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**At the Beginning of the Road. An Exploratory Research
of Fair Trade Coffee in Romania**

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Abstract

While globally it is growing by more than 20 % per year, on the Romanian market the commercial phenomenon of fair trade is still in its infancy. In this context, this article proposes a research on the importance of fair trade coffee for Romanian consumers and how its marketing helps producers in different parts of the world. The article is based on an exploratory methodology to identify entities (shops, cafes, etc.) and brands selling fair trade coffee in Romania. The results of the analysis show that, without the help of retailers, fair trade coffee goes unnoticed by Romanian buyers, due to its initially high price compared to other 'generic' types. In addition, Romanians are in the habit of obtaining information from other sources and paying little attention to labels. As a result, only a small proportion of Romanians are aware of the existence of the fair trade logo.

Keywords: Romania, coffee, fair trade, brands.

JEL Classification: F1, L81, P36.

1. Introduction

In the face of inequalities between states, poverty and malnutrition, the polarisation of consumption and production (especially in the developed world) and under pressure from some NGOs, the need for fair trade is growing. The need for projects in this direction is driven by the need to help food-insecure countries to help their own people to feed themselves (Mionel, 2017).

Every year, 1 October is International Coffee Day, a 'vice' with a history dating back about a thousand years. Coffee is considered a soft commodity and the world's main source of caffeine. Coffee beans were discovered by chance and later first cultivated in the Kaffa region of Ethiopia (Weinberg, Bealer, 2002). From here the

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coffee spread to the Arab world through Egypt and Yemen. Later, the people of Yemen began to grow coffee for commercial purposes. The origin of the word coffee may come from the Arabic word *quahwek*, which means 'stimulant/drive' (Moceanu, 2018). From the Middle East, coffee spread to India, Indonesia, and the Americas, but also to Italy through trade relations between North African and Venetian merchants. From Venice, it was then introduced to the rest of Europe and widely accepted in 1600, when Pope Clement VIII described it as nothing more or less than a 'Christian drink', despite its Arab-Muslim origins. In addition, the first coffee shop was opened in Constantinople in 1475, while in Europe, the first coffee shop was opened in Italy in 1645 (Tănase, 2013). Since then, the consumption and importance of coffee has grown steadily, becoming one of the most sought-after global agricultural products.

After fossil fuels (oil and gas), precious metals (gold and silver), and copper, coffee is today the world's most traded commodity (Thaxton, 2022). Around 2.25 billion cups of coffee are consumed worldwide every day (Yaqub, 2023). As well as being used for direct consumption, it is also decaffeinated to provide the caffeine needed to make other types of beverages, pharmaceuticals, and cosmetics. There are two types of coffee sold worldwide: *Arabica* (70 % of the world's total) and *Robusta* (cheaper and easier to produce) (Szenthe, 2019). With a coffee shop on every street corner in every major city, coffee has become one of the world's top products, in high demand around the world, and the third most widely consumed beverage after water and tea.

Considering the year that coffee was introduced to the country, Romania has been a traditional consumer of coffee from the very beginning, with the first documented coffee shop in Bucharest dating back to 1667. It is the café opened by a Turk from Constantinople, located in the place where the National Bank of Romania is today, roughly in the centre of the capital (Moceanu, 2018). With such a rich history as a coffee-consuming country, it is no wonder that it has been „part of Romanian culture for centuries, with Romanians being among the most active consumers of coffee in Europe“, says Ciobanu (2018). Romania, for example, is now modestly supporting producer countries by selling 'fair trade' coffee in coffee shops, supermarkets, petrol stations, and the like. When Romanians choose fair trade coffee, they are implicitly investing in the quality of life of families and producing communities. A fair trade coffee producer invests around 25 % of the money they receive in improving the standard of production and the quality of the coffee. Coffee is one of the world's most popular drinks, and 80 % of its production comes from the millions of farm workers who depend on it for their daily livelihoods.

