



Cameroon

Context

Bananas constitute the fifth largest export earner for Cameroon. The largest private employer in the country is the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC), a state-owned corporation, which produces 110,000 tonnes of bananas a year and employs 7,500 banana workers.

Yet, the industry fails to provide decent wages to workers, who are subsisting on less than half of what they need. Fines and deductions are regularly levied, reducing take home pay further. Nor are working conditions decent. Most workers are putting in more than 60 hours a week, with poor protection from illness and injury, and are losing 46 days a year due to work exhaustion.

This document summarises the research carried out by two researchers in the South West Province of Cameroon, as part of a project funded by Comic Relief. Over the course of a month they conducted 120 interviews across 11 farms owned by CDC. Questions focused on real wages, living costs, and working conditions. The purpose was to establish baseline indicators, which could be monitored over time, as Banana Link and our local partner FAWU (Fako Agricultural Workers Union) carry out work to educate and empower workers to secure Decent Work.

Research findings

The average worker interviewed was 35 years-old with a primary level of education, had been with their employer for 8 ½ years, was married with three children, and supported an average of 5.9 dependants (including their spouse and children).

Income

The wage system used by CDC is extremely complex. Most workers (43%) are on a piece-rate system, where workers are paid by the number of tasks completed or amount of fruit harvested. 33% are on an hourly rate and the remaining workers varying dependant on the specific task. Workers also have a number of deductions from their pay which go towards 'savings' and debt repayments, or are 'pro-rata deductions' for absenteeism and disciplinary action.

The average worker received 49,550 XAF before deductions and 33,246 XAF after deductions. £1 is approximately 792 XAF, so this works out at £62.56 before deductions and £41.98 after. 83% of workers regularly paid into the company credit union or another 'savings' scheme. These payments are a mix of actual 'savings', generally used to pay for school fees and smooth consumption over the year, and loan repayments.



'Pro-rata deductions' are extremely common and affect 79% of workers. These are levied for lateness, failure to meet quotas, and disciplinary action. The average worker receives four such deductions every month. Several people received less than 10,000 XAF (£12.63) in net wages due to the frequency of their deductions. This would be around an 80% deduction from the average wage. However, according to FAWU workers should not have more than 30% of their wages taken in deductions.

Living costs were calculated at 69,021 XAF (£87.15), significantly below previous estimates. This is probably because workers were asked to estimate their actual monthly spending rather than what they would need to meet their basic needs. Food was the most expensive item, followed by education, housing, and energy.

When the amount of income immediately available was calculated, only 8% of households had enough income to meet their monthly expenditure. This excluded 'savings' which included loan repayments and contributions to large expenditures such as school fees. Even if perceived 'savings' are included as available income, only 23% of households could meet their basic needs.

42.5% of workers have another source of income such as selling food, working as taxi drivers, or mechanics.

Those who did have another source of income averaged 31,714 XAF (£40) in income.

Debt is also used to cope with a lack of income. Research from 2012 showed that 60% of workers are borrowing money every month, whilst a further 22% are borrowing money every two months. Workers were uninformed about their options in finding cheap credit and savings schemes.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is needed by workers so that they can undertake their jobs safely. PPE can include items such as gloves, safety glasses, boots, respirators, overalls, and full body suits.

Some of the present hazards to workers on plantations include: cuts from machetes, stones, and banana leaves; contact with banana sap and debris getting into the eye; and having their hands in water all day. Exposure to chemicals causes serious health problems including respiratory disease and birth defects, which can be fatal.

In order for PPE to be effective it needs to be the right sort of protection for the hazard; of correct size, sufficient quality, and replaced regularly. Poor quality

or incorrectly sized PPE can lead to trips and falls, chemical burns, cuts, and skin conditions.

Personal protective equipment had been issued to 70% of workers over the past 12 months. However, this varied between type of work, and only 1% received PPE every month. Most workers (50%) received PPE once a year.

64% of workers said that their PPE was inappropriate for their work, for example field workers received boots but no eye protection. 65% did say, however, that their PPE was the correct size for them, but only 12% of workers said that their PPE lasted until it was replaced – 80% had repaired their PPE and 85% had bought their own at an average cost of 9,000 XAF a year. Poor quality PPE had caused health issues among 56% of workers.

Number of work related accidents/illnesses

Long working hours and the physical demands of banana work mean that work-related accidents and illness are common. Low wages and long hours also prevent workers from accessing necessary healthcare. Workers average five health issues a year, with just under half (46%) experiencing three or less a year.

