DECENT WORK FOR AFRICAN PLANTATION WORKERS

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A much-heralded shift to Africa?

Although banana and plantain are crucial to food security in most countries of tropical Africa, the continent's role in the world banana economy has, at least until now, been relatively minor. With Somalia, Cape Verde and Madagascar dropping out of international trade in the 1990s, this left just Cameroon, Ivory Coast and Ghana as the continent's exporting countries. In 2010 Mozambique entered the fray, initially sending fruit to nearby Middle Eastern markets, and Chiquita announced it had done a deal to secure land for bananas in Ethiopia.

Despite the increase in hectarage in the last five years[1], the four countries currently exporting still account for less than 4% of international banana trade. Put another way, this is just over half the UK's share of world consumption; or equal to the average consumption of France in the mid-2000s.

Trade policy matters

Virtually all exports from Africa go to the European Union (EU), with France and the UK being the primary destinations. This is due to geographical proximity and location of the shipping lines, but also to the fact that, as ex-colonies, African exporting countries have enjoyed substantial tariff preferences over Latin American fruit in the single European market since 1993[2]. The marketers of African bananas have never had to pay any duty to get their bananas into the EU, unlike their «dollar banana» competitors. The successful move to secure continued duty-free access for the long-term future through WTO-compatible Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the EU means that the foreign fruit companies are likely to stay in Africa and be looking to expand production if their new operations are successful.

In the case of Mozambique and Ethiopia, permanent duty-free access to the EU is guaranteed under the so-called «Everything But Arms» (EBA) preferential trade agreement that the EU reached with the Least developed Countries. Unlike the EPAs that are still on the negotiating table, the deal with the world's poorest countries is not «reciprocal»; in other words, the EU does not get free access to the markets of those countries as part of the EBA trade deal.

However, the real economic driver that has led to the rush to prospect new production locations in Africa is the strong downward pressure on prices paid to the big fruit companies in the large northern retail markets, combined with very low labour costs.

Although the jury is still out as to whether Africa will become a really major source of supply for the big consumer markets of the North, it is clear that African workers and their organisations have every reason to be developing strategies for ensuring that the employment created is decent and that

[1] Notably in Ghana, when a Compagnie Fruitière subsidiary started a major new export operation in 2005, Mozambique, and to a lesser extent Cameroon. In Ivory Coast political instability has prevented any recent investment and Chiquita sold its interests to Compagnie Fruitière in 2009.

[2] Significantly, in order to avoid having to pay the €176/tonne EU tariff after the end of the World Trade Organisation waiver in 2008 all three banana-exporting countries broke ranks with their regional neighbours in the western and central African regional groupings when they signed bilateral interim agreements with the EU in December 2007. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) were meant to sign fully reciprocal regional Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with the EU by 31st December 2007, but when it became clear that this was not going to happen, the governments of Cameroon, Ivory Coast and Ghana, – under heavy pressure from Compagnie Fruitière and other big traders - signed interim deals to ensure that they did not have to pay tariffs on their banana and cocoa exports to the EU.

the trade union rights are not eroded in the way they have been in recent decades in Latin America.

The workers, the companies, the unions

More than 90% of the total African banana export volume of just over half a million tonnes per year is accounted for by medium- and large-scale plantation producers linked to one of the three biggest fruit companies[3]. Smallholders have not had any stake in the expansion over the last two decades.

There are estimated to be a quarter of a million people whose livelihood depends on income from jobs in exporting companies – around 30,000 direct plantation and packhouse workers[4]. This is a much higher number of workers per hectare of export bananas planted than in Latin America, as, for the time being at least, working hours and, above all, the rates of productivity (per worker) are considerably lower than in traditional exporting countries like Costa Rica, Panama, Guatemala, Colombia, Honduras or Ecuador.

Two African banana workers in three are employed by the French Compagnie Fruitière (CF)[5], so the policies of this company are crucial in defining working conditions and attitudes towards trade union rights in the continent. CF has been active for decades in both Ivory Coast and Cameroon. Between 2003 and 2005, the company invested substantially in Ghana, forming a pineapple and banana subsidiary, Golden Exotics Ltd, which enjoys «free trade zone» status**.** Most of the remaining third of workers are employed by the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) that has a contract with Fresh Del Monte since the late 1980s. Although Del Monte is not the employer, the company controls virtually all decisions concerning production and labour conditions.

