

## Kuapa Kokoo

### Fairtrade's Challenge

*Michael Barratt Brown*

*Michael Barratt Brown has regularly contributed to The Spokesman since its inception in 1970. These excerpts are taken from his illustrated memoir, Seekers: A Twentieth Century Life, which was recently published by Spokesman (£18.95).*

Retiring in 1983 from full time work at the Northern College in Yorkshire, I went to see my very old friend, Robin Murray, who was then head of the industry and employment department of the Greater London Council (GLC). He suggested that there was need for a full study of the work that the Council under Ken Livingstone had been engaged on together with an examination of the way London's co-operatives, assisted by the Greater London Enterprise Board, might be developed – two big tasks. I started and, over time, completed work on the first, but the second attracted me more. I had written books about international trade, but here was a chance to put some alternative ideas into practice.

Robin was anxious to encourage two new developments in the GLC: the first was to organise the recruitment of more black officials through an apprenticeship scheme – there were plenty of black cleaners and messengers. The second was to build relations with revolutionary governments. Robin and I still believed in revolutionary political and economic change. Delegations from the Vietnamese, Cuban, and Nicaraguan governments and from Zimbabwe were invited to the GLC, and I was encouraged to see my ideas for trade development going in that direction. It got to the Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher's ears, that Ken Livingstone at the GLC was developing a foreign policy, and with her Foreign Secretary she determined to close it down, along with the banner on the GLC building that reminded all who passed of the current number of unemployed people.

With the help of Olivier le Brun at the GLC, in 1983, we organised a conference of

co-operatives from Britain and representatives from developing countries to consider forms of future co-operation. We had the strong support of Ken Livingstone and of Michael Ward, chairman of the GLC Industrial and Employment Committee. I made a speech arguing *inter alia* that we had had enough of unfair trade, and it was time for some fair trade. I had in mind forms of international planning, based on the GLC experience. This led to the idea of establishing an organisation in the GLC to promote such co-operation. The GLC already had a Greater London Enterprise Board (GLEB) and one of its leading members, Vella Pillay, chairman of the branch of the Bank of China in London, joined me in pressing our case.

The first idea was to help developing countries with progressive governments by encouraging planned trade exchanges, as recommended by the Norwegian Nobel Prize winning economist, Professor Ragnar Frisch, whom I had met at a London conference to consider alternatives for Britain to a European Union. A start could be made, we thought, in those countries being boycotted by the rich countries. Cuba, Nicaragua and Vietnam were our first choices, and Dick Day and Olivier Le Brun went to Vietnam to develop pineapple production for canning and export in exchange for British engineering products. Dick organised the production for export from Cuba of certain precious metals, textiles and rocking chairs, which had to be reassembled from the separate pieces that arrived.

As for the textiles, we had a great success. A friend of mine, John Laflin, was a manager at Liberty's store in Regent Street. John was married to Felicia, the daughter of my good friend, Don Sproule. John arranged for the beautifully coloured printed textiles, which could be made into dresses, curtains or cushion covers, to be exhibited in Liberty's shop windows. Four Cuban ladies arrived to display the textiles draped around them, but as they appeared in the windows they had no clothes on, having covered themselves in paint. The result was sensational, and seriously affected traffic flow in Regent Street. The textiles were soon sold out. I am now sitting on a cushion made by [my wife] Eleanor from the lovely bright materials with 'Mendive', the signature of the Cuban designer, at the centre. When the Sandinista Government came to power, we added Nicaragua to our list of possible trading partners.

Unfortunately, Mrs Thatcher had decided that the GLC should be closed down within a year. However, in 1985, we obtained a guarantee of funding of an organisation for three years, to be called 'Third World Information Network' (TWIN) with a trading arm, Twin Trading. Vella and I signed the necessary documents for setting up the trust fund on the evening before the GLC's closing date for new activities.

