



## International Partnership in Community Economic Development

### Just Us! Coffee Roasters Co-op





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*When we had to think of a name for our business. "Just Us!" was the first idea that came up. It seemed to fit. It was a play on the word "justice" which we liked. It also captured the notion that we were just a small group of people who were going to try, against all odds, to make a difference in the way coffee and other products were produced and traded.<sup>1</sup>*

Just Us! Coffee Roasters Co-op is one of this country's most successful worker-owned businesses. It is also Canada's first certified Fair Trade coffee roaster, collaborating with producer partners globe-over in the promotion of an international trade system that believes in "people and the planet before profits." (JU)

Just Us! now deals in Fair Trade organic coffee, tea, chocolate, and sugar. Based in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, the organization features:

- A coffee roastery
- Café locations in Wolfville,

This profile is one of four stories examining international partnership in community economic development (CED). The profiles have been prepared to showcase several examples of effective models of international collaboration and knowledge exchange that distribute contribution, benefit, and risk amongst all involved. They are examples of ends that were made possible because people were working together. For the other profiles and more information on the project, please see the notes at the end of this document or go to our website at [www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/pages/international.asp](http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/pages/international.asp).

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Canadian CED Network  
211-620 View Street  
Victoria, BC V8W 1J6  
Telephone (250) 386-9980  
Toll Free 1 (877) 202-2268

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An electronic copy of this document will be available on the CCEDNet website  
<http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca>

*Ce document sera aussi disponible en français.*

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#### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Taken from "About Us," <http://www.justuscoffee.com/AboutJustUs.aspx> on July 19, 2007. For the remainder of the document, any material sourced from the Just Us website on July 19, 2007 will be identified as (JU).

<sup>ii</sup> Taken from "How Fair Trade Works," <http://www.transfair.ca/en/fairtrade/howitworks/> on July 19, 2007. For the remainder of the document, any material sourced from the TransFair website on July 19, 2007 will be identified as (TF).

<sup>iii</sup> For more information on FLO please visit <http://www.fairtrade.net/>.

<sup>iv</sup> For more information on TransFair Canada please visit <http://www.transfair.ca>.

brings added learning, experience and inspiration to all involved. This form of international networking lends credibility to a global movement that is growing in significance and prominence. Through exchanges such as these, Canada's CED sector can play an important role in expanding support for alternative community-based approaches to sustainable development, at home and abroad.

### Contact Information

Jeff Moore  
Head Office and Roastery  
11865 Highway # 1, R.R. # 3, Wolfville  
Nova Scotia  
B4P 2R3

Toll Free: 1-888-NOT-THEM (668-8436)  
Local: (902) 542-7474  
Fax: (902) 542-4436  
[info@justuscoffee.com](mailto:info@justuscoffee.com)

*Many thanks to Jeff Moore for contributing his time, experience, and thoughts to this project.*

- Grand Pré, Halifax, and Toronto
- Its own bakery, specializing in local organic products, to supply its cafes with baked goods
- A small chocolate factory in the town of Hantsport, Nova Scotia
- A second co-op for "investors ": the Just Us! Fair Trade Investment Co-op (JU)

### Context

Before the days of Just Us! Jeff Moore, founder and Development Manager, was finding other ways to promote North-South knowledge sharing for the betterment of his Nova Scotia community. Jeff integrated his background in Social Work with Latin American popular education methods in his teaching around community development at Acadia University.

Shortly after the fall of the Berlin wall, Jeff was attending a conference in Cuba. The country had lost its support from Eastern Europe, found itself in a position of need, and was searching for non-charity models by which to develop its socioeconomic stability. How could they develop international trade relations based on fair prices?

This conference was a key moment in the development of Just Us!. Reflecting back on his introduction to freshly home roasted coffee on a trip to Ethiopia several years prior, Jeff began to paint a picture of possibility, "I realized that if you get

***Fair Trade** is an international system of doing business based on dialogue, transparency and respect. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions for producers and workers in developing countries. Behind the principles and goals of Fair Trade is a rigorous international system of monitoring, auditing and certification.*

*The international Fair Trade system is structured to produce the following outcomes for farmers and workers in developing countries:*

- *Fair compensation for their products and labour*
- *Sustainable environmental practices*
- *Improved social services*
- *Investment in local economic infrastructure*

*Taken from:  
<http://www.transfair.ca/en/fairtrade/>*

good coffee and roasted it fresh, you get a whole new product that we weren't used to in Canada." Maybe high quality, fairly traded coffee was the product that Cuba was looking for.

