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Sleepless in an EU Election Year



By Sophie Aujean, Director of Global Advocacy, Fairtrade International

I am not sleeping well. I am tossing and turning a lot at night because I am obsessed about European Union elections campaign. I am worried by the geopolitical tensions, the prospects of a far-right European Parliament, and backlash on the Green Deal. I cannot stop thinking about what this will mean for us at Fairtrade International and the people we represent.

This is a big, important year, it is an EU election year. The European Parliament elections, considered the largest transnational vote in the world, will be held from the 6 – 9 June, and there is so much at stake when it comes to my area of work - human rights and sustainable development.

The next EU leadership faces the challenge of moving from ambitious laws on climate and sustainability to their enforcement, and this must happen in a context where many are opposing the Green Deal out of political games. The member state governments and industry must progress towards the Agenda 2030 goals. The national governments are also under domestic pressure with the inflation crisis and farmers' protests, and the industry must confront competition from other global players that pay lower prices for energy and currently fulfil less-stringent regulatory requirements.

Plus, the possibility that far-right wing parties could make more gains in the elections means that together with other civil society organisations (CSOs), we must step up against disinformation and work to create more robust communication strategies that engage different groups, especially young people and rural populations.

But even in this tricky context, I see a great opportunity to shape the political direction of the EU over the next five years. For instance, the issue of farmers' livelihoods is now on the political agenda of several EU member states and of the European Commission, and that helps to make the case for fair prices for farmers in less rich countries too. That's why, together with SOLIDAR, the fair trade movement has called on the next EU institutions to shift the European Green Deal (EGD) into a Global

Green Deal (GGD), fairer, more inclusive, global, and social. The EGD is not enough to meet the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. And in its current form might be even environmentally and socially harmful to the Global South and may exacerbate inequality and poverty.

Like many activists, I feel compelled to work harder, to push further, because of all this. I need to be out in the public sphere more, building alliances with other CSOs, connecting with influential think-tanks, with UN bodies, companies, and policymakers. I need to be talking and writing about our needs, our agenda at Fairtrade International, a global organisation that is co-owned by more than two million farmers in more than 70 countries, where I serve as Director of Global Advocacy. The role may sound all encompassing, but what I am doing is making sure the needs and rights of underrepresented groups like farmers and workers are heard. And since I joined the organisation 18 months ago, I have created spaces to hold discussions on equity, trade, climate, sustainable agriculture, and how they articulate.

I am humbled by this role. I think it is because doing advocacy work for Fairtrade is not just about abstract principles that even seasoned advocates can't wrap their heads around, but it is about livelihoods. Let me explain, I speak about income and prices, and the economics of making human rights work, and demonstrate that fair trade proposes concrete solutions to many of our global challenges.

The job is all about patience; it takes time. The first thing: identify what needs to be changed and what political processes could help to unblock it. The second step: map the environment, the resources available, the risks involved, and the opportunities.

And then the work really begins. I dig deep. I need an abundance of energy and self-confidence to engage in bi-lateral meetings, speak at public events, spend hours reading each detail of a law proposal, identify gaps and avenues for improvement, search for the best wording, listen to hours of committee meetings to note who said what, meet with allies who share a similar vision, and communicate it out in both the oral, and later, written form. Then, if say a law passes (and it always seems to be far from what I originally envisioned), we need to fight for it to be well-implemented.

But being an advocate is more than just my job, it is part of my now 42-year-old identity, along with my role as a mother of two young boys, 4 and 7, wife, daughter, and friend. And I must say that is quite hard balancing it all, especially right now when there is a lot to do with so much at risk.

It all started when I was a volunteer with Amnesty International with a focus on human rights situation in Tunisia and the Middle East. I led EU advocacy efforts and programmes for LGBTI access to healthcare and education. I later worked as an EU Representative at WaterAid, an NGO that is focused on water, sanitation, and hygiene.

I believe in public action and advocacy because I believe in the EU project, what it stands for and the opportunity to effectuate positive change. I do, though, have my own personal doubts. Am I the right person to speak up for farmers when I cannot distinguish a banana from a coconut tree? Should I be advocating for the poor when I was raised in an upper-class family in Brussels and do not know what it means to live in precarious conditions? Who am I, a white, privileged woman, to think I know what is best when it comes to human rights?

The thing I know for sure is that I am extremely privileged to have this job, and that is why I am trying to be the most committed activist I can. My sleeves are rolled up to work in what is an even nastier context this year but that is what is necessary. I guess I am going to be relying on lots of chamomile tea for the next few weeks.

About Fairtrade

Fairtrade is the most recognised and trusted sustainability label in the world. We are a global organisation that is co-owned by more than 2 million farmers and workers who earn fairer prices, build stronger communities, and have control over their futures.

Connect with us

Fairtrade International
Bonner Talweg 177
53129 Bonn Germany

Tel: [+49 228 949230](tel:+49228949230)

[Email us](#)