Wages and union rights

Although medium- and large-scale banana plantations employ high levels of labour compared to any other export commodity, information from trade unions in Cameroon and interviews with workers in Ghana reveal that wages are low and have even fallen in relation to the cost of living[6]. In Ghana, workers calculate that wages would need to be multplied by three or four to allow a typical household to live decently, whilst in Cameroon, one local trade union estimates that average plantation wages are around one third of what might be considered to be a living wage. In early 2009, there were also reports by local and French NGOs[7] of non-payment of even the low national minimum wage in the plantations of CF subsidiary PHP; however, this was flatly denied by CF management.

The trade union rights situation in African plantations is varied, but there is not the structural hostility of the industry in Africa towards independent organisations and collective bargaining that exists in several major Latin American exporting countries.

Ghana enjoys good trade union rights. Both banana companies and many pineapple plantations have collective bargaining agreements with GAWU or FAWU, two IUF members. GAWU was even able to secure the explicit support of government ministers for the role of the union at the inauguration of the new Golden Exotic plantation in 2006. One of the two main banana companies, Volta River Estates, is the first-ever Fairtrade certified plantation in the world and its GAWU branch committee

3 Dole/Compagnie Fruitière in West Africa and Cameroon, Del Monte in Cameroon , Chiquita in Mozambique and Ethiopia.

4 Banana Link's own estimates based on research in 2010, company information, labour productivity estimates, known hectarages and demographic data on average household size.

5 Dole Food Company owns 40% of the shares in CF since the mid-1990s, although the Californian fruit multinational has little influence on labour or environmental policies of CF on the ground in Africa.

6 Rachel Smith, Wages in Volta River Estates Ltd, Ghana, University of East Anglia/Banana Link, June 2009.

7 Report published by CCFD and Oxfam France, March 2009

members take an active part in the distribution of the Fairtrade social premium.

In Ivory Coast, despite the political chaos, workers – mainly migrants from Burkina Faso - at the CF subsidiary SCB have a workplace union that is affiliated to one of the three main national confederations, Dignité. SYNTRASCB was formed in SCB banana and pineapple plantations in 2001, but not without serious repression and violence in the early 1990s, when 11 people were killed in one incident. Despite vastly improved relations 17 years on, the organised plantation workers seem not to have the same room for manoeuvre as their colleagues over the border in Ghana to secure access for foreign visitors. The lowest paid workers earn just 40 euros per month, although they do have free housing, rations of rice and other benefits, which other agricultural workers do not enjoy[8]. Pay scales do exist however and higher grade workers earn closer to what might be considered decent - or living - wages. As in most countries though, those working in the export sector generally have higher wages and more benefits than those in domestic production.

In Cameroon, it appears that there is a trade union operating in CF plantations, but it has not been possible to make contact as access to any visitors is strictly controlled. In CDC/Del Monte however, one of the oldest private sector unions in the country, the Fako District Agricultural Workers' Union (FAWU) is able to operate independently, but, as in Ivory Coast, workers are subject to a national agricultural sector wage agreement that they are not in position to improve on with their employers. Lowest paid workers earn marginally more than in Ivory Coast, but are just as far from living wage levels however they may be defined. Despite the fact that virtually all workers are members of FAWU, the union is powerless to bargain directly to improve its members wages and is frustrated by the weakness of - and divisions amongst - the national confederations.

Finally, in Mozambique, national agricultural and forest workers' union SINTAF has been able to organise a branch in the new plantations in Nampula province in the North of the country, but rumours abound that the future of the operation there may not be guaranteed. Wage levels are reported to be similar to those in Côte d'Ivoire, although workers do not appear to have many of the other benefits that longer-established operations in the francophone countries enjoy like access to decent healthcare and housing.

Hazardous for workers' health

Another key feature of industrial banana production is the high level of agrochemical inputs, including a range of toxic nematicides and insecticides, which have wreaked havoc in recent decades with the health of Latin American workers and their communities. Although overall levels of chemical application in Ghana and Ivory Coast in particular are much lower than in Central America and independent scientific studies are almost non-existent, the trade unions and communities around the plantations report a number of health, safety and environmental problems related to these products[9]. In Cameroon, PHP workers report violations of aerial spraying standards, with fungicides being sprayed directly on workers in the field and on neighbouring communities.