### *Fair Trade*

*...Is an alliance between producers and consumers that cuts out the "middlemen." In the process, it empowers producers and gives them greater dignity and a fairer price for their products and it provides consumers with high quality products that they know are more sustainable from a social and ecological point of view.*

*(JU)*

Fair Trade is very similar to a standard supply chain model; the main difference lies in the certification and monitoring of producers, importers, and processors to ensure they meet and maintain a particular standard of fairness, transparency, and accountability.<sup>ii</sup>

At the international level, producers and their organizations receive certification from the Fair Trade Labelling Organizations International (FLO).<sup>iii</sup> Domestically, there is a licensor, TransFair Canada, which maintains FLO standards amongst Canadian processors.<sup>iv</sup> (TF)

### **History**

Upon his return to Canada, Jeff began to investigate the feasibility of his idea. While there was little evidence of any fair trade discussion in Canada, he discovered some momentum in Europe. He contacted everyone he could think of in the coffee business, co-ops, and government about how to get things moving in Canada. In the end he had to just jump on a plane to Mexico.

With the name of a coffee producer coop in Chiapas – retrieved from the New Internationalist magazine September 1995 issue on coffee – Jeff went to Mexico in the winter of 1995 to pursue the possibilities of collaboration on the ground. The region was in the midst of a civil war sparked by international trade agreements threatening peasants' rights to communal land and thereby, their livelihood.

### *Use International Partnership to Create Opportunities for Local Practice*

Just Us! was able to use a product produced in other countries as platform on which to build a local CED initiative. By partnering with coffee producer co-operatives around the world, Just Us! has built high quality local employment opportunities, introduced active community gathering spaces, and provided the Canadian population with an ethically managed quality product. Throughout its development, this partnership has allowed the exchange of organizational practices between co-ops in the South and the Just Us! worker co-operative, now one of Canada's most successful worker-owned businesses. This kind of example - linking with international community development practices through mutually beneficial social enterprise exchanges - offers great potential for other CED organizations and the sector as a whole that CCEDNet and its International Committee hope to build upon. It also shows the importance of a two way transfer of knowledge and practice amongst CED organizations (not just development aid from Canada to the South!), an important principle that CCEDNet's International Committee is advocating.

### *Raise the profile of economic alternatives in Canada*

By providing a high quality product, sharing their story, and making education a central part of their business, Just Us! has successfully used social enterprise to engage the Canadian public in understanding and contributing to socioeconomic change at home and abroad. This business has become a model of how social and environmental responsibility can be merged with economic productivity and education for all. It is in no small part thanks to the work of Just Us! that the Fair Trade movement is now well established for certain products in Canada.

### *Contribute to a Global Movement*

Just Us! has built a business in which its owners, workers and customers engage directly in learning from and working with CED and social economy projects in other parts of the world. This engagement adds a global solidarity dimension to their work that

## *International Directions*

An exciting vision potentially on the horizon is the development of Fair Trade tourism in Mexico. Just Us! is currently undertaking a feasibility study of implementing such a project in Oaxaca. The idea poses huge challenges, but has much to offer in terms of building markets for socially and environmentally responsible travel to producer co-ops. The project would be built around a principle of learning and exchanging ideas.

Finally, Just Us! hopes to increase the participation of women in its international work. Most co-operatives recognize the importance of gender equality but there is often work to do to fully realize it in their practices.

## **On Partnership**

For Just Us!, working in partnership with its producers provides not only a platform for ethical business, but also a platform for international solidarity and a source of inspiration for CED practitioners in Canadian communities.

*In terms of CED, Fair Trade is an amazing story; that these small marginalized producers were able to organize, link up with markets and make something amazing happen. It's a real victory over more and more concentrated power. If people involved in CED in Canada could get a sense of how impressive the accomplishment has been for these Southern producers, who had everything going against them, it's an inspiration for us to not give up too easily.*

*- Jeff Moore, Just Us! Coffee Roasters*

## **Strengthening CED**

What does this story mean for CCEDNet and CED in Canada? This project demonstrates how a Canadian CED initiative was able to:

“It was an exciting place, unnerving. This was quite an adventure. I was questioned by military, they were suspicious....Trees were being cut down by the rebels to try to slow the movement of the military. There was certainly a tension; it was a serious situation...But then you get above this and go to the little communities high in the mountains and they were amazing.”

