

Banana production under a climate of fear

Occupational health and safety, labour rights, sustainability and unfair trading practices in the banana supply chain from Ecuador to Europe

A publication of

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Occupational health and safety, labour rights, sustainability and unfair trading practices in the banana supply chain from Ecuador to Europe

June 2016

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Published by: Südwind and Association of Conscious Consumers



For more than 35 years Südwind, an Austrian Non Governmental Organisation, has been advocating for sustainable global development, human rights and fair working conditions around the world. Through curricular and extracurricular educational work, the publication of the 'Südwind' magazine and other related publications Südwind ensures that the issue of global dependencies and their consequences remain part of the public discourse. Additionally, Südwind enforces its commitment for a fairer world through public awareness raising and its campaigns. – www.suedwind.at



Association of Conscious Consumers (ACC) was established in 2001, in Hungary. ACC's activities focus on sustainable and ethical consumption; the aim of the organisation is to make consumers aware of the environmental, social, and ethical aspects of their consumption and to help them to live more sustainable lifestyles and to make ethical choices. To achieve this aim, ACC provides information, delivers campaigns, educates and builds communities, publishes and distributes educational materials, conducts background research, and lobbies decision makers. We want consumers to have and make better choices!

Within sustainable consumption ACC works mainly, but not exclusively, on the following fields: food consumption, local and global supply chains, advertising, consumer rights, product and service testing – www.tudatosvasarlo.hu

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Introduction

Although banana is the main fresh fruit imported into the European Union, consumers often do not know under which conditions the tasty fruit is produced. Still, the banana economy has been a key example of trade injustice for decades. In the battle for market shares, supermarket chains exert enormous price pressure on their suppliers. This contributes to the fact that small-scale producers and workers on banana plantations can't achieve a sufficient income to feed their families. Produced in the framework of the Make Fruit Fair! campaign¹, this report gives insight into sustainability aspects of banana production in Ecuador. We look at environmental and health impacts as well as socio-economic conditions and business practices.

We chose Ecuador, as it is the main exporter of banana with a share of 24% on the world market. There are more than 6.000 small holders in Ecuador and 2 Mio. people involved in banana production - 5 Mio. boxes are exported per week.

The field research was performed in the provinces of El Oro and Los Ríos where most of Ecuador's banana production takes place. Banana production remains highly diversified incorporating small, medium and large producers to the trade. The research began in Los Ríos, where Ecuador's largest banana plantations are found, and moved on to the southern region of El Oro where small holders (with an approximate size of 10 to 30 ha per plantation) supply an important share of bananas for the market.. Due to financial and time limitations a structural comparison was not possible but would be a desirable research direction for future studies.

The results of this study are based on qualitative and quantitative data, that were collected by a multinational and multidisciplinary research team² using desktop research as well as field research in autumn 2015 in the regions of El Oro and Los Ríos.³ Questionnaire assisted individual interviews with 35 banana workers from around Quevedo and Machala were conducted in October and November 2015. Further we had interviews with 20 other stakeholders like union representatives, researchers, managers and officials to complement our data.

Information on occupational health and safety, housing conditions, working conditions and exposition indicators was collected in a separate cross-sectional epidemiological study conducted by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hans-Peter Hutter, an environmental and public health specialist, and his team. A structured questionnaire was used to interview 71 male farm workers at 5 locations in the two different provinces. The men were divided into two groups, the exponent group consisting of workers who use and have been using pesticides regularly and the control group who do not work and have not worked with pesticides. Both groups were homogenous regarding their sociodemographic characteristics, referring to size of household, age and weight. The results of this epidemiological study are included in this report, but are also published separately, as an academic paper.⁴

We chose a descriptive approach because our intention was not to conduct a representative study, but to gain in-depth knowledge and highlight important and complex issues in the Ecuadorian banana sector that are related to European consumption and business practice.

The following is a short outline of the contents of this report. The first chapter presents economic aspects and a mapping of the banana trade between Ecuador and the European Union. The next chapter puts important issues like minimum price, economic competitiveness, Unfair Trading Practices (UTPs) and social and environmental standards in Ecuadorian banana production to the forefront. Chapter 3 presents the main results of the epidemiological study on occupational health and safety and puts them in context with previous research findings. Chapter 4 presents an evaluation of the 35 in-depth interviews that were conducted

with banana workers in Quevedo and Machala. Finally, the last chapter summarises the different results of this study.

1. Where is our favourite tropical fruit coming from?

Banana is the third favourite fresh fruit of European consumers and the main fresh fruit imported into the EU⁵. The appetite for this nutritious fruit has been growing⁶. Most of the bananas we eat in Europe are coming from Ecuador whose sales to the European markets has been increasing in the past decades.^{7,8}

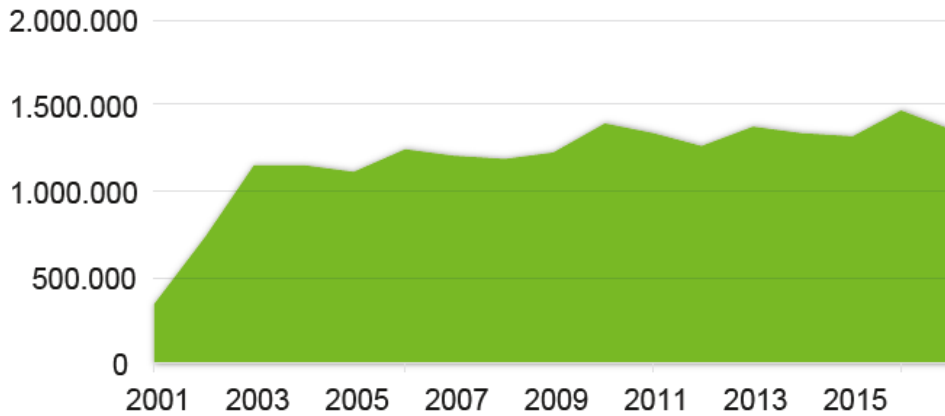


Figure 1: Annual banana supply from Ecuador to the EU-28 (tonnes)

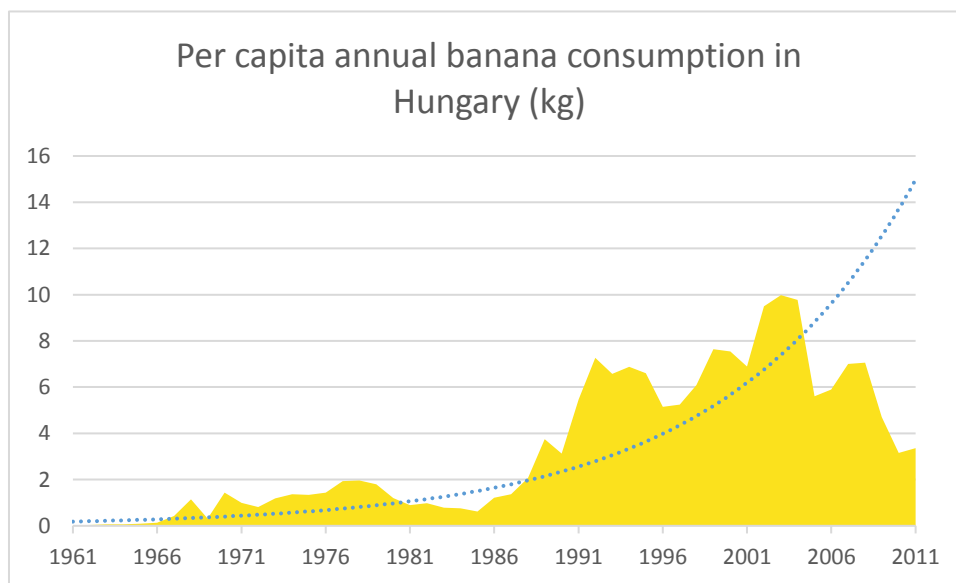


Figure 2: Per capita annual banana consumption in Hungary (kg)⁹



Figure 3: Banana consumption per year¹⁰

Banana is important for producers too

We say that apple is an important produce for our country. Banana is even more important for Ecuador. About 6,5 million tons of bananas are produced in Ecuador annually, which is 13 times the total apple production of Hungary and 30 times the total apple production of Austria. Banana is the second most important export product of Ecuador after crude petroleum. Every tenth export dollar of the country is coming from banana and plantain¹¹. The estimated number of people directly employed in the banana sector is between 190 000 and 380 000,¹² which is about 1,5-3 % of the economically active population.^{13 14 15}

No fresh produce is branded like bananas

When consumers choose Bonita, Chiquita, Citronex, Cobana, Del Monte, Derby, Dole, Don Mario, Equapak, Excelban, Fair Nando, Favorita, Fyffes, Golden B, Golden Bio, Onkel Tuca, Pretty Liza, Selvática, Slobana or Valentina, they are likely to consume bananas from Ecuador, which is the world's largest exporter of bananas. Every third banana that is shipped from the country docks in Europe, while one fourth of bananas consumed in Europe comes from Ecuador¹⁶. Europe and Ecuador are by far the most important banana trading partners for each other.

Opacity in banana supply chains

Direct links between producers and exporters in Ecuador towards supermarket chains in Europe are often hard to detect. There is low transparency along the whole supply chain, given the high fragmentation in commercial relationships and a high number of stakeholders involved from production to retail. Contracts along the value chain are usually undisclosed.

How do Ecuadorian bananas get into our shopping basket?

The majority of people buy their food from supermarkets and Ecuadorian bananas are being sold in almost all big supermarket chains across the continent.

The landscape of the banana business in Ecuador changed considerably over the past decades, both production and trade. Big banana companies outsourced their production and thus their responsibility. What they sell with the well-known brand names is only partly produced on their own land.¹⁷ Today banana production is done on relatively small scale lands. According to the latest census of the Ministry of Agriculture of Ecuador, 90 % of banana producers are small and medium size farms of less than 50 hectares, 10% of them cultivate less than 5 hectares. A similar process is apparent in banana trade¹⁸. Banana production is mainly carried out by national companies.

Hundreds of producers in Ecuador sell to an approximate number of 200 Ecuadorian exporting companies. The companies that export bananas from Ecuador are either owned by national or international interests. There is a big concentration: the 10 biggest exporting companies account for 50% of the country's total banana exports. An additional network of intermediaries trades a significant share of Ecuadorian bananas from producers to exporters, even though only farmers' associations have commercial rights since January 2011.¹⁹

Importing companies may act as independent suppliers toward ripening companies and retailers or may be under economic dependency of retailers. There are about 60 to 100 importing companies in Europe, who buy Ecuadorian banana. The main European level importers are Dole Europe GmbH, Delmonte Fresh, Chiquita Fresh, Favorita LP (Reybanpac), Univeg. Significant importers to the United Kingdom are Tesco Food Sourcing and Fruesh Ltd., to Germany Anton Dürbeck, Cobana Fruchtring and Afrikanische Frucht Compagnie, to Poland Citronex, to other European countries Rastoder (Slovenia), Frutura GmbH (Austria), Kuehne+Nagel (Germany, Austria).

Integration, business structures and ownership behind the supply chain may have various settings as pictured below.



Figure 4: Fruit company driven banana value chains²⁰

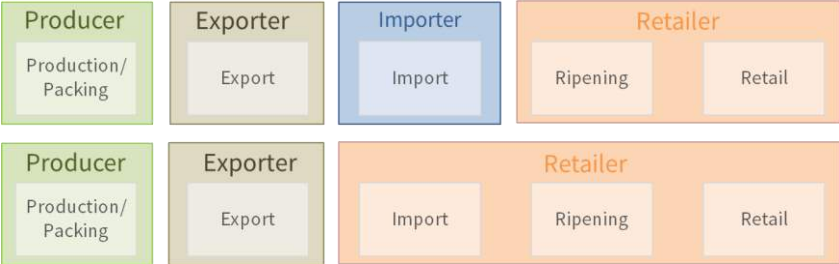


Figure 5: Retailer driven banana value chains²¹

Map of banana supply chains from Ecuador to Europe

The following is an attempt to introduce Ecuador’s biggest players in the banana industry and their links to importers in Europe as well as, where known, their final ‘presence’ at retailers. Due to the opacity of supply chains, only examples of relationships can be given in this study.

Exporter name and brands ²²	Exporter company background	Main European importer	Known Retailers (selection)
UBESA Main brand: Dole	Union De Bananeros Ecuatorianos S.A. (widely known as ‘UBESA’) belongs to Dole Ecuador, which is a daughter company of Dole Food Company. UBESA provides distribution and export logistics of Dole Ecuador’s tropical fruit portfolio (bananas, mangos, pineapples) and exports to (mainly Dole-owned) importing companies worldwide. At an approximate 10% share of Ecuador’s export volume, it is by far Ecuador’s largest exporter of bananas. ²³	Dole Europe GmbH	All across Europe
Reybanpac Main brand: Favorita	Rey Banano del Pacifico C.A. (widely referred to as ‘Reybanpac’) is the flagship company of the Favorita Fruit Holding Company (also known as "Grupo Wong"). Reybanpac is engaged in production, export and trade, and its main business lines are bananas, dairy products, forest products, plastic containers, palm oil and other agricultural products. Reybanpac sister companies (under the Favorita Holding umbrella) are engaged	Favorita LP, Tesco Food Sourcing, Moderate Capital Inc., Luki Fruit, Zeilberger, Frutura Obst GmbH (Austria)	Tesco, Spar

