



Food and Agriculture  
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World Banana Forum (WBF)

Working together for sustainable banana production and trade

Task Force on Gender Equity (GE-TF)

## WEBINAR

### ‘Addressing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women workers in the banana industry’

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Report of the WBF Task Force on Gender Equity (GE-TF)

Thursday, 3 December 2020

#### 1. Welcome by the WBF Secretariat


On behalf of the World Banana Forum (WBF) and its Task Force on Gender Equity (GE-TF), hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) through the WBF Secretariat, **Ms Camila Reinhardt Hurtado, FAO**, welcomed participants to the fourth and final of a series of thematic webinars on priority issues for women workers in the banana industry.

The WBF is a multi-stakeholder platform that connects key actors along global banana supply chains to enable collaboration and consensus on best practices, in efforts to improve the sustainability of the banana industry. It counts on the participation of diverse stakeholders, from producers, exporters, importers and trade unions, to retailers, civil society organizations and governments.

Among its different working groups and task forces is its GE-TF, which focuses on discussing and addressing priority issues for women in the banana industry, namely: women’s employment opportunities, women’s empowerment, health and safety, sexual harassment and gender-based violence and the gender pay gap.

The 3 December webinar was the fourth and final webinar of this series organized by the GE-TF in the second half of 2020. These webinars, which have been coordinated in collaboration with Banana Link, a WBF member, have enabled important discussions on the GE-TF’s priority issues.

This webinar focused on recent and ongoing experiences and initiatives to address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women and men agricultural workers, as well as the broader community. The initiatives discussed on



3 December 2020 went beyond those implemented in the banana industry to include other agricultural sectors, with the aim of highlighting key learnings and good practices that could also be applied to the banana industry.

## 2. Recap of the GE-TF 2020 webinar series

The first webinar focused on the healthy and safe employment of women workers in the banana industry. In this webinar, panellists:

- ♀ presented the main health and safety issues faced by women workers in the banana industry, as well as a set of health and safety guidelines developed for women workers in Ghana under the WBF's Banana Occupational Health and Safety Initiative;
- ♀ shared experiences in the field related to the use of the guidelines and the delivery of trainings; and
- ♀ discussed health and safety issues for women workers in Latin America and next steps for the adaptation of the health and safety guidelines for women workers to the Latin American context.

The second webinar focused on the issue of sexual harassment (SH) and gender-based violence (GBV) in the banana industry, with presentations on:

- ♀ the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention and Recommendation adopted in 2019;
- ♀ SH and GBV issues, and efforts to address these, at plantation level; and
- ♀ a retailer's gender strategy and initiatives to address SH and discrimination within its supply chains.

The third webinar focused on understanding the gender pay gap in the banana industry. It counted on important contributions from the International Labour Organization (ILO), Fairtrade International, the Anker Research Network and COLSIBA, whom together presented key tools and methodologies for calculating gender pay gaps (GPG), and further discussed the importance of collective bargaining for addressing these concerns at industry and plantation level.

## 3. Introduction by the chairperson

**Ms Jennie Coleman**, president of **Equifruit**, a Canada-based Fairtrade-certified banana importing company, chaired the 3 December webinar. Ms Coleman, together with other members of the Equifruit team, are active members of the WBF and its GE-TF.

Ms Coleman noted that previous sessions of the webinar series were informative, inspiring and empowering, and are helping to challenge perceptions of women in the industry. The webinars have been useful in allowing participants who are active in the banana industry to gain an even broader perspective on the issues discussed.

As the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in 2020, so did some major health-related, social and economic repercussions. Agricultural supply chain workers, immediately deemed essential workers, have been producing throughout the pandemic. This has resulted in new occupational health and safety (OHS) risks, bringing workers' conditions into sharper focus. Even prior to COVID-19, the WBF was already working on these issues.

In response to the unfolding international pandemic emergency, one of the topics discussed by the GE-TF was a review of the impact of COVID-19 on women workers, the theme of this final webinar of 2020. Focus was placed on work being done to support workers in global agricultural supply chains with challenges they faced aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic and to identify and share good practices.