The novelty of this research is obvious, as Eastern Europe, unlike the West, is less interested in fair trade products. Our paper aims to fill the gap observed in the literature on the acute lack of research in the field of selling fair trade products in Romania in general and fair trade coffee in particular. However, despite the truth evoked by the above figures/values, the results of our analysis show that the high price compared to other 'generic' types of coffee causes many Romanian consumers to bypass the stands and coffee shops that sell fair trade coffee. In addition, as

Romanians tend to pay little attention to the labels on coffee packaging, only a small proportion of Romanians are aware of the existence of the fair trade logo and the true meaning of the whole concept.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Main Worldwide Coffee Producers

Coffee is currently grown in around 50 countries. The hierarchy of the top ten coffee-producing countries is led by Brazil, which manages to supply more than 1/3 of the world's coffee bean production (ICO, 2020). Brazil produces over 3.5 million tons, seconded by Vietnam. The following places are occupied by Colombia, Indonesia, Ethiopia, Honduras, India, Mexico, Uganda, and Peru. Brazil has been the world's leading producer for more than 150 years. Its plantations cover more than 27,000 km². This country differs from other producers in the way it dries: the grains are left to dry in the sun (Szenthe, 2019).

On the other hand, Vietnamese coffee is known as the basis for a drink that is mixed with condensed milk, of which Vietnam produced 1.8 million tons in 2022. Production in the country has grown rapidly, from just 6,000 tonnes in 1975 to almost two million tonnes today. This increase has made Vietnam the second largest producer in the world.

Coffee is one of the world's most valuable and traded tropical agricultural commodities, produced by smallholder farmers, many of whom are unable to make a living. Global production varies due to weather, disease, and other factors, resulting in an unstable market characterised by price volatility. Price volatility has a direct impact on farmers. There are many links in the supply chain. The first link is the farmer, followed by the trader, processor, exporter, roaster, retailer, and the chain closes when the coffee reaches the final consumer. When farmers sell their coffee, they have no idea where it will end up (Fairtrade Foundation, 2019a).

Table 1. The hierarchy of major coffee producers according to the Human Development Index (HDI)

Producing country	Coffee production (metric tonns)	GNI/per capita (PPP \$)	The place in the HDI hierarchy	HDI Category
Mexico	273.000	17.896	86	high
Brazil	3.558.000	14.370	87	
Columbia	858.000	14.384	88	
Peru	270.000	12.246	84	
Indonesia	642.000	11.466	114	
Vietnam	1.830.000	7.867	115	
India	329.100	6.590	132	medium
Honduras	390.000	5.298	137	
Uganda	255.000	2.181	166	low
Ethiopia	441.000	2.361	175	

Source: Rodriguez, 2023; UNPD, 2022.

Given the precarious economic situation of most producer countries (see Table 1), fair trade certification, coffee consumption, and the psychological impact of the idea of certification on consumers are helping producer countries by providing the necessary financial support in the form of a fair price for the quantities produced. At international level, the Human Development Index, which ranges from 0 (the poorest countries) to 1 (the richest countries), classifies countries into four categories: very high, high, medium, and low. According to this ranking, among the major coffee producing countries, Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Indonesia, and Vietnam are in the high category, while India and Honduras are in the medium category. Uganda and Ethiopia, the least developed producers, are in the low category, with values of 0.525 for the former and 0.498 for the latter (UNPD, 2022). The consolidation of fair trade has an unexpected impact on the economically vulnerable population involved in coffee cultivation in these countries, while the multiplier effect brings even more horizontal benefits than expected. In this context, militant fair-trade organisations and associations have a key role to play globally, as shown below.

2.2 Fair Trade Organisations and Associations

Research into fair trade coffee cannot be carried out without a thorough analysis of the concept, the organisations involved, and the principles that govern this type of trade. The term *fair trade* has been around for more than 130 years. „Historically, the first person to warn of the injustices of international trade was Eduard Douwes Dekker, a Dutch writer. His writings, based on his own experience, satirised the injustices of the Dutch East Indies government in Batavia (Indonesia). In the novel *Max Havelaar*, the author evokes the story of a colony manager on the Indonesian island of Java, who is deeply affected by the mistreatment of workers in the Asian colony” (Mionel, Mionel, Moraru, 2014, p. 110). The name of the novel is the one that will give the first name of fair trade certified coffee (Smith, Barrientos, 2005).