	in aerial fumigation and technical assistance to banana plantations (Aerovic C.A.) or import, produce and sell fertilizers, agrochemicals and livestock products (FERTISA S.A.). Reybanpac exports to almost every continent and to a wide spectrum of importers. ²⁴		
Comersur and Exbaoro Main brands: Cobana, Pretty Liza, Bonita, Citronex, Rewe	Both companies, Comersur and Exbaoro, belong to Corporacion Palmar (also known as "Grupo Palacios", comprising 17 companies) and operate from the same office address. Combined, Comersur and Exbaoro form the third largest exporter in Ecuador's banana industry. Similar to Favorita/Reybanpac, also Corporacion Palmar (founded in 1995 as 'family business' by Euclides Palacios Palacios) provides products and services around banana production such as fertilizers, fumigation and banana boxes and case tags. ²⁵	Comersur: Citronex (Poland) Exbaoro: Cobana Fruchtring (Germany)	Tesco, Metro Group, Carrefour, JMD, Intermarche ²⁶ Rewe, Aldi, Kaufland
Truisfruit Main brand: Bonita	Truisfruit is closely linked to and owned by billionaire Álvaro Noboa, an Ecuadorian business man and politician ²⁷ . In 2013, Álvaro Noboa's plantation "La Clementina" in the Los Ríos province (one of Ecuador's biggest plantations at approx. 11.500 ha) was expropriated by the state and now belongs to a cooperative. Although Truisfruit's exports have declined since 2013, the company remains Ecuador's fourth biggest exporter. ²⁸	Leon Van Parys (Belgium)	Norma (Germany)
Oro Banana Main brands: Excelban, Del Monte, Equapak	Oro Banana S.A. is also widely known in its abbreviated form OBSA. Founded in 1970, the company – another 'family business' – is led by Servio Serrano and his son Jorge Alex Serrano, who also owns a producing and exporting company called Jasafrut. Oro Banana subsidiaries offer a variety of services related to the plantation business such as agriculture spraying, shipping and transportation logistics services and plastic manufacturing. ²⁹	Anton Dürbeck (Germany), Delmonte Fresh, Tesco	Tesco
Coragrofrut Main brand: Derby, Slobana	Coragrofrut is a major exporter of the cooperative Cooproclem-owned "La Clementina" plantation ³⁰ in Los Ríos (see Truisfruit above). It exports in Europe mainly to Rastoder Slovenia.	Rastoder (Slovenia)	Spar

Banacali Main brand: Excelban	Banacali is a huge exporter (and exclusively exports to) Anton Dürbeck in Germany	Anton Dürbeck	
Asisbane Main brands: Citronex, Chiquita, Dole, Favorita, etc.	Asociación de la Industria Bananera del Ecuador (Asisbane) export for several brands and clients to many continents; to Citronex (Poland; to Rastoder (Slovenia)	Citronex, Rastoder	All across Europe
Tropical Fruit Export Main brands: Onkel Tuca, Selvática	Tropical Fruit Export export mainly to "Afrikanische Frucht-Compagnie" (Germany) as well as "De Groot International BV" and "Banafood BV" (Rotterdam and Antwerp).	Afrikanische Frucht-Compagnie GmbH (Germany), De Groot and Banafood (NL, Belgium)	Lidl
Exbafruc Main brands: Fair Nando, Golden Bio, Golden B	To Europe, Exbafruc mainly exports to Port International (and Port International Organics) in Germany.	Port International (Organics) GmbH	
Brundicorpi Main brand: Chiquita	Brundicorpi is linked subsidiary to Chiquita Brands International, exporting to Chiquita Fresh and Chiquita Banana Co.	Chiquita Fresh, Chiquita Banana Co.	All across Europe
Dialinspect Main brand: Excelban	Dialinspect is a major exporter to Anton Dürbeck in Germany.	Anton Dürbeck	

2. Trending issues in the banana sector

Stakeholders from all sectors identified several factors influencing the banana production in Ecuador.

The economic competitiveness of the sector in Ecuador has been challenged, because its regional competitors (e.g. Colombia and Peru) signed a favourable trade agreement with the European Union, which aims to reduce import tariffs of banana from 124 EUR per ton in 2013 to 75 EUR per ton by 2020. At the end of 2015 the European Parliament voted in favour of Ecuador's adherence to the mentioned agreement, which is an important step towards applying the same preferential tariffs to Ecuadorian bananas.³¹

In Ecuador 6,55 USD was the legally set minimum price that the producer should receive for a box of banana of 43 pounds (19,5 kg, 0,33 USD/kg) in 2015. The minimum price may protect the many and typical small producers from harsh price negotiations, however it is criticized by other stakeholders for various reasons. Studies estimate that the real costs of sustainable production are still above the minimum price, since it is calculated on the basis of the costs of big industrial plantations (> 50 ha), which are more efficient, because of bigger economies of scale³², while the typical plantation is small or medium size. On the other hand representatives of bigger producers and exporters claim that the minimum price negatively affects their competitiveness on the international market, which is mainly driven by price.³³ Their competitors from other countries do not have to pay the minimum price. Critiques say that the minimum price system may keep less productive producers in business and motivate others to produce on less productive lands, since they can make a low risk investment³⁴. Experts and other sources assume that the minimum price may direct banana trade towards the black

market or grey zone, where the prices are still under the legally set limit ^{35,36}. The per kilo unit value of bananas exported to certain European countries has been lower than the minimum price in the recent years³⁷, which supports this assumption. According to estimations as much as 40% of banana producing lands may produce for grey zone, partly illegal, trade.³⁸

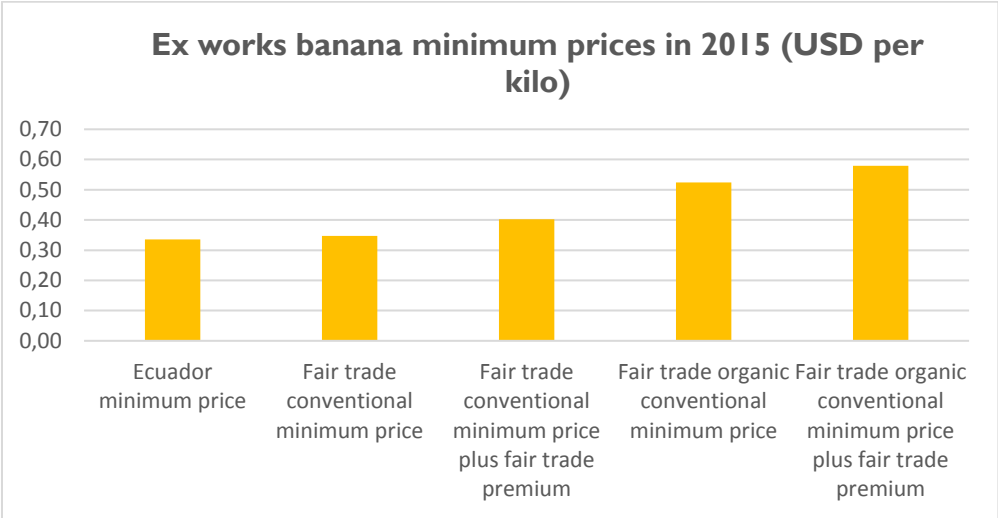


Figure 6: Ex works banana minimum prices in 2015³⁹

Studies concluded that working conditions are better on smaller farms than on big plantations in Ecuador. The owners employ twice as many people per hectare than their bigger competitors,⁴⁰ however their long term sustainability is still uncertain. Experts point to the problem of ageing owners of these lands. Elderly farmers are not in the physical condition to do the hard work required in banana growing and they neither have the possibilities to hire reliable workforce. Many times they even lack the capacity to change for less labour intensive crops^{41 42}. Nevertheless they need to compete with well-managed plantations. The absence of financial means and loans to invest in technical modernisation as well as the lack of willingness to cooperate also hinders the competitiveness of small producers.^{43 44 45}

1 from every 8 dollars spent on banana production covers the costs of agrochemicals use.

The most serious environmental and health problems in the banana industry are caused by the heavy use of agrochemicals. Studies show that many times not only plants are sprayed, but water, farmlands and residential areas are contaminated⁴⁶. The problem came to the forefront of union fights as well.



Figure 7: Uncontrolled chemical use affects residential areas and contributes to skin, respiratory and other health problems.⁴⁷

Unfair trading practices (UTPs) in the Ecuadorian banana supply chain

UTPs are typically imposed in imbalanced business to business power situations by the stronger party onto the weaker one against the will of the latter⁴⁸. UTPs may impact consumer prices and variety, producer and supplier profitability and competitiveness, and the working conditions of their employees⁴⁹.

UTPs are hard to reveal, because of the climate of fear: those who suffer from UTPs prefer to stay silent, they fear to lose business. Experts confirmed that although legal remedies enforcement mechanisms and bodies exist, producers do not denounce their problems, as the “banana world is a small world”⁵⁰. Older producers often don’t have the skills to make complaints, thus they are more vulnerable to these unfair practices⁵¹.

Small producers are more exposed to UTPs and their negative consequences, while bigger, established players are more capable to defend their own interests. Exporters who work with large plantations and thus have more bargaining power with their European buyers, are less likely to experience UTPs^{52, 53}.

European demand for Ecuadorian banana is higher during the European winter season, while lower in those months when when local fruits are available. Because of their higher bargaining power, big producers have more stable contracts and can sell their products throughout the year. : Any demand exceeding those contracted quantities is satisfied by the products of smaller producers, thus they are more exposed to market forces and price pressure⁵⁴. Price pressure is not considered a UTP per se, but prices undercutting even the legally set minimum prices are not sustainable and hinder the improvement of working conditions and sustainability. A typical response to harsh price pressure is to increase short term productivity. According to a stakeholder in banana business, the most obvious way for that is adjusting the use of fertilizers⁵⁵.

Banana trade professionals reported several forms of UTPs in the banana value chains between Ecuador and Europe. Although there is a legal minimum price to be paid to producers, they don’t always get this amount. As their buyers are not allowed to reduce the price they impose extra quality requirements instead to receive more for the same price or ask for retrospective contributions to packaging etc.^{56, 57}. According to experts for about 50-70% of the banana the producers receive the minimum price, while the other part is sold at spot market prices which might be higher during the high consumption season, but significantly lower in the low season^{58, 59, 60, 61}.

Putting contractual terms in writing is obligatory in Ecuador. Nevertheless experts report, that these terms are often not respected. For example the producer sometimes receives the minimum price only for half of the contracted quantity, for the rest he is paid the market price. The extreme price pressure that pushes real prices under the production costs has negative consequences on small producers' viability. With such prices small producers cannot invest in the farm and control diseases for example, which at the end will undermine both the quality and the quantity of their production. They enter into a vicious circle.⁶² Sometimes buyers (e.g. European supermarkets) make retrospective quality claims.^{63,64} Instead of prompt feedback they come with a long list of quality claims several months after the delivery, when the fresh product is not available anymore, so their claims can't be verified or refuted by the producer.⁶⁵

Environmental and social requirements as contract conditions

Banana business stakeholders confirmed that usually at least some kind of written contract exists between producers and buyers. The contractual terms are mainly about price, quality, volume and delivery. Several of the stakeholders interviewed confirmed that respecting environmental sustainability or decent working conditions is usually not required from producers. In response to the growing interest from consumers, some European supermarkets ask their suppliers to have social certifications, but are not willing to pay the extra costs of this added value. "They expect us to comply with everything, but accept a lower price" – as one expert interpreted.⁶⁶

What consumers find on the shelves?

The most popular certifying schemes and their features.



- (1) Fairtrade for fair price and working conditions, some environmental standards
- (2) UTZ for better working conditions and good agricultural practice, no minimum price,
- (3) Rainforest Alliance and
- (4) EU organic for better environmental conditions, no guarantee for better working conditions.

Nevertheless both Ecuadorian fruit companies and governmental programs regard organic and social certifications as a means to enter "value markets" whose consumers are willing to pay more for healthy, and fairly produced bananas. The basic standard that is demanded is Global GAP^{67 68 69}. Banavid, an export coordinating association of small and medium sized producers, is proud for the 25% share of organic bananas within their total exports.⁷⁰ The National Program for Development of Small Banana Producers Productivity aims to help the small producers to have organic or fairtrade certifications, or at least Global GAP.⁷¹

Production compliant with social or environmental standards

In 2011/2012 the three most common certifications all together had 4,1% share of the total production of the top 20 banana producing companies. Ecuador produced 161.155 tons of

Rainforest Alliance, 200.000 tons of organic and 47.600 tons of fairtrade certified bananas annually. It was – and still is - among the major exporters of these three categories of standard-compliant bananas. After the Dominican Republic (35% of global sales) and Colombia (28%), Ecuador (17%) and Costa Rica (17%) sell the most fairtrade certified bananas, Ecuador is the second biggest producer of organic bananas (25% of global production).⁷² The area dedicated to organic production is 10.500 hectares, to fairtrade production is 6.100 hectares, to RA production is 4.160 hectares.⁷³ This is all together about 10% of all banana producing land.

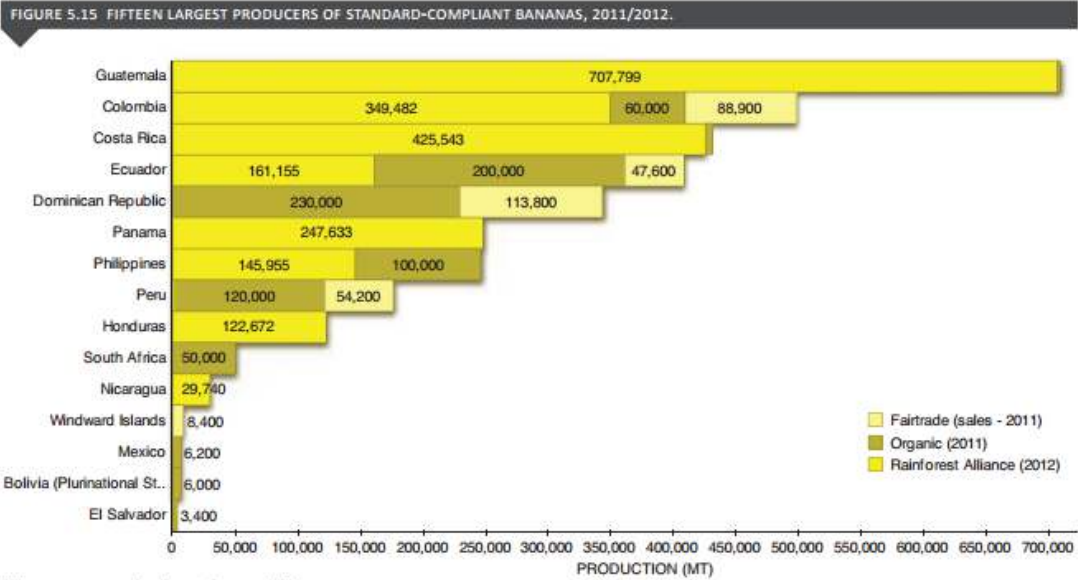


Figure 8 Fifteen largest producers of standard-compliant Bananas⁷⁴

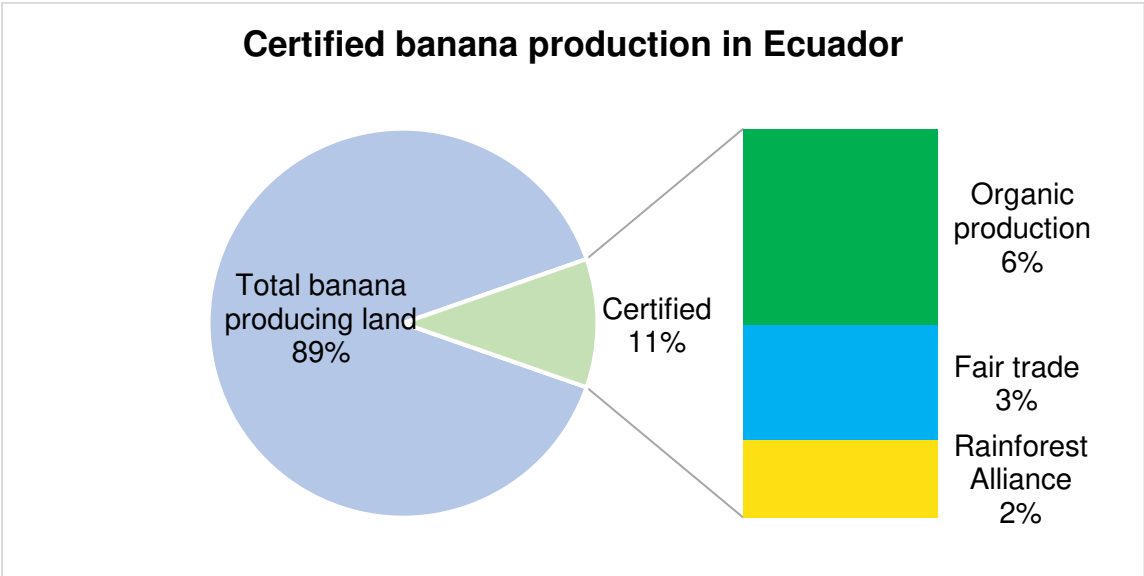


Figure 9 Certified banana production in Ecuador⁷⁵

Stakeholders interviewed confirm that fairtrade fulfils its mission to provide better working conditions, but they also admit the relevance of some critiques. While fairtrade conveys the image of the “happy small producer” and about fifty percent of the production is still from small producers, an increasing number of large plantations also get certified and some of the big brands introduced their fairtrade product line. These big brands have their own marketing strategy and may easily push small producers out of the market.^{76, 77}

Small Producers' Symbol

As a response to fairtrade critiques a new regional label was introduced in 2006 in Latin America and the Caribbean. It exclusively certifies small producers along similar principles than fairtrade: environmental and social sustainability as well as community development are the main values it promotes.



3. The trade with pesticides is a lucrative business⁷⁸.

More than 40 kilos^{79 80} of pesticides - herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, nematicides – are spread on conventional banana plantations per hectare and year. This is ten times as much as is used in the production of potatoes, although the potato is one of the crops with the highest pesticide use in our latitudes.⁸¹

A banana tree gets a heavy shower of agro-chemical cocktails more than once each week: Up to sixty times per year fungicides are sprayed with aeroplanes on the plantations. Herbicides for destruction of all plants between the banana shrubs are applied six to seven times a year. The seed heads are wrapped from the beginning of the growth phase with insecticide-impregnated plastic bags to prevent insect infestation. Once a year nematicides are applied.⁸²

It is not unusual that chemicals that are suspected carcinogens, like Glyphosate, which is classified as agent of the group 2A⁸³ (“probably carcinogenic to humans”) by the International Agency for Research on Cancer, are sprayed from aircrafts, while workers are in the fields. Previous studies in Ecuador show that between 90 and 95 % of workers examined on Noboa and Reybanpac plantations in the provinces of Guayas and Los Ríos as well as on plantations of their suppliers were in the fields during aero spraying. At Dole plantations 55 % of examined workers reported this problem.⁸⁴ The cross-sectional epidemiological study that was done by Dr. Hutter in autumn 2015 in two regions in Ecuador revealed that 76 % of workers surveyed were at the plantation during aero spraying.⁸⁵

Environmental effects

The reason for the high usage of chemicals in banana production worldwide is that the fruit is mainly produced in a humid tropical climate where not only bananas but also insects and diseases flourish easily. Conventional banana plantations in Ecuador cover huge areas and are monocultures, which promotes the development of plagues. The high amount of chemicals applied gives rise to pesticide resistance – a vicious circle.⁸⁶ In order to control costs, aero spraying of pesticides is used.⁸⁷ This has serious side effects: The chemicals used on the plantations reduce biodiversity in the banana-producing areas. Birds, fish and reptiles are decimated and poisoned chronically.⁸⁸ Production and community areas are mingled in Ecuador. So often, not only the workers on the fields, their supervisors, the pilots and mechanics are harmed/contaminated, but also local communities.⁸⁹ Their land, water courses and aquifers are polluted and their livestock dies.^{90 91} Even organic plantations are contaminated by aero spraying that is used on conventional banana plantations.⁹² This is due to the drift of the chemicals, which is extending beyond the plantation, especially when they are applied through planes: To save costs and reduce the contamination of the ground, the size of the drop is reduced. The smaller the drop and the more wind, the bigger the drift. The bigger the drift, the less the effects on neighbouring communities can be controlled. Buffer zones around conventional plantations as well as the use of electrostatic pumps that reduce the amount of chemicals needed for fumigation to only one fifth⁹³ would be possible solutions. The main problem is nevertheless, that the regulations for this issue that do exist in Ecuadorian law are too lax and incomplete and their enforcement is not controlled strictly enough.⁹⁴

Although Ecuador ratified several ILO conventions, it has not ratified two important ones, the Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention⁹⁵ and the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention⁹⁶. The country did not only ratify The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), where “*the States Parties [...] recognize the right of everyone to the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work which ensure, in particular [...] Safe and healthy working conditions [...]*”.⁹⁷ It was also the first

country, to ratify the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR⁹⁸ in 2010, which provides a complaint mechanism for victims of violations of all economic, social and cultural rights.⁹⁹

As the Working Group on Labour Rights of the World Banana Forum, already observed in 2012 for all banana producing countries: “there are no tools in place that facilitate or strengthen a tripartite dialogue to develop better national and international policies concerning occupational health in the producing sector.”¹⁰⁰

Little knowledge of workers about chemicals

The majority of workers that were interviewed for the cross-sectional epidemiological study had no knowledge which pesticides they apply: *Practically half of the plantation workers could not provide any information about which pesticides they use. Those pesticides that we could identify [...] are extremely detrimental to health, such as glyphosate. This is a herbicide that was classified by the WHO 2015 as a probably carcinogenic.*¹⁰¹ Previous studies in Ecuador mention Calixin, Bravo, Macozeb and Tilt – all of which are classified as dangerous, the last three include substances that can cause cancer according to EPA, the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the use of Calixin is not authorized in the European Union.¹⁰²

Health effects

The most common negative health impacts for workers on conventional banana plantations that have been reported in previous studies include headache, fever, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, poisoning, miscarriage, sterility problems and cancer.^{103 104} In our discussion with a local expert in Ecuador different types of cancer, intoxications, malformations and genetic problems were mentioned.¹⁰⁵ The evaluation of the cross-sectional epidemiological study conducted by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hutter revealed that the health of pesticide users is heavily affected by chemicals that they are exposed to while working in conventional banana production. Pesticide workers showed significantly more often symptoms such as dizziness, vomiting, diarrhoea, burning eyes, skin irritation, fatigue and insomnia than the control group. The group had a 6-8 fold increased risk for reporting gastrointestinal symptoms than the control group who did not use pesticides.¹⁰⁶ Workers' situation is really desperate as many times they are not registered at the social security system. One worker told us the following:

*At the age of 5 I started to work on a plantation. With 7 I started as a fumigator. I have done all kinds of work with bananas. I've never had social security and never had any security as a worker.*¹⁰⁷

In this situation workers have to fund their own medical care that they obviously cannot afford.¹⁰⁸

Protective clothing

The effects of the heavy use of chemicals on workers' health are aggravated by the fact, that mostly, adequate protection is missing, although this is required by law in Ecuador.¹⁰⁹ The evaluation of the cross-sectional epidemiological study revealed that only one fifth of pesticide workers are using protective clothing regularly – mostly because they are not provided by the employers.¹¹⁰ *From a medical point of view, the result that about 2/3 of the workers do not take any protective measures during work is problematic. Remarkable - but not surprising - is that the most common reason for not applying masks and gloves was that these safeguards simply were not available or had not been provided by the employer.*¹¹¹ The downward price pressure through the whole supply chain seems to require savings in this area too.

Workers are often not aware of the dangers that the chemicals pose to their own health.

One worker told us:

*I worked on the plantation as a flag man. When the aircraft came to spray, I stood there with a banner. I had no protection for this work. I was completely drenched by the chemicals. And I did not even know how dangerous these chemicals were.*¹¹²

They wash their clothes that they have been using on the plantation together with the ones of their family or reuse the containers from the pesticides as water containers in their households. We spoke to a teacher, working in a school for children with special needs who told us: „I’m coming from a culture where it’s normal that people spray pesticides all over you. Even if people tell you that it’s wrong or to keep security measures it’s so normal that they continue to do it.“¹¹³

Regarding the 71 respondents in the cross-sectional epidemiological study pesticide users and control group differ highly significantly with regard to the assessment of the harmfulness of pesticides. There was no pesticide user, that categorized the chemicals as “very harmful” nine of ten said they were “moderately harmful”, the rest “not harmful”.

Improving the awareness of the workers regarding health effects of the pesticides is one key to change their situation for the better. Change would be possible, if awareness rising was done through workshops held by unions, for example. Although union rights are provided for in the Ecuadorian Labour Law, union density still remains low. Industry unions are not allowed in the country, but in-house unions are. Often workers are harassed, oppressed and intimidated when they try to form or get involved in a union.¹¹⁴ Sometimes repression goes so far as to sack the workers, as we were told by one:

2014, we established a union on the plantation La Luz. We registered with the Ministry of Labour but then they terminated all of us.^{115 116}

Of course there are also workers who are aware of the dangers of chemicals. Still, they often don’t have any other possibility but to continue working on the banana plantation as they don’t have any other means of income. One worker told us about his desperate situation: *There are many people here in Los Ríos with illnesses. No one could ever complain because if you did you were threatened and told that you would be sacked from the hacienda. That’s it. And one who is poor can’t do that. Because if you leave one plantation you will just have to go on to the next one and there is already a negative report on you. They threaten to fire you and if you are poor you don’t have any other way to make a living. We don’t have property, we don’t have cattle, we don’t have pigs or anything to make money from if we get fired from the bananera. That’s why the rich are able to abuse the humility of the workers.*¹¹⁷

235 dollars of compensation for thirteen years of work

I have worked on banana plantations more than 20 years. After working five years on one plantation my skin began to burst. I was covered in abscesses that would grow and all my body hair began to fall off. I told the general manager that I have a skin problem. He said we’ll talk about that later, first let’s go check your working area. After that I showed him how swollen I was. I couldn’t even stand the clothes on my skin, as if I had thorns under each abscess. He told me to go to social security. I thought I would be given a compensation for my years of labor. I asked how we would work things out and he told me I shouldn’t take long because if I did someone else would take my place. After one month social security stopped paying and cancelled my account. Back at work they had already replaced me. They asked me to leave because my job was taken. I told them I would find a solution. That’s when I met Jorge Acosta and we tried everything. We found lawyers to take my case, but they turned out to be corrupt. They said the results of my blood tests had been lost in Quito. I think that means that someone

*paid so that those results wouldn't make it to Los Ríos. Then I went to talk to one of the company's' lawyers. He said they would compensate me and give me 500 dollars. For thirteen years of work. I decided to take it, but I had such bad luck! I had to bring a lawyer to receive the check. She had half of the check deposited in her account and even had the audacity of charging me fifteen extra dollars for the ride to the plantation. All I received was 235 dollars. What a nice hoax!*¹¹⁸

4. Tough and desperate life of banana workers

The research team conducted structured and in-depth interviews with 35 banana workers from around Quevedo and Machala in October and November 2015. The labourers reported that they work for plantations producing for Chiquita, Favorita, Dole, Bonita and Sabrostar, however we were not able to verify this information from other sources. According to them, part of the production is marketed in Europe,¹¹⁹ the rest in Asia.

Who produces the banana?

The workers were predominantly males around their forties. The highest education that they had was primary level. Workers usually live in households with two adults and 1-3 persons under 18 years, where only one of the adults has regular income.¹²⁰ They are usually hired at plantations near their homes.

Insecurity in the future and now

*Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization [...].*¹²¹ It is very hard to achieve without papers, even if Ecuador has an established social security system according to ILO standards.¹²²

Although workers have been working for plantations typically for 15 years, they generally didn't have written contracts. According to the Ecuadorian Labour Code, if employment lasts for more than a year a written contract should be concluded. Employers should register their workers at the social security institutions from the first day they are employed.¹²³ This often does not happen. Other employers do inscribe workers in social security but although they work full time, they inscribe them as if they worked only half time, which only provides them with part of the service of social security.¹²⁴ This makes it difficult to control if the social security payments, which are obligatory, are paid by the employer. The majority of labourers interviewed assumed that their social security contribution was not paid. If their contribution is not paid these people will not be eligible for pension or for sickness, maternity, medical or other benefits they are entitled to by law. They can only rely on themselves in case they need surgery, hospitalization or medicine.¹²⁵ These are expenses that they themselves are not able to cover even at the basic level. How could they do so in serious cases?

Living on the edge

*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.*¹²⁶ This fundamental human right is a dream for many banana workers.

Minimum wage in Ecuador has been rising since the mid 2000's and is by now significantly higher than in neighbouring and banana-competitor countries.¹²⁷ The country also ratified the ILO Minimum Wage Fixing Convention¹²⁸. The government defined 354 USD gross legal minimum wage for 2015. To draw a realistic picture about what this amount means for workers, we need to estimate the net wage that is influenced by several individual factors, including the composition of the household. The estimated net monthly minimal wage was 300 USD in 2015,

without complimentary 13th and 14th months' payment¹²⁹. If we include these amounts the net amount should be around 325-350 USD.

The average monthly net wage of workers interviewed was around 370 USD. Some workers commented that they receive the minimum wage or below.

Although workers earn more than the minimum wage, this is hardly enough to survive, especially if only one person of the family earns an income, like in their case. The average monthly expenditures of households where workers lived was 470 USD. According to the Ecuadorian Statistical Office the monthly income required to cover the basic needs of a household was between 653 and 673 USD in 2015.¹³⁰ The income banana workers receive is not enough to cover the basic needs of their households. Moreover in most cases none of their household members has other earnings, for example from additional jobs. Many of them claimed that they cannot pay for satisfactory alimentation or health expenditures. The majority of workers explicitly said that they were not able to adequately feed their families. None of the labourers reported that they can make savings. No matter how hard they work, their situation has not improved in the recent years.

Even that little is cheated

*Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration.*¹³¹ But does everyone receive it? Most banana workers were paid on an incentive basis, according to the measurement of their performance; for example by the boxes they pack or the area they cultivate. They were told that the more they work the more they would receive – but that was not the reality. Workers were not required to verify their performance assessment, and most of them regularly experienced incorrect measurements. Even if their income depends on their achievements, workers chose not to make complaints. They were afraid of the consequences. They have their reasons: some of those who denounced their problems had been intimidated.

Exploitation and overtime for nothing

*Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.*¹³² But not everyone can afford it. To achieve their substandard living, people work hard on the banana plantations. Work starts between 6-7 AM and finishes between 5PM and 6PM. Labourers usually work more than 10 hours, and they have 30-60 minutes break every day. According to Ecuadorian Labour Law, the regular working time may not exceed 8 hours daily and 40 hours weekly.¹³³

While the national weekly mean is 41.5 hours¹³⁴, banana workers that were interviewed for this study estimated to work more than 48 hours per week. This is within the legal limit, as regular working hours may be exceeded by 4 hours daily and 12 hours weekly under special conditions and for extra remuneration. However this intensity of work endangers their health and increases the risks of injuries as well as it takes time from their family and from recreation.

If workers are not able to meet their production quota or if their superior requires, they have to stay for overtime. Half of the workers we interviewed never refused overtime, because overtime was either compulsory or they were afraid of the consequences. They were afraid that if they refuse overtime, they would lose their jobs. Weekend work was not exceptional: most workers had to work at least on a few weekends during the last season.

As many of them said, the overtime usually was not paid to workers or if it was, the payment had not met the legal standards. Unfortunately workers are not organised and educated enough to change this. Many of them did not know what the legal standard payment for overtime or for performance during the overtime was.

Without drinking water and medical care

*Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.*¹³⁵ Despite working on plantations is an exhausting physical job and they work long days, workers usually

don't have access to drinking water on the haciendas. In case of injury, there is no medical care, although employers are obliged to have at least a medical kit on site.^{136 137} This requirement is also formulated in the ILO Plantations Convention¹³⁸, which was ratified by Ecuador in 1969. Workers claimed that in those few cases when care had been provided, the service had been poorly equipped and did not even have medicaments. If workers were insured, they would – in case of an accident – be sent to social security paid institutions where they would be treated. If a worker is not registered in the social security system, s/he has to go to a private clinic and needs to bear the costs him/herself.

Lack of unionisation

*Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.*¹³⁹ Many experts that were interviewed for this study, suggested the most important way to improve working conditions was to unite forces. This does not happen yet, although there are legal foundations for it. Union rights are provided for by the Ecuadorian Labour Law¹⁴⁰, and Ecuador also ratified the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise ILO Convention¹⁴¹, the Right of Association (Agriculture) Convention¹⁴² and the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention¹⁴³.

The Ecuadorian enforcement of union rights and related conventions has been criticized many times by stakeholders on ILO forums. In each year there are about 4-5 observations made by stakeholders, usually unions, on the matter. Discrimination of unions, violations of the right to collective bargaining and freedom of association are among the mostly discussed cases.¹⁴⁴

Among the interviewees only few workers were union members, although the majority of all workers would contact the union in conflict cases. For those few people who would not do so, the typical reason is fearing consequences. We assume that labourers do not yet really know how a union could improve their situation. For example the majority knew their rights as workers, but they did not have suggestions what issues the union should fight for. According to others the most important causes for union work would be wages, work time, working conditions, health and safety. Most workers did not know what one of the most important tools used by a union, a Collective Bargaining Agreement was, and many others said there was no such thing on the plantation where they worked.

Some administrative measures hinder unionisation as well. Only plantations with more than 30 employees are obliged to have a union¹⁴⁵. Some of the plantations circumvent this requirement by formally splitting production into smaller production entities with less than 30 employees.

5. Conclusion

The Make Fruit Fair campaign works towards a sustainable and fair fruit supply chain. There are many challenges that have to be overcome to ensure sustainability in the banana supply chain between Ecuador and Europe.

With regard to **social aspects of sustainability** all stakeholders of the banana supply chain should take steps towards decent work and respecting human rights. We found serious disrespect of basic labour rights, of freedom of association and occupational health and safety. Those people who work under these harsh circumstances deserve to earn a decent living. The income of workers, although on average slightly higher than the legal minimum, does not allow to cover satisfactory alimentation, health expenditures or appropriate education for their children. The enforcement of legal measures taken by the Ecuadorian government on this field is weak.

With regard to **environmental sustainability** stakeholders along the banana supply chain should work towards the sustainable use of resources (e.g. soil, water) and should protect biodiversity. Producers should reduce or avoid the use of hazardous agrochemicals, in compliance with international and national conventions and regulations, and where possible they should increase their use of sustainable alternatives to agrochemicals. We discovered

that it is intensive and uncontrolled usage of chemicals that endangers both biodiversity and workers' health. Unsustainable chemical use is also fuelled by downward price pressure throughout the supply chain. We found strong and mutual links between banana and agrochemical business, which may hinder the sustainable use of agrochemicals as using fewer chemicals, is not supported by business interests. Intensive agrochemical use is more than an environmental issue, it has detrimental effect on banana workers' health. Many of them use hazardous substances on a daily basis, which has already caused serious health problems that may last for a lifetime. This situation is aggravated by many additional factors; workers do not have access to protective gear or medical care on plantations. They are not educated about the potential risks of handling chemicals. If their health is seriously affected and they are temporarily not able to work, they may easily lose their job. Since many of them are not registered at the social security system they have to pay themselves for the treatment of their health problems, which they are almost never able to do. On top of this – as unionisation is obstructed – workers are not able to join forces to fight for improved conditions.

This degrading situation should not be accepted any longer. Thus we call on all stakeholders of the supply chain, especially producers, supermarkets and governments, to ensure that plantation workers producing tropical fruits earn a living wage, are treated with dignity in the workplace as well as protected from exposure to toxic pesticides. We call supermarkets to pay fair prices to all their suppliers, including small-scale farmers, to enable them to cover the costs of socially just, fair and sustainable production.