## 4. Summary of panel discussions

### 4.1 Dealing with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on women workers and the wider community in banana producing regions of Ecuador

*By Bertha Shinin and Carmen Banegas, SINUTRABE*

**Ms Bertha Shinin**, SINUTRABE, is currently women's officer at SINUTRABE, the National Union of Ecuadorian Banana Workers, where, together with **Ms Carmen Banegas**, she coordinates activities related to women banana workers. **Ms Banegas** has many years of experience in Ecuador's banana sector and is currently a volunteer with SINUTRABE.

**Ms Shinin** expressed enthusiasm to learn and share from different countries. She explained that SINUTRABE has been mainly working in two areas: 1) Training workshops for men and women workers on COVID-19 and other issues and 2) Humanitarian aid for workers in the industry.

In terms of training workshops, a priority topic was biosafety. Many workers have no safety or protection equipment. If they want to use equipment, they have to buy it themselves, and **Ms Shinin** noted that, currently, there are obstacles to workers organizing themselves.

As a result of COVID-19 restrictions, domestic violence is on the rise which prompted SINUTRABE to carry out workshops on this issue. A result of confinement, or perhaps an expression of frustration, this violence, in her view, is a response of powerlessness in part due to the inability to support one's family.

There were also new workshops on labour rights, especially in light of changes in laws that impact women workers, namely more working hours with less pay and salaries that do not meet family needs. In addition, **Ms Shinin** stated, migrant workers from Venezuela and Peru tend to accept lower wages, thereby replacing Ecuadorian workers with more experience. These scenarios unfolding during the pandemic exacerbate existing difficulties for workers in the industry.

**Ms Banegas** explained the humanitarian aid work SINUTRABE has carried out in recent months. In March many cases of COVID-19 began to be registered in Ecuador. Members of SINUTRABE directed 50 percent of their support to women headed households, 25 percent to the community's elderly, and 25 percent to those who simply don't earn enough to support their livelihoods. They also helped with gloves and disinfectant.


According to **Ms Banegas** there are critical areas in need of humanitarian aid. For example, she claimed, an employee can be dismissed with no remuneration, regardless of how long they have been working. Often he or she is unable to find work elsewhere due to the fact that they are considered old. She noted that during the pandemic, workers continued working, despite little or no health security or occupational security.

### 4.2 Initiatives developed to support workers and small farmers in Latin America and the Caribbean with the impacts of the pandemic

*By Marike de Peña, Latin American and Caribbean Network of Fair Trade Small Producers and Workers (CLAC)*

**Ms Marike de Peña**, CLAC, is chair of the banana network at CLAC, representing fair trade banana organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean. She is also chair of the Dominican network of Fairtrade farmers and workers.

**Ms de Peña** explained that CLAC carried out a survey from April to October 2020 to better understand the different challenges posed by COVID-19 on farmers and workers and the collective investments organizations made to deal with the pandemic. The survey covered banana and other products.



Among the many challenges that surfaced, the most key was how best to support farmers and workers on the ground, in both big plantations, and on small farms. Twenty-five percent of CLAC funds have been directed towards biosafety, followed by funds dedicated to food for farmers, workers and vulnerable families in rural communities.

In terms of investments in training, COVID-19 took everyone by surprise, so training had to be organized quickly to face the pandemic. Producers, workers and their families received information and training on how to avoid contracting COVID-19, including hygiene protocols. Public hospitals and other health centres also received support from farmers and workers, amongst others to increase the availability of COVID tests and through the donation of face masks and other protection material.

**Ms de Peña** provided examples of good practices that can be identified in relevant banana producing countries, noting that the banana industry is resilient and invests in solutions to its problems. Safety protocols have been put in place, protection equipment facilitated and workers have been trained in the workplace to ensure their health and ultimately continue producing.

