Report on the 8th International Fair Trade Towns Conference, Kumamoto, Japan  
- 29th /30th March 2014

**Introduction**

The 8th International Fair Trade Towns conference was the first to be held outside Europe and it was fitting that this special historic event should be held in Kumamoto as the first Fair Trade Town in Japan and Asia. In June 2011 Kumamoto declared jointly with cities across all continents as part of the event to celebrate 1,000 Fair Trade Towns worldwide. At the time of writing there are 1,482 Fair Trade Towns in 24 countries stretching across all six major continents.

The objectives of the Conference were:
1) to strengthen the international Fair Trade Towns network,
2) to stimulate the burgeoning Fair Trade and Fair Trade Towns movements in Japan, the second largest economy in the world,
3) to promote Fair Trade and Fair Trade Towns movements in Asia, the international growth centre,
4) to develop and strengthen the North-South Fair Trade link and solidarity.

**Strengthen the international Fair Trade Towns network**

With the majority of Fair Trade Towns (over 95%) concentrated in Europe there were understandable concerns that holding one in Asia (where there is still only one Fair Trade Town declared) would fail to attract a sufficient number of participants. The ambitious target of 200 was soon exceeded however, with a total of 300 attending, including 57 from outside Japan.

The Fair Trade Towns movement is strengthened by its diversity providing us all with the opportunity to learn from each other. Fair Trade Towns (or Fairtrade Towns as they were called at that time) started in the small English market town of Garstang back in the year 2000. At that time the campaign focused solely on promotion of the Fairtrade Label, but as the movement spread internationally and particularly in the USA Fair Trade Towns developed to include the wider Fair Trade movement; what is known as the ‘Big Tent’ approach now used in Australia and New Zealand, Spain, France, Japan, Czech Republic, Poland and more recently Switzerland.

The theme of the Kumamoto conference was ‘Building Fair and Local Socio-Economies in the South and the North’ which further broadened the ‘Big Tent’ approach developed in the US. A 6th goal has been added in Japan that focuses on ‘Contributing to Revitalization of Local Community’. Involving the whole community has always been central to a Fair Trade Town campaign and increasing civic pride, social capital and community networking are benefits recognised from the start, including the words of the former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown when he said “Fairtrade in the UK demonstrates the power of communities at its best”.
Groups in the UK have often made the connection to the plight of local farmers also suffering from not obtaining a fair price for their produce and the 6th goal developed in Belgium ten years ago aims “to support a local initiative to help local farmers in sustainable agriculture”. But in Japan the 6th goal has gone further not only serving to support local farmers, but also community development, environmental actions and welfare of the handicapped and other disadvantaged persons, with a view to revitalizing local production, local economy, local society and strengthening the social bond within the community.

Some would say this only serves to dilute the Fair Trade message and some even suggest that the Fair Trade Towns movement is “out of control”. As a grassroots movement however, Fair Trade Towns must continue to be led by the people and rather than weaken the message these moves in Japan to broaden the movement serve to unite even more people who are fighting towards a better world for all. In my view this can only strengthen the movement as we look to learn from Kumamoto and Japan.

**Stimulate the Fair Trade Towns movements in Japan and promote the movement in Asia**

With just one Fair Trade Town in Japan and budding campaigns in South Korea and Taiwan the movement is still very young in Asia. As well as witnessing first-hand the strength of the Fair Trade Town campaign in Kumamoto we also heard from other strong campaigns in Nagoya and Sapporo in Hokkaido which inspire activists in other towns and cities across Japan. In line with the 6th Japanese goals there are moves in Hokkaido to make chocolate using Fair Trade cocoa and locally produced milk and sugar.

Several representatives from South Korea spoke of the campaign to make Seoul the world’s largest Fair Trade City and the recent formation of the Korea Fair Trade Towns Steering Committee. The campaign in Seoul is led by the Mayor, Mr Won Soon Park and epitomises a Fair Trade Town campaign by involving all aspects of the community from schools to Buddhist temples, churches to universities and retailers to businesses.

The recently launched campaign in Taiwan was also represented and we heard of moves in Hong Kong and Cambodia to start Fair Trade Town initiatives there. There can be little doubt that the conference in Kumamoto served its objective to strengthen the growing movement in Japan and inspire and motivate other countries in Eastern Asia and beyond to take up the initiative.

**Develop and strengthen the North-South Fair Trade link and solidarity.**

There has been much discussion at previous conferences regarding the development of Fair Trade Towns in the Global South and this opportunity was not lost in Kumamoto. Raquel Brasil Mendes Ferreira from SEBRAE in Brazil made the 40 hour journey to Kumamoto to talk about Pocos de Caldas, the first officially recognised Fair Trade Town in South America. As a country that contains Fair Trade producers as well as consumers Brazil has adapted the five goals and set up a Fair Trade Towns Initiative that is aimed at both consumers and producers. This is a model that can be adopted by other countries in the Global South that wish to be a part of the international Fair Trade Towns movement. Communities in the South are also showing an increasing interest in developing links with Fair Trade Towns in the North.
Fair Trade Towns and the WFTO

The conference was attended by Rudi Dalvai, President of WFTO International and Tadeusz Makulski of WFTO Europe and member of the International Fair Trade Towns Steering Committee. The opportunity was taken to invite Rudi to the International Fair Trade Towns Steering Committee meeting held on the Friday before the start of the conference. The main part of the discussion focused on how Fair Trade Towns can be better brought to the attention of WFTO members during and in the run up to the WFTO Conference in Milan between 24th and 28th May 2015.

Three defined areas of interaction exist between WFTO members and Fair Trade Towns:

1. The ‘Big Tent’ approach - which makes it clear to WFTO means that Fair Trade Towns can include them. There is however, a need to encourage and find new ways for WFTO members to join existing local Fair Trade Town Steering committees.
2. Advocacy work – In collaboration with the Fair Trade Advocacy Office (FTAO) e.g. MDGs beyond 2015 campaign
3. Development of Fair Trade Towns in the South - Pilot schemes developing in Brazil, Costa Rica and Ghana can be discussed with WFTO members and with 2/3 of WFTO members being in the Global South there is an opportunity to involve them in strengthening these schemes and developing new ones in other countries.

Introduction to the 9th International Fair Trade Towns Conference in Bristol, UK

On the 15th anniversary since the start of Fair Trade Towns in Garstang, UK the next International Fair Trade Towns conference will move back to its home country and take place in the Fair Trade City of Bristol on the 4th and 5th July 2015. In 2015 Bristol will celebrate its 10th anniversary as a Fair Trade City and take on the title of European Green Capital. Following on from the Kumamoto conference and broadening the ‘Big Tent’ approach the focus will be on Fair Trade and Sustainability and how links can be developed between Fair Trade and environmental groups.

The conference will be extended to include a ‘Green Fair’ on Friday 3rd July and a Producer event on the Monday following the conference. Participants will also be invited to visit Garstang and the International Fair Trade Visitor Centre, The FIG Tree to see where and how it all started.

Summary

The conference in Kumamoto was a success in achieving all four of its initial objectives as well as providing an important forum for Fair Trade activists across the world to share their ideas and inspire each other. All that remains is to thank all those people who made it happen and especially the many volunteers who were always there to provide a helping hand when needed and by their very presence epitomise the strength of the Fair Trade Towns movement.

Bruce Crowther
The FTT Campaign Ambassador, FIG Tree UK