. 57) argue is shown in the preoccupation of measurements as in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In contrast, feminist scholars argue that in order to determine economic development, one has to acknowledge the perspectives of the disadvantaged groups (ibid). For example, the economist Naila Kabeer (1994) has argued that development must be seen from the perspective of the ‘poor third world woman’, considering her intersectional perspective, i.e. her multidimensional viewpoints of being oppressed in several power structures. Instead of only measuring economic development in merely economic activities, which do not necessarily say anything about the actual well-being, the economist Amartya Sen formulated the framework of a ‘capability approach’. This framework focuses on individuals’ freedoms and capabilities to affect their lives in order to generate well-being (Benería et al., 2016, p. 55). Thus, feminist economics favour the expansion of capabilities over merely economic growth (ibid, p. 241). The capability approach is related to the arguments of Vanderhoff Boersma (2008) and Murray (2010) as presented in the previous

section. They highlight the importance of artisans to be in power of creating their own product development and consequently having the freedom to nurture their cultural values without being burdened with capitalistic objectives. Although the framework by Amartya Sen will not be extensively used in the present study, it nevertheless provides overall insights that have inspired the following discussion.

## **4. Method and material**

### Method discussion

This study has the form of an interview study and shares some characteristics of a case study design since the aim was to identify perceptions within WFTO (Bryman, 2012, p. 67). In other words, WFTO constitutes the case, exemplified by informants from five different countries (see Sampling below). Considering that the purpose was to understand the experiences of the informants, a qualitative research method was applied and the empirical data was conducted through semi-structured interviews (ibid, pp. 380; 471). The interviews were conducted through online video calls due to the prevailing circumstances regarding the covid-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, interviews via link was also beneficial in that it made the extent of the data collection possible, considering that air travel between the informants would not have been economically possible, nor would it be defensible from an environmental perspective. Moreover, communicating through video calls has become the norm during the pandemic, which generated good conditions for conducting the interviews via link. The sociologist Sally Seitz (2016) has summarised key strategies for conducting interviews through online video calls which has been useful in the preparation of the interviews.

### Sampling

The sampling of informants was purposive with an ambition to reach informants affiliated to WFTO and who had a longer involvement with traditional handicraft and Fair Trade (Bryman, 2012, p. 418). All of the informants were managers of their respective organisation and had worked within their organisations for more than 25 years. Some of them were or had been artisans themselves. The organisations were small scale enterprises and were founded as either interest organisations for marginalized artisans or as cooperatives run by artisans themselves. They were later on connected with Fair Trade organisations that became their link

to an international market. Some of them were simultaneously active in the conventional market, while others had earlier experience of selling to mainstream buyers, both in the local and global market. The informants were from five different handicraft producer organisations located in Vietnam, Bangladesh, India, Kenya and Bolivia. The purpose of interviewing informants from different producer organisations in the Global South was to give an in-depth understanding of experiences of WFTO as a whole, and not to give attention to one specific sub-organisation within the WFTO. Thus, the sampling of context was also purposive even though it was to some extent limited to the relationships of the gatekeeper (ibid, p. 417), see below. The narrow sampling of five informants decreased the chances for this study to achieve theoretical saturation, hence the limited opportunity to give generalizable results (ibid, pp. 425-426). This has been taken into account when analysing the result, and I have rather focused on generating insights into the members' experiences for future research on the subject.

The sampling method was facilitated through the existence of contacts with Fair Trade members through a family contact who, it could be argued, served as a gatekeeper (Bryman, 2012, p. 151), due to her previous work as manager of a Fair Trade retail business in Sweden. These pre-existing relations could potentially have consequences for the results and the trustworthiness of this study. For example, the informants might have preconceived ideas of me as being related to the gatekeeper, and might for example refrain from voicing certain opinions that they believe would not be welcome. However, the gatekeeper has no formal role with respect to these informants, nor power over them, and furthermore, the relationship between her and them has been one of friendship and mutual trust. In fact, it is my understanding that the informants felt confident that the gatekeeper would not introduce them to someone who might harm their presentations. Thus, this has given me the confidence to tell their honest stories about how they perceived the difficulties in the Fair Trade market as well as the possibilities in the conventional market. Throughout the study, I have strived to maintain an objective attitude towards these relationships, and to be critical of my own interpretation of the informants.

## Ethical considerations

The interviews were conducted with an understanding that the informants could be affected by the human interaction that takes place during an interview, especially when the subject is something that concerns the person in question (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014, p. 97). This study

was deliberated in accordance with ‘Good Research Practice’ of the Swedish Research Council (2017) which emphasizes to protect individuals from harm and wrongs in research. Therefore, each informant was informed with the purpose of the study through e-mail correspondence (see Appendix 1). They were also informed that data such as recordings and transcripts were in confidential care and deleted afterwards, that they and their organisation would be anonymous and that they at any time could chose to withdraw their participation. I made sure to repeat these clarifications before starting the interviews and once again during the member validations (see ‘Collecting and analysing the data’ below). Furthermore, the informants were assigned with fictitious names and in agreement with the informants, the information given about them is that they work with a producer organisation affiliated to WFTO and in which country they operate. Moreover, the results of interviews affect our understanding of human beings and the researcher consequently faces both human and scientific ethical issues in interview studies (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014, p. 98). The analysis and presentation of the empirical data has been deliberated carefully, considering both professional ethics and without jeopardizing to harm the presentation of the informants (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

### Collecting and analysing the data

The interviews were approximately one hour long and conducted with help of an interview guide (see Appendix 2) which were created in line with the research questions. The questions of the interview guide assisted the informants to speak on the selected subjects. However, the purpose of semi-structured interviews was to allow the informants to develop their thoughts and arguments in directions that the interview guide might not have covered (Bryman, 2012, p. 471). In comparison to an open-ended and unstructured interview, the semi-structured interview is beneficial in qualitative interviews via link, however, it still requires the interviewer to be particularly observant (Seitz, 2016). Considering that English was not the native language of any of the informants, I was sensitive to repeating the questions when I thought they might have been misperceived. Likewise, I was careful to ask the informants if I had perceived their answers correctly. Additionally, as the contexts differed considerably for each informant, it was particularly important to pay attention to local expressions and metaphors. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in detail and to further increase the credibility of the empirical data, a member validation was accomplished through e-mail correspondence; the informants got to read a summary of my interpretation of the interview and respond with feedback (Bryman, 2012, p. 391). Furthermore, the covid-19 pandemic has

affected the contexts of the informants to varying degrees and most certainly it has affected the global trade. Considering the difficult time for trade during this last year, it consequently might have affected the answers of the informants even though the questions were not aimed to take into account the context of the pandemic.