Unlike Latin America, where the barriers of language, even with Brazil, are almost non-existent, African plantation workers' unions do not really know each other. Their paltry resources and language barriers – even between neighbours like Ivory Coast and Ghana – mean that overcoming this handicap is far from easy. Company managers move freely from operation to operation, even across language barriers (although they rarely speak any of the dozens of local lnaguages they would need to communicate freely with their employees), but workers do not have that freedom.

In the countries involved in the banana export sector in Africa so far, the main issues are not so much about securing basic trade union rights, as how can trade unions now work towards living

[8] The information in this paragraph was gathered by Banana Link and French NGO Peuples Solidaires.

[9] General Agricultural Workers' Union of Ghana TUC and Banana Link field visits, 2008; CCFD/Oxfam France, 2009

wages for their members, drawing on their embryonic relationships with organised Latin American workers *(see photo)* and by gathering their strength at regional and continental level in Africa itself. What is certain is that they will have plenty of allies in civil society across the world in this process. What is also now possible is that some of the big retail buyers and even some of the fruit companies (*see box below*) will agree that decent work for the people who work in African plantations and packhouses is a responsibility on which those further up the commodity chain can help to deliver.

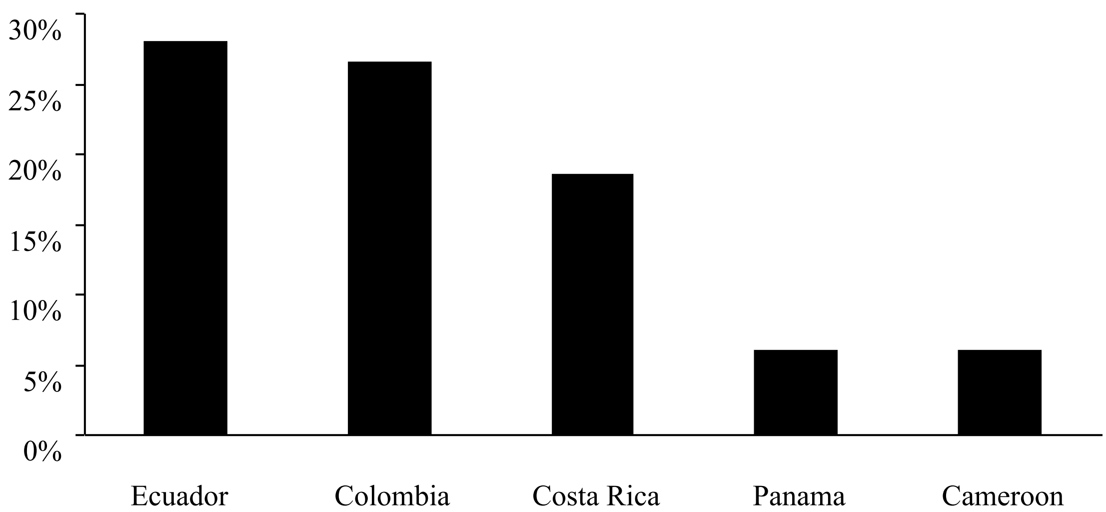
Box **An opportunity to drive change**

Since 1996, a global process of dialogue on key social, economic and environmental issues facing the banana industry - punctuated by two major International Banana Conferences in Brussels in 1998 and 2005 - has been led by civil society organisations representing plantation workers, small farmers and consumers from four continents: the key players have been the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Sindicatos Bananeros y Agroindustriales (COLSIBA), Windward Islands Farmers' Association, UROCAL (Ecuador), Farmcoop[10] (Philippines), the International Union of Food and Agricultural Workers (IUF), GAWU Ghana, the European Banana Action Network (Euroban) and the US Labor Education in the Americas Project.

Following a series of preparatory meetings between 2007 and 2009, fruit companies, producers' associations, plantation workers' unions, global retailers, civil society organisations and governments met in Rome to launch the World Banana Forum in December 2009 - with the support of the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO). *For more information see: www.fao.org/wbf*

African stakeholders are already involved, and the independent trade unions that organise and represent workers in the industry have a real opportunity to play a vital role in this intercontinental initiative.

EU-27 imports: top five major supplier countries in 2008



Source: Eurostat (2009)

[10] Farmcoop is a NGO that services fifteen banana workers' cooperatives that were formed in the agrarian reform process in Mindanao in the 1990s.