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Living Wages and Living Incomes in Fair Supply Chains? A Critical Review

Katharina Gröne[1*], Isabell Mayer[2], Boris Braun[3]

[1] *Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne, Classen-Kappelmann-Str. 24, 50931 Cologne, Germany, katharina.groene@uni-koeln.de, https://orcid.org/0009-0006-7060-0687*

[2] *Department of Geography, University of Cologne, Albertus Magnus Platz, 50923 Cologne, Germany, isabell.mayer.im@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6569-9661*

[3] *Department of Geography, University of Cologne, Albertus Magnus Platz, 50923 Cologne, Germany, boris.braun@uni-koeln.de, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3863-2153*

* *corresponding author*

Introduction

The living wages and living incomes approach was designed to contribute to poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, and social justice. It is prominently positioned in the Fair Trade movement, which treats living wages and living incomes as a core political demand. The notation “Fair Trade” is used for the social movement, “Fairtrade” is used to refer to the institutionalized certification scheme (Fairtrade Labelling Organisation) and “fair trade” is used to denote fair trade scholarship. Commodities are traded in both schemes, labelled with Fairtrade or without label via alternative trading initiatives (ATO), for example, World Shops. While the concept of living wages and living incomes is not new, the challenges arising from a globalized, crisis-ridden world are increasingly complex and poorly understood. This special issue presents four international, wide-ranging empirical papers that, first and foremost, ask whether living wages and living incomes provide socially just and sustainable livelihoods for workers and smallholder farmers in countries that produce key primary commodities, mainly in the Global South. This editorial first reviews the origins and evolution of the living wages and living incomes concept and different methods of calculation. It then previews the empirical contributions in this special issue and discusses the practical implementation challenges of living wages and living income ideals.

Origin and Evolution of the Living Wages and Living Incomes Concept

The ideas surrounding fair, decent and dignified wages have been discussed since pre-Christian times, even if the terms *living wage* and *living income* were not always explicitly used (Hurley et al. 2018, p. 7). The idea of a living wage can be found in works by ancient Greek philosophers and medieval scholars (Werner & Lim, 2016, p. 436). They drew on moral and religious doctrines to define an acceptable wage as one that would secure more than just biological existence (Schrage & Huber, 2018, p. 355). Plato, for example, argued for a wage that covers basic needs (Stabile, 2016, p. 8), and Aristotle recognized a need for households to be self-sufficient (Werner & Lim, 2016, p. 436). Aristotle also assigned this responsibility to the state, which should provide means for the “poor” to earn an income and sustainably secure their livelihood (Werner & Lim, 2016, p. 436). In the 13th

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century, Thomas Aquinas advanced an economic theory of *just prices* to (at least) cover production costs and secure producer livelihoods (Stabile, 2016, p. 9). According to Aquinas, a fair wage should be agreed upon by both the employer and the employee; any wage rate that pushed workers below the subsistence level was unjust (Stabile, 2016, pp. 9–10).

Five centuries later, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* established the need for a subsistence wage (Schrage & Huber, 2018, p. 355). Smith recognized that an adequate wage must be at least high enough for workers to live on. In most cases, it should be even higher to allow workers to raise and sustain a family (Schulten & Müller, 2017, p. 508). Furthermore, Smith argues that workers should be able to afford certain goods and live in dignity, and that such costs should be included in wage levels (Mair et al., 2019, p. 12).

These early interventions have strong parallels to the modern concept of living wages. In all cases, the wage level is built around an understanding of what workers need to survive and thrive, which can vary across space and time (Stabile, 2016, pp. 10–11). The term *living wage* was coined in 19th century, industrializing Europe in response to the poor living and working conditions of the working class. Workers' right to a living wage was only formally ratified in 1919, with the constitution of the International Labor Organization (ILO, 1919, p. 2; Schrage & Huber, 2018, p. 355). Finally, the need for living wages was enshrined in the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (UDHR, 1948, Art. 23, 3). The concept experienced a renaissance in the 1990s, as grassroots movements in mostly English-speaking countries drew on earlier works (e.g., Ryan, 1912) to fight for higher wages (Hurley et al., 2018, p. 7). The question of living wages was increasingly framed as an ethical one in the fight against inequality and socio-economic polarization (Werner & Lim, 2016, p. 436).

