

Cameroon Living Wage Report Summary



Banana Link is working in partnership with the Fako Agricultural Workers Union (FAWU) to develop and deliver a programme of education and empowerment to enable workers and their union to improve the livelihoods of banana workers and their dependents in Cameroon. This report investigates the working and living conditions of the banana workers in Cameroon.

Overall aim: To achieve a better understanding of the well-being of the banana plantation workers in the Fako district in relation to their working and living conditions.

Specific aim: Collect data on wage levels and household costs.

Primary research question: *Does the real income of banana workers allow them to meet their basic needs?*

Banana sector in Cameroon

There are two banana producing companies in the Fako district mainly exporting to European markets; Plantations- Haut- Penja (PHP) and the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) comprising of Banana Expansion Project (BEP) Plantations and Tiko Banana Project (TBP) plantations.

Methodology

Preliminary research consisted of document analysis of previous research on the working and living conditions of banana workers. Followed by a field research project collecting data to support the primary research question.

Sample

The final sample consisted of 100 workers. Great importance was placed upon gender stratification during sample collection.

Research Findings

Sample description.

The average participant is 35 years old, has primary education but nothing further, belongs to a household of 5 and is financially responsible for 3 children.

Education

Of the participants, 67% have attended primary education and only 33% have completed secondary education.

Household Structure

53% of the participants are single, widowed or divorced. However, disaggregated by gender, we observe that 77% of female participants have no partner compared to only 27% of the male participants. The average participant household has 5 members, most male workers are responsible for only 2 children where women are more likely to be responsible for 3 or 4.

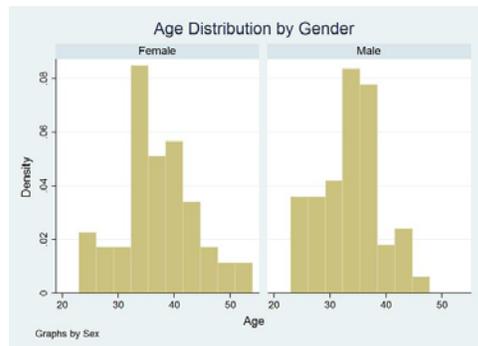
Contract type

The contract type reveals the average number of years working in the plantation is 10, only females exceed 20 years of working in the plantation.

Non banana related income

It was found that 92% of workers have no other income other than their banana plantation wages. Furthermore 81% act as the sole income earners for their family, implying there is a high dependency upon these wages. Whilst the production of food at home could act as a separate income or be used to reduce expenditure on household food consumption only 33% of workers participate in this activity.

Banana Plantation Wages



The wage distribution is presented above, once again gender discrimination can be seen, as most female workers earn less than XAF30,000 (equivalent to £39.33) whereas male workers earn around XAF40,000 (£52.44).

However the workers are often unclear on their earnings due to confusions surrounding wage deductions that occur through the system of 'pro-rata' payments. Pro-rata payments refer to the payments received by workers after management has made any deductions they deem necessary. These deductions face no restrictions and are often applied when management deem an employees work as unsatisfactory. Some workers perceive pro-rata payments as discriminatory.

Living costs

The average wage of XAF40,000 was claimed by all participants to fall short of meeting their basic needs. The necessity of borrowing subsequently became apparent, with the average amount requested to borrow being XAF132,500.

Survival strategies

Debt

Many workers consider themselves in a permanent debt trap with many claiming that "borrowing and paying is a continuous process. It has no end. That is how it will have to continue until we reach retirement." Workers borrow from variable sources charging interest rates between 1-30%. The 'No Debt' wage is suggested by workers to be on average at XAF150,000.

Temporary and permanent school dropouts

"It's not easy for a child born in the (CDC) camps to escape poverty. The chances are they will become plantation workers like their parents." The number of temporary dropouts is high, many attributed to parents being unable to pay the school fees on time.

It has been found that minimum wage is not enough to cover all basic needs and keeps workers in extreme poverty. Although average wage is above the legal minimum wage it is still below the

World Bank extreme poverty threshold of XAF440.46 per person per day. For a household with 1.2 earners they are earning below the net monthly comparator of XAF66,986.50 defined by the World Bank extreme poverty threshold.

Working Conditions

Working Hours

Working hours are not fixed, but vary according to the season and job allocation. Packhouse staff claimed working 12-15 hours per day during the peak season. Some workers have also reported working for periods up to 4-5 weeks without a day of rest.

