

2020: Does ethical consumerism by informed global citizens have the power to end global poverty?

Ethical consumerism spending has risen dramatically in the last number of years with a heightened consumer and public awareness of inequities and exploitation in the production chain driving this change (the Guardian). Yet, the question remains. Can this shift in consumer behaviour truly be a driving force in ending global poverty? In this essay, I will outline that this ethical consumerism does have the ability to achieve this. I will examine this with reference to progress already achieved, economic pressure on companies, political pressure aiding change, and the counterpoint of unethical production being a structural issue. I will reference Key Thinkers Karl Marx, John Locke and Vandana Shiva to support my points, as well as data and examples from a number of sources.

When examining this issue, we must also understand what exactly ethical consumerism is. According to the [Irish Congress of Trade Unions](#) (ICTU), ethical consumerism is 'a form of consumer activism', which involves consumers taking responsibility for their decisions in purchasing goods and services. This may include 'positive buying' which involves favouring ethical products (developmenteducation.ie), moral boycotting where consumers refuse to purchase from a company with unethical practices, or many other forms of activism. As a whole, ethical consumerism is based on tackling the issues of exploitation and inequity present in many production chains- a key modern example being the boycotting of 'fast fashion' brands in favour of more sustainable and second-hand options such as the app 'Depop'. We must also understand 'poverty' to examine whether this behaviour has the ability to tackle it. [The World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995](#) defined poverty with 'various manifestations including lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods.' It built on this by highlighting poverty is characterised by 'powerlessness and voicelessness' which constrains people's choices and opportunities, which can clearly be seen in unethical practices such as low wages and worker exploitation.

This leads into my first point: progress already made by ethical consumerism towards ending global poverty. According to ICTU, ethical consumerism goes back as far as the mid-19th century with the rise

of cooperative movements. Cooperatives are based on principles of solidarity and community, to provide ethically produced products and services at affordable prices. A UN research paper in conjunction with the Research and Consultancy Cooperative College in Tanzania in observance of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty found that cooperatives had the ability to play a significant role in ending poverty. It stated that cooperatives aided in providing a voice to poor people in policy making, opportunities for small farmers to make a fair profit, and facilitate social welfare and community development. The consumer choices and behaviour as part of these cooperative structures further aided in this, illustrating the power and potential for activities such as these to end poverty at a community and global level. Key Thinker Karl Marx wrote of the importance of the working class and disadvantaged being empowered to no longer be exploited and instead see the fruits of their labour fairly divided 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'. The community-driven sharing of ethical production and sales through cooperatives is a key example of achieving this system and eradicating the abject poverty which Marx saw while writing the Communist Manifesto.

Another key example of ongoing efforts of ethical consumerism which is aiding in reducing and ending global poverty is Fair Trade. [Fair Trade is defined by](#) FINE as 'a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect that seeks greater equity in international trade'. It aims to work with marginalised producers and workers to move them from vulnerability to security; empower producers and workers as stakeholders; and work in the global arena to achieve greater equity in international trade. According to the [Fair Trade foundation](#), there are more than 1.7 million farmers and workers currently working in Fair Trade certified producer organisations. On average, these workers and farmers invested 32% of their Fair Trade premium in education services and housing improvements in their own communities. This aids in community development, promoting self-sufficiency and enabling consumers to buy more ethically. The Fair Trade label has aided consumers in knowing how to make ethical choices and engage in ethical consumerism. In turn, this has led to community development and investment from farmers. From this, we can clearly see that consumer choices in buying Fair Trade provide fair income and premiums to these farmers and workers, stimulating growth and reduction of poverty at a global level. Key Thinker Vandana Shiva wrote of the importance of farmers not being exploited by global companies such as Monsanto, as this stimulates cycles of poverty in vulnerable regions. The fair trading processes and premiums conducted by Fair Trade and the consumers that buy

from them combat this, and address the issues raised by Shiva. Therefore, it is evident that Fair Trade is a key example of ethical consumer behaviour driving action in the reduction of poverty.

With these ongoing examples in mind, we can also examine the impact of ethical consumerism on economic pressure on companies that are targeted. As Karl Marx wrote, companies in a capitalist society are driven to prioritise profit and will exploit workers to do so. In today's globalised economy, we see workers in developing countries paid low wages and working in dangerous conditions, such as the [2013 collapse of a Bangladash](#) Penney's factory which killed 96 people and injured more than 1,000.