In order to identify the market experiences of the informants, the empirical data was coded in a thematic analysis approach (Bryman, 2012, pp. 578-580). The themes were identified through patterns that appeared in the material and organised by repetition, similarities and differences and further put in four different categories: 1) The value of traditional handicraft; 2) Necessities for the viability of traditional handicraft; 3) Opportunities for traditional handicraft; 4) Challenges and threats for traditional handicraft. Within these categories I found interesting similarities and contradictions which resulted in four other themes that ultimately became the current headings of this study. Furthermore, the themes were analysed through an abductive approach, that is, the results were analysed by a process that alternated between theory and interpretations of the data (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014, p. 239; p. 252). In order to understand the coded data and answer the research questions, the analysis was conducted through a hermeneutic interpretation of meaning, in order to understand the perceptions of the informants from their perspective (ibid; p. 252; Bryman, 2012, p. 560). A narrative analysis method was considered to further explain the stories of the informants, thus, aiming to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how they perceived the market for traditional handicraft (ibid, pp. 531-532). The grounded theory method was excluded due to this reason, as its main focus of coding the data in detail could have led to an undesirable fragmentation of the data (ibid, p. 522). However, any form of coding qualitative material can lead to a reduction of its actual meaning (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014, p. 243; Bryman, 2011, p. 526). Hence, the coding was drawn towards a more narrative analysis approach rather than one that could have produced a fragmented result. However, the choice of a thematic analysis approach over a purely narrative analysis was justified by the fact that coding can make large amounts of data more available for analysis, which was necessary considering the narrow time frame of this study (Kvale & Brinkman, 2014, p. 243).

## 5. Results and analysis

### Managing a Fair Trade enterprise

There were two main aspects that emerged in the interviews concerning the way of working in the informant organisations, which further was how they distinguished themselves as practitioners of Fair Trade. The first concerns the overlap between running a business and a more social, non-profit organisation. For example, Minh from Vietnam explained that her organisation manages both a business and an NGO, where the receiving profit of the business is reinvested in their community projects. Another example is Priya from India, who explained that her organisation works with approximately 500 artisans around India, but indirectly Priya believed that the positive impacts affect more than 1000 people because of their community development programs. For example, she mentioned a child support program where children get help with school work, a self defence program for women and a microcredit program for supporting the artisans with savings. She emphasized that especially the microcredit program has helped the artisans and their communities to survive this last year during the pandemic. These kinds of development programs were significant for all the informants' organisations. In parallel with the social work, their organisations operated as a business managing sales, marketing and product development. This operational overlap is outlined in previous research, and the social scientists Eileen Davenport and William Low (2013) explain the Fair Trade practice as it 'straddles the for-profit and the not-for-profit world', which became clear in the stories of the informants.

The second aspect of the informants' organisational work that appeared in the data concerns being the connecting link between the artisans and the domestic and international market. According to the informants, this was important since many of the artisans were situated in remote, rural areas where the lack of infrastructure had limited their ability to build necessary capacity for survival on a trade of their traditional handicraft in a globalized world. Additionally, some of the informants explained that this connection has been important since the artisans had experiences with unreliable middlemen. As previously outlined in this study, the exploitation by middlemen is also found in research on both traditional handicraft (Murray, 2010) and on Fair Trade (Raynolds & Bennett, 2016).

These two aspects are characteristic of managing a Fair Trade enterprise and will be an important background to the following discussion.

## The experience of value in the Fair Trade market versus the conventional market

There are two overarching observations that can be seen in the data concerning how the value of traditional handicraft is perceived. First, the handicraft sector seemed to be of great importance for generating income for marginalized groups in the informants' respective countries. Many of the informants specifically emphasized the importance of this sector for the empowerment of women. This can also be found in previous research that highlights craft production as an important industry for employment in many countries in the Global South (Scrase, 2003), and particularly for rural women (Eversole, 2006). The informants seemed certain that Fair Trade have played an important role for the viability of this sector. Second, traditional craftsmanship is a way of remembering and maintaining the artisans' cultural heritage, and the use and protection of raw materials appeared to be an important part of such cultural practices. These two factors, the income generation and the cultural maintenance, appeared to be of mutual importance, as one factor seemed to fuel the other. This will be discussed in the three following topics.

### *Pricing the craftsmanship*

To begin with, all of the informants described a similar history of having experienced exploitation of traditional artisans by middlemen who were demanding lower prices for their handicraft. Everyone expressed that there was a need for an artisan empowerment in generating economic income of their production and that Fair Trade helped them with this issue. "I think Fair Trade is an artisan's movement, at least that is how Fair Trade started" (Priya, India). The problem of insufficient payments, however, seemed to be an ongoing procedure in the conventional market as some of the informants explained how the commercial buyers were still pushing the prices inappropriately. "[In] the conventional market, they put a price on you, they tell you a discount. Our workforce is not so valued. [...] Well, they have their rights, but they always weaken us by putting the price and telling us 'Well, you have to go down'." (Valentina, Bolivia). "In the regular market, they will try to buy as cheap as possible. They will not care much about the fair price that [the] artisans receive. They care about the price of the product and the cost of the product, if they can buy cheaper then they can have more profit." (Minh, Vietnam). "So the conventional trade is like that, for them the profit is the biggest thing." (Priya, India). These stories are highly comparable to how the history of Fair Trade is explained in the research field (McDowall, et al., 2011; Raynolds & Bennett, 2016). Furthermore, in line with the feminist critique of the mainstream economics as expressed by Benería et al. (2016) and Sherif-Trask (2014), it can

be seen that the profit orientation in the conventional market was perceived as an oppressing practice by some of the informants.

One important aspect when dealing with the problem of pricing their products seemed to be the training in cost calculation provided for the artisans by the informants' organisations. Some of the informants explained how the artisans have the power to negotiate the prices of their products when they trade in the Fair Trade market. Valentina in Bolivia, who is an artisan herself, expressed how they were able to set their own agenda when working with their Fair Trade partners. This is in line with the eighth Fair Trade principal of 'Providing Capacity Building' (WFTO, 2017). The empowerment concerning the artisans' economic development were present in the stories of the informants, which confirms the argument of VanderHoff Boersma (2008), who claims that the important part of Fair Trade is that producers are able to be actors of their own development. Furthermore, the experience of having the freedom to affect their own economic development is related to Sen's framework of the capability approach (Benería et al., 2016, p. 55).

Moreover, the cost of being a 'guaranteed Fair Trade member' was by a few informants mentioned as challenging sometimes. According to WFTO (2019), this cost is determined on the basis of a minimum fee and an intermediate fee based on percentage of each member organisation's financial conditions. However, the informants who expressed this challenge were careful to stress their awareness of the importance to be included in a certification system in order for the handicraft to be able to compete with the mainstream mass-produced products. Consequently, this challenge was not necessarily perceived as a problem in itself, rather, it seemed to be a problem in relation to the competition in the conventional market. This competition is something that most of the informants perceived as a challenge, as further discussed in the section 'The struggle of working 'within and against' the conventional market'.

