

## Consumers International Pineapple Supply Chain Research Banana Link Summary April 2010

### Introduction

Banana Link has been commissioned by Consumers International to research conditions along European – specifically France, Belgium, Poland, Greece, Denmark, Spain, Italy, Portugal - pineapple supply chains using a case study of Costa Rica, who supplies 75% of the fresh pineapples sold on European supermarket shelves. The research will be used to inform a 20 minute documentary, produced by Guardian Films, which will be filmed in Costa Rica in June and launched across Europe in 8 languages in October 2010. A technical report will also be published to provide more in depth information, including testimonies and photos, to be distributed amongst Consumers International's partners and inform their future campaigns on supply chain issues. The report and documentary will be available for distribution to Banana Link's partners in October.

### Research summary

Data collected from the 8 European countries included in the study showed that Del Monte is the biggest supplier of fresh pineapples to European retailers, closely followed by Dole, Fyffes and various other small independent companies. The Costa Rican case study research therefore focused on plantations that sell to these companies. In Costa Rica, research was carried out in the South and Central Atlantic zones and the South Pacific zone. The documentary also plans to visit small producers in the Northern zone in June. Interviews and discussions with both unionised and non-unionised workers and members of the local community highlighted the following key issues:

- **Wages and hours**

Nearly all pineapple workers on Costa Rican plantations are paid piece rates. The system of piece rate payments both in the field and the packing plant are extremely complicated and vary depending on multiple factors, including each workers specific role, the area of land they are working on, the overall production of their work team, the level of difficulty of work etc. Subsequently very few workers actually understand their pay slips and find it very difficult to predict what their final wage will actually be. Most workers feel that they are being underpaid for their work either because the demands put on them are too hard or unachievable within typical work hours or because the company is actually 'fixing' their payslips and therefore not paying them for the correct amount of work they have done.

Most workers do receive a salary above the national minimum wage but they may have to work for up to 14 hours a day, 6 days a week to earn this salary. Following a brief study on the current living wage in Costa Rica, it appears that many pineapple workers earn around half of what they themselves deem to be a 'living wage'.

- **Working conditions**

The long hours mentioned above are a particular issue when we consider the conditions of work on the plantation. In the field, workers are exposed to extreme sun and also heavy rains with often no cover during breaks or lunch time. The work in both the field and the packing plant involves heavy and repetitive tasks that put a lot of strain on the body (i.e., constant bending over to plant seeds, weed and harvest the pineapples).

- **Health impacts**

Due to the physical intensity of the work on pineapple plantations many workers suffer back problems and also issues with joints and muscles. Many workers also reported accidents in the workplace ranging from being bitten by poisonous snakes when working in the field at night, damage to eyes from the long spiky pineapple leaves to being left immobile after accidents involving heavy machinery such as tractors and trailers. Working with high levels of agrochemicals also led to reports of problems of skin and eye irritation and damage, respiratory and bronchial disorders, problems associated with the nervous system, birth defects (in women workers and the partners of male workers), male sterility and psychological issues such as anxiety and depression.

Protection is provided on most plantations (including gloves, aprons and masks) but some workers reported that the costs of protective clothing are deducted automatically from their payslip if they are 'overusing' the equipment.

- **Migrant and flexible workers**

Approximately 70% of workers in the Costa Rican pineapple industry are Nicaraguan migrants who have left their country due to the relatively lower wages and fewer job opportunities. These migrant workers are the secret

to Costa Rica's pineapple success, providing a cheaper and more flexible workforce. Some migrant workers only stay for short periods whilst others eventually move their families to Costa Rica. Many have no official papers or visas which leaves them particularly vulnerable to the power of their employers, who can both sack them and deport them at any sign of trouble, i.e., if they complain about working conditions or join a trade union. Around 50% of workers on Costa Rican pineapple plantations are hired through subcontractors who provide similar benefits of a flexible, low paid and non-unionised workforce whilst also further decreasing the company's direct responsibility to provide adequate working conditions in line with national and international labour laws.

- **Women workers**

Unemployment amongst women is high in Costa Rica and pineapple companies increasingly prefer to employ men over women due to the 'high costs' associated with employing women. For those women that have secured work in the pineapple packing plants (they generally don't work in the field) conditions can be very difficult. The long working hours are particularly challenging for women who are left with no spare time to care for the family and household. Three women working on one PINDECO (a Del Monte subsidiary) plantation also reported severe cases of sexual discrimination and harassment from male plantation managers. Women also reported being sacked for being pregnant.

- **Union repression**

The level of union organisation is extremely low in the Costa Rican pineapple industry, particularly in the Northern and South Pacific zone. Union members can face discrimination, persecution and sometimes violence. Union organisers have reported death threats, vandalism of union offices and a recent case of the burning of an activist's house. The costs of union membership can be high for workers; union members reported being moved to undesirable and low paid jobs; multiple sackings appear to be regular and commonplace, with only non-union members being re-hired; 'black lists' are shared amongst pineapple companies (and sometimes also passed onto banana companies in the region) preventing trade unionists from finding work on other plantations. Trade unions SITRAP and SITAGAH (both in the Atlantic region) and SITRAPINDECO and SITEPP (both in the South Pacific region) are continuing the struggle to organise workers but the anti-union tactics carried out by companies - including the continued support of 'Solidarismo' - is currently preventing any major developments in the organisation of workers in the Costa Rican pineapple industry.

- **Environmental impacts**

Pineapple production in Costa Rica is characterised by large scale, high input, monoculture plantations (excluding the small producers in the northern zone). This type of production is dependent on regular and intense use of a number of toxic agrochemicals, including Bromacil, Endosulfan, Diazinon and Diuron among others. Across the country the poor environmental practices of both national and international producers is leading to environmental problems of contamination of local aquifers and ground water, erosion and sedimentation and deforestation. Many local communities no longer have access to natural sources of drinking water, having to rely of government supplies transported to the affected region in tanks. Health impacts have also been reported, similar to those mentioned above by plantation workers. Despite nationwide campaigns to halt the expansion of pineapple plantations and hold the companies responsible for their actions the problems remain to be solved as the companies economic and political power and influence continues to secure their impunity.

#### The impact of supermarket policies and practice

Very little impact was seen on the ground in terms of the commitments made by European retailers to promote and monitor their social and environmental policies along the Costa Rican pineapple supply chain. Some workers did report being aware of supermarkets policies and certification and having seen auditors on the plantation. Every worker who provided details on the impacts of auditors stated the same story; auditors never arrive without prior warning; in preparation for the auditors arrival changes and improvements are made to conditions on the plantations; workers are given training or guidance on what the standards require and what they have to say to make sure the auditors believe the standards are being implemented; workers who say anything 'out of line' of the standards do so on risk of losing their jobs; auditors are always directed to speak to non-union members; once the auditors are gone conditions return back to normal.

*The above is a summary of the key concerns highlighted by the initial research in Costa Rica, the final report intends to paint a broader picture of the industry as a whole, from plantation to retailer. It is hoped that the small pineapple producers in Northern Costa Rica, to be visited in June, will provide an example of how some of the above issues are being tackled through small scale production systems and Fairtrade certification.*

Please contact Banana Link on [info@bananalink.org.uk](mailto:info@bananalink.org.uk) if you would like to receive a copy of the full technical report once it has been published in October this year.