

EU Trade Policy in Practice: Fair Trade in the Banana Sector?

Roundtable with study presentation

Brussels, 27 March 2019

Ecuador is one of the largest banana producers in the world, with the EU as one of the main export markets. Banana production is an intensive and year-round production. Although the severe production and working conditions, such as precarious wages, health problems caused by pesticides or the dismissal of trade union members are well-known, the import and sale of fair trade bananas in Europe is still rather low.

In 2016 Ecuador joined the trade agreement between the EU and Colombia/Peru. While the agreement's trade and sustainability chapter provides for compliance with international labour and environmental standards, structural violations of these standards and rights continue. On behalf of the Trade Union Association of Agricultural, Banana and Peasant Workers (ASTAC) Nadia Alvarado, a lawyer working with ASTAC, and Anahi Macaroff, researcher at the Instituto de Estudios Ecuatorianos wrote a study on these ongoing violations of workers' and environmental rights.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung which supported the study invited them to Brussels to present the findings to EU officials and in the Domestic Advisory Group Colombia/Ecuador/Peru at the

Economic and Social Committee. FES is official member of the DAG.

In addition, a roundtable at the FES EU Office brought together representatives of civil society organisations, trade unions and researchers to discuss how to improve the working conditions in the Ecuadorian banana sector and to what extent the FTA with the EU could contribute.



Anahi Macaroff and Nadia Alvarado illustrate the working conditions in the Ecuadorian banana sector

Macaroff and Alvarado highlighted several grievances and violations at the banana plantations of Ecuador which are mainly related to

issues of employment, the environment, workers' health as well as their freedom of association.

For instance, 97 % of workers said they cannot create trade unions in their plantations. Trade union representation in Ecuador is traditionally low, but even lower in the banana sector. Legislation from the 1930s reserves the right to form unions to companies employing 30 or more people. There are also no sectorial trade unions. Although associations can be formed legally, there are practical hurdles and workers fear the employer's pressure as those who try to unite in a trade union often lose their jobs or get blacklisted.

Despite the minimum wage being enshrined in the Ecuadorian constitution, many workers fall short of this. Being paid according to the hectares of the area they manage to handle, they usually do overtimes, working ten hours per day, six days a week. As they often have to be supported by their families to meet the daily targets, they earn less per hour than required. Many workers are not registered and half of them do not have access to social security systems. Many even have no proper contracts, or do not own a copy of it. Others got only verbal working contracts. Also cycle employment,

which is also allowed for the huge producers, is a problem for workers, leaving them in insecurity.

Among the pesticides to support the growth of the banana crops, about 26 substances are labelled as dangerous for human health. Eight of them are allowed in Ecuador, but banned in the EU, which nevertheless imports the products in the end. Aerial spraying often takes place without proper protection measures for the workers as well as the population living nearby, as waiting times are not always respected and the buffer zones have been reduced to 200 metres. ASTAC therefore demands an extension to 1000 metres and also sufficient equipment to protect workers when spraying on the ground.

These are some of the findings which were lively discussed with the audience. An official complaint about these violations of workers' rights has been filed with the Ecuadorian authorities as well. Macaroff and Alvarado emphasize that they do want Ecuador's banana sector to prosper. That includes the employed workers benefitting either.

by Leonard Wessel