

Fairtrade supports Kenyan flower workers – a response to the Guardian article of 5th March 2005

Felicity Lawrence ("Why I won't be giving my mother Fairtrade flowers", The Guardian, March 5) has raised a valid point that consumers expect large quantities of products like fruits, flowers and vegetables to be in our shops for special occasions like Mothers' Day, and this has direct consequences for workers involved in producing these. Since these products are perishable and cannot be stockpiled, then either overtime or the employment of casual labour is unavoidable; neither arrangement is ideal and both leave poor people vulnerable to exploitation. Securing workers rights, especially through effective trade union representation, and promoting development opportunities are needed to tackle both the exploitation, which is the symptom, and the poverty that is the underlying cause, of poor working conditions. Fairtrade standards do this and, specifically, provide clear limits on working hours that are verified by independent inspection.

While Fairtrade is best known for its priority work with small farmer organisations, our mission has always been to improve the position of all disadvantaged people in developing countries through trade. As a result, workers on tea estates and fruit farms have been involved in Fairtrade for over 10 years. When working with employed workers, Fairtrade requires the management of farms to meet all their responsibilities on working conditions and wage levels as a minimum point of entry, as we believe that consumers have a right to expect good ethical standards as a matter of course on everything they buy.

As Ms Lawrence notes, achieving that level of ethical standards for all the products that we buy is the primary role of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) and it is an indication of their success that many more farms in developing countries are now able to qualify for Fairtrade certification. The Fairtrade Foundation is a founding member of ETI and our role in promoting development outcomes through trade is complementary to their work of ensuring good ethical standards across all international supply chains. Fairtrade operates successfully to complement ethical trading work in sectors like tea, coffee, bananas and wine, collaborating where possible with other organisations that share our goals of eliminating poverty and exploitation.

The international Fairtrade movement has been involved in the flower industry since 1999, when the Max Havelaar Foundation which operates the Fairtrade label for Switzerland started to develop standards for roses. As with all products certified by the FAIRTRADE Mark, standards must be approved by FLO (Fairtrade Labelling Organisations International) and this was achieved in 2001. Fairtrade flowers have been sold in Switzerland for the past four years and the programme works with over 30 farms in six countries across Africa and South America, including more than a dozen in Kenya. However, before extending Fairtrade flowers to the British market we consulted extensively with other ETI members involved in the flower trade to ensure that the Fairtrade programme built on the work of our partners in ETI.

Fairtrade also goes further than ethical standards, by setting out an improvement process that requires additional investment by employers but also, uniquely, provides resources to empower workers directly through the Fairtrade premium that are controlled and managed by democratically elected workers' bodies. So while both the farms mentioned in the Guardian article have increased maternity leave provision well above the legal minimum for Kenya, and have full Collective Bargaining Agreements with the Kenyan Agricultural & Plantation Workers Union in place, the Fairtrade premium committees (known as "Joint Bodies") are able to fund additional projects for workers, their families and the wider community. With the premium from the first year's sales of Fairtrade roses, workers at Oserian have chosen to create and maintain a range of adult education facilities, repair a local primary school roof and upgrade clean water supplies off the farm.

At the Finlay's flower farm, near Kericho in Western Kenya (not Naivasha), workers are establishing a tree nursery to grow fruit for local markets that will provide affordable food to local people and create alternative employment opportunities. This is very important as many of the problems in Naivasha, such as poor housing, stem from the influx of people from other areas, especially Western Kenya, to seek work. Of the five farms that currently produce Fairtrade flowers for the UK market, only two (Oserian and Longonot) are in Naivasha – the others (Finlay's, Liki River and Eldama Ravine) are in areas that provide much-needed employment to people in their local communities.

Supporters of Fairtrade can be assured that flowers operate to the same level of standards and certification as all other products that carry the FAIRTRADE Mark, and that every purchase of a Fairtrade product is helping people in some of the poorest countries of the world work towards a better future.