Consumer behaviour and choices can aid in increasing economic pressure on companies to halt these practices and move to more sustainable business models. A key example of this was the 2018 boycott of Burberry, following its burning of millions of dollars of unsold goods. Consumers launched #burnberry to boycott the brand and shortly after Burberry announced it would no longer burn clothes or sell animal fur (Seattle Times). Another example was the 2007 boycott of Gap, which worked with factors using child labour, a lack of drinking water, abuse of workers and inadequate safety measures.

Following the boycott, Gap set up new standards to eliminate child labour in its supply chains (New York Times). Both of these examples show us the power of ethical consumerism and consumer activism in placing pressure on companies, who will lose sales and revenue as more consumers refuse to buy their products on moral grounds. As mentioned, when profit is the key motivator, companies will change their production methods to recover revenue and image. This can lead to the risk of 'greenwashing', where companies only appear to be sustainable but continue unethical practices.

However, as a whole, we can see the power of widespread consumer activism in challenging companies' practices and unethical behaviour. When this behaviour changes, workers particularly in developing countries will be more protected and receive fairer wages in the long run. This can aid in contributing to the reduction of global poverty.

Continuing from this, ethical consumerism has the power to create legislative change. [Brittanica](#) writes that ethical consumerism is 'a political choice', highlighting boycotts of South African goods which aided in ending apartheid. Consumer campaigns for more ethical purchasing options can aid in improving regulations of companies who operate and sell in developed countries, even if they predominantly produce in developing countries. A key concern here is that these policies may drive these companies to developing countries where wage regulations are lower, thus perpetuating cycles of

poverty. However, if a company is unable to sell in a first world market unless it can prove ethical production processes, it will lose a significant chunk of its market potential and as such be forced to adapt if it wishes to continue selling there. This is a key way in which consumer behaviour and lobbying can prevent unethical behaviour by companies and ensure workers are protected and paid living wages. In this way, global poverty can be further reduced. Key Thinker John Locke wrote of 'continuous consent' and 'legitimate commonwealth', where a government must enjoy the consent of its people as well as providing security. If a government allows unethical practices by companies operating and selling within its borders, when this is opposed by its population and consumers, they may no longer be said to have this consent. As such, if consumer behaviour dictates protections and regulations against unethical practices, governments must deliver this. This regulation aids in reducing these practices, providing fairer conditions and opportunities to workers, and reducing global poverty in developing regions.

There is a counterpoint to all of these claims which is that the unethical practices which ethical consumerism seeks to end are structural issues, which cannot be solved by individual actions. This viewpoint may point to Marxist thinking of how capitalist societies are fundamentally rooted in exploitation and as such no amount of individual action will prevent unethical behaviour which is supported by societal structures. While this can certainly be said to be true, it is important for us to remember the point around political pressure. An individual consumer buying more ethically may not completely change global structures of poverty. However, consumers coming together to pressure companies and governments to change by 'voting with their feet' and their money can. It can create the change as outlined above, force companies to change their practices, and aid in developing more progressive and fair regulation of the market. Those who point to Marx to support this counterpoint will also find that Marx spoke of the power of the people, the proletariat, in overcoming exploitative practices of the bourgeoisie, those in power. As such, while it is certainly a structural issue, people power and ethical consumerism on a large scale has the power to change these structures and tackle global poverty.

In conclusion, global poverty is a wide and structural issue. However, ethical consumerism and widespread consumer activism has the power to contribute to ending it. This is visible through previous and ongoing efforts which have been proven to reduce poverty at a local and global level. These include

the cooperative movement, building on Marxist ideas of working class power. This is also seen through the Fair Trade movement, which has had a measurable impact on community empowerment and development with workers across 74 countries. Ethical consumerism has the ability to create both economic pressure on companies and political pressure for improved regulation of exploitative practices, built on by the thinking of John Locke and Vandana Shiva. In essence, ethical consumerism has the ability to drive change in practices and behaviour, empower communities, and continue the fight towards eradicating global poverty at all levels by tackling exploitation.