Cuts were the most common injury, with over a third of workers experiencing this, mostly as a result of an equipment accident. 20 workers had experienced a break or sprain, generally due to a fall or environmental hazard, and 11% of workers (13) had suffered bruising. Two workers experienced chemical burns and 3% reported nose bleeds after chemical exposure.

Nearly half of workers (48%) had experienced skin problems, such as rashes, mostly due to chemical exposure. Just under a third (32%) had had an eye infection in the past 12 months, from environment hazards such as falling tree sap or from chemicals. Respiratory problems affected 21% of workers over the past 12 months, caused by physical overstraining and chemical exposure. Nail fungi affected 14% of workers and particularly affected those in the pack house due to hours spent with their hands in water polluted by chemicals.

Half of the workforce experienced daily body pain and 95% had experienced this in the past 12 months. Workers said these were due to overstraining and overworking, especially among harvesters. Fatigue



affected 47% of workers, with 94% of those affected stating this was caused by overworking. Stress and anxiety are a daily issue for 47.5% of workers and two-thirds said they have suffered from this in past 12 months. Most workers said this was due to overworking, but around a third said financial pressures and worry about feeding their family contributed to their stress.

Applying or other exposure to chemicals affected 64% of workers, and 93% of workers exposed to chemicals experienced a related health issue. The researchers even witnessed aerial spraying of fields whilst workers were present, in violation of health and safety law.

The only option available to workers to cope with illness and injury is to be absent from work. The average worker is absent a staggering 46 days a year due to injury or illness. Workers do not receive enough sick leave or medical care, which results in them having to take unpaid leave. On average, workers only receive 4 ½ days of sick pay, 23% receive no pay, and 51% receive two days or less sick pay. Body pain, stress,

and fatigue are not covered by sick pay despite being the most common work-related illnesses.

Working hours

In Cameroon there is a legal maximum working week of 48 hours, with some exception allowed. However, there is an absolute legal ban on working more than 60 hours a week. Plantations in Cameroon operate 20 hours a day, seven days a week.

Working hours vary between tasks and system of pay (hourly or piece-rate). On average, piece-rate workers work 60 hours a week in the 'low season' and 65 hours a week in the 'peak season'. The most frequent response from workers, however, was that they work 72 hours a week all year round. Workers paid by the hour work 52 hours a week in the 'low season' and 58 in the 'peak season' on average. In total, 77% of workers are working more than the legal 48 hour maximum.

67% of workers believed that overtime beyond 48 hours was compulsory. Piece-rate workers can receive production bonuses if they exceed their quota for the day. However, only 49% of those who had worked longer than 48 hours were always paid overtime and a further 25% were sometimes paid overtime – meaning 26% had not been paid for overtime. The reasons

workers did overtime was mostly (62%) to complete quotas, 11% said they were ordered to do so, and 27% of workers stated they had worked overtime to make extra income. Workers often complained that quota levels were set too high to complete in normal working hours.

Travel to and from work adds extra hours at the plantation waiting for transport, and means workers have to get up early to travel to work. Waiting times for return journeys are often up to two hours for a CDC truck. 13 CDC trucks were out of service at the time of the research, with overcrowding and poor road conditions posing a significant health and safety risk.

Working conditions in numbers

Banana Link is monitoring four 'key indicators' to see how standards of living change as a result of our work with FAWU. These cover income, working hours, PPE, and work-related accidents and illness.

Currently, just 8% of households receive enough income to cover their basic needs. This is far worse than we had estimated when the project began. 49% of workers are regularly working overtime without pay. Only 35% have appropriate protective equipment, and 70% suffer two or more work-related accidents or illnesses a year.

Conclusions

- 1) Workers need higher wages to meet basic needs and escape debt.
- 2) PPE needs improvement as it is inadequate for most workers and is not of sufficient quality, causing health problems for workers.
- 3) Working hours need to be reduced as they are currently extremely long and are affecting the health of workers.
- 4) The health of workers needs to be improved to reduce absenteeism.
- 5) Sick leave needs to be improved to allow adequate recovery time and to cover the most common work-related illnesses.
- 6) Chemicals should stop being used without the proper precautions.

'Securing Decent Work in tropical fruit production' is a three year project which aims to educate and empower workers and their unions to negotiate living wages and improved conditions; and build the capacity of partner unions, FAWU and GAWU, to engage in dialogue with national and international supply chain actors. As part of the project Banana Link worked with researchers from the University of East Anglia who conducted face-to-face interviews with workers to provide an evidence base for ongoing monitoring of the project.