“There, he was able to see first hand the pride that the coffee farmers took in growing their coffee organically and the empowerment and dignity they derived from being members of a co-op. They said Fair Trade was the first thing that had given them real hope for a better future.” (JU)

For generations, these small coffee farmers had been dependant on buyers from the major coffee companies (known locally as *coyotes*) for the sale of their products. Without the means to process or transport their coffee, this was the only choice in these remote communities. Aware of the farmers limited options, the *coyotes* paid as little as 15 or 20 cents per pound of organic coffee: well below the very cost of production. The big companies controlled the coffee from farm to table.

If Fair Trade could help increase their income from under one dollar to two dollars a day, these farmers would be much more secure in their ability to eat a decent diet, send their kids to school, and deal with medical emergencies. Interest in building a partnership in Canada was strong.

*Jeff came home with “good news” and “bad news”. The good news was he had found a great Fair Trade co-op that would be thrilled to sell their coffee to Canada but the “bad news” was that he and Debbie would have to put their house up as security to finance a minimum shipment of 10 tons of coffee without having a single customer.*

*(JU)*

Jeff reflects on the exciting time: “We had no business or coffee experience! But we believed strongly in the project and we haven't looked back since. This year our sales will be about six

million. We never dreamed it would get to this size. We thought we'd be like a little bakery selling primarily in Annapolis Valley."

## **Activities**

### *Just Us! Coffee Roasters Worker Co-op*

A major and unique aspect of Just Us! is its success as a worker co-operative in Canada.

"We started as a worker co-op without really knowing what this entailed. We wanted to create something to parallel the co-ops we were working with in the South. We were never driven simply by profit. We wanted to create jobs. We wanted to sell Fair Trade products and we wanted to give information on related issues. The initial group all wanted a say in the business. We thought this model could ensure that...There aren't many models to use. Especially in English Canada, there are very few successful worker owned businesses. Now we have close to 80 employees."

Not all of these employees are owners of the business. To be a worker-owner of Just Us! Coffee Roasters an employee must work at least two years, must make a \$2000 investment in the company, and must be accepted by the other worker-owners. The company now has fifteen worker-owners. Jeff explains the worker co-op model:

"These guys basically own the business. They have the final say in whether the business is changed, moved, or sold. All the assets of the business basically belong to this group – one member one vote...they might be production staff, bakers, administration, sales. They come from throughout the entire organization."

The co-operative is guided by a Board of Directors elected by and from within the worker-ownership.

"At this time, there are some important decisions to be made in the movement. We need to keep listening to the producers. There are lots of national initiatives, especially in United States and Britain that are really listening to Big Business in this time of transition. The fear is that those big economic forces will start highjacking the whole movement."

Farmers are already creating an understanding that if they aren't listened to, they will build their own alternative systems. This assertion is global; the network of Latin American producers that met in November has been inspirational to African and Asian producers to be firm and to self organize if their needs are being compromised.

## **Future Directions**

Just Us! has many hopes for the future: organizationally, locally, and internationally.

### *Organizational Directions*

Internally Just Us! is making a commitment to increase the inclusivity of its Board of Directors by engaging in more Board training. This is with the hopes of helping those who are less experienced in these activities gain confidence and participate in this important part of the organization.

### *Local Directions*

The organization is exploring the possibility of expanding its operations to include organic dairy which would also use a lot of Fair Trade chocolate and sugar. Just Us! is also examining the possibility of capitalizing on series of recent chocolate plant closures in Canada; they are considering partnering with Venezuelan cacao producers on a new project to develop the Fair Trade chocolate market.

Of course, the organization plans to continue to develop its coffee, sugar, and tea and to build its strength and sustainability as an organization

“I think we’ve been pretty true to what we’ve set out to do. This whole worker co-op model – “people and the planet before profits” – we’ve been able to do that. We pay our workers a better wage than similar jobs in this area offer. They are also getting other benefits in terms of job satisfaction...There is little difference between top and bottom wages, which is quite unique in a business...We work hard to be really fair to our employees and our producer partners.”

### **Success Factors & Lessons Learned**

In addition to solid relationships, committed workers, risk taking, and a strong belief in the work, Jeff mentions coincidence as a major contributor to Just Us!’s success.

“It was such an amazing coincidence: that small organic farmers were able to identify a potential to organize themselves into cooperatives, to export their products to sympathetic markets in the North, and that Fair Trade organizations were able to develop a market to the extent they have : billions of dollars and growing rapidly. It has been an amazing coincidence.”

The challenge for the organization now is to help the Fair Trade movement continue to develop in the face of global economic forces. There is currently growing interest from multinationals to embrace Fair Trade and many involved in the movement fear this would undermine the integrity of the Movement.