Fair Trade Organisations (FTOs), also known as Fair Trade Enterprises, define the concept of fair trade as a trading partnership based on dialogue, transparency, and respect, which aims to achieve greater fairness in international trade (Hutchens, 2010). It contributes to sustainable development by improving trading conditions and guaranteeing the rights of marginalised producers and workers, especially in the global South (Elad, 2013). The FTO has a very clear mission: to support producers of Fair Trade products in developing countries. However, its mission cannot be achieved without the help of consumers, who play an active role in supporting producers by buying products whose packaging bears the fair trade logo. Awareness-raising and campaigns also have a role to play in changing existing trade rules and practices (WFTO, 2018c).

In order to be easily recognisable and to give confidence that the products purchased are fair trade, it has been internationally agreed to draw a specific logo. This logo is a certification mark registered for goods from producers in developing countries. The brand is only used on products certified to FTO standards to

encourage people to buy them (Fairtrade Foundation, 2019b). Internationally, there are several fair trade logos on different products (Figure 1). To avoid confusion and feelings of mistrust, consumers need to understand and be aware of the meaning of each logo (Hestian, 2013).

Figure 1. Fair trade logos



Source: Hestian, 2013.

The Fairtrade logo is a registered mark provided by the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO). It is most commonly found on product labels in supermarkets. To use the logo, companies must comply with international Fairtrade standards agreed by FLO. The standards are agreed through research and consultation with producers, traders, NGOs, academic institutions, and the Fairtrade Foundation. The Fairtrade Foundation does not certify individual products, but assesses a whole business. According to Frăsineanu (2018), fair trade certification has very strict rules, and therefore „not every company can be certified as a fair trade producer. There is a simple verification method, the list of certified producers worldwide can be consulted on the organisation's website“. Once a company is certified, it can add the fair trade logo to any of its products.

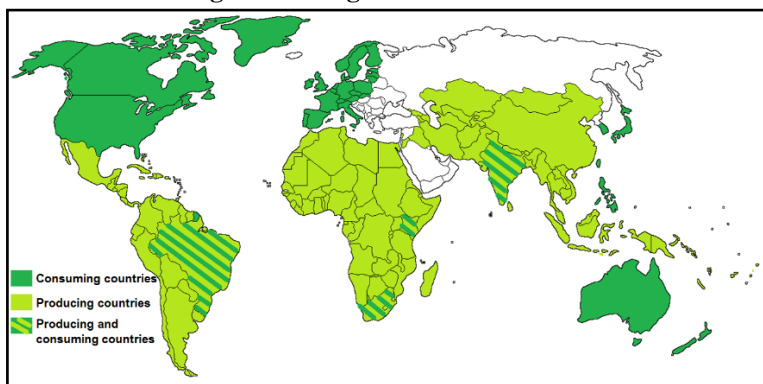
The logo symbol is similar to the yin-yang, but it is also said to represent a person with an upraised arm, with green grass below and blue sky above, leading to unspoilt nature, the freshness of the green grass carpet and a pollution-free blue sky. Instead, some say that the fair trade symbol can be seen as a parrot, a fish, or simple leaves (Hestian, 2013), which are all natural elements.

The BAFTS logo is the fair trade certification of the British Association for Fair Trade Shops and Suppliers. BAFTS is an association of independent shops and suppliers who work with fair trade producers who are considered disadvantaged. Its purpose is to promote the ethics and practices of fair trade and to make the principles of fair trade known to the world. Membership is determined by an annual assessment to ensure that members can provide clear evidence of compliance with the principles (BAFTS, 2019).

