When Sheena Biju visited Shrewsbury in March 2016, she painted a vivid picture of the difference Fairtrade was making to her community.



Sheena is a farmer in **Kerala, India**. It is a mountainous region, with few roads, where the farmers led isolated lives. They used to sell their crop to traders, and had to bargain hard to get the best price possible. They were often cheated by these traders, who of course owned the scales. They only got their money once the harvest was in: until then they had to pledge their land to the bank, in order to borrow money to pay their workers, and buy whatever they needed for their crops. There was no diversification so if their one crop failed, they faced ruin: poverty and hunger. Many resorted to suicide. It was a desperately bleak picture.

To change this, in 2001, farmers began to group themselves into a co-operative, growing organic crops, and in 2008, they turned to **Fairtrade**. The differences this has brought are immense. The farmers now receive a fair price for what they grow – and are no longer cheated. And through the **‘Fairtrade Premium’**, which is paid to the whole community, and decided democratically, there are all kinds of other benefits.

One of the first acts of the co-operative, was to buy a **vehicle - complete with a weighing** **machine**, which could travel round the area collecting the produce from the farmers. More recently, the premium has been used to buy land to build a **processing centre**, where all the members’ products can be processed. This will save on all the money presently spent on using private processors which are at least 2 hours away and might be as far as 100km. This centre will also facilitate the spread of ‘good practice’ farming methods, and there is a bi-monthly newsletter which again helps to keep the farmers up to date with improved farming ideas.

**Climate change** is very apparent: the region experiences both floods and droughts. When Sheena was in England, the temperature at home should have been around 25 – 30 degrees; in fact it was 39 – 40. At the same time, growing industrialisation, the demand for cars (however ancient) and air conditioning, is exacerbating the problem. The co-operative is therefore encouraging re-forestation: wherever one tree is cut down, five more are planted.

In such a remote area, **medical centres** are few and far between. Funded by the co-operative, there are now doctors with vehicles, able to visit the farmers and check-up the whole family; and all the families are covered by health insurance.

Another positive change affects the **children**. Before the advent of the co-operative and Fairtrade, children were very often used to help out in the fields, especially at harvest time. With Fairtrade, this is forbidden, and children are now helped, not only to stay at school, but are given scholarships for further study. Sadly, if they go away to university, students rarely return to their home area, so their dream is to establish a college in the area, possibly in collaboration with an English institution.

Sheena herself is also very much involved in **the empowerment of women**. In such rural areas especially, it has been customary for the women to stay at home, cooking and looking after the children. But with the new processing centre, there are opportunities for work which fits in with children’s schooling. She believes that being able to work together enables the women to share difficulties and support each other, rather than remaining isolated, and that this helps to improve the well-being of the whole family.

