

The Women Behind Beautiful Roses: Solving Occupational Health Hazards in Cut Flower Farming in Naivasha, Kenya

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Abstract

The cut flower industry is one of Kenya's major export earners, generating billions of shillings per year. According to the Kenya Flower Council, Kenya is the largest supplier of cut flowers to European Union markets, accounting for 25 percent of all flower exports into the EU. Flower production is done on 2,000 hectares - 20 sq. km. - of land, mostly in the Naivasha area in the Rift Valley Province. Lake Naivasha is the only fresh water ecosystem in the eastern Rift Valley with area between 114 and 991 square kilometres, depending on the rainfall. Approximately 30 large flower farms, mainly producing cut flowers for the European markets, are situated around the lake. The horticultural industry as a whole - of which the flower farms are a part - is the second largest foreign exchange earner in Kenya, above coffee and tourism. But roses come with thorns, too. Its culture, use, health and economic implications have become issues of social and academic inquiry. Growing concerns have been expressed not only about the health hazards involved in flower production but also about the environmental unsustainability of the flowers.

Today, the flower industry poses a particularly difficult dilemma for development since its production has generated a wide range of employment, income, foreign exchange and other cash contributing effects, while the damage to the ecology and food resources in general seems to outweigh the benefits. These complexities challenge researchers and policy makers to address the dynamics of agricultural intensification and local scale land-use systems and their long terms implications. As these roses' colorful blooms radiate romance around the world, large growers here have been accused of misusing a toxic mixture of pesticides, fungicides and fumigants to grow and export unblemished pest-free flowers. These problems have mainly affected women who are normally employed as unskilled workers in the greenhouses.

In fact, women constitute the majority of workers in this flower horticulture; men are often in permanent employment, whereas women tend to work in temporary and insecure jobs. The gendered needs and rights of employees in the sector will be examined, as identified by employees in each country, paying particular attention to vulnerable groups such as temporary women workers. The extent, to which these gendered needs and rights could be addressed through both worker and wider stakeholder participation, will be assessed. The findings will inform an analysis of how the evolving process of code development, monitoring and verification can be made more gender-sensitive through participatory processes.

Background: Thorny Issues of Sustainability

Since the attainment of independence, countries in Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa in particular have experienced persistent and severe economic and environmental problems, as well as numerous social disorders. Poverty is endemic and has perpetuated under-development and mismanagement of resources.(UNEP, 1997) Various regional meetings and consultations of African experts and leaders in government have consistently identified land degradation, desertification, deforestation and pollution problems as key causes of widespread poverty in the region.(UNEP, 1996).

The crisis affecting Africa has its profound roots in the integration of African economies into the world capitalist system.¹ The agricultural sectors and the rural areas are most often the ones most affected because of this integration. The case of agriculture, which, in most countries, is in crisis situation because it is essentially oriented towards the world market and not towards the feeding of the local people, shows that it is for the underdeveloped countries, and particularly for Africa, to seek solutions to their problems in the framework of a system whose modes of operation and rules of the game operate in such a way that it is always the poorest and economically weakest that suffer the most serious consequences of the crisis.(Gakou, 1997).

Capitalist production is based on carrying out cyclical processes in the shortest possible time to get a return on capital invested. Thus, it must impose a rhythm and framework on natural processes that is foreign to them and the spread of commodity production cannot respect pre-existing modes of social organization. As a result, the exploitation of natural resources impacts negatively on the environment.²

Recent times have seen a rise of what can be called the sustainable development movement in terms of a heightened concern with the state and future of the environment and the extensive politicization and institutionalization of environmental questions on a

¹ See also James O'Connor, "The Second Contradiction of Capitalism", in Natural Causes (New York, 1998), pp. 158-177.

² Paul Burkett makes the significant point that 'insofar as value encapsulates capitalism's fundamental antagonism with nature, then any environmental policies under which value remains the "active factor" in human production are unlikely to seriously alleviate ecological crises.' See Paul Burkett, Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective, (New York, 1999), p. 81. Burkett's book is a well argued corrective to views that have wrongly pilloried Marx for being a promethean anti-ecologist

global scale. The result of this has been innumerable initiatives and efforts at many levels, which include the internationalization of knowledge, practices, strategies, and institutions to understand and predict environmental trends better and to arrest environmental decline and degradation. As part of these, a series of strategies, approaches, and techniques is being developed to plan, organize, and manage the environment. Increasingly a body of knowledge and expertise is growing around these efforts and is beginning to constitute what is formally defined as orthodox environmental management. (Tade Akin Aina, 1999). But how orthodox is this?

All the above crises, have in one way or the other affected Naivasha Division. Forms of land degradation, deforestation, famine, poverty and decline in food production have been a subject of journalistic coverage in the district in the last decade or so, unfortunately no research has yet been carried out to ascertain these claims. This work therefore, is intended to *inter alia* assess the contribution of Cut flower farming in these problems.

