

We all make choices every time we buy a product or service. Once we decide to make a purchase, we might have to make decisions about the product price, quality, colour, or other considerations. Many consumers are also interested in knowing where the product comes from, how and under what conditions it was produced, as well as the environmental, economic and human impact of production. If we purchase a service we may need to make decisions about price, the quality, and from whom we will make the purchase.

Below are several theoretical consumer choice situations for you to think about. Do your choices really matter? What should you do? What are the possible implications of your choices?

Situation 1:

Your family plans to purchase some new furniture made of tropical hardwoods. A family friend reminds you that the purchase of items made from tropical hardwoods is causing the destruction of rain forests, resulting in erosion, increased likelihood of flooding, and reduction in the amount of oxygen released to the atmosphere during photosynthesis. You feel that one coffee table is hardly going to destroy a rainforest, and that the trees have already been cut so you might as well use the products.

What do you think? What are the economic and environmental implications if many families buy just one coffee table? Do our individual consumer choices matter?



Situation 2:

You are going to a coffee bar with some friends to enjoy a cup of specialty coffee. One of your friends objects to your choice of coffee bar saying that it does not purchase its coffee through the "fair trade" network and that its coffee is produced without giving fair wages to the workers. Another friend says that since there are not coffee plantations in Canada, why should you worry about where and under what conditions the coffee is produced?

What do you think? Is it worth the trouble of looking for another place to go? What are the economic and social implications if you purchase coffee made by workers getting low wages and living in poor conditions?



Situation 3:

You are showing off some imported clothes you just bought. Your friend responds by telling you that you should not purchase items produced in that country because of its poor human rights record. People are being jailed without being charged and those who protest often disappear. She tells you that your purchase helps support a government that disregards human rights. Your sister, however, says young people cannot do anything about this situation, so why worry about your consumer choices.

What do you think? Should you refuse to purchase products from countries with poor human rights records? What difference can you make?