Other examples of good practices include a program on preventive health developed in the Dominican Republic that could be replicated in other countries. It is designed for farmers, workers and communities that lack access to healthcare. Preventive healthcare is key in this country, since many workers, their families and smallholders in the banana packing industry do not always have access to health centres. This program is developed along the border with Haiti and operates in banana communities, a mobile team visits the farms and communities to assist those in need. The program counts on community health promoters that visit the houses of banana workers and producers and assist families with their health challenges. Through the program medicines for COVID-19 patients or other illnesses are distributed as well as care for when there is contagion or a positive case of the virus.

On domestic violence, already discussed in the webinar, and its increase with the pandemic, the Fairtrade Premium support organizations such as the Casa Comunitaria – a community service for victims of abuse. It also provides counselling for problems, such as a domestic violence telephone hotline for women who are unable to leave their homes. Ms de Peña added that the Casa Comunitaria reports a 30 percent increase in domestic violence cases since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Food security was cited as a challenge for all families who suffer poverty, particularly during COVID-19, when there is less access to food and income has been reduced in most families. One mitigation method is diversification, in which small producers, often at the household level, also produce honey, coconuts, or other fruits.

The banana industries in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru have invested significantly in bringing food to the houses of producers and workers. For example, in some cases, plantations set aside a certain amount of food for workers and their families.


### **4.3 Oxfam project for tackling sexual harassment and gender-based violence on Malawi's tea plantations**

*By Juliet Suliwa, Malawi Tea 2020 Revitalisation Programme*

**Ms Juliet Suliwa**, Malawi Tea 2020 Revitalisation Programme, project coordinator, has nearly twenty years of experience working with governments and a range of stakeholders in development work, as well as in the tea growing sector, applying her knowledge of labour rights and gender inclusiveness.

**Ms Suliwa's** recent work with Oxfam has centred on sexual harassment and gender-based violence (GBV) on Malawi's tea estates during the COVID-19 pandemic. Oxfam has supported the Plantation and Agriculture Workers Union (PAWU) from 2015-2020 with capacity building.

This work focused on capacity building on women's rights through gender training for tea estate workers, both men and women. The trainings are aimed at union leadership, who work hand in hand with tea estate workers and therefore must be part of sustainable change.



Leadership training for the leadership of PAWU, which is 50 percent women and 50 percent men, focused on women's leadership. Other aspects involve anti sexual harassment trainings for estate workers that include men, and the provision of information education and communication (IEC) materials on sexual harassment. For example, posters that depict sexual harassment visually through cartoons or other images are utilized, since they reach those workers who may be illiterate.

Women labour rights training has been carried out to help women negotiate wages and also for them to be able to voice out concerns and abuse at the tea estates. This includes: institutional strengthening of women's committees in all estates; the dissemination of information on referral pathways on GBV cases; and virtual training during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these initiatives, women's leadership in the workplace is still 7 percent, which is well below the target of 30 percent.

**Ms Suliwa** cited some impacts that have resulted from capacity building on gender related issues including:

- ♀ introduction of International Women's Day Annual Celebrations;
- ♀ launching of the Tea Sector Gender Policy, launched in 2017;
- ♀ introduction of an Annual Gender Learning and Sustainability Symposium;
- ♀ reduction in workplace gender-based violence;
- ♀ women finding the voice to demand their rights at work;
- ♀ women speaking out anytime they have been abused in any way;
- ♀ women taking up leadership positions (both at the union and work - 50 percent of women are leaders in various PAWU committees); and
- ♀ reduction of sexual harassment cases.

She continued to cite specific ways in which sexual harassment and GBV were tackled during the COVID-19 pandemic period, through:

- ♀ sensitization on complaints and feedback mechanism as a safeguarding strategy;
- ♀ access to essential services such as shelters and toilets in the tea fields;
- ♀ public awareness against GBV through mobile vans; and
- ♀ provision of hygiene and WASH materials for hand washing and cleaning surfaces.