We hired a staff of seven, headed by Olivier Le Brun as director of TWIN and Twin Trading and Dick Day as our development officer. We started on TWIN's programme of conferences, launched the newsletter and implemented some of the numerous projects emerging from the GLC trade conference, including:

a) technical and financial support with EEC funds for an irrigation scheme of peasant village associations, running vegetable gardens, to supply neighbouring towns and hotels. This scheme functioned for more than ten years.

b) a fair trade project with coffee producers in Nicaragua. This coffee, branded as 'Twin Trading Nicaraguan Coffee', sold mainly to organic shops and students' unions, was a seed that later grew into 'Café Direct'.

c) barter trade with Nicaraguan enterprises, exchanging computers against rocking chairs and other handicraft products.

d) import and sales of several Vietnamese products (spices, silk, kimonos) for state companies in Vietnam.

e) importing Mozambican wood to be transformed into beds by a London carpentry enterprise.

f) technological support for various projects, e.g. for a pineapple canning company in Vietnam and an organic vegetable growing scheme in Eritrea.

Vella joined our managing board, and stayed to help us until he was called back to South Africa by Nelson Mandela to advise him on financial matters. Basil Davidson came onto the Trust as an advisor. I shall not easily forget the day when Vella and I were chatting in his Highgate home, and the phone rang. Vella said, 'Nelson, Nelson! I don't believe it!' After 26 years in prison on Robben Island, Mandela had been released and one of the first people he wanted to speak to was Vella, whose family had helped him before his imprisonment. Mandela had recalled the name of Vella's wife, Patsy, and the names of his sons and wanted to be remembered to them.

Vella went back to South Africa, and put forward constructive economic and financial planning proposals for Mandela to introduce, but the international monetary authorities had got South Africa in their sights, and nothing was done that Vella had hoped for. I saw him briefly with Olivier Le Brun on his return to England. We celebrated his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday, but he was not well and died shortly afterwards. I was asked to make the oration at his funeral and sat next to his wife, Patsy. 'Give it them hard and strong!' she whispered. I had prepared a rather quiet, factual story of Vella's life and work in China, ending with TWIN and Mandela, but an

idea for a conclusion came to me and I quoted from the song of the left-wing American trade union, the Wobblies:

*Freedom doesn't come like the rain from the sky!*

*Freedom doesn't come as a gift from on high!*

*You have to work for it, fight for it, day and night for it!*

As I finished, I threw out my clenched fist, and by mistake hit the microphone. The noise in the crematorium and in the overflow meeting outside in the garden was shattering. Everyone thought that I had done it intentionally. When I sat down amid the din, Patsy said 'Wonderful, Michael, just wonderful!' I was pleased because there was no doubt about our celebration of Vella's life, working and fighting for the cause of African liberation and for TWIN as a part of that new Africa.

My interest in Africa, begun in 1942 by my boat trip along the West African coast to Cape Town, train journey across the Kalahari desert to Durban, and seaplane flight all the way back up the East coast of Africa to Cairo, led me to think at once, when we founded TWIN, of TWIN working with African organisations. We decided to arrange in Africa a follow-up international conference of co-operatives. Several African co-operatives from Zimbabwe and Tanzania had attended our GLC conference in 1983, and I had a good friend managing a sugar factory in Kenya. I set out to travel with Eleanor to our friends in Kisumu, Kenya, and went on to Zimbabwe. Mugabe had just established himself as the President of Zimbabwe, and our co-operatives were being brought under his control. Despite much support from Professor Terry Ranger, whom I had met in Manchester, we failed in Zimbabwe, but a much earlier English Co-operative College contact I had with co-operatives in Tanzania gave us a start in Africa.

Our work with coffee farmers in Africa had been preceded by imports of coffee from co-operatives in Mexico and Nicaragua. The Mexican Government relaxed control over coffee exports so that small coffee farmers' co-operatives could choose how to export. Teodor Shanin, who I had persuaded to join our TWIN board, had contacts in Mexico among the co-operatives, which led to our importing the first container load of Fair Trade coffee from Mexico, despite its reactionary government, for sale through Oxfam, Equal Exchange and other charity shops in the UK. The export of this container had been held up by our refusal to pay bribes to the officials at the port. When this was reported to the dockworkers, they showed their solidarity with the small farmers by stopping work until our coffee was loaded. The Mexican Government then jailed some of the farmers for supposedly getting round their legislation. I got Ken Coates, as

a Member of the European Parliament, to persuade the European Union representative in Mexico to intervene, and we got a cable from the Mexican co-operatives, thanking us for the improvement of the food in prison. I told this story in my book, *Fair Trade*.