### *The cultural context of the traditional handicraft*

In addition to the artisans' empowerment in generating economic income of their production, the traditional handicraft appeared to be an important part in maintaining their cultural heritage. The informants expressed an inherent value in the traditional handicraft which lies in the historical knowledge that has been passed down from generation to generation. In Bolivia, the culture surrounding the traditional handicraft has been an important part for indigenous

groups who have a long history of living under suppression and discrimination. Valentina's story with the organisation she works in starts in the 1970s. At that time in El Alto, a city close to the capital La Paz, immigrant women from the countryside as herself, struggled with discrimination and economical misery. Thus, together with other immigrant women, she started a cooperation working with traditional handicrafts such as textiles and ceramics. She expressed that she is proud of how they have been able to keep their traditions alive and described the years in the organisation and the Fair Trade community as a place where they have been able to remember their common history, values and cultures.

Well, the importance of craftsmanship is its life, our life. Why? Because we have been doing the traditional production for years and years. [...] I believe that it is our own life, our culture. And apart from what belongs to us, we are sharing; exporting to other countries to generate the economic part. [...] I think we want to continue giving that strength [to our children] because there is still much to do for our children, for our grandchildren, because we want them to be men and women who will not forget their country, their food, or their languages (Valentina, Bolivia).

The story of Valentina is very similar to other stories of indigenous communities and Fair Trade as shown by the anthropologist Sarah Lyon (2016). She argues that Fair Trade has enabled many indigenous groups in Latin America to generate economic income through exports of their products. This is also related to the capability approach considering Valentina's experience that their organisation and the Fair Trade movement had paved the way for their ability to continuing practice their culture (Benería et al., 2016, p. 55).

Another example is the traditional craft villages and the ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. Minh explained that these groups are specialised in specific traditional skills of handicraft, e.g. traditional weavings, stone carvings and jewellery makings. Although Minh is not an artisan herself, she explained that she grew up with her grandmother who could weave silk on a handloom and who spent a lot of time teaching Minh to weave on the loom. She believed that her grandmother's love for handicraft had inspired her to continue her advocacy for the traditional craftsmanship. For Vietnam in general, she continued, there is a great importance of the handicraft because it is a big part of their traditions and cultures. Similar to Minh, Shyam from Bangladesh had also grown up with a family that were involved in traditional craftsmanship. For example, his father made bamboo baskets to sell in the local market and had taught Shyam the traditional techniques. Valentina, Minh and Shyam expressed a fear of

those traditions getting lost because people were starting to work in more modern ways. This conviction of the cultural value of the traditional handicraft was also apparent in the stories of the informants in Kenya and India. Additionally, the traditions getting lost to modern production is something that all the informants mentioned. This fear of losing the value of the manual work seemed to be present in the conventional market due to the insufficient payments and the competition with mass-produced goods, which is similar to the findings of Littrell (2016, p. 457). She points specifically to the artisans' struggle for their handicraft to compete with cheap manufactured products.

### *Protecting materials and the local environment*

In the data, traditional craftsmanship was not only defined by the traditional techniques and knowledge; the use of natural raw materials appeared to be of equal importance.

We use our own raw materials and are not importing anything. And the biggest importance is that *we* are using the products. We are dressing ourselves [in the clothes], we are eating on the clay dishes, on the ceramics. [...] Fair Trade helps us a lot to value all the natural raw material, this organic gold that we are working with. The formal trade or the other trade does not care what it is made of, as long as the price is cheap. (Valentina, Bolivia).

Similar to the statement of Valentina, other informants expressed an encouragement within Fair Trade to continue to protect the traditional use of raw materials and to protect the environment, which is further outlined in the tenth Fair Trade principal of 'Respect for the Environment' (WFTO, 2017). For example, Peter from Kenya stressed how the use of raw materials creates a need to also conserve and protect the materials, thus it works to protect the environment which further benefits the entire community. This is related to the observation by Walker et al. (2019), who describe that the characteristics of traditional craftsmanship entails a strong connection to specific places and consequently creates a respect between humans and nature.

Many of the traditional artisans that the informants worked with are situated in rural areas, where different villages had their own specialities in crafting with the specific raw materials of their surroundings. However, several informants expressed difficulties in coping with consequences of the climate changes as droughts or floods, which threatened the access to essential resources and expressed a struggle of providing these artisans with materials.

The monsoon is now longer, and oftentimes; you will see floods. [...] We need to depend on the sunshine, like glue made paper from jute, it needs sunshine to dry the paper sheets, and then when it is continuous raining we can not do anything for our producers at that time. (Shyam, Bangladesh).

Additionally, Minh emphasized a struggle with the lack of natural resources and she described how her organisation actively worked to try to assist the artisans with materials. There seemed to be an agreement among the informants that the practice of Fair Trade was crucial for this work of preserving the raw materials, however, they also expressed concern about maintaining access to resources in the future.

To summarise, according to the informants, it is the traditional techniques, knowledge, and use of raw materials that are the centrality of maintenance, not necessarily the appearance of the handicraft. Conversely, in fact, in the data it becomes clear that the handicraft to some degree *requires* change in order to adapt to the market and to further generate economic income for the artisans. Both Littrell (2016) and Murray (2010) highlight this necessity of change for the viability of traditional handicraft, as discussed in the following sections.

### *The role of information exchange and social relations*

The perceived difference of being valued in the Fair Trade market but oppressed in the conventional market seemed not to be solely related to price and profit. In the stories of the informants, an additional value appeared; that of information. As previously outlined, the Fair Trade market was not established on the basis of profit maximization but on social and economic justice. In the data, it became clear that the stories of artisan empowerment were the important part of the exchange in the Fair Trade market. For example, Shyam explained that he perceived the people who are involved in Fair Trade as ‘soft hearted’, which he thought was noticeable in their obvious interest of the traditional handicraft and their enthusiasm to listen to the stories of the artisans. Priya described this in similar ways:

In Fair Trade, producer is first and the product is behind, and everybody wants to know what is behind the product. And in commercial market nobody asks; ‘Oh, it's nice and cheap, beautiful, I buy it.’ But in Fair Trade, it tells you the story, what is behind and from where it's coming. (Priya, India).