**Ms Suliwa** shared some general challenges faced during the COVID-19 pandemic, namely:


- ♀ restrictions put by government to fight the spread of COVID-19, e.g. when schools were closed women could no longer attend adult literacy schools;
- ♀ few women trainings and meetings; and
- ♀ virtual trainings proved to be impossible due to connectivity problems in most rural areas as well as a lack of appropriate devices to enable women to attend training.

Overall there has been encouraging news from Malawi with its low COVID-19 infection numbers and no reported cases on tea estates. Oxfam, IDH and Rainforest Alliance have provided great support in the context of the pandemic, and were also effective in monitoring sexual harassment and GBV issues, utilizing techniques such as families being trained together on sexual harassment.

#### **4.4 Company level initiatives to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on agricultural workers in Ghana's fresh fruit industry**

*By Simon Derrick, Blue Skies*

**Mr Simon Derrick** represents Blue Skies, a fresh cut fruit company that grows and produces mango, coconut, papaya, and pineapple for mainly European retailers, but also for local markets. Blue Skies has factories in Benin,



Brazil, Egypt, Ghana, Côte D'Ivoire, Senegal, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. It was established more than 20 years ago, on a foundation of respect for its community and the environment.

**Mr Derrick**, joined online by his colleague **Mr Alistair Djimatey** of Blue Skies Ghana, explained that the company's philosophy is "adding value at source"; that is, finishing the product in the country where the fruit grows. In fruit-producing countries, traditionally only raw materials are extracted. Blue Skies' method allows it to have a closer link between the retailer, supplier and farmer, and ultimately employ more people. Moreover, this method allows for a transfer of skills and technology to countries where the fruit is grown. In addition, four out of eight of their operations are run by women.

By adding value at source, around 75 percent of the value remains in the country of origin, compared to as little as 15 percent if it is made elsewhere.

Blue Skies' business is founded on three core beliefs that make up its Joint Effort Enterprise:

- ♀ Diversity – breaking down the barriers of division and embracing the qualities that make each person different. This strengthens their experience, agility and resilience.
- ♀ Culture of respect – believing that care for their people breeds care for their fruit, which in turn fosters a natural respect for the environment and the communities where they exist.
- ♀ Profit – aiming to benefit all their stakeholders without negatively impacting the communities and the environment upon which they depend. Keeping the business going and being able to invest in the future.

The Blue Skies Foundation aims to support communities and make a meaningful and sustainable difference. Foundation partners are Albert Heijn, Waitrose – the British supermarkets brand – and Blue Skies. Since it started in 2009, the foundation has carried out:

- ♀ 39 water and sanitation projects
- ♀ 10 health and wellbeing projects
- ♀ 42 education projects
- ♀ 8 vocational training projects
- ♀ 1 green energy project

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Blue Skies, like other businesses, went into crisis mode. Production, distribution, sales and fruit sourcing were all severely affected and thrown into jeopardy. In response, Blue Skies:


- ♀ overhauled its logistics to ensure its products could get to its customers, despite huge disruptions;
- ♀ reorganized its factories to scale up production where needed and ensure the safety of staff;
- ♀ moved production to ensure that factories that were forced to close due to border restrictions could shift production to other sites; and
- ♀ remade forecasts and fruit planning.

As a result of these actions, the company managed to maintain 98 percent service level throughout the pandemic; implement new OHS measures at its factories; sew face masks for staff; and provide extensive training on how to protect against COVID-19. Nevertheless, Blue Skies had to make tough decisions including requesting temporary salary reductions and releasing some temporary staff.

In the end, people were able to protect themselves from COVID-19 and there were no outbreaks in the factory in Ghana.

Blue Skies also sought assistance from the Waitrose and Partners Foundation COVID-19 support fund. This support helped to provide a hardship fund with the aim of supporting people on the lowest incomes and protecting as many jobs as possible. The assistance from the Waitrose and Partners Foundation also helped to make hygiene kits available to the local communities and develop communications materials to ensure health and safety advice reached remote areas.





