**Understanding the SE/CSR overlap: The mainstreaming of fair trade.**

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**Abstract**

Grant & Palakshappa (2013) highlight how although typically positioned at opposing ends of the social/business economic spectrum, social enterprise (SE) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) share a similarly fuzzy status in scholarship as umbrella terms encompassing a range of practices influenced by social, political, geographic and economic factors. The rise in SE activity at the business end of the spectrum raises questions about where, how, and why SE and CSR might overlap.

Fair trade has traditionally been recognised as an example of social enterprise (Huybrechts, 2012; Huybrechts & Defourny, 2008), and links between CSR and fair trade have also been raised by Mohan (Mohan, 2009), albeit somewhat cautiously. As such we propose fair trade provides a constructive example of this potential overlap on which we may reflect more carefully. The move towards mainstreaming or corporatisation of fair trade activity brings new dimensions to be considered, as tensions between the social justice aspirations of fair trade and commercial imperatives are highlighted. Some are optimistic about the development, others are more sceptical. Smith (2010)demonstrates either outcome is feasible, depending on which supermarket/corporate you focus on or how you interpret their actions. We contend considering fair trade, and the mainstreaming thereof, through SE/CSR lenses provides a useful framework to better understand this process.

Fair trade is our chosen focus for both practical and conceptual reasons. Fair trade provides a clear example of hybrid activity (Huybrechts, 2012). Although the volume of mainstream fair trade activity in New Zealand is small when compared to overseas markets, the topic in general is well documented in scholarship, providing ample material for consideration. Our intention in this paper is not to determine if mainstreaming of fair trade is ‘good’ or ‘bad’. The positives and negatives of this activity are already well documented in literature (see for example Davies, Doherty, & Knox, 2010; Fridell, Hudson, & Hudson, 2008; Low & Davenport, 2005; Moore, 2004; Reed, 2009) to the extent that Doherty, Davies, and Tranchell (2013, p.179) have called for academics to move away from pragmatic vs. radical debate on the topic. Rather, we seek to re-view this activity through SE and CSR lenses to better understand the extent to which either or both concept is evident in this hybrid activity. In doing so, we begin to address Moore’s (2004) call for prioritisation in research of issues associated with mainstreaming of FT, although we acknowledge our approach may not be as Moore expected.

This is a conceptual paper, building on the growing discussion of mainstream fair trade in literature, and drawing in particular on the diverse scholarship presented in *Journal of Business Ethics*. Extending our previous work (Grant & Palakshappa 2013) we continue to develop an epistemological approach which enables us to consider SE and CSR as societal processes rather than ‘distinct’ categories (Corry, 2010). We begin by briefly reviewing the concepts of social enterprise, corporate social responsibility and fair trade to orient the reader and establish our case for the conceptual overlap. We then consider the issue of fair trade mainstreaming and related issues more deeply. From our analysis we find conceptualisations of value, in a variety of forms, provides a common
foundational theme across SE and CSR. We build on this understanding to develop the multi-dimensional conceptualisation presented here as an initial framework through which to such hybrid activity and/or SE/CSR overlaps might be better understood.

References