Although not the focus of this study, previous research has shown how consumers of Fair Trade in the Global North actively buy in solidarity to producers in the Global South. The political scientists Candace Archer and Stefan Fritsch (2010) illuminate that the normative of Fair Trade consumers is motivated by social values rather than the ‘natural price mechanism’. Significantly, this attitude of solidarity was being recognized by the informants. The informants’ perceptions that the consumers care about the history of the craftsmanship prove a key point similar to the argument of the sociologist Matthew Watson (2005). He emphasizes that the reason of buying Fair Trade products is not only about ensuring that the producers benefit from the trade: “it is specifically focused on *who* benefits – putting names and faces to the process of global trade.” (Watson, 2005, p. 217). This is also supported by McConway and Moore (2016, p. 254) who in their case study of a Fair Trade craft enterprise in Peru, which also sold their products in the conventional market, have shown that buyers in the conventional market seemed to focus on the products, while the partners within Fair Trade focused on their relationships. This is related to Geertz (1978) explanation of the sociality in the bazaar economy. His observation of information sharing and the subsequent need of close relationships between buyers and sellers, is similar to the activities in the Fair Trade market, where the exchange in information appears to be needed in order to value the products, thus it connects the consumer to the producer. It can be seen that this is the opposite of the practices in the conventional market, as explained by Gudeman (2008) who terms the mainstream market exchange as an impersonalized trade where the consumer is disconnected to the producer.

The role of the stories of the artisans within this trade could be compared to the logics of a gift-economy. In similarity to how Mauss understood the purpose of a gift (Wilk & Cliggett, 2007, p. 159), traditional handicraft being sold in the Fair Trade market contains a value connected to the understanding of the people behind the product and the place it is connected to. By contrast, the experience of selling in the conventional market appeared to be different. The informants’ perceptions that buyers in the conventional market only cared about price and appearance of the handicraft, indicate an exchange more in similarity with Marx’s interpretation of the capitalistic trade in commodities (ibid, p. 160). However, some of my informants were careful to stress that even in the conventional market there existed buyers who were interested in the craftsmanship and the artisans behind the products. Yet, these informants further added that what seemed to be most important for the mainstream buyers was their environmentally sustainable methods, rather than their social work.

## Professionalism – a lack or a different kind?

In the discussion above it can be seen how several informants emphasized the importance of maintaining the traditional techniques, knowledge and use of raw materials. Yet, as was pointed out, they also expressed that change and development was necessary in order to adapt the handicraft to the market. To deal with market adaptation, most of the informants expressed an aspiration towards ‘more professionalism’ within the Fair Trade community, and some of them idealized commercial buyers as ‘very professional’. There were several associations with the term ‘professional’ that appeared in the interviews. For example, some mentioned better packaging systems, better logistics or to be more organized, but the main thing that appeared to be associated with professionalism was market adaptation. Some of the informants were of the opinion that actors in the conventional market have a great advantage due to their resources as skilled designers and their access to good market research, which the informants seemed to lack within Fair Trade. As noticed by Littrell and Dicksson (1997) two decades ago: market research is a crucial component for the practice of Fair Trade in order to create a relevant product development, yet, the need of better market research appeared to be a contemporary struggle for the informants. In the data, this struggle seemed to be connected to the fundamental purpose of exchange in the Fair Trade market, similar to the exchange in gifts (as outlined above). This will be discussed in the following themes of this section.

### *Moving away from the gift-economy*

To begin with, the informants told similar stories of their learning curve of how to work with traditional handicraft in a global marketplace and they stressed that during the years, the practice of Fair Trade has become ‘more professional’. The Fair Trade movement was founded with the aim to create a link between artisans and the world market, but the market they got connected to was, as some of the informants expressed it, a market of ‘sympathy buyers’.

I remember in the early 1990s; we could export like five containers of sisal baskets per month. But then I think the market got flooded with these products. Their stores were full with a lot of products that they could not sell, because they just were bought with what we call instinct buying, or sympathy buying (Peter, Kenya).

The very early phases of the Fair Trade movement could be understood as a gift-economy, where the most important reason to trade was the sociality of the market; the social relations

that connected the artisans with the consumers (Wilk & Cliggett, 2007, p. 159; Aspers, 2011). However, as Peter explained above, the supply was higher than the demand. All of the informants expressed in different ways how there was a need for the traditional handicraft to adapt to the market aimed at increasing the artisans' sales opportunities. In other words, there was a need to expand from the logics of a gift-economy towards a way of thinking about their handicraft as commodities (Wilk & Cliggett, 2007, p. 160). The informants talked about this as an ongoing process and it was further that which appeared to be the process of becoming 'more professional'. However, the adaptation of the handicraft was by some informants perceived as a sensitive process, and they were careful to stress the importance of comprehending the manual work of the artisans. This is related to the observations by Littrell (2016, p. 471), that Fair Trade enterprises have proven to respect artisans' artistic traditions in both production and design.

### *To mass-produce the handmade*

The informants who were selling in the conventional market experienced difficulties in meeting certain kinds of requirements considering that their products are handmade, e.g. requirements of specific types of quality or too similar and standardised appearances of the products. Even though they described that there were certain demands when selling in the Fair Trade market as well, as outlined in the third Fair Trade principle of 'Fair Trade Practices' (WFTO, 2017), the informants expressed a higher tolerance with product divergence from their Fair Trade partners. Some of the informants told similar stories about a greater level of patience regarding misunderstandings of orders. For example, one order might have required a specific amount of products in a specific type of colour, but the delivery ended up with half of the products in a different colour. According to the informants, these kinds of mistakes were not accepted by the buyers in the conventional market, since they had the ability to instead trade with another producer organisation. However, the informants also expressed that in order to adapt to the market, they could learn from this behaviour in the conventional market. To give an illustration, Minh explained it as the balance between managing a business and an NGO, which she referred to as operating with both a 'business mind' and a 'development mind'.

If this is in different colour, it's rejected, we cannot accept it – so this is business mind. For all the buyers from the conventional market, they will follow the business mind, and in that way they can train the artisans much better than the

development mind. And otherwise, with the development mind, we support them when they say ‘Okay, this time, it’s a little bit different - the colours, so please accept for us and next time we do better’. But they will not learn much. I mean, this is really human. That’s a human thing. (Minh, Vietnam).

The ‘business mind’ appeared to be the professional approach and a means to adapt to the market. In other words, in order to adapt to the market, and further increase sale opportunities, some of the informants felt that they might do the artisans a disservice when they accepted their mistakes.

In contrast to the other informants, Valentina never spoke about professionalism. However, she, too, described how over the years they have been forced to learn and understand the market. In similar ways, all of the informants seemed to work actively to sustain the market for traditional handicraft and consequently they were repeatedly careful to stress the importance of product development. Valentina did not talk negatively about the adjustments of their handicraft, conversely, it seemed to be a natural evolvement in order to also make a living, accepted as long as they were able to work in their traditional ways and using their traditional raw materials. This is, once again, related to the argument of Murray (2010), who points to the need for traditional handicraft to change in order to maintain its viability, although only to the extent that the artisans are able to be the driver of their own product development. Furthermore, it is related to the framework of Amartya Sen, which emphasizes the importance of individuals having the freedom to create the path for their own development (Benería, et al., 2016, p. 55).

