

Institution: University of Leicester		
Unit of Assessment: 34		
Title of case study: Developing innovative participatory communication strategies for marginalised farming cooperatives		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2014–2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Maria Touri	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Lecturer in Media and International Communications	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: 2006–Present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>Research undertaken by the University of Leicester has led to the use of new marketing strategies by organic farmers and their buyers. Dr Maria Touri's research has underpinned the use of video in bringing the authentic voice of organic producers in the Global South, specifically via an organic farming co-operative in Wayanad, India, directly to buyers and end-consumers. This has led to socio-economic benefits for the farmers and consequential benefits to buyers and end-consumers in the forms of increased trust, knowledge and understanding of the producers and their products, new marketing and purchasing strategies, and better-informed choices. The research has directly influenced new funding streams for the co-operative through increased investment and changed local misperceptions of the economic and agricultural successes of organic farming, which had been social barriers to community inclusion.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>Fair trade marketing strategies have traditionally neglected the authentic voice of the farming communities, relying on traditional messages of the 'poor' Global South to promote products. Consequently, organic farmers have felt misrepresented to the foreign consumers who ultimately buy their produce. These strategies have also perpetuated local misunderstandings that organic methods are less productive and that organic farmers are less wealthy than their non-organic counterparts. Moreover, the benefits of sustainable farming in relation to biodiversity protection, soil integrity and the subsequent continuous yields are not well promoted.</p> <p>The first stage of Touri's research explored existing communication practices between 'Organic Wayanad', a cooperative of ~400 farmers in Wayanad in the South of India, and five foreign buyers from North America and Europe. Through focus groups and in-depth interviews over the span of two years (2014–2016), Touri discovered:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) the empowering dimension of interpersonal relationships with foreign buyers in the context of their local trade and relationships; b) the crucial role that buyers can play as development agents; c) the significance of interpersonal communication for the sustainability of small organic farmers in the Global South and of small environmentally responsible buyers in the North. 		

Touri found that the close communication between farmers and buyers facilitated mutually beneficial learning. Farmers were able to learn lessons from their trade negotiations, successes and failures, to make increasingly astute business decisions and negotiations that could be applied to their trade relationships. Buyers were able to gain a much closer understanding of the value and quality of the products that could be used to inform purchasing decisions and effective marketing strategies to end-consumers. The research helped shift the emphasis to: a) market development opportunities that are not confined to institutional efforts relying on large aid packages; and b) the significance of interpersonal and dialogic communication in development and social change [R1, R2].

The second stage of the research [G1], was developed from the findings of [R1, R2], specifically those relating to the way in which the farmers were portrayed in traditional marketing strategies in the North that perpetuate a commodification of poverty and misrepresented the farmers' knowledge, skills and lifestyles.

Co-produced by the farmers and Dr Touri, this research investigated how more authentic representations of the farmers and their produce could be introduced into communications strategies. Touri collaborated with a group of twenty farmers from Organic Wayanad—half of whom had also participated in the first stage—to produce a series of short videos. The content was developed entirely by the farmers and was pedagogic in style, focussing on organic agricultural methods and their benefits, recipes and the knowledge and skills of the farmers [R5]. These videos were shown locally, addressing misperceptions about organic farming and farmers in the local communities, built relationships and increased interconnectivity between farmers in the cooperative, and encouraged new cooperative members. Intermediary agents were able to use the videos to market the produce to more foreign and local buyers, and existing buyers shared the videos with end-user consumer focus groups.

Touri's innovative programme of participatory research with Organic Wayanad has:

- developed an understanding of how digital videos can enhance farmers' own sense of empowerment and mobilise them as a community to promote environmental protection;
- identified ways in which videos can be incorporated in the marketing strategies of both farmers and buyers/SMEs and strengthen farmers' and buyers' socially and environmentally responsible image - this led to the creation of more videos for training and marketing purposes;
- developed and evidenced an understanding of how consumers engage with content that is created by the farmers;
- identified those features of the farmers' videos that served to nurture consumers' understanding in relation to sustainable agriculture and food consumption.

