



Say it with flowers

Ethics and sustainability in the flower value chain

Ecuadorian female workers in the flower value chain © Sean Garrison for Fairtrade International

In 2007, Hilary Benn, Britain's International Development Secretary asked consumers to buy roses from Kenya because importing African flowers is better for the environment in view of the fact they are not grown in heated greenhouses. He added that it makes it easier for African people to make a decent living.

But are his arguments right? How sustainable are flowers from the South and how good are the working conditions? And what is fair trade's role in this?

Delocalised

Holland's flower power is waning. Two-thirds of European ornamental flowers are still traded through flower auctions in the Netherlands, which boast a multi-billion turnover. But since the 1990s flowers have increasingly been imported from East Africa. For instance, in 2010 the Dutch imported three billion roses from Kenya, mostly for export to other parts of Europe.

Countries near the equator have strong assets for the cultivation of cut flowers: twelve hours of daylight per day, ample rain and ideal temperatures. Add cheap labour and the availability of modern means of transport to this and you understand why it makes economic sense to have flowers picked from a Kenyan flower farm and to sell them at a flower stall 7,000 kms away.

Kenya, a forerunner

Hilary Benn is right to point out how important the flower business has become for East Africa. For several years the sector has witnessed 20% growth margins. Today, flowers amount for more than 10% of total exports, which makes it second only to tea.

Tens of thousands of young women work on flower plantations; hundreds of thousands indirectly depend of the sector. That is why the country is top of the list, with Ethiopia, Uganda and Tanzania following.

In South America a similar scenario can be seen in Ecuador and Colombia, the main producers for the American market.

Scented truth?

How sustainable are Kenyan roses? Several studies show that the CO₂ emissions from Kenyan rose production, including transport, is many times lower than emissions produced by heating greenhouses in the Netherlands. However, Pat Thomas, journalist at *The Ecologist*, challenges this statement: "Investigating this issue properly would certainly broaden the focus beyond narrow CO₂ calculations. First, such figures must encompass the entire life cycle of the flower and include carbon released from fossil fuels used in cultivation, fertiliser production, refrigeration and transport, as well as the methane released from binned flowers. In addition, there are two major elements that should indeed make you doubt whether a rose from Kenya is actually good for the environment, more specifically the massive use of pesticides and water."

For a rose to bloom, fungi and bacteria must be kept at bay. The use of chemical pesticides is very high in the flower industry and legislation in the matter is lagging in African countries. Pesticides that have been forbidden in Europe for a long time already, such as DDT and methyl bromide, are still being used. Since flowers are not food, they are controlled less stringently and there is no tight system to ban pesticides. In Kenya and Ethiopia workers receive hardly any training regarding the correct use of chemicals. Consequently, there are many health complaints



Protective clothing is necessary © Kenian Flower Farm Research Project

The cultivation of cut flowers also requires a lot of water. Kenya and Ethiopia are not really known for their large water reserves. As a result, Pat Thomas raises further questions about the ecological impact of inedible luxury products that are exclusively cultivated for export:

"Most of the Kenyan floriculture industry is concentrated on the shores of Lake Naivasha – a complex and sensitive ecosystem, which is home to hippos, flamingos and other animal life. Since the floriculture industry moved in, the population rose from 6,000 to 240,000. Lake Naivasha has shrunk to half its original size, water is polluted – because of pesticides and sewage from the city of Naivasha – and the biodiversity is threatened. Even the flower industry recognises the environmental degradation resulting from the overuse of water, pollution of the lake, and the increasing population in the area."

Social added value?

Flowers create jobs. But this does not say anything about the quality of these jobs. HIVOS, the Dutch NGO that launched the Power of the Fair Trade Flower campaign in 2013, summarises the working conditions in the flower business as follows: "Young women do most work on the flower farms. They are in high demand because they work meticulously, which is necessary for such a delicate product. But more importantly they are cheap. They do unskilled work for low wages. They have no or hardly any access to knowledge and training and consequently they have no perspective for development. Secure jobs are rare and temporary employment makes women very vulnerable. Exploitation and sexual abuse is rampant. Moreover, the careless use of chemicals contributes to health risks.

If you look at concrete data, things get even worse. "Bosses demand sexual favours in exchange for an extension to a contract or a day off. Women with a temporary contract lose their job when pregnant. Staff with an open-ended contract is requested to take leave instead of maternity leave. But the health conditions of many female workers are particularly worrying: headaches, dizziness and fatigue are the rule rather than the exception. Miscarriage rates are high. Protective clothing is rarely available."

Working days can add up to 16 hours of work in the high season. Wages, by contrast, are low. The minimum wage in agriculture in Kenya is 1.25 euro per day. In Tanzania it is 0.96 euro and in Ethiopia it is even lower. Uganda does not have minimum wages at all.



Tanzanian roses © Max Havelaar Switzerland

Proliferation of labels

Regardless of cutthroat competition, many in the sector are aware that things must change. Already in 1999 the international co-ordination organisation of flower retailers took the initiative for a global standard with social and ecological criteria. In 2006, this resulted in the European consumer label Fair Flower Fair Plants (FFP), which is managed by a foundation in the Netherlands. But the label did not succeed in breaking through and is used mainly for flowers that are grown in Europe.

