

rubbernews

on tap – angezapft

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NGO Member from Asia!

In its own small way the Fair Rubber Association (FRA) mirrors the FSC's governance structure (see main article on this page). We have members with commercial interests (i.e. companies that buy Fairly Traded rubber, pay the Fair Trade premium, and use the FRA logo on their products, and we have members without commercial interests, i.e. in particular Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) whose main interest is to improve working and living conditions of disadvantaged workers in the rubber industry.

Our latest NGO member is Liberty Asia, and we are particularly glad that they have joined as they are registered and based in Hong Kong, i.e. 'surrounded' by rubber producing countries. Liberty seeks to identify ways to disrupt the social environment in which slavery and exploitation thrive and it gathers and provides relevant information and data to various stakeholders in society, such as the private sector, legal industry and law enforcement, whose actions might cause a systemic reduction in potential and existing abuses.

FSC 'discovers' Rubber – and the FRA

Every three years the (by now) 1,000 plus members of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) meet for a General Assembly. This year the event took place in Vancouver, Canada – and for the first time ever rubber as a 'non timber forest product' was given the stage for half a day.

The Fair Rubber Association (FRA) has been promoting FSC certification among its supplier members, for two reasons: Consumers, who are likely to purchase Fairly Traded rubber products are also likely to be concerned about the environment. And in our view the FSC certification is the most appropriate environmental certification for rubber.

The second reason for demanding FSC certification of supplier partners is that FSC audits minimum social standards at the plantation (and small farmer) level – and the FRA wants to keep the number of audits a supplier has to undergo as low as possible.

For more than 10 years, i.e. even before the FRA was founded, some of its members have promoted FSC for rubber. The FRA has continued this policy, including paying for FSC audits where necessary: Unlike other Fair Trade schemes we do not require supplier partners to pay for becoming part of Fair Trade in rubber – we feel this would be unfair, as we cannot guarantee sales to any supplier. So in a way it was only appropriate that the FSC's international secretariat asked the FRA to do a presentation at its assembly – the 10,000 balloons ordered and printed, Fairly Traded and FSC certified, alas, got stuck in customs and did not make it to the grand opening.

Our presentation was even the first – out of six in a crowded 1.5 hour slot – crowded with (by our standards) new-

comers to the concept of FSC certified rubber, some even so 'new' that all they could talk about were plans of possibly sourcing a FSC certified rubber product in the future.

Which in itself is still laudable. But what emerged as a concern is that it seems that the bigger the (potential) buyer is, the smaller the willingness to add Fair Trade to FSC certified rubber: While being able to demonstrate to customers 'environmental stewardship' by buying from FSC certified sources, paying a Fair Trade premium is often turned down as 'too expensive'.

After 10 years of explaining why the FRA is promoting FSC certification on rubber products (when the few consumers who know FSC associate it with wood and paper only, and e.g. IKEA sources the majority of its wood from FSC certified sources – but does not use the label for lack of recognition), maybe it is time for the FRA to reconsider its current strategy of using FSC certification as part of its own criteria. Maybe now, that FSC has 'woken up' to rubber, is the time for the FRA to focus on Fair Trade, its actual core concern?



Budini's Wish

Twelve year old Budini is a young lady who knows what she wants. We first met her three years ago. During a brief audit visit in August we checked in again with her and her family. They still live in their small neat house on Frocester. At the end of our visit she asked for a laptop.

Frustratingly we had to tell her that the Fair Trade premiums paid by the members of the Fair Rubber Association go into a separate account of the joint body. Elected by the workers the joint body decides how to spend the Fair Trade premium. And while it may be possible to petition them for a laptop, the sad truth is that Fair Trade orders have been few and far between, i.e. the chance to buy even a few laptops for the brightest children is remote indeed.

But even more than a laptop Budini wants to have her father back from his



work contract in Mauritius. He has just signed on for another 3-5 years, as he can send home about twice as much money as he could earn as a rubber tapper. For Budini, her mother and sister, a 15 min phone call every Sunday is

all they have to keep in touch. And as long as the big buyers of rubbers consider the current prices 'adequate' ('no need for Fair Trade' – we were told), that situation is unlikely to change.

The Right to Learn

It is one of the key principles of the concept of Fair Trade that the 'recipients' of the Fair price, or Fair Trade premium, are absolutely free in their decision on how they spend the extra income. In the case of the Fair Rubber Association the 'recipients' are the farmers and workers of our supplier partners. The role of the FRA is to ensure that its members pay the correct Fair Trade premium, that it reaches the correct suppliers - and later on to check that this key principle was followed, i.e. the recipients decided the use of the premium: Therefore we don't just check the account books (easy, as the Fair Trade premium goes to a separate account as far as plantation suppliers are concerned).

More importantly: we look at the minute book of the joint body, i.e. the committee made up of worker representatives (and some from the management) to see who took what decision when. Long experience show that the workers themselves know best what they need/want most.

Nevertheless: Things can go wrong in unexpected ways and despite of the best intentions: One joint body came up with a scheme to financially support bright students for further studies: Applicants were required to graduate from high school with excellent grades, and following that their progress at college was monitored year after year. Only if sufficient credits were earned, was the stipend continued. So what could go wrong?

Well, as it turns out, even hard earned college degrees don't come with a job guarantee. There may be too many graduates of a particular subject (engineering seems to be an oversubscribed course), and the teaching of some colleges may simply not be good enough/not prepare their students well enough for work life afterwards. We have heard from one young man who failed to find a job – and regrettably there is nothing we (and presumably the joint body) can do. Except, perhaps, review the strategy overall: Maybe stipends should be used to encourage vocation-

al training courses instead of purely academic ones? That's one idea the supplier partner came up with – and we can only hope that they get it right and future disappointment of 'successful graduates' can be avoided.



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