3. References to the research

R1. Touri, M. (2016). "Development Communication in Alternative Food Networks: empowering Indian farmers through market relations", *Journal of International Communication*, 22(2):209-228.

R2. Touri, M. (2018). "Development and Communication in trade relations: new synergies in theory and practice", *Development in Practice*, 28(3):388-399.

R3. Touri, M. (2020). "Representation, voice and development in Fair Trade Movements: toward new theoretical and empirical directions", *Geoforum*, 117:103-113.\

R4. Touri, M. (2020). "The Power of Weak Communication", in J. Tacchi and T. Tufte (Eds.) *Communicating for Change, Concepts to Think With*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp.75-84.

R5. The Food for Thought Project: <https://foodforthoughtstories.weebly.com/>

G1. British Academy / Leverhulme Trust, Small Research Grants, RS15G0165.

4. Details of the impact

"If it wasn't for this project, we would never think of using videos for our marketing and training" **[E1]**.

Touri's research led to a step-change in the way that Organic Wayanad were able to market their produce to new buyers locally, to foreign buyers and, in turn, how those foreign buyers promote the produce to end-consumers. This has led to a range of socio-economic benefits for the farmers, the buyers and the end-consumer.

End Consumers

Videos from the project were discussed with end-consumer focus groups in England and Germany. Most of the consumers admitted they had not realised organic farming required so much work, and the videos explained the reasons for the higher cost of organic produce, "Why don't more people do it? And why don't we support that more? It made me think that if they can change their farming, I can change the way I eat" **[R3]**. All groups reported an increased appetite to know more about the production of certain foods and the seasonal cycle of the farming process. The consumer focus sessions also demonstrated the effectiveness of the use of video in challenging dominant perceptions of the Global South, as one respondent insisted, they were not "charitable case[s]" and "did not need our help" **[R3]**. The consumers all expressed that they had learned about aspects of farming they had not imagined were possible. Several of them were motivated to do their own research on methods, while others admitted that they were unlikely to seek out this information for themselves **[R3]**.

Some fair trade organisations have begun to recognise the benefits of challenging stereotypical representations in empathy-driven advertising and are moving towards more educational, factual and knowledge-based communication strategies **[R3]**. The Organic Wayanad project provides a functional blueprint for how this might be achieved.

These focus sessions, centred on the farmer's videos, also met the needs of the farmers who felt that their misrepresentation in traditional fair trade marketing practices of the 'poor farmers who need help', was not worth the perceived economic benefits that depiction might bring. They valued the opportunity to share their knowledge and experience with the end-consumers of their products, stating: "We do not use the modern machinery that people often think is used in farming, simply because it is not suitable for the landscape and the size of the farms . . . we use many different techniques and we want to share these with the consumers" **[R3]**. Others talked about educating consumers regarding the importance of the climatic conditions of places like Wayanad for the quality and taste of the produce and the harmful effects of chemical pesticides **[R3]**.

Foreign Buyers

By using the videos as a communication and marketing tool with foreign buyers, Organic Wayanad secured GBP30,000 from European investors that was used to fund a new organic shop in Wayanad, a weekly farmers' market, and a new employee responsible for marketing. One of the investors explicitly credits the research as "eye-opening" for the potential of the cooperative [E7]. Two of the buyers interviewed, 'World of Origins' (England) and 'Elephant Beans' (Germany), drew directly from [R1, R2, R3] to develop new marketing strategies and have reported that they now use material provided by the farmers about the farmers' expertise and provenance as marketing strategies in their websites and social media accounts. Elephant Beans "have now taken steps to give ourselves and our customers different opportunities to better explore individual farmers [sic] living circumstances and their life philosophies" [E5]. World of Origins uses their "capacity as a retailer to convey their stories to consumers through tasting events . . . in the UK" and shares the videos through social media [E4].