McConway and Moore (2016, p. 254) have shown similar challenges of the different requirements from the commercial buyers and the Fair Trade buyers in their case study of the Fair Trade craft enterprise in Peru. Littrell (2016, p. 459) also highlights these problems of coping with the demands of the mainstream wholesalers and the paradoxical struggle for the artisans to create mass-produced handicraft. Such pressure from actors in the conventional market, to mass-produce the traditional handicraft, can be further theorised in light of the gift/commodity dichotomy, given that the standardisation called for can be regarded as a form a decontextualisation of the products. In this decontextualisation, traces of sociality – social relations and specific signs of the local circumstances regarding their production – should ideally be removed, so that the final product is an anonymized commodity with no "gift"

traces left (Wilk & Cliggett, 2007, p. 160). Conversely, as previously described, this is the opposite of what the informants perceived that actors in the Fair Trade market valued.

### *The professionalism of Fair Trade*

In addition to some of the informants' challenging experience with trying to ensure volume, quality and a mass-produced appearance of the handicraft within the conventional market, it is the insufficient payments (observed in the previous section) and the uncertainty when trading with actors in the conventional market that the informants perceived as the main challenge.

There is no consistency [in the conventional market], because we also go to trade fairs, we meet Fair Trade buyers, we meet ethical buyers as we meet commercial buyers. Sometimes you meet a commercial buyer that gives you a big order. You get so inspired. But once you supply that order, he does not bring the next order, and he disappeared like that. [...] One of the best things with Fair Trade is that the Fair Trade market has been consistent. (Peter, Kenya)

Most of the informants had the same experience as Peter, and believed it to be connected to the profit orientation in the conventional market. Hence, the informants perceived the commercial buyers as volatile and unreliable. Furthermore, the 'professionalism' linked to actors in the conventional market seemed to come at a cost. For example, Minh explained that the commercial buyers do not need to care about the life of the artisans, as their focus is finding the best products for the market. By contrast, all the informants pointed specifically to the reliability with the Fair Trade partners. These social relations appeared in the data as a means to enable the artisans to develop their work considering that they do not need to worry if, in the end, there will be any buyers.

But the Fair Trade buyers, they maintain the long term relationship, even if the artisans meet with much more difficulties, they will find a way, and we will find a way to help them to develop further. That is a big difference (Minh, Vietnam).

In the interviews, the long term relationships with the Fair Trade partners appeared as highly valuable by all of the informants. This illuminates a key point concerning the practice of Fair Trade; the 'professionalism' one seems to lack operating in the Fair Trade market might simultaneously be that which distinguishes their practice from the conventional market logic.

This can be compared to how previous research has emphasized precisely that one of the main challenges for marginalized artisans in the Global South has been the inconsistent trade relations in the mainstream markets (Raynolds & Bennett, 2016). This realisation is also reflected in the third principle of Fair Trade 'Fair Trading Practices': "The organization maintains long term relationships based on solidarity, trust and mutual respect that contribute to the promotion and growth of Fair Trade" (WFTO, 2017). Also McConway and Moore (2016) identified consistency with the Fair Trade partners as a major difference compared to the producers' experience of trade in the conventional market, which further allowed the artisans to develop and expand their work.

The stories of the informants were similar to the observation by Sherif-Trask (2014, p. 34), that the neoliberal logic has created actors in constant search for new trading partners in the ambition to find cheaper products. Moreover, the commercial buyers do not have the same obligations as the Fair Trade enterprises, thus, their way of operating in a 'more professional' way might not be desirable for actors who practice Fair Trade. In the data, the practice of Fair Trade seemed to have developed in another way, divergent from the conventional market logic, but still towards a market adaptation of the traditional handicraft. In other words, instead of unpredictable companies in constant search for the perfect products for the market, the Fair Trade enterprises appeared to be stable and invested in the artisans in order for them to be a part of their own product development. This is similar to how Geertz (1978) distinguishes the professional way of operating in the bazaar economy. Instead of the practice of searching 'widely through the market at each occasion of need', which he describes as the norm in regular labour markets, he emphasizes that the actors in the bazaar establishes close relationships to verify getting the best products. Added to this, which could be found in the argument of Gudeman (2008), the 'continuing ties' in the Fair Trade market are the opposite of the competitive form of trade in the conventional market. Consequently, it can be seen that the practice of consistency could be understood as a way of professionally practicing Fair Trade.

To conclude, the informants' aspiration towards 'more professionalism' highlights a key point in the sociality of the Fair Trade market: What started as a marketplace built on social relations as the most important reason to trade for both sellers and buyers, has developed into a place where the informants experienced that they have to consider the market attraction of their products. Thus, the Fair Trade marketplace has evolved into an arena with a practice that is both influenced by the logics of a gift-economy with the importance of the stories of the

artisans, and the logics of a commodity-economy considering that the products needed to be adapted to the market (Wilk & Cliggett, 2007, pp. 159-160). The informants were acknowledging their own kind of professionalism in their strong relationships. However, they still strived for better market research and collaborations with designers.

## The struggle of working ‘within and against’ the conventional market

### *Increasing sale opportunities in a limited market*

One of the main challenges of working as a Fair Trade enterprise that appeared in the interviews was related to the experience of being confined to a limited market. In order to increase sale opportunities and incomes, the informants expressed a longing for the Fair Trade market for traditional handicraft to grow. Some of the informants made the observation that the Fair Trade market has limited distribution channels, thus, they perceived the purchasing power to be a bit lower in comparison to the big corporations in the conventional market. For example, Peter talked about the Fair Trade market as a ‘niche market’. Moreover, some of the informants perceived the Fair Trade market for traditional handicraft as stagnant. The experience of a limited market is also what Littrell (2016) emphasizes as one of the main challenges of the artisans in her case studies.

Considering the informants’ perceptions of the Fair Trade market as limited, they were asked if they thought selling their products in the conventional market would have been different. The informants who were solely selling in the Fair Trade market replied in a similar way and did not see any great opportunities for traditional handicraft in the conventional market. Conversely, they were careful to stress that they believed the Fair Trade market to be crucial for the viability of the traditional handicraft. However, those who sometimes were selling in the conventional market described it rather as a place to sell in order to fill in the gaps when there were low orders from the Fair Trade partners. This is partly related to the craft organisation in Peru. McConway & Moore (2016, p. 254) shows that they could make great profits from the high-volume orders in the conventional market, however, they believed that the long term relationships within Fair Trade sustained them in the long run.

### *The experience of unfair competition*

Another challenge of being a Fair Trade enterprise that appeared in the data is the competition with the commercial buyers that seemed to always be present. “The commercial field is

dominating, so the competition is really hard for the small organisations as within the Fair Trade movement.” (Priya, India). This challenge concerning competition was related to several aspects. First, the main thing that appeared in the data was the competition with the mass-produced products and some of the informants expressed a fear of machinery taking over the manual work. However, they perceived the Fair Trade market as a market for handicraft, thus, this competition was related to the products existing in the conventional market. This is related to the argument of Littrell and Dickson (1997), who emphasize that a different market logic is crucial for the handicraft, considering that the mainstream markets are flooded with cheap manufactured products that are difficult to compete with.

Second, some of the informants expressed an ambivalence considering the costs of being a ‘guaranteed Fair Trade member’ since they felt that this puts them into an inferior position, compared to other actors in the conventional market. For example, Peter explained that in order to increase the artisans’ business opportunities, the artisan groups they worked with were not bound to sell their products through their organisation. This meant that commercial buyers were able to trade directly with the artisans and export the products at a lower price. “And because he’s not investing, he can afford to put a smaller mark-up and push you out of the market. So this is one of the negative aspects. But that is competition. So there is not very much you can do about it.” (Peter, Kenya). This comprehension of ‘the rule of the game’ was also expressed by some of the other informants, nevertheless, it became clear that the perception of an unfair competition caused a feeling of frustration. However, some of the informants believed that the novel certification system of WFTO could increase their market competitiveness. Thus, being certified as a Fair Trade enterprise seemed important considering the competition with the commercial actors. “Along with other components, trust is a big issue to expand your business. So, it is important to certify that this specific group is doing good. Then Fair Trade is a nice certification system.” (Shyam, Bangladesh). In similar ways, both Littrell (2016) and McDowall, et al., (2011) argue for the importance of the Fair Trade handicraft sector to be included in a certification system considering the increasing demand in control of production, thus, certification enables the handicraft to compete in the conventional market.

Third, other informants perceived the competition as unfair due to challenges related to a demanding work of managing an organisation that needs to be fully transparent, which they experienced required a lot of time and energy. However, as described above, they were simultaneously careful to stress their awareness of the purpose of certification.

If we sell to a normal mainstream market, maybe they don't ask to test for safety, but for all the Fair Trade buyers, it's a must we have to follow. Because when we call us Fair Trade, we have to certify all those condition, otherwise this doesn't make sense. (Minh, Vietnam).

Even though it is being perceived as a necessity, being transparent involves a great deal of information sharing. This can be related to Geertz (1978) findings in the bazaar economy, where the relationships between sellers and buyers is characterized by a mutual dependence concerning the distribution of knowledge; the buyer requires the information of the seller, and the seller is tied to his customer and thus bound to share the information. Such knowledge sharing can be seen in the relationships in the Fair Trade market, where the buyer requires the seller to be transparent in line with the logics of the Fair Trade practice, as outlined in the second Fair Trade principal of 'Transparency and Accountability' (WFTO, 2017). However, when selling in the conventional market, this kind of knowledge is not needed, which consequently causes the perception of an unfair competition.

### *Being the alternative or improving the conventional market?*

In addition to the above described challenges, there also seemed to be a longing for the commercial buyers to adapt the practice of Fair Trade. The Fair Trade objective to influence the conventional market is to some extent apparent in the data. For example, when the informants got the question if they thought they could learn anything from the practices in the conventional market, some of them were careful to stress that, above all, they thought that actors in the conventional market could learn from the practice of Fair Trade.

Fair Trade is a concept, it's a way of life, it's a holistic approach. And conventional trade can adopt it. We don't need to say that they should be two different things, they should be all together. And conventional trade, they should embrace Fair Trade principles, and ideas and actions. (Priya, India).

However, some of the informants also explained that they could see how the demand in the conventional market has changed over the years. For example, they described that the commercial buyers have become more aware of the social aspects in the production stage, even though it was the environmental aspects that the informants perceived to be their highest priority. This is related to the observation of McDowall, et al., (2011), that the social and

environmental awareness of the commercial sphere has increased, which they argue are shown in the development of CSR programs in the mainstream corporations. Furthermore, the aspiration to affect the practices in the conventional market is related to the opinion of the Fair Trade pioneer VanderHoff Boersma (2008), who argues that the Fair Trade market should not strive to be an alternative market, or a 'niche market', parallel to the conventional market. It should rather be understood as a means to correct and create better conditions within the conventional market.

The paradox of operating 'within and against' the conventional market appeared to be a struggle for all of the informants considering the experience of Fair Trade as a limited market and the struggle to compete in the commercial sphere. The Fair Trade practice is supposed to be an alternative to the practice in the mainstream market, however, according to the stories of the informants, it seemed to be impossible not to get affected by the logics of the conventional trade, which becomes clear considering their previous described aspiration towards 'more professionalism'. Leigh Taylor (2004) emphasizes precisely that the conventional market logic is affecting practitioners of Fair Trade, specifically considering the conventional objective of competition. In line with feminist economics, it can be seen that the conventional market logic is characterized by the idea of the 'rational economic man' (Benería et al., 2016, p. 101) and the struggle of the informants appeared to be a struggle between the 'caring and cooperative behaviour' and 'the maximising individual' (ibid, p. 52). In other words, the work of the informants appeared as a contradiction; as practitioners of Fair Trade, their objective was social and economic justice, and environmental sustainability, at the same time, they were being forced to always take into account the logics of profit and competition.

## Difference in a time of a global crisis

### *Challenges in the covid-19 pandemic*

All of the informants described that the trade during the covid-19 pandemic has been a challenging experience since their orders dropped dramatically. The low orders have forced the artisans to live out of their savings and according to Peter "they are just surviving". Some of the informants described that their organisations' developmental work has been their main focus during this year. For example, they mentioned food relief programs for the artisans and their communities. Apart from the low orders, other key factors to remember are the

challenges related to the pandemic that are not necessarily connected to challenging trading conditions. For example, India has been one of the worst affected countries from the disease in terms of fatalities (Gamio & Glanz, 2021) and Priya expressed grief over their many losses.

The informants described that their domestic market for traditional handicraft depends mainly on tourists and expats, thus, their local trade has been exceptionally low. Consequently, all of the informants described how they were surviving on their exports. Some of them thought that the big corporations in the conventional market have had an advantage in the crisis, since they have more resources and were able to easily transform their business to adapt to the circumstances. For example, Shyam talked about the fast adjustment of the commercial actors to convert their businesses online. He believed that the retailers of Fair Trade might not have the recourses to make the same adjustments. However, other informants described an adjustment of their production. Minh explained that they had shifted their production to produce masks by hand woven fabric from the textile artisans, and that the fabric was sent to other artisan groups to further accomplish the masks, in order to spread out the work. This flexibility and creativity in production is also precisely what Littrell (2016, p. 471) highlights as a character of the Fair Trade craft enterprises in her case studies.

### *Back to the gift-economy*

In the data, the context of the covid-19 pandemic illuminates the difference between operating in the conventional market and the Fair Trade market. The worldwide measurements of lockdowns in order to cope with the spread of the disease highly affected the global trade (UN, 2020, p. 15). However, the informants expressed a gratitude towards their Fair Trade partners as they described how the buyers from the conventional market ‘just disappeared’. “We have not received any order from the regular market, but within Fair Trade, because we have our relationships, they are the ones who gives us work, that forms 35-40%.” (Peter, Kenya). As previously described, all of the informants pointed to the long term relationships within Fair Trade as a security in their trading conditions, and that the pandemic had further proven the importance of these relations.

During this time, the very difficult time, we see that the support from the Fair Trade organisations is very great. Why the other, the conventional buyers, they will stop by. Because the situation is very difficult, right? But many of the Fair Trade buyers try to maintain the orders, even small, even little, but they try to

maintain the order. Because they know that they need to support the artisans. So they have their own difficulties, but they try still to support the artisans. So I think it's a difference, that's a big difference between Fair Trade buyers and the conventional buyers. At this period of time. (Minh, Vietnam).

Apart from the buyers' attempt to maintain placing orders, some informants described how the Fair Trade partners also helped with humanitarian support. All the informants believed that it was the trade within the Fair Trade market that had sustained them during the year of the pandemic. This can be related to internal research by WFTO that shows how Fair Trade enterprises are estimated to be four times more resilient (in bankruptcy terms) than mainstream small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) (Doherty et al., 2020, p. 25).

In the context of a global crisis in trade, the sociality of the Fair Trade market appeared to be the reason of the survival of the informants' organisations. In similarity to Geertz's (1978) idea of the bazaar economy, the close relationships in the Fair Trade market were described by the informants to be specifically valuable during the pandemic. Furthermore, in the light of the informants' perceived solidarity between them and the Fair Trade partners, the logics of a gift-economy appeared to be returning, considering that it seemed to be more important to maintain and nurture their relationships, than maximizing profits. Moreover, it can be seen that the Fair Trade practice worked in opposite to the conventional market logic in a time of a crisis.

### *Looking at the future from a crisis perspective*

Despite the challenging time due to the pandemic, all the informants expressed hope and encouragement about the future for traditional handicraft. The desire for the Fair Trade market for traditional handicraft to grow seemed to outweigh the related struggles as outlined above. For some informants, the global interest in traditional handicraft had been proven during the pandemic. For example, Shyam had the experience that during this period of time, people had been even more encouraged to buy the handmade products. That said, there were several struggles for the future of traditional handicraft that appeared in the data. For example, some of the informants expressed a concern about the lack of interest from the younger generations.

The next generations are not very much interested in continuing the handicraft. They want the white collar jobs [...]. It's the same like farmers, you know, more

and more farmer's children, they don't want to become farmers. Because it's very hard work. So things will change. (Priya, India).

Similarly, Peter explained that he thought the desire for young people were to get a job in the industry or in an NGO, not to continue their parents traditional work in crafts. This concern is recurrent in most of the interviews. Some of the informants pointed specifically to the use of electronics such as phones and computers, and they perceived that young people do not seem to have the time and patience to learn the craftsmanship. Furthermore, it becomes clear that it was not just specifically the traditional handicraft that the informants were afraid to lose, it was the cultural and social aspects that surrounds it. For example, Valentina expressed a fear of their indigenous cultures getting lost, she explained that if they lose one thing they might lose the other: "We also want to pass on the craftsmanship to our children. [...] If we lose making crafts, we would also be losing our languages, our cultures, our values, our food." (Valentina, Bolivia). Moreover, Shyam emphasized the importance of the social context of the craftsmanship and expressed a sadness of a fragmentation he perceived to be growing between the younger and older generations. In other words, the sociality of the traditional handicraft appeared to be the reason of protecting the viability of the craftsmanship.

Ultimately, as previously described, the competition with the mass-produced products in the conventional market was the most recurrent fear of the future for traditional handicraft. However, the informants' perceptions of the stable relationships they had within Fair Trade appeared to be the driving force of their articulated hope when looking at the future. Furthermore, the practice of Fair Trade was perceived as the obvious way of ensuring the viability of the traditional handicraft.

And we should not think only about the profit, [about the] business, how to grow. That's an important security, but at the same time, we should also work to keep alive our art, our traditions, and that is what our organisation is doing. So I don't think [the handicraft] will die. I think hundreds of years ago the traditions were there. Maybe they will change shapes, but it's going to stay. (Priya, India).

This summarizes well the key aspects of the importance of Fair Trade as expressed by the informants. It can be seen that the informants' confidence of the future viability of traditional handicraft lies in the sociality of the Fair Trade market. This is related to the findings of Littrell (2016, p. 471) as she argues that Fair Trade has proven to put the interests of the artisans first by realizing their artistic traditions in both production and design. Furthermore,

the process of a cultural exchange as an important phenomenon for strengthening the traditions of handicraft, as expressed by Murray (2010), appears in the previously described perception of the need for market adaptation. In other words, the adjustments of the handicraft to the demands of the market are further that which enables the artisans' income generation. Hence, in order for the artisans to survive on the craftsmanship, the overall objective of the informants was to better understand the demands of the market.

## **6. Conclusions**

The two-pronged viability of traditional handicraft that appeared in the data concerns the income generation for the artisans and the maintenance of their cultural heritage. According to the informants, this has been possible in the Fair Trade market where they had the experience of being valued properly. This can be understood through the analysis of the sociality of the Fair Trade market. By contrast, the experience of trade in the conventional market was perceived as challenging which mainly were related to issues concerning insufficient payments, and volatile and unreliable relations. However, simultaneously, some of the informants expressed an aspiration towards the conventional market, both to reach the bigger crowds in order to expand the market for traditional handicraft, but also to learn the perceived 'professional' behaviour, which were mainly associated with an approach of better market adaptation.

A recurrent subject in the data was the experience of the Fair Trade market as a limited market. This was to some extent related to the perception of the market as stagnant and the lack of market growth. On the other hand, the informants expressed a gratitude that the Fair Trade market had been consistent, which, furthermore, was one of the main challenges in the conventional market. This illuminates a contradiction considering that the informants were grateful for the Fair Trade market but, simultaneously, some of them expressed a tiresome feeling that it was also stagnant. This paradox was not unknown to the informants, rather, they seemed highly aware of the struggle. Yet, the informants were careful to stress that they thought of the Fair Trade market as vital for traditional handicraft and consequently seemed to have trust in the future.

The understanding of Fair Trade as the right market for traditional handicraft was by the informants explained through several aspects. First, some of the informants perceived the

insufficient payments in the conventional market as an oppressive practice, and further emphasized the wages in the Fair Trade market as crucial. Second, the long term relationships were highlighted by all the informants as the main difference between the Fair Trade market and the conventional market. The payments and consistency in the Fair Trade market appeared as essential parts to pursue the investments in the craftsmanship. This constituted the professional way of practicing Fair Trade which enabled them to work and trade with traditional handicraft in a globalized market. Third, due to the competition with the mass-produced goods in the conventional market, the informants appreciated the alternative objectives within Fair Trade, where the products were being valued out of its social and cultural characters, which accordingly seemed to be the success of their practice. Thus, the theoretical understanding of the sociality of the Fair Trade market can be seen as vital for traditional handicraft.

