

WORLD BANANA FORUM

Rome 7 and 8th December 2009

CHANGE DEPENDS ON US

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Since I attended the last International Banana Conference (in 2005, I believe) things have not got any better either for workers or for the environment; quite the contrary. I recall that the major concerns expressed at that time were: the high level of protection afforded to EU banana production, the existence of import quotas that gave no scope for growth of developing country exports, very bad social and working conditions for plantation workers, and a range of environmental issues that were beginning to be voiced more and more strongly.

Since then, things have not got better for anybody, even though there are signs that the EU is opening its market more because of rulings at the WTO. There are no longer any quotas, only tariffs that are being reduced for Latin American countries whilst ACP bananas enter the EU duty-free.

Once again we are playing the multinationals' game: things have indeed changed for them and they, rather than the people of the traditional banana producing countries, are developing by playing off people on either side of the Atlantic against each other. Now they are shifting production to the African coast, leaving behind, in many cases, social and environmental disaster areas in the traditional Latin American banana exporting countries like Panama that cannot compete with ACP bananas. In short, the majority of us lose out, the environment included, so that a few increase their profit margins and the rest of us keep playing the game.

To get stuck in a debate over social dumping for some and over economic dumping for others is to fall into the trap set for us and get lost in sterile debates that lead nowhere. It seems logical that we, the European producers, should request protection from the EU in the face of unfair competition from social dumping by Latin American and African producers. Meanwhile, without realising it, we are all – some more than others – involved in environmental dumping, which is the most serious problem of all because

the planet will take a long time to recover from the consequences of the system in which we are operating today.

For something to be *economically* competitive, it has, in reality, to be *ecologically* sustainable, or at least as far as possible. This statement leads me to ask everybody: 'how many cows do we have for each hectare of banana planted?'; 'how many hectares of fruit and vegetables do we have for each hectare of bananas?'; 'how many renewable energy production plants per hectare of bananas?'

We are submerged in a system in which it is the same who lose out all the time: rural people who devote themselves to a monoculture, buying inputs (chemical fertilisers, agrochemicals, fuel, cardboard etc to meet the crop's requirements) and at the same time buying vegetables and fruit, milk, cheese and meat etc that we need to feed ourselves.

The environment loses out, because the growers pollute when they produce and pollute when they transport, whilst we all pollute as we consume; and it is the same multinationals who always win out; sometimes it is even the same companies – with different brands – that manufacture and distribute inputs as distribute bananas.

Following this reflection - and assuming that governments are mainly made up of people who effectively give in to the strong corporate lobbies whose only interest is to make as much money as fast as possible – only one solution occurs to me: to change the system from the bottom up.

Rural people who are also consumers and urban consumers who form the majority of the world's population (particularly the latter) should know that a kilo of bananas has a real cost that must include living wages and proper environmental management, otherwise they are contributing to enslavement, social inequalities, mistreatment of women and children, illiteracy, mass migration and the destruction of the planet.