In the meantime, Blue Skies continued with its 2020 Foundation projects as planned. These included the renovation of a facility in Ghana to provide support for victims of domestic violence and the construction of accommodation for nurses. In addition, with the support of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ghana Education Service, Blue Skies continued with a School Farm Competition aimed at raising the profile of agriculture among young people and teaching them about farming. Students continued to learn even while schools were shut due to the pandemic.

Looking to 2021, Blue Skies has some bold plans as it seeks to expand, diversify and address some of the big sustainability challenges facing the world, including emissions, plastics and waste. It also plans to implement phase two of the Waitrose and Partners COVID-19 Response Fund by providing financial support to small scale growers, facilitating vocational training and starting an 'agritech lab' to trial new technologies that can support farmers.

## 5. Discussions and Q&A

**Ms Manzanillas** shared experiences of **Asoguabo**, Ecuador's Association of Small Banana Producers El Guabo, providing the perspective of a small producer organization in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like everyone, **Asoguabo** was unprepared for the pandemic. The first thing they did was to implement biosafety measures, and provide all workers with masks and disinfectant gels.

In addition, women have often borne the brunt of the new pandemic environment both at work and in the home. **Ms Manzanillas** emphasized that women in the banana industry work, care for children, and are active in committees. Time needed to dedicate to children has increased as a result of virtual learning. At the same time, many men and women have lost their jobs, and have no means to pay for livelihoods, which has given rise to an increase in domestic violence. **Asoguabo** has responded to this situation in many ways. To name one example, it has encouraged diversity in production, including plantain, cassava, and other crops so workers and their families in the countryside are less dependent on banana.

**Ms Selfa Sandoval, COLSIBA**, congratulated all the panellists. She commented on the success of the GE-TF webinar series and on the efforts made by everyone who participated: companies, employers, workers, small producers, as well as the organizers of the webinar. She emphasized that these discussions must continue since COVID-19 is still present.

**Mr Emerson Aguirre**, president of **AUGURA**, commented that it is important for the association to participate in WBF events. He highlighted the responsibility taken by the Colombian banana industry for taking part in a process of social dialogue, together with the trade union SINTRAINAGRO. AUGURA's aim is to support the banana industry, to ensure its continuity, the food security of many communities, as well as the sustainable development of producer communities. He stated that they have been recognized by ILO as an example at the global level, in navigating the pandemic, with women's support at the forefront of these efforts.

**Ms Adela Torres Valoy, SINTRAINAGRO/COLSIBA**, added her voice to the issues presented related to COVID-19 stating that the sharing of experiences has been a real learning experience for everyone. For SINTRAINAGRO, there was much work done in relation to COVID-19 in Colombia. While they were caught off guard at the start and worried about its spreading, currently the country has few infections. She reiterated the challenges that women face, working in the plantations only to return home and have to help with online learning—with all its new issues.

**Mr Jose Antonio Hidalgo, AEBE**, thanked the organizers of the series and stated that Ecuador is committed to the sustainability of the banana industry. While it has been a challenging year, the industry has been busy developing biosecurity measures, and so now it is a question of adapting those measures. He commented that all actors in the banana supply chain have made a commitment to sustainability by exporting safely and tending to the needs of workers. It is important to note the achievements of the industry overall, and of the progress achieved through dialogues like those in this webinar series.

## 5. Conclusion

This final webinar of the 2020 series provided an overview of efforts made by the banana industry and beyond, bringing together different voices and viewpoints of its stakeholders, and highlighting the importance of moving the industry forward despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2021 the GE-TF will continue to pursue the above-mentioned themes with the aim of making overall improvements to the banana industry to benefit all actors along the supply chain. The WBF Secretariat at FAO foresees another dynamic series of webinars next year.

Special thanks go out to Ms Coleman for chairing the session; to Holly Woodward-Davey and the rest of the Banana Link team for their support in coordinating these webinars; to the interpreters for the critical role in enabling the GE-TF to reach a broader audience; and to the colleagues at the WBF Secretariat.

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