The Living Wage and Living Income Concept in Fair Trade

From the 1970s to the 1990s, a heterogenous movement for global solidarity, social justice, and environmental protection emerged in Europe and the US around the common idea of fairer trade relations (Kister, 2021, p. 43). Alternative economic concepts like Fair Trade initially sought to improve smallholder incomes; this focus was later broadened to include wages for hired plantation workers. The Fair Trade movement's use of the living incomes and living wages concepts has geographic and relational undertones. They hope to promote poverty alleviation along global supply chains, mostly from the Global South to the Global North.

However, living wages and living incomes only recently became core demands in the Fair Trade movement. Despite "fair prices" being a cornerstone of fair trade's struggle, minimum prices do not always guarantee a decent standard of living for producers and workers (Besky, 2008, 2014; Makita, 2012; Renard & Perez-Grovas, 2007). In fact, the system often fails to noticeably ameliorate actual working and living conditions of smallholder farmers and wage laborers on Fairtrade-certified plantations.

This is partly because the "fair price" for wage workers mirrors legally defined minimum wages (if any exist). Fairtrade calculates the minimum income for smallholder producers based on the costs of sustainable production and world market prices. Despite an additional social premium, these wage and income levels are often well below living wage and living income calculations (FFH, 2016, p. 4). Forum Fairer Handel (FFH; Fair Trade Forum), a German Fair Trade association, explains the relationship between a "fair price," a "fair wage," and a "local living income" as follows: "Living incomes and fair prices are two sides of the same coin. The calculation of living incomes and wages is the basis for the calculation of fair wages, and these in turn are the basis for being able to calculate fair prices" (FFH, 2016, p. 4).

However, in recent years, there has been growing recognition that national minimum wages in many Global South countries (e.g., Bangladesh, Ghana, India) barely reflect average costs of living (FFH 2016, p. 4). The Living Income Community of Practice (LICoP), supported by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, is an alliance of partners "dedicated to the vision of thriving, economically stable, rural communities linked to global food and agricultural supply chains" (LICoP, 2021a). It defines a living income as, "the net annual income required for a household in a particular place to afford a decent standard of living for all members of that household" (LICoP, 2021b). The Global Living Wage Coalition (GLWC, 2018) offers a similar definition. It is a partnership between two knowledge-action networks—the Anker Living Wage and Living Income Research Insti-

tute and the GLWC Action Network—that organize to put living wages and living incomes into practice.

Calculating Living Wages and Living Incomes

Drawing on Anker & Anker (2017, p. 19) the following figure shows the calculation of a living wage. Living wages provide a decent standard of living in a given location for workers and their family/household in exchange for a standard work week. In contrast, living income applies to people who (primarily) earn income through the sale of (agricultural) products. Non-wage income is included in the calculation of living incomes, for example, revenues from rent or net revenues from the sale of products after deduction of production costs and the cost of (re-)investments (FFH, 2022). In both cases, a decent standard of living includes food, water, housing, education/schooling, healthcare, transportation, clothing, and other essential needs, including a reserve for unexpected events (GLWC, 2018; LICoP, 2021b).

Figure 1 *Calculation of a Living Wage According to Anker & Anker*

cost of food
cost of housing
cost of basic but decent life for reference size family
cost of other essential needs
small margin for unforeseen events
net living wage = cost of basic but decent life for a family ÷ number of workers per family
gross living wage = payroll deductions and taxes + net living wage

Note. Costs of a basic but decent life for a family (upper), from costs of a basic but decent life to net living wage (middle), and from net living wage to gross living wage (lower), Source: own illustration based on Anker & Anker, 2017, p. 19.