Access to drinking water and toilets

It is reported that 80% of workers do not drink the water available on the plantations as they fear getting sick if they drink it.

Provisions

Workers have repeatedly reported that they buy their own personal protective and working equipment in order to be able to work efficiently and avoid pro-rata payments. They also reported that if given new equipment, this usually occurs once a year, just before external auditing visits.

Use of chemicals

Workers in CDC stated they were never informed about the time or location of the spraying. It was also stated that if the workers went to seek shelter in the packhouse from the aerial spraying that this would be considered as “unwillingness to work” and they would risk pro-rata deductions. Many health problems attributed to chemical exposure were reported such as skin irritation and eye damage/irritation.

Transportation

There are 16 company vehicles used for transporting workers to the field. However breakdowns are common, frequently resulting in only 13-15 vehicles running. As a result 70% of staff have been unable to board the company transport at least once a month due to overcrowding. Workers are often placed in a position where they must then pay for transportation or risk losing the day's pay.

Discrimination

There is an issue of discrimination due to tribalism; workers in the PHP group have reported second class treatment for being Anglophone workers in a Francophone company. Many of whom fear dismissal if their participation in the focus groups or affiliation with the FAWU was revealed.

Living conditions

Housing

CDC provides housing in CDC accommodation camps or a housing allowance of the value of 25% of their gross wage. PHP workers in comparison are given a set amount lower than 25% of their wage of the value of XAF5000, which does not cover the variable rent rates in the area of XAF7000-10,000. In all cases (CDC camps and private compounds) workers face very poor living conditions, with 4-5 persons sharing one room, and shared (if existent) sanitation facilities.

Health

Work in the plantation is clearly affecting worker's health. Of the workers asked 92% reported body pains attributed to the nature of banana plantation work, and 41% reported problems related to the use of chemicals.

CDC clinics face lack of equipment and drugs; as a result the workers do not trust the prescriptions of the doctor, as they believe they are based upon the drugs available not the ailments of the patient.

Gender issues

Long working hours are particularly affecting female workers, as this prevents them from taking care of their dependents. Female workers also suggested that plantation work is affecting their ability to maintain their relationships: "By the time you close from work, it is 10 o'clock, 11 at night- when will perform your married right as a woman? In the end our husbands look for another lover who will comfort him."

Pregnancy

Workers report that medical staff do not consider pregnancy to be an ailment therefore it is believed that pregnant women should not be treated any differently however miscarriages are described as frequent.

Maternity

Pregnant workers are eligible for 14 weeks maternity leave upon their eighth month of pregnancy, national social insurance is supposed to continue payments equivalent to their wages in those three months however some must wait up to two years to receive these payments. The lack of income often results in the babies being fed on pap (porridge type food made of ground maize) instead of formula.

Gender discrimination

Female workers have reported cases of sexual abuse saying that "if supervisors ask you to be a lover and you refuse, you will obviously receive pro-rata." It is also stated that in PHP a capable woman has no chance of gaining a managerial position against a francophone man.

Life satisfaction

As a result of such poor treatment and rights workers hold the collective feeling that they are partaking in "modern slavery" and that there is no 'escape', no alternative to plantation work. The lack of any perspective for life improvements is translated into lack of hope and despair. Workers have repeatedly stated that they feel stuck in a poverty trap that even their children will not be able to escape.

Conclusions

Workers are highly dependent upon the plantation wages, as the long hours do not allow them to have alternative sources of income. They tend to be the only wage earners in their family; the level of dependency is higher for female workers. The research concludes that despite the arbitrary wage reductions the net wage is close to the agreed legal minimum agriculture wage; however this is far from enough for covering basic household needs.

The research estimates that the basic living costs tend to be three times higher than the average wage. In order to provide the basics for their families (food, accommodation,

education), workers are forced to live permanently in debt, borrowing money with abusive interest rates. The long hours and continuous working for prolonged periods cause absenteeism as workers sacrifice a days pay for rest.

Water and toilet facilities exist at the plantation but their use is problematic. Protective and working equipment is not provided or adequate, chemical use occurs without necessary precautions, resulting in serious health problems. The transportation is overcrowded and unreliable, affecting the net income of the workers. There were numerous ailments reported as a result of the work in the plantation. Discrimination by gender and tribal identity was also reported.

Overall it is clear that the wages are not covering the basic needs of workers forcing them to enter into a never ending debt cycle, while working conditions are undermining the health and relationships of workers.