Through the theoretical lens of the gift/commodity dichotomy, it could be argued that the exchange in the very early beginning of the Fair Trade market was characterized by the logics of a gift-economy (Wilk and Cliggett, 2007, p. 159). In other words, the social relations were the reason of trade and the value of the product was the story of the person behind, not necessarily the product itself. Some of the informants expressed this as ‘a sympathy trade’. This exchange in information required close relationships between sellers and buyers comparable to Geertz (1978) idea of the bazaar economy. According to the stories of the informants, it can be seen that Fair Trade had proven the possibility of a different marketplace with social objectives rather than merely capitalistic goals, and further challenged the neoliberal longing for a free market separated from social involvements. However, the informants described a need to adapt to the demands of the market, in order to increase sale opportunities for the artisans. In other words, there was a need to expand from the logics of a gift-economy, to a way of thinking about their handicraft as commodities that needed to improve its market attraction. Thus, the Fair Trade marketplace evolved into an arena where the exchange of products illustrates a blurred line between the purpose of gifts and the purpose of commodities. Yet, while orders from the conventional market disappeared due to the challenging time of global trade in the covid-19 pandemic, the informants expressed their appreciation for the efforts from their Fair Trade partners as they continued placing orders. Accordingly, the context of the pandemic showed that the logics of a gift-economy may have re-emerged, and, furthermore, shed light on the sociality of the Fair Trade market.

## Future research and concluding reflections

The ambition of this study was to illuminate how members of WFTO in five countries in the Global South perceived the market for traditional handicraft. This has been achieved through examining their perceptions of possibilities and challenges to trade in the Fair Trade market, and further how they perceived it to be different to the conventional market. The results have to some extent confirmed previous research on the struggle of working ‘within and against’ the conventional market. Moreover, although it relied on a small sample of informants, what really stood out in the data was the informants’ longing for certain aspects that were associated with the practices in the conventional market, yet, at the same time, they seemed determined that the practice of Fair Trade was essential for trade in traditional handicraft. Thus, for future research, it would be interesting to advance the investigation of how practices in the conventional market could influence the practice of Fair Trade, without undermining their original purpose of being a counterpart to the conventional market logics and further risk to increase the commodification of traditional handicraft. Added to this, future research could investigate whether Fair Trade actually influences practices within the conventional market, and if so, could the movement challenge the mainstream understanding of markets as disconnected to the sociality?

Although it was not the purpose of this study, the novel certification system of WFTO were by some of the informants mentioned in a positive sense. Thus, it would be interesting for future research to investigate if the Guarantee System of WFTO, that certifies entire organisations as Fair Trade, is preferable to the product certification system of FLO.

Another research topic could be to investigate the conditions for traditional craftsmanship in contexts that are highly affected by the climate changes, where access to traditional raw materials is at risk of being destroyed. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore the connections between the traditional handicraft and sustainable development considering that traditional craftsmanship entails a practice that should be highly valuable for practices and knowledge of sustainable development.

Finally, through the theoretical understanding of the sociality of markets, this study has brought insights to the meaning of Fair Trade in a context of a global crises. This would be an interesting subject for future research, specifically to evaluate the logic of the Fair Trade market after the pandemic.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1. E-mail correspondence

Dear X,

This spring I will be writing my bachelors thesis in Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg. The current purpose for the study is to understand how different members in the WFTO experience the market for the traditional handicraft, and to understand the difference between selling in the Fair Trade market and the mainstream market. For that reason, I am interested in doing an interview with you and four other members in WFTO. The questions I will be asking are focused on your experiences.

I would be really happy if you are interested in helping me to do this study. Of course, the results will be totally confidential and I will give you my interpretation of the interview before I finish the study. You and your organisation will be anonymous and this information will only be available for me and my supervisor. It is important to know that you can always, at any time during the process, choose to cancel your participation. The interview will be on Zoom and will take maximum one hour.

The dates I suggest for the interview are during the weekdays of the last two weeks of March. But my schedule is flexible and I will of course adapt to what is possible for you.

Thank you for your consideration!

Kind regards,

Miranda Kårelind

## Appendix 2. Interview guide

Themes	Head questions	Sub questions
<b>Background</b>	<p>Place of residence and place of birth.</p> <p>How long have you been working in the organisation?</p> <p>What is your position in the organisation?</p> <p>Did you work with traditional handicraft before?</p> <p>Are you, or have you been an artisan of traditional handicraft yourself?</p>	
	<p><b>The following questions will focus on how you experience the Fair Trade market for traditional handicraft.</b></p>	
<b>Traditional handicraft</b>	<p>Can you start by giving me a brief introduction about the traditional handicraft that you work with in your organisation?</p> <p>Why do you think the traditional handicraft is important to preserve?</p> <p>Why is the handicraft important for you, personally?</p>	
<b>The meaning of Fair Trade</b>  <i>Bridge</i>	<p>What does Fair Trade mean to you, personally?</p> <p>What do you think that Fair Trade means for the traditional handicraft?</p> <p>How do you think the Fair Trade market has affected <b>the production</b> of the traditional handicraft? Good and/or bad?</p>	<p>What is your personal experience of how Fair Trade has helped the traditional artisans?</p> <p>Do you think the handicraft needs to be adapted to the market?</p> <p>How do you compromise? – How does that make you feel?</p>

<p><b>Challenges and obstacles within Fair Trade</b></p> <p><i>Bridge</i></p>	<p>Do you experience any challenges or barriers for the traditional handicraft in the Fair Trade market?</p> <p>How do you think it would have been different in the mainstream market?</p>	<p>Any other challenges?</p> <p>Do you sell your products in the mainstream market as well? Or only in the Fair Trade market?</p>
<p><b>The conventional market</b></p>	<p>What do you think that the mainstream market can offer the traditional handicraft?</p> <p>Do you sell your products on the local market?</p>	<p>Do you think this is different from the Fair Trade market?</p>
<p><b>The future</b></p>	<p>If you bear in mind everything that we now have talked about, if you think about the future, what do you see?</p> <p>In 10 years, what do you see for traditional handicraft?</p>	<p>The meaning of Fair Trade?</p>
<p><b>Context</b></p>	<p>For me to analyse your answers well, I think it is important for me to understand the context of your organisation. So, therefor I ask if there is any specific event in the nearest past that you think I should know about, that you think might have affected the trade? Good and/or bad?</p> <p>How do you think the pandemic has affected the market?</p>	<p>Did you experience any difference between trading in the Fair Trade market and the conventional market?</p>
<p><b>Ending</b></p>	<p>Before we end the interview, is there anything that you have been thinking about, that you want to add?</p> <p>If there is anything that you are wondering about, or if there is something that you want to add after this meeting, feel free to just contact me.</p> <p>Thank you!</p>	