While advocates of the living wage and living income approach agree on these basic definitions, there are many ways to calculate living wages and living incomes. The most prominent method—the Anker method—was developed by two US economists, Martha and Richard Anker (Anker, 2011; Anker & Anker, 2017). The Anker Living Wage and Living Income Research Network provides so-called benchmark studies that are conducted under the auspices of the GLWC. Forty detailed internationally comparable benchmark studies have been or are being conducted in 23 Global South countries. A multivariate regression analysis (GLWC, 2020, p. 2) is then used to create so-called Anker reference values, a first approximation of living wage and living income requirements in countries where detailed benchmark studies are missing. This also helps identify hot spot countries where the gap between the actual income/wage and the calculated living income or living wage is extremely pronounced (GLWC, 2020, p. 9). Fairtrade International prominently applies this Anker method.

Other ways of calculating living wages and living incomes include the World Fair Trade Organization's (WFTO) focus on living wages, particularly in the handicraft trade. Like the Ankers, it calculates the income/wage needed to fill the producers/workers "shopping cart" of needs. However, the WFTO approach uses self-collected data (WFTO, 2019). In another method, the German Development Agency's (GIZ) 'Living Wage Costing Tool' and 'Living Income Reference Price and Gap Estimator' represent a more general approach to setting a (fair) price against any benchmark, including internationally accepted poverty lines (Nuecken et al., 2023). GIZ calculates for two scenarios of "current" and "improved" production. In this approach, the gap between actual wage/income and a living wage/living income is closed by a productivity and price increase (Bronkhorst, 2020). Fairtrade International has also developed a Fairtrade Living Income Reference Price Model based on a living income/living wage benchmark. Their productivity benchmark considers adequate yields, farm size, and the cost of sustainable production to achieve those yields (Hänke, 2020).

Current Discussions on the Concept and Calculation of Living Wages and Living Incomes

The living wage and living income concept receives significant (mostly positive) attention at the policy level. For example, the governments of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana announced in 2019 that they would raise the farm gate price for cocoa to 1,820 US dollars per ton in order to support a living income for smallholder farmers. This so-called Living Wage Differential came into force in October 2020, meaning that the income compensation set by the governments of the two countries must be paid to all cocoa producers (Adams & Carodenuto, 2023; Boysen et al., 2023, 2021;

Business and Human Rights Resource Center, 2019; Fairtrade International, 2019; Knößlsdorfer et al., 2021).

The living wages and living incomes concept, especially the widely used Anker method, is highly normative and draws on the ILO's international labor standards. On the one hand, the concept draws on a wide corpus of theoretical foundations and provides comprehensive orientation, also for policy-advice. On the other hand, the concept may not adequately address the complexities of local living and working conditions or local societal and cultural contexts. The criteria for a decent living standard are determined (and standardized) mostly by scholars from the Global North. This presents challenges, even when there are clear commitments to consider local contexts and conditions (e.g., the WFTO [2019] speaks of "local living wages" and "local living incomes").

There are many ways to define and calculate living wages and living incomes. However, manageable strategies to put the concept into practice (and close the gap with current wages/incomes) appear rather limited. For instance, cost and time restrictions mean that living wages and living incomes calculations for all 420 WFTO-member producer groups are impractical. Other challenges also exist:

- Data may not be available or accurate. For example, living income calculations require difficult-to-assess harvest production costs (Anker & Anker, 2017).
- The cost of living varies from region to region and between urban and rural areas within regions (Anker & Anker, 2017).
- Cultural determinants influence the cost of living, for example, different food choices and preferences (FFH, 2016).
- Well-being is individual, varying greatly amongst individual producers and different producer groups, for example, female workers are often responsible for household expenses and the unpaid workload of care (Geiger-Oneto & Arnould, 2011).
- Informal and care work are indispensable for household income but are not valued (FFH, 2016).
- Livelihood diversification is often necessary since productivity is low on smallholder farms (FFH, 2016).
- Supply chains are characterized by power asymmetries underpinned by cost-price negotiation. Furthermore, true costs—social and ecological externalities—are not calculated. A "true cost accounting" would account for the ecological and social costs of production and lead to a considerable upstream cost increase (Gaugler et al., 2020).
- Although the living wage and living income concepts attempt to take local and regional differences into account, their calculations are rather universal, with poorly considered regional and local differences and cultural characteristics. These standards (e.g., payment for accommodation according to normative, international standards) are tantamount to a preliminary decision and can have a depoliticizing local effect (see Kuiper in this special issue).
- Another danger involves the shift from state to private regulations. This may ameliorate the situation for some smallholders but does not significantly affect wider wage negotiations, usually between employers and labor unions. Some companies may also use the living wages and living incomes label for marketing purposes to "fairwash" their products (Fairafric, n.d.). Fair Trade's reformist tendencies work within and against the market (Fridell, 2006; Raynolds et al., 2007). Its adherence to the capitalist logic of production limits its potential as a social movement to create decolonial spaces between the Global South and the Global North.

From Coffee to Cut Flowers, Smallholder Farming to Plantations: The Diverse Worlds of Living Wages and Living Incomes

The papers included in this special issue discuss challenges and opportunities linked to living wages and living incomes in diverse certified supply chains from the Kenyan cut flower industry (Kuiper) to smallholder coffee producers in Southern Sumatra (Bray et al.) and Mexico (Lyon et al.), and Indian tea plantations (Kister & Wenner). Smallholders in Mexican and Southern Sumatran coffee production face different challenges and have different opportunities than plantation workers in Kenya or India.

Jutta Kister and Miriam Wenner ask whether plantation workers actually benefit from Fairtrade's hired labor standard and certification. The authors discuss the situated capacity of plantation workers to generate change within a moral geography framework of *fairness*. They remind us that fairness is the outcome of a highly "contested process." It can be framed as a "shared responsibility" negotiated between "situated

actors" with very different capacities. Gerda Kuiper critically discusses the "depoliticization" of wage negotiations within Fairtrade-certified supply chains in the Kenyan cut flower industry. Sarah Lyon, Tad Mutersbaugh and Holly Worthen concentrate on the gendered dimensions of labor provision within Mexican coffee Fairtrade certification schemes. They argue that Fairtrade's quality-oriented differentiated market channels demand inexpensive labor inputs, usually provided by women hoping to increase household income. Lastly, Joshua G. Bray, Bustanul Arifin, Hanung Ismono and Jeffrey Neilson discuss the broader concept of Voluntary Sustainability Standards (VSS) and the subjective experiences of Indonesian coffee farmers in Southern Sumatra. While the VSS impact on yields and household income remains underwhelming, producers value the opportunities to build different forms of social capital in the coffee production sector to advance their broader livelihood strategies.

The papers in this special issue empirically and theoretically critique the Fair Trade system and its (lack of) achievements, including widespread unfulfilled hopes for fair wages and incomes. In this context, fairness should strive to empower producers in their struggle for redistributive justice (Ferrando et al., 2021; Kister, 2019). However, fairness in the Fair Trade movement remains an ambiguous political concept. Far from challenging the imbalances between the Global North and the Global South (Kruger & du Toit, 2007, p. 215), the political economy of the Fair Trade system entails the commodification of political concern, running the risk of depoliticizing local struggles for justice and a decent standard of living. The struggle for living wages and living incomes needs to be understood as a shared but differentiated responsibility. Fair trade relations can only be achieved as a joint process with differentiated responsibilities for historical and structural injustices within the capitalist economy.

These questions go far beyond the technical issues of calculating acceptable wage and income standards. Geographers and fellow travelers in anthropology, social and economic sciences, and law can help answer these critical questions and develop practicable approaches that sustainably improve the living conditions for many people in the Global South. Local and indigenous approaches to well-being and a good life can complicate the universal calculations and definitions of a living wage and a living income. We must urgently integrate such knowledge into these predominantly "Northern" concepts.

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