The Area of Study: The Rift Valley and Big Money?

Naivasha has a farm area of 970 km². Naivasha division is the only area growing flowers on 31 farms and this employs the highest number of people especially during the harvesting time. The Division has 365.6km² under flower production with 2,500 seasonal employees. (Nakuru District Development Plan, 200-2005). Kenya's cut flower industry had its humble beginnings soon after the end of the Second World War. Exports did not begin to take off, quite literally as it happens, until the late sixties, when wide-bodied jets started to bring large numbers of tourists to Kenya and service the fresh produce industry. The flower industry's link with fresh produce goes deeper than the mere sharing of transport. It grew largely from expertise, infrastructure and investment provided by the burgeoning vegetable industry. Flower production is now largely concentrated around Lake Naivasha, to the north-west of Nairobi. Today Kenya has the fastest growing flower industry in the world. Expanding at a rate of 200 hectares a year according to Trade and Industry Minister, Dr Mukhisa Kituyi, the sector is the third largest foreign-exchange earner in the country after tourism and tea. The cut flower industry is one of Kenya's major export earners, generating billions of shillings per year. According to the Kenya Flower Council, Kenya is the largest supplier of cut flowers to

European Union markets, accounting for 25 percent of all flower exports into the EU. Flower production is done on 2,000 hectares - 20 sq. km. - of land, mostly in the Naivasha area in the Rift Valley Province.(see figure below). The sector employs about 500,000 people Yet the it is threatened by environmental mismanagement.

Production of fruits, vegetables and cut flowers for exports (volume in metric tonnes)

	1998	1997	1996	1995	1994	1993	1992
Fruit	11,352.00	17,455.00	16,869.40	13,865.00	13,079.00	11,697.40	11,232.90
Vegetables	36,800.00	30,882.00	32,742.00	32,126.30	26,978.00	26,785.70	26,323.60
Cut flowers	30,221.00	35,853.00	35,212.30	29,373.50	25,121.10	23,635.90	19,806.60
Total	78,373.00	84,190.00	84,823.70	75,364.80	65,178.10	62,119.00	57,363.10

Production of fruits, vegetables and cut flowers for exports (value in Kshs.m)

	1998	1997	1996	1995	1994	1993	1992
Fruit	805.00	804.99	769.52	617.34	536.60	489.40	358.98
Vegetables	4067.00	3027.69	2577.11	2204.83	1797.45	1700.30	909.7
Cut flowers	4856.93	4900.94	4366.32	3642.32	2637.18	2482.80	1247.81
Total	9,728.68	8,733.60	7,701.95	6,464.49	4,971.23	4,672.50	2,516.49

Source: Fresh Produce Exporters Association (FPEAK)

The Problem: Poverty Trap and Challenge of Environmental Safety

Although Kenya has attracted some foreign dollars through these export-based flower and tea industries, a majority of Kenyans remain mired in poverty (Lehmann, 2004). It is quite true that most people don't eat flowers. But they are an important source of food security because of the income they bring to thousands of people -- most of them women. But why do they still remain poor? Demand for water from flower growers is compounded by another problem facing much of Kenya—deforestation and environmental pollution. For many years there were no substantial efforts to enforce codes of environmental protection, however, and ironically with close trading links with

European buyers, the sensitivity of Kenya's natural environment, the strength of the Kenyan conservation movement and the lack of comprehensive and enforceable national legislation have meant that Kenya has one of the most codified flower industry in the world. Curiously, there exist a number of to regulated the quality and beauty of the flowers but those governing human safety seems to just occupy the secondary position within the industry. Kenya as a country does not in fact have homegrown codes but most of them are dictated from the flower buyers in Europe. For example codes have originated from a Europe since the : more concerned with quality management, UK supermarkets are now adding social and environmental requirements to their supplier codes of practice. Most largegrowers can now expect up to two monitoring visits a year from each of their majorUK retail buyers.

By creating their own internationally recognised social and environmental standards, Kenyan growers have largely managed to resist pressure to comply with European flower industry codes of practice (most notably the Dutch MPS code). Currently there are two "home-grown" code options for Kenyan flower growers. The more rigorous code has been developed by the Kenya Flower Council (KFC) and is the subject of this study. The alternative is offered by the Fresh Produce Exporters' Association of Kenya (FPEAK), which, as the name suggests, caters for vegetable as well as flower production. In the near future, the horticulture industry will start to implement a new harmonised national code of practice. Its supporters hope that they can persuade the Kenyan government to licence horticultural exports on the basis of code compliance. Only this way, they claim, can Kenya build a strong reputation for consistently high quality horticultural exports. The KFC code is likely to survive the introduction of the national code because it offers flower growers higher standards that specifically relate to flower production.

Codes of practice also exist to conserve the natural environment of specific areas. Two of the best known are administered by the Lake Naivasha Growers Group and the Lake Naivasha Riparian Association, which aim to ensure that the lake and its surrounding natural environment are conserved.