In November 2007, Just Us! participated in a meeting in the Dominican Republic to address this very challenge. Producers from all over Latin America brought key players in the Fair Trade Movement together (with a very limited budget) to discuss the threatened state of Fair Trade. They discussed how to build effective communication and strategic direction for the movement. This gives Jeff hope, “I haven’t seen this kind of sophistication in too many organizations. And we’re talking about people who often have less than a grade-5 education. They created such a sense of unity amongst all the producers: coffee, sugar, cacao...”

### *Just Us! Development & Education Society*

Established in 2005, this society is a non-profit organization working at an arms length from Just Us! Coffee Roasters. The organization aims to build tools to educate and engage the public around social and environmental local-global links, responsible consumerism, and the benefits of Fair Trade. One of their first major projects was the development of the Fair Trade Coffee Museum in Grand Pré, Nova Scotia. (JU)

*Many people think Fair Trade is about price, but it is also about empowerment. Producers form into co-ops and can do things they were never able to do organizationally and financially.*

*- Jeff Moore, Just Us!*

### *Just Us! Fair Trade Investment Co-op*

The purpose of the investment co-op is, “To secure capital to invest in common shares of JUCR (Just Us! Coffee Roasters) and to provide a return to the members on their investments.” This initiative invites members of the broader community to invest in Just Us! and help promote Fair Trade commerce. (JU)

The investment co-op was established in 2002 under the provincial Community Economic Development Investment Fund Program of Nova Scotia, which allows investors to receive tax benefits and modest dividends. (JU)

### *Trade & Exchange*

Finally, at the very heart of the organization is its commitment to actively using trade as a tool for social and environmental change.

Just Us! currently partners with over twelve producer co-ops around the world. These relationships provide a reliable and fair market for the producers and a high quality product for the worker co-op in Canada. But these partnerships extend well beyond the business transaction.

The standard was set early on, with the first partner co-operative in Chiapas. “This co-op, Union de la Selva, was quite a sophisticated organization; they had good coffee, good quality control, plenty of expertise around logistics,” recalls Jeff. “They really helped us get on our feet as a business. We were the ones who had to learn the ropes, not them.”

This cooperative no longer exists as a Fair Trade certified producer, but Just Us! has maintained relationships with some of the original individuals who have now organized another certified co-op. Just Us! hopes to begin buying from this new organization. “This was a really important relationship. They [Union de la Selva] gave us so much and we invested so much trust...We are going to try and re-establish this relationship”

Just Us! does what it can to bring these important relationships to worker-owners and customers. Jeff explains: “We try to have someone from Just Us! visit our partner organizations at least every couple of years...And in turn, we have at least four visitors from these organizations come to Canada and visit our workers here every year. This allows them to discuss what Fair Trade means to them and to explain the details of the projects they are undertaking in their own communities. There is a big educational component to these exchanges.”

“We see this as pretty key to what we do. We aren’t really an organization set up just to sell coffee. It’s more about education; explaining the issues to our staff and customers is priority. The products will follow once the public understands what they are all about.”

## **Support**

In the early history of Just Us! finances were a major challenge. However, with the success of the business, they have built a solid financial base and strong credibility. In addition to the Just Us! Coffee Roasters earnings, the Just Us! Fair Trade Investment Co-op has raised over a million dollars. Given their equity, lenders don’t have to think twice about lending to Just Us!. Money shortages no longer hinder the realization of good ideas.

A more major issue in keeping the organization on its feet is the maintenance of relationships with producers: one of the initiative’s most important and valuable resources.

Especially with the growing market and increasing corporatization that the Fair Trade movement is seeing today, it is important to maintain strong relationships and clear commitments between partners. Jeff reflects on this idea:

“You really have to nurture the relationships with producer partners so everyone knows you care about each other and about the integrity of the business. You can’t squander this. You have to build trust with Canadian stakeholders too: with investors, customers, employees. You have to maintain this or you are building a house of cards.”

## **Outcomes & Evaluation**

When it comes to evaluation, measuring the success of Just Us! as a business is quite simple: sales figures in market development for producers.

But the organization is much more than a business. Just Us! also measures its success in the employment it is able to create locally and in the community assets it is able to help develop in Canada and abroad.

The story of the Wolfville café provides a strong example of the organization’s successful community asset development. In partnership with a local community group, Acadia Cinema Co-op, Just Us! purchased and reactivated an old theatre in the town centre. Just Us! established a café and the film co-op, a theatre and film space. This initiative has benefited both groups and the broader Wolfville community, reintroducing a diverse social gathering place into the town centre. (JU)

Have they held true to their values and original goals? Jeff reflects: