

The Sustainable Coffee Activist Network

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If, on your next trip to your favorite coffee shop, a leaflet-dispersing sustainable coffee activist happens shove a slip of paper into your hand, take some time and look up the Internet address printed near the bottom. It will plunge you into a dense network of activist organizations all dumping buckets of information and messages into your computer. The web of links and partnerships woven by these organizations appears, at first glance, to have a completely random structure. However, after a little examination, it becomes reasonably comprehensible and begins to unravel. To untangle the network, it is best to adopt the Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International (FLO) as a starting point and then follow the flow of information as it surges out through the web.

FLO and the Coffee Trail

The Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International is an umbrella organization in charge of coordinating the efforts of the seventeen Fair Trade certifiers, or National Initiatives. Each of these certifiers operates exclusively within one country and is responsible for certifying, marketing, and promoting Fair Trade coffee within that country. Before the coffee enters an importing nation, however, FLO remains in charge and maintains contracts with coop members, coops, exporters, and importers dealing in Fair Trade coffee. Then, after the coffee is imported, one of the seventeen Fair Trade certifiers takes over. Fair Trade roasters, distributors, and retailers maintain contracts with one of these National Initiatives and may display the Initiative's label on their products to verify that they are Fair Trade certified (see Fig. 1).

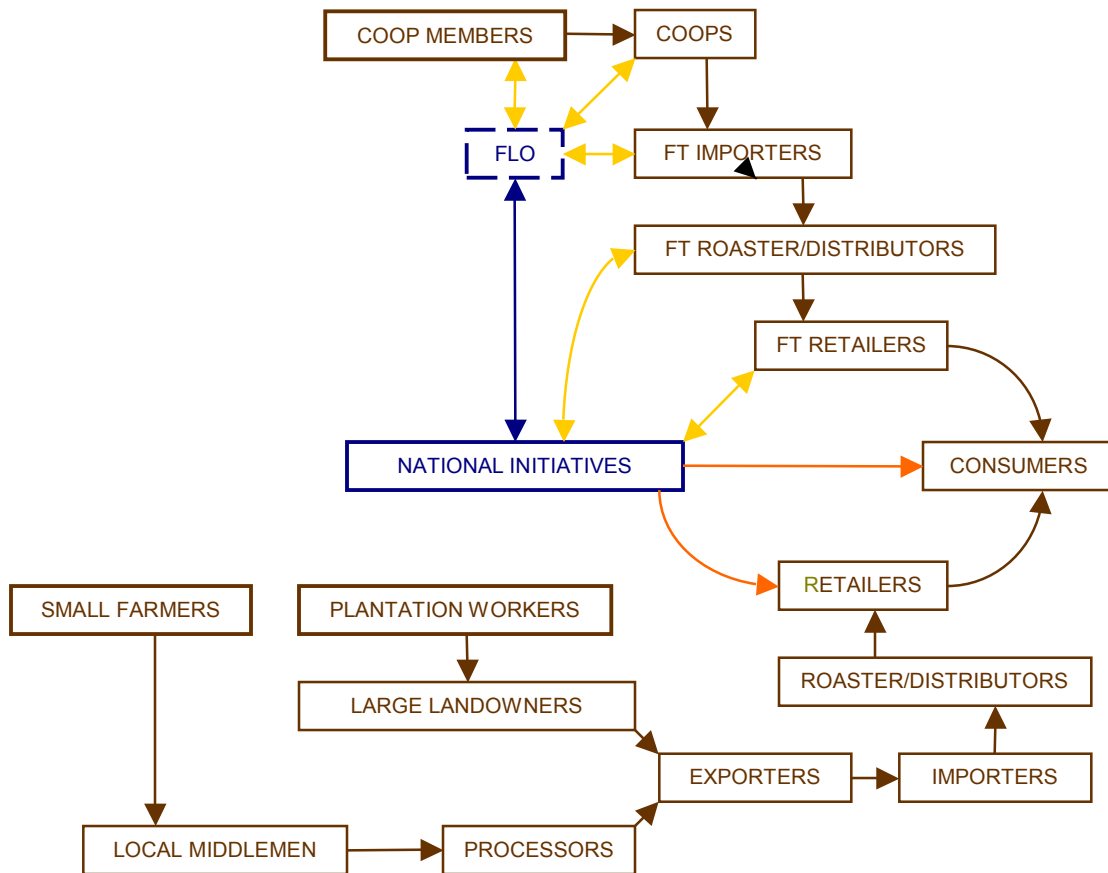


One of seven FT certification labels used by the 17 certifiers

FLO, created in 1997, provides the Fair Trade certification process

with uniformity and greatly increased efficiency. Since FLO oversees the growing, processing, and importing of Fair Trade coffee, each National Initiative does not have to certify those steps individually and can thereby avoid unnecessarily duplicating the efforts of the other National Initiatives. The National Initiatives step onto the scene only when duplication is no longer a concern and, even after they enter the picture, FLO still governs their certification criteria. As a result, a Fair Trade label holds the same meaning in Switzerland as in the United States and Fair Trade coffee producers do not have to adhere to multiple sets of standards.

Fig. 1: FLO and the Coffee Trail



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National Initiatives and Fair Trade Retailers

In addition to certifying coffee, the National Initiatives are responsible for supporting Fair Trade retailers by increasing consumer demand for Fair Trade products. However, the National Initiatives are not without help. The sustainable coffee network has developed largely around this end and, consequently, scores of actors are simultaneously working to increase the demand for sustainable coffee. Of these actors, the group most closely linked to the National Initiatives is the collection Fair Trade coffee companies with whom the Initiatives have contracts. Many of the merchants selling Fair Trade coffee do so out of a sense of moral obligation and are therefore deeply involved in spreading the movement's message. In a late May lecture, Deborah James remarked that, "there are some great people in the coffee industry." These companies headed by the people Deborah alluded to sell only sustainable coffee and are thus set apart from companies such as Starbucks and Seattle's Best Coffee. These companies, in contrast, sell a limited amount of sustainable coffee and are not likely to propagate the movement's message even though they have contracts with TransFair USA.

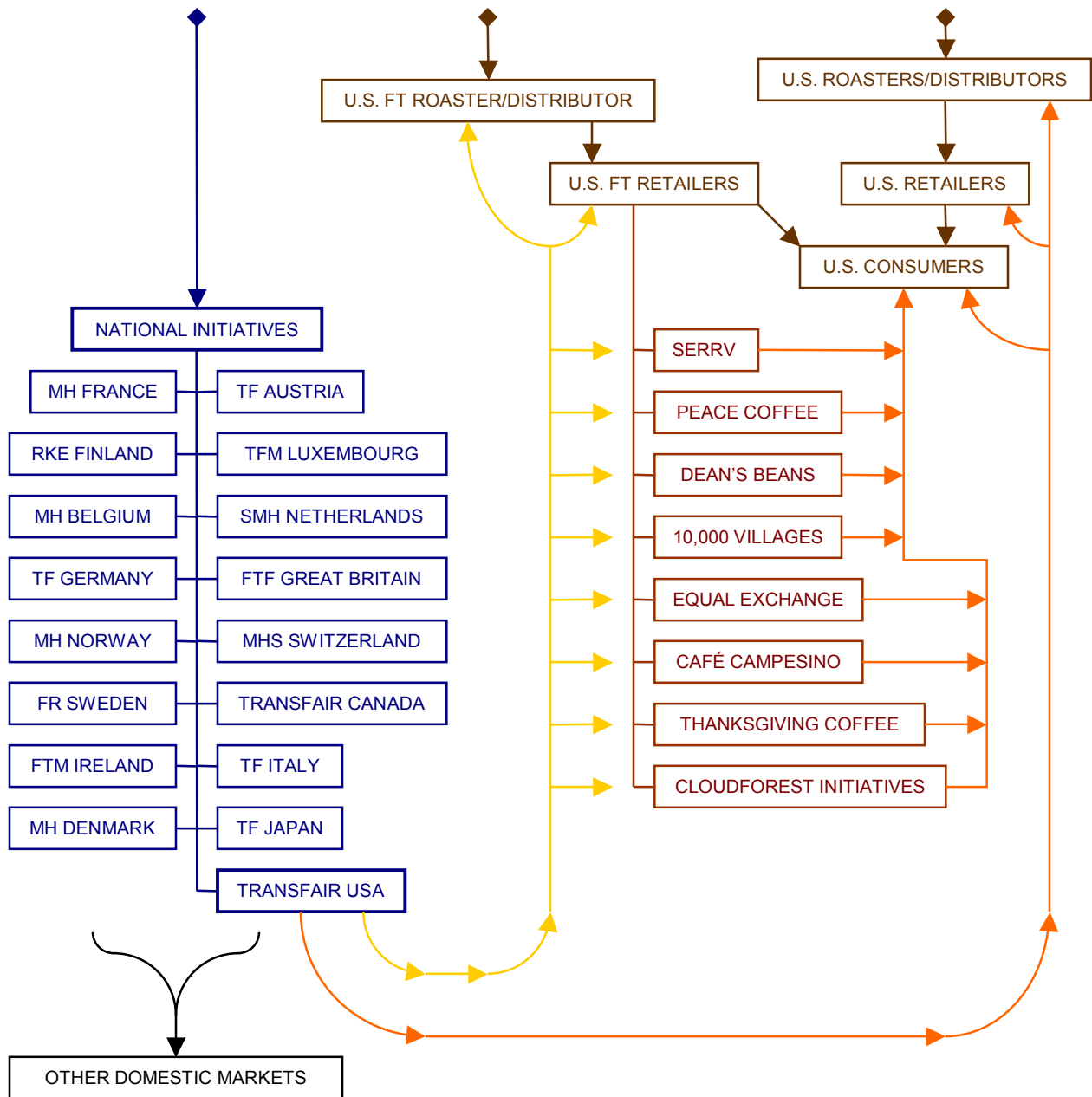
Many of the companies that TransFair USA, the National Initiative in the United States, has contracts with, such as Peace Coffee and Equal Exchange among others, actively work to increase consumer demand for Fair Trade coffee (see Fig 2).

These companies dedicate large sections of their websites to spreading the movement's message and educating web-surfers about sustainable coffee. For example, Equal Exchange, a Massachusetts based coffee retailer, hosts a website that supplies detailed definitions of Fair Trade, shade-grown, and organic coffees, accompanied by descriptions of their benefits. In addition, the site provides a "get-involved" section with multiple links for those interested in further pursuing the issue.



Similarly, about a dozen other of TransFair USA's partner companies offer comparable sites and together they throw a considerable amount of information at coffee drinkers. The story is much the same abroad with each National Initiative following a parallel strategy. For example, Café Direct, Equal Exchange UK, and Tradecraft, have the same type of relationship with the Fairtrade Foundation of Great Britain and the United Kingdom's coffee drinking population.

Fig. 2: National Initiatives and Fair Trade Retailers



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Activist Organizations

Beyond the sustainable coffee companies, and not linked to the National Initiatives by any contracts, are the sustainable coffee activist organizations. Unlike the coffee companies, these organizations do not focus on selling products. Rather, they exist for the sole purpose of pursuing one or more campaigns. While the mass of links between these groups has no clear center, a number of important focal points are identifiable. In the United States, TransFair USA, Global Exchange, and Oxfam America provide the most important organizational hubs.¹

TransFair USA is by far the most frequently linked to organization in the movement and the certifier's web site even has a detailed description of how to link other sites to it. TransFair itself maintains several links to major activist organizations highlighted by an exceptionally strong tie to Global Exchange—a fellow Bay Area-based human rights group that boasts one of the most visible sustainable coffee campaigns. The relationship between these two organizations developed largely because their methods, mission, and location are very compatible. TransFair, because it works extensively with companies, cannot engage in anti-corporate campaigns and instead must maintain reasonably good relationships with coffee companies. They of course attempt to convert companies to Fair Trade, but do so by way of educational campaigns detailing the benefits of Fair Trade coffee.

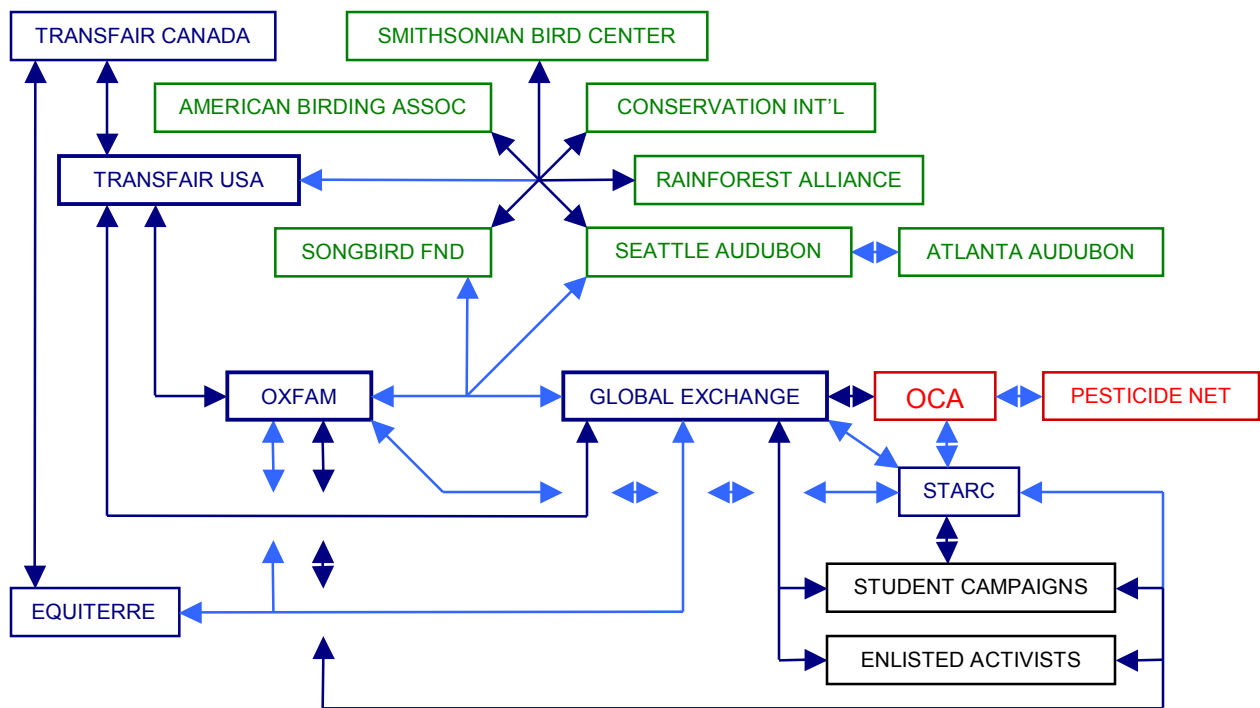
However, since educational campaigns do not always sway companies, the working partnership with Global Exchange becomes important. Global Exchange pursues multiple anti-corporate campaigns dealing with a variety of issues at any given time and currently is involved in campaigns against both Starbucks and Folgers. Since TransFair USA has a contract with

¹ While the sustainable coffee network, and the information flow it facilitates, is transnational, the groups that form the network, with the exception of umbrella organizations usually do not operate in more than one importing country.

Starbucks, it would be ill advised for them to aggressively pressure the coffee giant to carry more Fair Trade coffee—thus, the pressure from Global exchange becomes beneficial.

Oxfam, another human rights NGO, operates in much the same way as Global Exchange. Both Global Exchange and Oxfam provide resource packets supplying activists with leaflets, instructions, and contact information. They also maintain list-serves and are in frequent contact with their activist base. Both organizations, especially Global Exchange, link to multiple other activist groups.

Fig. 3: Links Between Activist Organizations



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A particularly prominent cluster of activist organizations within the movement is the closely-knit group of environmental and migratory bird groups linked to TransFair USA, Oxfam, and Global Exchange (See Fig. 3). These organizations generally take a less hostile position

when it comes to coffee companies, preferring to work with these companies rather than against them. Conservation International even has a working relationship with Starbucks and shares a joint website with the coffee retailer. Furthermore, because these organizations are primarily concerned with migratory birds and other environmental issues, they are beginning to develop shade coffee certification to compliment the Fair Trade certification provided by FLO. The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center is at the forefront of this effort and provides a label for certified shade-grown coffee (Shown at right).

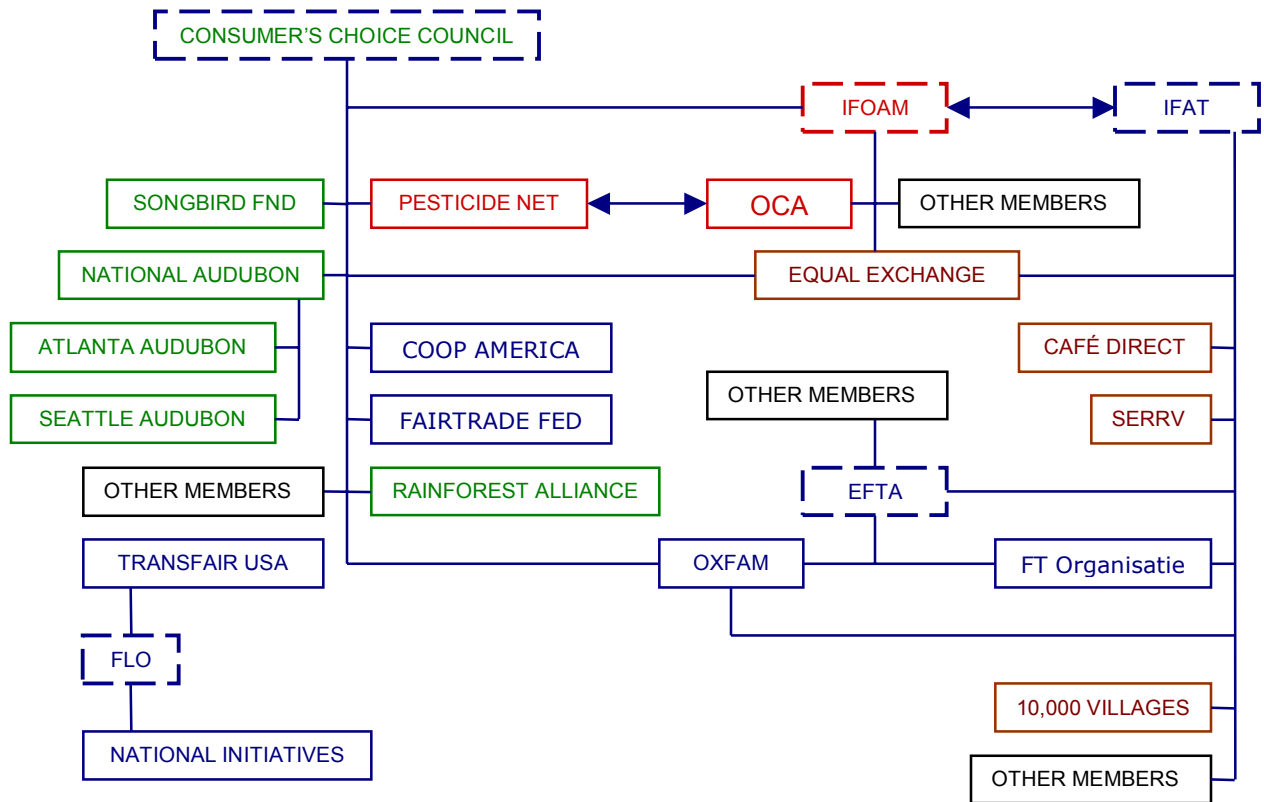


Umbrella Organizations

Providing additional links between activist organizations, umbrella organizations make up another important group of actors in the sustainable coffee movement and serve to create and strengthen links between their member organizations (see Fig. 4). Umbrella organizations come in two types. First, there are those like FLO who become deeply involved in the movement. The sole purpose of FLO and all of its member organizations is to promote Fair Trade. Second, there are those like IFAT, IFOAM, the Consumer's Choice Council, and EFTA. These organizations do not involve themselves directly in the sustainable coffee movement, but rather become involved in broader movements such as sustainable agriculture or fairer producer-consumer relationships in general. Some of these groups' member organizations may involve themselves deeply in the sustainable coffee movement but many will not. The value of this second type of umbrella organizations lies in the connections they form between members, allowing members to support each other's ideas and campaigns. The Consumer's Choice Council's web site, for example, contains a document titled, "The Conservation Principles of Coffee Production," signed

by sixteen different organizations. Some of these, such as Conservation International and the Seattle Audubon Society are centrally involved in the sustainable coffee movement. Others like Greenpeace and the National Wildlife Federation are involved only on the periphery. Nevertheless, they agree with the movement's message and are able to express their support through their involvement in the Consumer's Choice Council. Other umbrella organizations serve similar functions, supplying the network with both uniformity and connectivity.

Fig. 4: Umbrella Organizations



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Getting the Message out

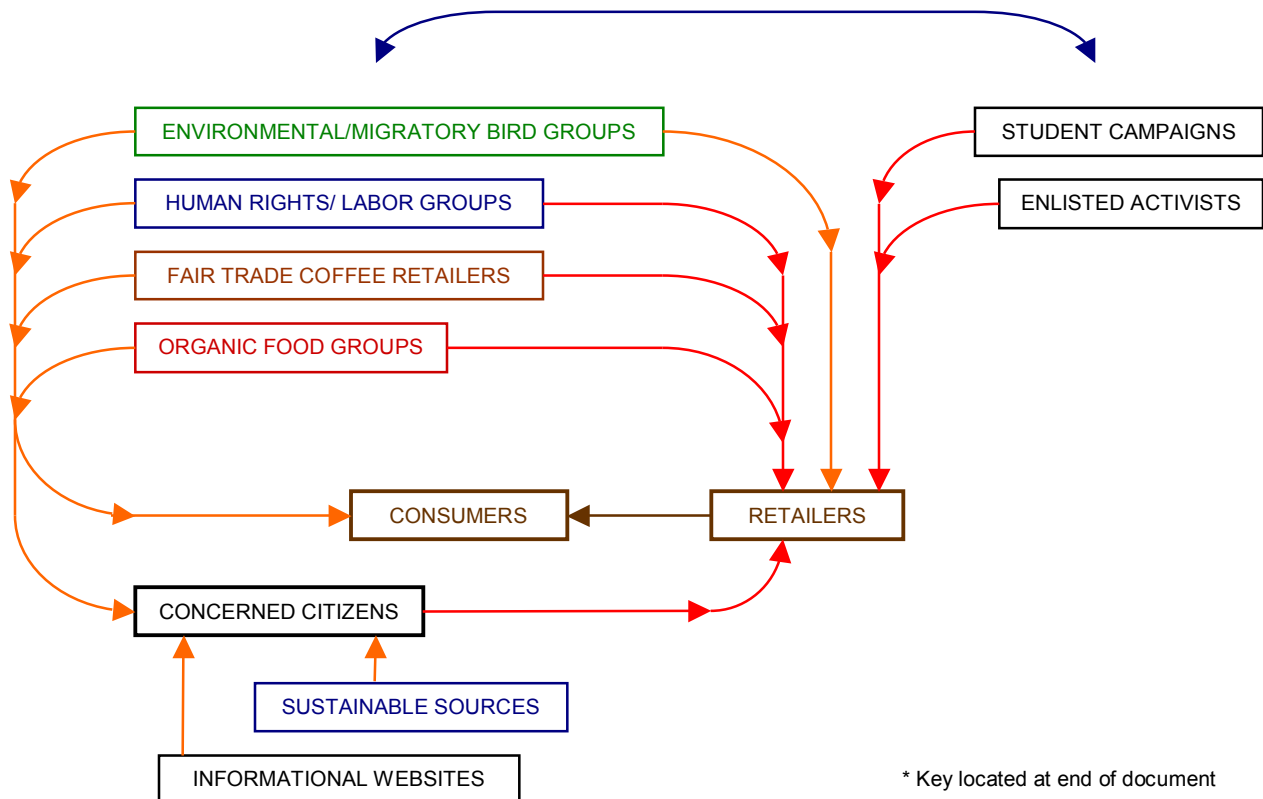
From under the umbrella organizations and out of the activist hubs the messages and campaigns hit the consumer. These messages come in a variety of forms. They may be the reports of umbrella organizations, the educational campaigns of certifiers and environmental

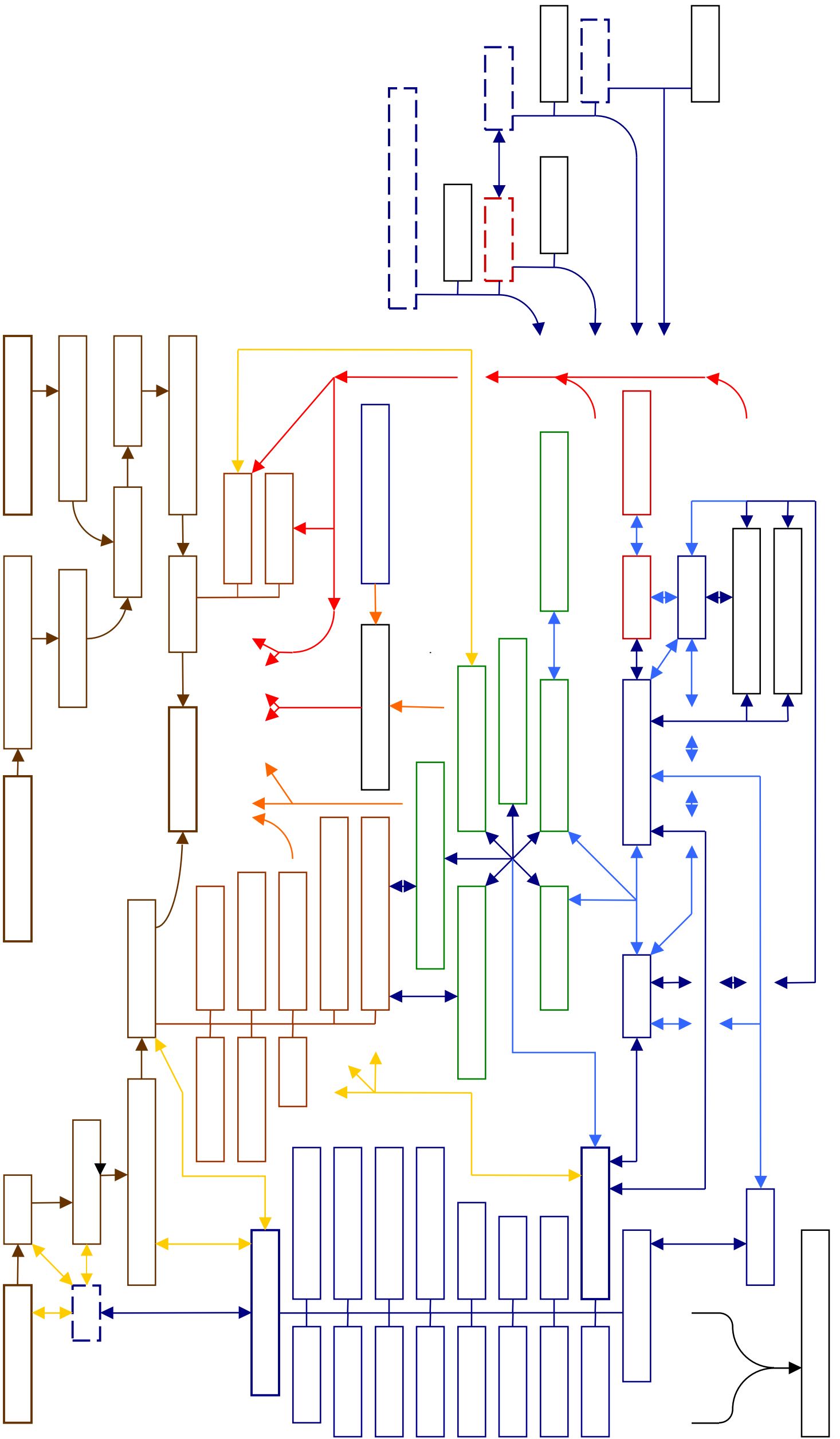


groups, the anti-corporate campaigns of labor activists, the student voices of campus campaigns, data from a multitude of informational organizations such as Sustainable Sources, or the leaflets handed out by a human rights activist. To tap into this

cornucopia of information, just search for “sustainable coffee” on your nearest computer and open one of the hundreds of links your search will produce.

Fig. 5: Getting the Message Out







- A bolded box indicates that the group named in the box is of special importance to that specific diagram.
- A dashed — — — boarder around a box indicates that the group named in the box is an umbrella organization.
- Both green and blue are used to indicate the Consumer's Choice Council. This is because the CCC is both a human rights organization and an environmental organization.