The addition of Nicaragua to our list of favoured countries was brought to an end by the United States' military intervention and overthrow of the Sandinistas. When that happened, our agent there had a bar of gold for export, as part of our plan to offer an alternative to gold for wedding rings supplied from *apartheid* South Africa. As our agent's house came to be inspected by the new government authorities for evidence of collaboration with the Sandinistas, he hid the gold in the chamber pot under his bed and got it away to his sister in Peru, who forwarded it to us. It so happened that at that time my wife lost her wedding ring in our strawberry patch at Robin Hood Farm, and she replaced it with one from Nicaraguan gold. My granddaughter Sarah still wears it on her right hand.

Once TWIN's association with co-operatives of coffee farmers in Tanzania and Uganda, cocoa farmers in Ghana, and cotton farmers in Mali was established, I met Adebayo Adedeji, the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa on a visit to London, and had long talks with him. I also talked with my friend Victoria Bawtree, who was editing the Food and Agricultural Organization magazine of the Freedom from Hunger Campaign, and with my old friend Basil Davidson, who had broken into new interpretations of African history. I decided to launch myself into writing a series of books on Africa. The first, published in 1992, was called *Short Changed*, a major statistical study of Africa's world trade, on which I had the assistance of Pauline Tiffen. I followed this up in 1995 with a comprehensive study of *Africa's Choices – After Thirty Years of the World Bank*. This was published by Penguin, with an American edition from Westview Press and a Japanese translation. Finally, in 1997, I delivered the 'African Studies Lecture' at Leeds University, under the presidency of my friend Lionel Cliffe. In this I emphasised, with much historical support, that my belief in the possibilities of developing fair trade was not just a romantic illusion but a real basis of hope for the future.

Having begun on TWIN'S programme of conferences, and launched the newsletter, we opened a shop in London for Third World co-operatives' products, especially from countries suffering trade embargoes such as Vietnam and Cuba. Dick Day, as development officer, explored trade openings in Africa and was soon joined by Pauline Tiffen, who became his partner. Pauline organised a co-operatives conference under the rubric 'Whatever happened to Fair Trade?' She realised that our shop and the

small markets of voluntary organisations such as Oxfam were quite inadequate to sell the produce of the co-operatives we were in touch with. She proposed the formation of a company made up of TWIN, Oxfam, Traidcraft and Equal Exchange, that would be capable of marketing small Third World co-operative producers' coffee to the UK supermarkets.

So it was that Cafédirect was born, in 1993, and we had advertising posters on the railway stations promising a fair deal for Third World producers – ‘You get excellent coffee, and they get schools and clinics’. The first supermarket to take some of our coffee was won over by Equal Exchange in Scotland. This was followed by the Co-op and, after three years of agonising delays, all the UK supermarkets, except ASDA, were putting Cafédirect on their shelves.

Pauline and Dick Day went on to work with a newly formed Ghanaian cocoa farmers' co-operative to make chocolate for marketing in the UK and in Japan. A company was formed with the involvement of Sophi Tranchell and Sandy Balfour to market chocolate in the UK. Originally this Ghanaian-British company was called ‘The Day Chocolate Company’ (in memory of Dick after his death), but later became Divine Chocolate Ltd to align with the name of the successful chocolate brand they created. It was the first Fairtrade chocolate company to be owned by cocoa farmers – the members of the Kuapa Kokoo co-operative, who therefore get to share a significant percentage of any distributed profit.

Dick's death from a brain tumour was a terrible loss. He had done so much from the very beginning to build TWIN. I had once again to speak the oration at a funeral. Our Japanese co-operative colleague came all the way from Tokyo to be present, and there were delegates from co-operatives in Africa and Spanish America. I ended my tribute to Dick's work with the Spanish challenge, *Venceremos!* (We shall overcome!) and *La lucha se continúa!* (the struggle goes on!) I sat down, shaking with emotion. Happily, I had sitting next to me, Barry Munslow, a huge man, African expert and Professor at Liverpool University, who had been one of our most loyal supporters. He took my hand in his great paw, and calmed me down.

An early success in establishing TWIN as a major force in Third World Trade was at a conference organised partly by TWIN and partly by the World Association of Fair Trade, held in Kilkenny, Ireland, in 1988. Mary Robinson, the Irish President, presided. She later became the UN high commissioner for human rights. I had to make a major speech about TWIN and the principle of fair trade and had strong support, speaking in Erse, from my friend Mike Cooley, the author of the *Lucas Plan* to replace arms production at Lucas Aerospace. The conference was the first to bring

together a number of Third World small farmers' co-operatives with European non-governmental organisations under the inspired leadership of Carol Wills from Oxford.

One very important role that TWIN played in the advancement of ideas for diversifying the trade of developing countries was by attending at conferences on the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), organised by the UN Commission for Europe in Geneva in the late 1980s. I attended several of these on behalf of TWIN and had the support of John Denham MP, later a Labour minister, for establishing fair trade principles in international trade. However, the increasing acceptance worldwide of free market 'neo-liberal' trading practices unfortunately brought these valuable discussions to an end.

One great occasion was the public launching of TWIN's products in London. We assembled representatives of nearly a million farmers from several hundred co-operatives in 26 different Third World countries. I wrote the book with Pauline Tiffen, *Africa Short Changed*, which was published by Pluto Press and we started a regular information service, the *TWIN Café Bulletin*. This still appears every fortnight, informing our coffee-growing members of the movement of arabica and robusta coffee world prices. One of our first tasks had been to supply computers to all our members, so that they could receive e-mails and get internet communication.

As well as my earlier visits for TWIN to Kenya and Zimbabwe, I made one memorable visit to Peru to visit our coffee co-operatives there with the support of Rebecca Morahan where we could witness the buying skills of John Wheeler of TWIN. We went to Lima and then to Cuzco and climbed up into the mountains to Machu Picchu, which I visited with the representative from the Japanese co-operatives to whom some of our Peruvian farmers were selling their coffees. You can see her with me in the photo. Machu Picchu is an amazing site, with the remains of a large settlement of houses dating back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century between the peaks. On the mountain climbs some of our party suffered from altitude sickness. But for me it was pure joy. I could hear without my hearing aids, because the air pressure was less and my Eustacian tubes opened, which high board diving had closed. I once asked my wife while we were staying in the Pyrenees why lovemaking was so good in the mountains. 'You can hear me!' she said.

Climbing up into the mountains from Cuzco, I had an extraordinary experience. It was 12 November, and I was just thinking that it was Eleanor's birthday when I noticed that the village we were approaching was called 'Eleanora'. As we left the village, I looked out for the sign that gave its name, and it was true – truly remarkable. When we returned to

Lima, I stayed with relatives of Robin Murray's wife, Frances. My hostess and her daughter were both well-known Peruvian dancers. They took me to a dance, and to my amazement I found that, when they led, I could follow their movements in accord with the music. Before leaving Lima, I bought two jerseys of llama wool, each having the outline of two llamas woven into the pattern. They are warm without being heavy. I still wear them; indeed, I am wearing one now, as I write. It now has little leather elbow pads, where I wore out the wool at the elbows. The Peruvian trip was a real summation of my whole TWIN experience, not only the products we bought, but the splendid people, the mountain countries they came from, and their evident gratitude for our help.