The video-based marketing tools that Touri's research developed, were adopted by French company, Ecoidées, an organic, fair-trade produce distributor that has a client base of more than 300 retailers across France. Adoption of the new marketing strategy has "helped Ecoidées strengthen its online presence and credibility as a brand" [E6]. The value of this strategy is emphasised as a contributing factor to the retention of Ecoidées' biggest client, Biocoop, a French network of 540 shops and independent agents engaged in the organic movement "because we demonstrated [our] commitment to the economic, environmental and social development of food growers in India. This commitment gives added value to our products . . . retaining Biocoop . . . gives us a significant advantage in a competitive market" [E6].

Local Benefits

Organic Wayanad officials began organising screening sessions using the farmers' videos to train new farmers. This resulted in knowledge sharing and practice changes within the co-operative as fifty members who watched the videos started cultivating crops that had been abandoned, leading to higher yields and bigger orders from foreign buyers. Thirty new farmers converted to organic farming and joined the cooperative [E1]. Recruitment is important to the farmers in the co-operative who see the benefits in the quality and fertility of the soil: "if more farmers convert to organic farming, the environmental damage that was caused to the soil due to the heavy use of chemicals during the early 2000s can be reversed and using the videos as education helps immensely" [E1].

Since face-to-face meetings have ceased due to Covid-19 restrictions, Organic Wayanad officials have been sharing the videos via social media: "[T]hanks to the videos we have recruited more than 50 new farmers joining the cooperative during the lockdown" [E1]. The research has, therefore, contributed to a ~20% increase in cooperative members since Organic Wayanad started using the videos as recruitment tools.

The shared knowledge and understanding of the value of their produce and skills that emerged from phase one of the project [E2] led to the cooperative's field officers putting this knowledge into action by organising four training workshops in 2015 [E2]. The outcome was more sophisticated negotiation practices and associated economic benefits. Organic Wayanad has "introduced new negotiation guidelines for the farmers, to emphasise the unique climatic conditions of the area . . . and the importance of the artisan methods and zero-budget farming" [E3]; "when we started promoting these qualities to our potential buyers, we were able to secure higher prices for our products" [E1].

The use of the videos to improve the buyers' knowledge and understanding of methods and quality of products means that: "current buyers believe in the farmers more now, and put fewer clauses in their contracts" [E1].

Through their participation in the video production process, the farmers have built community resilience during the Covid-19 lockdown. Five field officers and twenty-five farmers have used the skills they gained from the research project to create new videos with motivational messages and farming practices that they share with the rest of the cooperative through social media. These videos: "... provide a valuable social support mechanism and have proved critical for the farmers well-being" [E1]. This has helped to mitigate feelings of isolation and the negative impact of the crisis on farmers' wellbeing.

As well as building community resilience within the co-operative, the farmers' participation in the research led to improved social inclusion in the wider community. Before the research, "Organic farmers are not valued by the society. There is a perception that the income is low" [E1]. The farmers organised screening events in Karnataka and Palakkad to raise awareness among non-organic farmers, agriculture students and locals, attracting audiences of 150 people [E3]. This was a valuable exercise to redress the locally held misconceptions about the farmers and their produce: "[F]or a long time the locals laughed at us for caring about the environment; but they have now started appreciating our work. These videos are very important for the future generation" [E1]. One farmer stated: "I feel more recognised after doing these videos, more people know us now and it helps farmers feel less isolated" [E1]. The trust and understanding built by the local screenings led to the co-operative gaining their first ten customers in Palakkad [E1, E3].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

E1. Interview transcripts with farmers and officials from Organic Wayanad.

E2. Testimonials: Organic Wayanad.

E3. Email testimonials from co-ordinator of Organic Wayanad.

E4. Letter of testimony from, founder and director of World of Origins.

E5. Letter of testimony from founder and director of Elephant Beans.

E6. Letter of testimony from founder and director of Ecoidées.

E7. Testimonials from investors.

a) Individual investor AG.

b) Mokka Makan, coffee and spice company, Germany.

c) World of Origins Ltd, spice export company UK.