SWEET FRUIT, BITTER TRUTH

GERMAN SUPERMARKETS’ RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE INHUMAN CONDITIONS WHICH PREVAIL IN THE BANANA AND PINEAPPLE INDUSTRIES IN COSTA RICA AND ECUADOR

SUMMARY
This investigation shows the dramatic social and ecological cost of tropical fruit farming, based on the examples of the pineapple industry in Costa Rica and the banana industry in Ecuador. German supermarkets such as Aldi, Lidl, Edeka and Rewe share the blame for the untenable conditions which prevail in the banana and pineapple industries: they abuse their market power in forcing down prices paid to producers and suppliers. For example, the import prices for pineapple decreased by around 45 per cent from 2002 – 2014, despite increasing production costs. This contributes to the intensification of traditional exploitative structures in both countries, to the fact that the plantation workers’ wages in Costa Rica and Ecuador are too low to support a family, and to the perpetuation of unstable employment conditions. While the supermarket chains meticulously check the imported fruits’ appearance, refusing to accept entire deliveries due to even the smallest flaw, they take social and ecological criteria much less seriously. This investigation reveals (too) many violations of human and labour rights in the production of bananas and pineapples.

PESTICIDES CAUSE DAMAGE TO HEALTH
Bananas and pineapples are usually cultivated in pesticide-intensive monocultures. The plantation workers and people living close to the plantations are frequently exposed to the pesticides, some of which are highly poisonous. In Costa Rica, pineapple producers use a large number of poisonous pesticides, for example Oxamyl, which the World Health Organisation considers highly hazardous, or Bromacil, which is not licensed for use in the EU. All this despite the fact that groundwater is consistently contaminated in several cultivation areas, making it necessary to maintain the drinking water supply via water tankers.

The Ecuadorian banana industry uses highly poisonous substances such as Paraquat, which is not licensed for use in the EU, or the cancer-causing products Mancozeb and Glyphosate. Spraying pesticides from airplanes is standard. During a survey on a plantation which supplies Lidl amongst others, 60 per cent of the interviewed workers stated that they work on the plantations during or straight after airplane spraying has taken place — a clear violation of state-recommended re-entry safety periods. In Costa Rica too, workers of producers which supply German supermarkets report that pesticides are sprayed whilst they work on the fields.

Many of the workers surveyed reported a high rate of disabilities, miscarriage and cancer in the areas around plantations. They also reported frequent respiratory disease, nausea, skin allergies and dizziness. These reports correspond with the results of the few scientific studies which have been carried out on the subject. Necessary occupational health and safety measures are missing on many plantations.
DISREGARD FOR TRADE UNION RIGHTS
According to Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to form and join a trade union. The banana and pineapple industries in Ecuador and Costa Rica systematically violate this human right.
Oxfam investigated 20 businesses in Ecuador; none of them had independent employee representation. Workers reported “black lists” of names of union members, passed around amongst plantation owners. At Lidl supplier Maras, 93 per cent of those surveyed said that they did not want to form a union for fear of repressive measures. In Costa Rica, workers who get involved with unions are regularly made redundant – such as in the case of Agricola Agromonte, a producer for Aldi, Edeka and Rewe, which made 50 workers belonging to the union UNT redundant in autumn 2015.
Precarious employment conditions
Employment conditions at the pineapple and banana plantations are unstable and unacceptable. Employers deliberately decline to inform their employees about their rights. In Ecuador, many workers do not even receive a copy of their employment contract. Female workers report that they have been made redundant due to pregnancy, leaving them without insurance. In Costa Rica too, survey respondents at Lidl supplier Finca Once and at Aldi, Edeka and Rewe supplier Agricola Agromonte told us of unstable contractual conditions. The majority of the field workers – mostly migrants from Nicaragua – are employed via middlemen. These generally offer oral contracts only, with a contractual period of just three months and without social security. Some of these workers live in miserable conditions, sharing a 10m² room between four of them.

GREENWASHING
German supermarkets have recently begun putting more effort into promoting the sustainability of their products. Fairtrade products indicate a product’s social sustainability, but are underrepresented in the ranges of German supermarket chains. For pineapples and bananas, Aldi, Edeka, Lidl and Rewe rely increasingly on the Rainforest Alliance label. However, our research on-site shows that this does not solve the biggest problems such as pesticide contamination and the violation of employment laws.

DEMANDS
Oxfam demands that German supermarket chains do justice to their ecological and social responsibility. This includes ensuring humane working conditions, sustainable farming methods, and paying fair prices to their suppliers. Politics also shares in this responsibility. The German government must bind companies to respect human and employment laws at their suppliers too and to introduce a set of “due diligence obligations for human rights”. The governments of Costa Rica and Ecuador must rigorously enforce compliance with employment and environmental law in the lucrative export sectors. Consumers should give priority to fairly produced tropical fruits and demand that companies use transparency and compliance with employment laws as the basis for their business.

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