In addition, international business-to-business standards such as MPS-ABC, GLOBALGAP and ETI are sometimes used while other flowers have the ecological EKO label and British supermarkets developed private labels of their own. There is a growing awareness in the South that the sector's image must be improved; the Kenya Flower Council launched a Code of Practice and Asocolflores in Colombia launched its Florverde standard.

To stop the proliferation of labels and meet the demands of NGOs and consumers for more ethics in the value chain, the sector launched the Floriculture Sustainability Initiative (FSI) at the beginning of 2013. NGOs are also involved in the process. The FSI's target is very ambitious: 90% of flowers and potplants internationally traded by members will be sustainably produced. To that end, it especially wants to foster cooperation within the sector to develop a shared vision on sustainability.

Jeroen Oudheusden, FSI's programme coordinator: "Because of the many labels nobody can see the wood for the trees any more. The goal is not to establish a new label, but instead to develop a tool that compares several labels so growers and retailers finally get a clear view. Things should be more transparent and based on facts. In addition, we mainly want to share information about best practices on water management, the use of pesticides, human rights and environmental-friendly transport."

Fairtrade flowers

The FLO criteria for the flower sector include:

- A Joint Body, with representatives of the workers, has been created. All expenditure of the Fairtrade Premium (10% on top of final price) is decided exclusively by the Joint Body. Employees can veto proposals and the Premium is to be used for community development and better working conditions.
- There is no forced labour nor child labour under the age of 15.
- Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining.
- Salaries are in line with or exceed the regional average and official minimum wages.
- The company has implemented a health and safety policy; use of fertilisers and pesticides is limited.

Fair trade flowers

In 2001, COOP and Migros, two Swiss supermarket chains contacted Max Havelaar Switzerland about putting fair trade flowers on the market. Fairtrade International (FLO) took on the challenge and in 2004 the first Fairtrade-labelled bouquet was sold in Switzerland.

Meanwhile, more than 50 plantations have been certified in 17 countries, mostly in Kenya, Tanzania and Ecuador. In Belgium, fair trade flowers are sold mainly at Delhaize and Carrefour supermarkets.



The flowers are being prepared for transport
© Kenian Flower Farm Research Project

The impact of fair trade

In 2012, the Center for Evaluation (CEval) published a fair trade impact study, commissioned by Swiss and German FLO members. Beside small-scale West African cocoa growers large scale East African flower farms were also included in the study. The study highlights how working conditions at Fairtrade certified plantations are significantly better than on their non-certified counterparts, especially in areas such as health and safety, training and gender. While in the sector fewer than 20% of workers have a permanent contract of employment, at certified plantations this amounts to 85%.

The Fairtrade Premium is used for projects that benefit workers of the certified organisations as well as the wider population. For instance, at Finlay Flowers in Kericho the Premium was invested in teacher training and school equipment. At Oserian Flower Farm near Naivasha the Premium was used for a training centre, an AIDS campaign, a seminar about domestic violence and the purchase of a bus.

Also, certified plantations pay more attention to environmental issues. For instance, the Longonot Farm in the Naivasha region actively recycles water and invests in hydro-electricity. To certify plantations in Ethiopia, 90 of the 120 chemicals used were banned.

Wages and trade unions

The study shows that certified farms offer slightly better wages. 64% of female workers are able to save compared to 51% at other plantations. Other studies by Gardmann, Leipold and Morgante, and Caestecker, among others, show that wages at certified plantations are still an issue.

Wages are usually slightly above the minimum wages and therefore comply with the FLO criteria, but few workers can actually cover the cost of living with these wages. In other words, the standard of living remains extremely low.

Horticulture is a very competitive business and management at plantations is often unwilling to raise wages. This also goes for certified businesses, even though labour relations are generally better there because of the consultation about the use of the Fairtrade Premiums.

The authors of said studies also investigated recurring criticism about fair trade, i.e. that it hinders trade union activity. Indeed, often trade union membership is not higher at certified plantations compared to elsewhere. Employees pointed out to be happy with their say in the Joint Body and do not see the added value of trade unions. But fair trade contributes to a more democratic organisation structure and is a best practice that puts pressure on other plantations to improve employment conditions.

“You notice that Fairtrade has empowered the union”, concludes Caestecker, “but it should help strengthen labour organisation even more. Fairtrade cannot substitute national labour law and therefore should cooperate with the union and the Kenyan government to aim for better working conditions in all farms.”

Leipold and Morgante add the responsibility of consumers: "In recent years, consumer choice in Western countries has increasingly shown a tendency towards flowers with reliable accreditation. This has increased pressure on Kenyan flower farms to work towards improving the industry's image. If that process continues, it can steer the whole sector in the right direction."

Trade for Development Centre
February 2014



Ecuadorian fair trade rose © Didier Gentilhomme for Fairtrade International

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