Social Impacts of Banana Supply Chains
A Case Study from Cameroon

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International Conference on CSR
16th October 2012, Prague
Why are we here?
Research coordinated by Banana Link as part of an education and empowerment programme for banana plantation workers in Cameroon.

What did we want to find out?
Does the real income of banana workers enable them to meet their basic needs?

We want to share our findings on:
- Wage levels
- Living costs
- Living & working conditions
- Survival strategies
Why Research in Cameroon?

- **There were bananas:** 2 companies, occupying 6200 workers, exporting to EU: CDC/Del Monte and PHP
- **There was interest:** Visit reports and desk research indicating a gap between actual and living wages, and poor working and living conditions.
- **There was need:** No field data documenting the gap between wages and costs.
- **It was doable:** There was a local partner, FAWU, with interest and ability to support and facilitate.

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How did we do it?

- 110 general labourers surveyed
- 3 focus groups
- Interviews with managers, health workers and teachers.

Challenges:

- Sampling: Random sample not possible. 
  *Participants were facilitative staff representatives.*

- Complications in estimating banding plantation wage:

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What did we do?

Collect qualitative and quantitative data on:

- Min, max and average wage
- Alternative sources of income
- Living costs: food, housing, energy, water, non-food utilities, school fees, religious/cultural contributions.
- Levels of debt and “no debt” wage
- Working provisions
- Housing
- Health
- Gender
What did we find out?

High dependence on “banana” wage

- 90% have no other source of income
- 80% are the only income earners in their families.

No significant household food production:
- Only 1/3 of the workers are able to produce their own food.
- 85% of this food is consumed and not sold.
- For 70% of the workers, this food covers only a very small part of their total food needs.

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Average wages reported meet the salary scale requirement.
Putting Findings Into Context  
(Adapted from Ergon, 2012 /1$ =  

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Borrowing is the main survival strategy

- Becoming indebted is a common and continuous practice:
  - “You get paid, you pay back your debt, you buy some food and you go home empty. Next day you borrow again.”
- Pack house workers
Debt levels are several times the average wage
(1$=506XAF)

- 30% of the workers have debts over 10 times their average wage
- Abusive interest rates up to 30%
Hidden debts: Repeated temporary school drop outs

- Children are sent home when workers are unable to pay school fees or buy textbooks and uniforms.
- Children may stay out of school up to several weeks and this can occur several times within the year.

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Summary of Wages, Costs & Debt

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Life Quality Implications

- Use of chemicals, long hours of standing & physical effort are affecting workers’ health: body pains, eye infections, skin rashes, nail fungi
- 10-15h working days prevent workers from spending time with children, family, friends
- Families living in 3x4m rooms, with shared sanitation facilities
- No hope for improvement or escape from poverty:

“We are civilised slaves”

“There is no other alternative”

“This banana is a product of slavery”
Conclusions:

- Workers earn above minimum wage but still fail to meet basic needs
- Work in the banana plantations demands time and effort, preventing alternative sources of income & taking care of family
- Very limited alternative job opportunities
- High debt levels in order to cover basic needs and educate children
What can be done?

- Separate collectively agreed minimum wage for the banana sector
- Educate and empower workers and their unions
- Fair Trade certification
- Create consumer awareness in the North
- Monitor EU funding in the banana sector in ACP countries
Thank you!

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