The opacity of supply chains and the presence of unfair trading practices impede both environmental improvement and social progress. Stakeholders can easily point to each other and relieve themselves from responsibility. Additionally there is a very strong climate of fear in the banana supply chain: Banana suppliers choose not to make complaints against unfair trading practices (UTPs), because they fear losing their business, and their workers prefer to remain silent and not join unions because they fear losing their jobs or being intimidated. An appropriate and credible European level enforcement against UTPs could make international banana trade work for the benefit of all stakeholders. The desired mechanism should be accessible for all businesses participating in the EU food supply chain, including the banana supply chains. This should be regardless of whether they are located in the EU or not. It should operate in a manner which protects anonymity and confidentiality, especially of suppliers who are concerned that they may lose business if they raise complaints. It/One should be able to deter poor practice, either at EU or Member State level via a selection of different enforcement tools (e.g. informal dialogue, financial penalty).

Increased transparency could contribute to fair business and employment practices. Supermarkets and fruit companies should be legally obliged to disclose their impacts on human rights and the environment and conduct human rights due diligence.

A banana worker is anxious for many reasons. For example he is afraid of getting sick, because he may lose his job and may not be able to pay for the cure. He is afraid of refusing overtime, making any kind of complaint or joining a union, because he may lose his job. Finally he is afraid that he may not be able to feed his family or provide education for his children. Someone who produces a fruit that we all love should not live in such a miserable situation.

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⁹⁷ The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Article 7, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CESCR.aspx> accessed: 29/05/2016

⁹⁸ <http://www.cesr.org/article.php?id=890> accessed: 29/05/2016

⁹⁹ For more details about this see chapter 4.

¹⁰⁰ www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/.../WG03_OHS_en.pdf accessed: 29/05/2016

¹⁰¹ Hutter, Hans-Peter. Bericht. Epidemiologische Untersuchung von Kleinbauern und Landarbeitern im konventionellen und ökologischen Landbau (Bananen) in Ecuador. Wien: ÄrztInnen für eine gesunde Umwelt, 2016.

¹⁰² Humbert, Franziska. Bittere Bananen. Ausbeuterische Arbeitsbedingungen in Ecuador in der Lieferkette Deutscher Supermarktketten. Berlin: Oxfam Deutschland e.V., 2011:9.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Hütz-Adams, Friedel & Ertener, Lara. *Von der Staude bis zum Konsumenten Die Wertschöpfungskette von Bananen, Case Study*. Siegburg: SÜDWIND e.V. - Institut für Ökonomie und Ökumene, 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Stakeholder interview 25/10/2015.

¹⁰⁶ Hutter, Hans-Peter. Bericht. Epidemiologische Untersuchung von Kleinbauern und Landarbeitern im konventionellen und ökologischen Landbau (Bananen) in Ecuador. Wien: ÄrztInnen für eine gesunde Umwelt, 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Stakeholder interview 26/10/2015.

¹⁰⁸ For more details about the financial situation of workers, see chapter 4, „Living on the edge“.

¹⁰⁹ Humbert, Franziska. Billige Bananen Wer zahlt den Preis? Die negativen Auswirkungen der Preispolitik Deutscher Supermarktketten auf Produzenten und Beschäftigte in Ecuador und Kolumbien. Berlin: Oxfam Deutschland e.V., 2014.

¹¹⁰ Hutter, Hans-Peter. Bericht. Epidemiologische Untersuchung von Kleinbauern und Landarbeitern im konventionellen und ökologischen Landbau (Bananen) in Ecuador. Wien: ÄrztInnen für eine gesunde Umwelt, 2016.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

¹¹² Stakeholder interview 26/10/2015.

¹¹³ Stakeholder interview 26/10/2015.

¹¹⁴ Hütz-Adams, Friedel & Ertener, Lara. *Von der Staude bis zum Konsumenten Die Wertschöpfungskette von Bananen, Case Study*. Siegburg: SÜDWIND e.V. - Institut für Ökonomie und Ökumene, 2012.

¹¹⁵ Stakeholder interview 26/10/2015.

¹¹⁶ For more details about unions in Ecuador, see chapter 4 „Lack of unionisation“

¹¹⁷ Stakeholder interview 27/10/2015.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ In Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom

¹²⁰ This composition of the household is typical in Ecuador, the Ecuadorian Statistical Office (INEC) calculates the required income level of a household with 4 household members among them 1.6 who make an income. [http://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/ipc-canastas-2015/](http://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/ipc-canastas-2015/http://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/ipc-canastas-2015/) accessed: 03/05/2016

¹²¹ UN General Assembly, Universal declaration of human rights, Article 22., 1948

¹²² Ecuador ratified the Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention (C102) in 1974.

¹²³ <http://www.trabajo.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/LEY-DE-SEGURIDAD-SOCIAL.pdf> Art 73, accessed: 09/05/2016

¹²⁴ Email from stakeholder 03/06/2016.

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- ¹²⁵ <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/progdesc/ssptw/2012-2013/americas/ecuador.pdf>
accessed: 03/05/2016
- ¹²⁶ UDHR <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/> Article 25 accessed: 01/06/2016
- ¹²⁷ <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2015/cr15289.pdf> accessed: 09/05/2016
- ¹²⁸ International Labour Organization, Minimum Wage Fixing Convention, 1970 (C131)
- ¹²⁹ The gross minimal wage was 354 USD in 2015, the net wage depends among others on the yearly income and the number of dependents in the family.
- ¹³⁰ <http://www.ecuadorencifras.gob.ec/ipc-canastas-2015/> accessed: 03/05/2016
- ¹³¹ UN General Assembly, Universal declaration of human rights, Article 23.3., 1948
- ¹³² UN General Assembly, Universal declaration of human rights, Article 24., 1948
- ¹³³ <http://www.justicia.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/CODIGO-DEL-TRABAJO.pdf>, Art 19,
accessed: 09/05/2016
- ¹³⁴ International Labour Organization statistics.
https://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/help_home/data_by_country/country-details?country=ECU, accessed:
04/05/2016
- ¹³⁵ UN General Assembly, Universal declaration of human rights, Article 25., 1948
- ¹³⁶ <http://www.justicia.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/CODIGO-DEL-TRABAJO.pdf>, Art 430,
accessed: 09/05/2016
- ¹³⁷ Stakeholder interview 28/10/2015.
- ¹³⁸ International Labour Organization, Plantations Convention, 1958 (C110)
- ¹³⁹ UN General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 23.4., 1948
- ¹⁴⁰ <http://www.justicia.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/CODIGO-DEL-TRABAJO.pdf>, Art 440,
accessed: 09/05/2016
- ¹⁴¹ International Labour Organization, Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise
Convention, 1948 (C087)
- ¹⁴² International Labour Organization, Right of Association (Agriculture) Convention, C011, 1921
- ¹⁴³ International Labour Organization, Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, C098,
1949
- ¹⁴⁴
http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:14101:0::NO:14101:P14101_COUNTRY_ID,P14101_ARTICLE_NO:102616,22 accessed: 09/05/2016
- ¹⁴⁵ <http://www.justicia.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/CODIGO-DEL-TRABAJO.pdf>, Art 459,
visited 9/5/2016