The World Fair Trade Organisations (WFTO) is a global community. Its main goal is to unite all businesses that put people and the needs of the planet first. More than 350 partners and 1.3 million farmers and workers in the 70 WFTO member

countries (Davies, 2014), from Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as Europe, Anglo-Saxon America and Asia-Pacific (Frăsineanu, 2012), see this community as a new business model based on social mission (WFTO, 2018a). On the other hand, the Fair Trade Federation (FTF) is an Anglo-Saxon American trade organisation that strengthens and promotes organisations in the USA and Canada. The FTF is part of the global fair trade movement, building fair and sustainable trading partnerships and laying the groundwork for real opportunities to reduce poverty (Fair Trade Federation, 2019). According to Mionel (2017), with the exception of some Eastern European countries, the Balkans, Russia, Turkey, and almost all Middle Eastern countries, the rest of the countries participate substantially in the global fair-trade network (Figure 2).

Figure 2. The global fair trade network



Source: Mionel, 2017.

2.3 Fair Trade Products, Principles and Sales

Internationally certified fair trade products include: bananas, chocolate, cotton, flowers, gold, cold drinks and juice, herbs and spices, confectionery and snacks, rice grains and cereals, tea, wine, beauty products and, last but not least, coffee (Fairtrade Foundation, 2019c). As we can see, the fair trade logo appears on both 'simple' products such as coffee, cocoa and bananas, and 'composite' products such as chocolate, biscuits and ice cream. The rule for certification is that at least 20 % of the ingredients must be fair trade.

The smooth functioning and practical application of the fair trade concept cannot exist without respect for the ten basic principles of fair trade. The principles are presented in a logical order so that producers can benefit from all the knowledge and experience gained during the WFTO. These principles aim to: (1) create opportunities for economically disadvantaged producers, (2) show transparency and accountability, (3) apply fair trade practices, (4) ensure fair payment, (5) prohibit child labour, (6) commit to non-discrimination, (7) ensure women's equality, economic empowerment and freedom of association, (8) ensure decent working conditions, (9) strengthen the working capacity of marginalised producers, and (10) promote fair trade and protect the environment (WFTO, 2018b).

In 2019, global sales of fair trade products amounted to around €9 billion. This was an increase of more than 5 % on the previous year and has continued to grow steadily since then. The European Union is by far the most important region for the sale of such products, accounting for 2/3 of the total. The countries that spend the most on fair trade products are the UK (€2 billion), Germany (€1.3 billion) and France (€561 million) (Fairtrade International, 2018). It is instructive for the present study that more than half of the turnover comes from the sale of coffee (59 %), followed by bananas, cocoa, flowers, and cotton plants and seeds.

3. Research Methodology

As the Internet is a pragmatic tool for data collection (Sheehan, 2002) and an increasingly influential tool for identifying sources of information, the research methodology used the main online search engines to obtain information. As the research was exploratory (Stebbins, 2001), only data relating to the fair trade phenomenon were taken into account. Thus, we referred to the general data, the theoretical ones, as well as the data concerning Romania.

First of all, the research successively and logically deals with the theoretical aspects of the phenomenon under analysis. In order to extend the research to the Romanian context, the specificities of fair trade coffee have been outlined, through the analysis of the main world producers and their economic profile, the presentation of the profile organisations and associations and promotional logos, as well as a brief analysis of the products and principles of fair trade. Furthermore, in the second part of the research, with the help of the Google search engine, the certified brands and units for the sale of fair trade coffee, which have a significant impact on consumers, were identified on the Romanian market.

4. Romania: Results and Debates

A study carried out in 2015 under the auspices of the European Union and the Committee of the Regions, entitled *Local and regional authorities promoting fair trade*, identified four dimensions of awareness and recognition of the concept of fair trade in European Union countries.