Behind the beautiful Roses: Women and Occupational Health Issues

Security of employment was a major concern for many women workers, but especially non-permanent workers. While many employers in the study have begun to issue more permanent contracts, and shift seasonal and casual workers to permanent employment, thirty-three percent of the sample workforce remains in insecure jobs. Overtime is often compulsory and frequently exceeds the maximum hours set out in codes and national law. Overtime payments also vary with many workers feeling that they are not properly compensated. The likelihood of performing overtime is also linked to the employment status of workers. For example, permanent workers, who are paid monthly, are more likely to work overtime than casual workers, who are paid daily. For women, regular overtime makes it difficult to balance productive and reproductive roles. Arranging childcare when overtime is required at short notice is particularly problematic. Personal safety can also be an issue if transport is not provided after dark. Wages in the industry are typically better than the government minimum wage and those that could be obtained through viable alternatives in the region. However, they are nevertheless low. While low wages impact on both men and women, women with sole responsibility for children are particularly affected as they cannot afford to pay someone to look after their children while they are at work. At the same time There are generally few opportunities for upward career progression, which tends to diminish worker motivation. Among women, this partly relates to the gendered allocation of jobs, rooted in socio-cultural perceptions and norms, which provides few prospects for women to move into management positions. Promotion is also linked to corruption, sexual favours/demands, tribalism, and nepotism. There have been substantial improvements in the health and safety practices of companies. However, chemical exposure remains an important concern among workers.

The main issues raised were a lack of provision of protective clothing for workers handling chemicals, the non observance of re-entry periods, and the exposure of pregnant women to chemicals. In some cases, the perception of risk among workers exceeds actual risk, suggesting that companies may not be providing sufficient training and/or accurate information to workers on where the dangers of chemical exposure lie. On the other hand,

several companies mentioned the difficulties of ensuring that workers abide with health and safety regulations, especially the wearing of protective clothing. Again, lack of access to adequate maternity leave creates anxiety about income security and can lead women to seek abortions and/or hide their pregnancies, both of which can carry long-term health implications. Adequate childcare was widely recommended as a significant benefit. Currently there is only one farm that has childcare facilities available, although other companies understand that women face difficulties with childcare, and some are planning to establish day care facilities in the future.

Although the introduction of codes of conduct may be contributing to improved labour conditions, most workers are unaware of their employment rights and of national legislation that is relevant to them. They are also unaware of codes despite the fact that this research was conducted on farms that had a comparatively long history with codes. Poor communication with workers about codes and their importance reflects the problem of communication that exists between management and workers in the industry. This may change as companies recognise the importance of worker involvement to achieve code compliance. Indeed, flowers grown in Kenya for the European market come at a very high price: the systematic sexual harassment of poor women, who comprise the majority of workers in the industry although the Federation of Women Lawyers in Kenya, (FIDA-Kenya) runs clinics that educate women about their legal rights. In a recent research:

sixty-three women interviewed complained and talked about basic human rights abuses they had experienced involving sexual harassment and violence. Almost “Supervisors and managers regularly make sexual advances on these women, forcing them to engage in sexual activities or take nude photos. They threaten that they will fire them if they refuse.” (Nyong'o,).

Nyong'o researched the flower-growing industry and discovered that it is one of Kenya's leading sources of foreign revenue, employing some 50,000 workers in a country with devastatingly high rates of unemployment. About 75 percent of the workers are women, many of them young single mothers who work for the equivalent of less than one dollar a day. The women are unable to meet basic housing and transportation costs and are victimized by the advances of managers who promise overtime or transfer to better departments in exchange for sexual favors. Nyong'o learned that many of these women live in company housing projects, where apartment managers also frequently offer better housing in return for sex.

Nyong'o discovered that the problem, while not well documented, appears to be widespread. She also learned that efforts to remedy the situation are scant and inadequate, failing to address the complex cultural, political, and economic factors that are at play, in addition to the legal issues. And as Nyon'go discovered and with my own experience, these companies do not allow women workers to talk to outsiders, that anyone talking to a journalist or human rights organization risks being fired." As a woman I found it extremely difficult to get women to meet with me. The women are young, single, poor, and easily exploited. And there's a power discrepancy. All the general workers are women and all the managers are men (Sandra Dias, 2004). In addition, Naivasha lacks any women's rights organizations. A woman who is willing to lodge a complaint would have to travel to the capital city of Nairobi, losing a day's pay in the process.

Conclusions

Sustainable development is a notion, a movement and an approach which has developed into a global wave of concerns, study, political mobilization, and organization around the twin issues of environmental protection and economic development. The approach embodies the notion and ideal of a development process that is equitable and socially responsive, recognizing the extensive nature of poverty, deprivation, and inequality between and communities. It also seriously advocates that the world be seen as one ecosystem and that the economic development process should include ecological and environmental issues as an essential component.

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