After twelve years as TWIN's chair, I stood down in 1995, retaining my board membership. Robin Murray, returning from several years' work in Canada, took over. Pauline Tiffen resigned and took on a high profile job at the World Bank in Washington. Pauline completed the chocolate negotiations with finance from the Body Shop, and Robin launched initiatives with tropical fruit producers in AGROFAIR, and nut producers in a new organisation, obtaining nuts from Peru, Malawi and Kerala. AGROFAIR became a major UK supplier, first of all in the Co-op, of Fairtrade bananas and other tropical fruits.

The financing of a nut company proved more difficult and required a major contribution of funds from TWIN's reserves. In the end, a company called 'Liberation Nuts' was launched with first sales in Sainsbury's. After starting initiatives for fair trade cotton from Malawi and rubber goods from Malaya, Robin resigned from the chair in 2010. It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of Robin Murray's contribution to TWIN and Twin Trading, from the founding in 1983 at the GLC to his retirement 27 years later, all combined with most important work done with London boroughs and books written on waste disposal and co-operatives, and most recently on the whole social economy.

TWIN continued under the chairmanship of Catherine Cameron, the environment expert, and then of John Bowes, the director of the Co-operative Society in Cumbria, who sadly died after only a year, having written a key book, *The Fair Trade Revolution*. Finally, Michael Ward took over the chair. He had been the chair of the GLC industry and employment committee, which had first launched TWIN and Twin Trading in 1983. It cannot be said that the TWIN experiment has changed the unequal economic relations of developed and developing countries, but a beginning has been made.

Especially remarkable has been the growth in public understanding in Britain and more widely of the concept of fair trade. Even giant

corporations such as Nestlé and Kraft have sought to carry the Fairtrade logo and guarantee on some of their products, notably Ethiopian coffee and KitKat chocolate. Their huge scale of supply means that they can be offered at prices that the products from our small-scale farmers cannot compete with on the supermarket shelves. The creation of a level playing field in international trade is still a long way off.

A new problem that affects our farmers is the result of climate change. Some areas of production are suffering from continued droughts, others from torrential rain. My friend Catherine Cameron, a well-known expert on climatology, while she was the chair of TWIN for a few years after Robin, sought to address this issue. The problem of combining the finance of TWIN's ongoing responsibilities with new initiatives proved overwhelming and Catherine resigned. The issue remains. TWIN has attracted a succession of brilliant leaders, but many of its problems remain intractable in a world of giant corporations.

International trade in a time of continued recession is bound to be sluggish. It can be said that fair trade principles applied to the produce of small-scale, Third World co-operative farmers have slightly increased the price they receive and improved somewhat the quality of their lives. But when I drink my cup of coffee in Starbucks or Costa, or buy a bar of chocolate in the Co-op, perhaps 10 pence of the £1 I pay goes to the producer, even if what I buy has the fair trade and organic logos. Apart from the milk and sugar, which may or may not be fairly traded, the money is made in the roasting or processing, the packaging and the retailing. Very few farmers' co-operatives and hardly any fair trade suppliers do their own upstream roasting, processing, packaging and, least of all, the retailing. TWIN has never had enough capital to be able to do that and compete on price with the giant companies that control the markets, but fair trade has enhanced the power of the small farmers in the international commodity markets which these companies dominate.

The whole history is a history of leaving it to the market and of a market dominated by ever fewer and larger international companies. Even some of the great fair trading Quaker companies such as Rowntree's and Cadbury's have been taken over by such giants as Nestlé and Kraft. They advertise some of their products as 'fair trade', but these make up less than 1% of their sales. You can buy fair trade coffee at Starbucks, but only a few people do. This few is growing every year, and that is where some hope lies. But the future for fair trade has to lie in a real movement from below to build an alternative social economy, which reduces inequality and protects the environment. And that implies a major challenge to the

capitalist market, using all the new means of communication – the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, and email links. It is a massive task, but that alone will save the planet, which we all depend on for our very lives. And it means resisting the great land grab by the rich that is taking place in Africa and Latin America to take over land for large estates to feed the rich with sugar, soya, beef and maize, at the expense of the millions of small farmers growing their mixed crops – a disaster for the planet.