In the classification made by the aforementioned report, Romania is placed in the last category, namely a country in which the level of awareness and recognition of the concept of fair trade is low or even non-existent. On the last dimension of Table 2, Sen, Garnizova and Negencov (2015) undertake a further division, as follows: (1) countries that reported sales of fair trade products, and (2) countries with negligible sales of fair trade products. The group of countries in the first sub-category includes Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, where sales of fair trade products have been carried out by Finnish FLO quality labelling organisations. Following Finnish support, in October 2014 the Estonian district of Hiiu became the country's first 'fair trade town'. In fact, the aforementioned district was the first in a programme that today operates in more than 2222 cities around the world. On the other hand, the second subcategory included countries such as Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece,

where the sale of fair trade products is presented as a very slow development (Sen, Garnizova, Negencov, 2015).

Table 2. The level of awareness and recognition of the fair trade concept in a selection of European countries

Dimension	State
High awareness raising and recognition	The UK, Germany, Belgium, Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands, Ireland
Medium to high awareness raising and recognition	France, Italy, Spain
Medium to low awareness raising and recognition	Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia
Low or no awareness raising and recognition	Bulgaria, Romania, Portugal, Latvia, Lithuania, Greece, Estonia

Source: Sen, Garnizova, Negencov, 2015.

The precarious situation of trade in coffee and other certified fair trade products on the Romanian market must be seen in a historical context, as the past has left its mark on Romanian society. Before 1989, due to the communist regime, Romania was unable to create associations or non-governmental organisations that would support the principles of the fair trade movement. However, in recent years, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and therefore Romania, have been responsible for developing initiatives in the field of fair trade and promoting various activities and partnerships in this field. A factor in the regional support for the development of fair trade is the existence of the European 2020 Agenda, which is inspired by many of the national reform programmes (OECD, 2014).

One of the main reasons why Romania is still at the beginning of its fair trade coffee commercialisation efforts is the lack of information and awareness among consumers about the importance of fair trade products and what they can do for producers (Popa, 2012). On average, only 1/3 of Romanian coffee consumers attach importance to the concept of fair trade (Forbes Romania, 2019). Most of the time, when choosing a package of coffee from the shelf, the Romanian consumer chooses according to the price, without asking too many questions about its origin, the conditions under which it was produced and by whom. Somewhat the same argument is used by Frăsineanu (2012), who clearly states that "Fair trade products have a high price from the beginning. It often exceeds the price of some products (...) with a large market share." For example, young Romanians are completely uninterested in global issues and say that it is rather unimportant for them to buy a type of coffee from the fair trade supply chain. The 35-44 age group is more aware, with greater knowledge and concern about the international social environment, the value of labour and the correct price for coffee production. In addition, Romanians do not pay attention to coffee labels, they do not get information from coffee packaging, but from the Internet and by word of mouth (Reveal Marketing Research, 2019).

However, there is a countervailing attitude among Western coffee consumers, who want to know the history of the product they buy, especially when they know

that their choice has supported disadvantaged communities. In Romania, there are several coffee shops that are tentatively managing to sell Fair Trade certified coffee to consumers through the stories they tell. Consumers thus support disadvantaged communities through the so-called 'fair trade premium', which is paid on top of the agreed price and is invested in social development projects: building schools, hospitals, access to water and electricity (Duțu, 2010). Thus, for a cup of coffee costing one euro, the consumer pays a 'fair trade premium' of 10 eurocents to the small producer who harvests the coffee in developing countries (Racheleanu, 2017). However, as a Romanian proverb says: "One flower does not make a spring", so it will take much more than a few coffee shops dedicated exclusively to selling fair trade coffee for the phenomenon to spread in Romania.

Data from a study conducted in 2019 shows that in Romania, the preferences of coffee consumers are quite polarised. More than 80 % of consumers prefer coffee from the mass brands - Jacobs (38.2 %), Lavazza (20.8 %), Nescafe (12.8 %) and Tchibo (8.6 %). The other brands spontaneously mentioned by the respondents register small percentages, below the value registered by Tchibo, but interestingly, Julius Meinl, a brand that sells and promotes fair trade coffee (more than other brands), stands out clearly. It is worth noting that this brand is preferred by the young categories (18-24 years old) and the young half of the adult category (up to 45 years old) (Reveal Marketing Research, 2019).

It is quite possible that Julius Meinl's preferences are due to its strong presence in hotels, restaurants, and coffee shops. On the Romanian market, this is due to the fact that fair trade certified coffee is mainly present on the shelves of online shops, supermarkets, coffee shops, and petrol stations. Even in the main retail chains, the presence of fair trade coffee is extremely limited and, as expected, only well-known brands are found on the shelves (Frăsineanu, 2010). In addition, according to Năsui (2020), fair trade products will also be marketed through special shops run by volunteers (World Shop), who will also be involved in education and information activities. Unfortunately, in Romania there are no physical shops dedicated exclusively to the sale of fair trade products, which are mainly promoted by social enterprises.

Among the brands with a tradition of promoting and selling fair trade coffee on the Romanian market, the most visible are Starbucks, Julius Meinl, Viva and Esquires Coffee. There is also a small number of assortments compared to the total range of coffee sold: Malongo, Tchibo, Dallmayr, Delhaize, and others. Among the most popular brands in Bucharest, Starbucks is by far the most important, extensive, and visible: 27 coffee shops. The coffee shop brand segment recorded an increase in sales of 30 % in 2017 and 18 % in 2016, the highest percentage increase in Europe in the last two years (Ciobanu, 2018). Moreover, Starbucks and Esquires Coffee were among the champions at the time. Unlike Starbucks, Esquires Coffee seems to be on the verge of withdrawing from the Romanian market, despite having started with a lot of optimism (Roșca, 2019). Instead, for 40 years, Starbucks coffee shops have been committed to serving high quality, responsibly grown, fair trade coffee. Since 2010, the most popular coffee assortments have been served in all 52 Starbucks

coffee shops in Romania and are 100 % fair trade certified (Starbucks, 2019). In comparison, Julius Meinl can be found in approximately 2300 coffee sales units across the country and in major retail chains (Panaete, 2017).

6. Conclusions

The present research, in its most general lines, draws attention to the importance of the link between hard work and fair payment. It forces Romanian consumers to think critically and to be open about the fairness of the payment for a consumed product, in this case coffee. On the one hand, the paper is a necessary reading to familiarise oneself with the subject and it is a trigger for an absolutely inexhaustible understanding and awareness of the importance of fair trade in general and fair trade coffee in particular. On the other hand, the research focuses on the Romanian market and the most popular commercial units promoting fair trade coffee, thus neglecting the niche cool coffee shops in the city centre, due to the lack of official data.

The observed data lead to the conclusion that it will take a long time for the fair trade coffee market to consolidate and that, at the moment, Romania is only at the beginning of its journey, like a child learning to keep its balance as well as possible. Information and, above all, the support of the media and large retailers play an important role in keeping the balance and reaching maturity (market and consumers). And, although it is not easy, the combined involvement of retail chains and NGOs could give an unexpected impetus to the current stage of fair trade in Romania, and the recognition of the logo could become increasingly popular, raising awareness even more than it is now.

What is certain, however, and at the same time detrimental to the purchasing power of Romanians, is that fair trade coffee is more expensive than branded coffee, which has a large market share, and few companies have chosen to bring such products to Romania. As a result, as Frăsineanu (2012) noted earlier, „their low rotation speed has to be compensated somewhere, both by the retailers and by the importers. A handicap, in front of which there are few companies willing to risk their money“. And although we find more and more such fair trade products in Romania, most of them in the coffee, cocoa, and chocolate categories, they are not yet widespread, because not all retail chains are seriously involved in listing such products on their shelves.

The article has some limitations due to the lack of concrete data measuring the level of awareness and adoption of fair trade labelled coffee on the Romanian market. As a consequence, future analyses should investigate the awareness of fair trade coffee among Romanian consumers. Also, based on the information provided here, there is a need for quantitative research on the level of visual identification of fair trade symbols, the meaning of this standard for coffee, and the aspects with which Romanians associate the fair trade movement. Moreover, future research should also focus on the extent to which Romanian consumers are willing to adopt this type of coffee and how much they are willing to help needy farmers by buying fair trade products.

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