

Issues of Justice and Sustainability in Banana Trade in the Light of Cameroon Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the banana economy, particularly its social and environmental consequences. The discussion is largely based on the case study of Cameroon, but there are good reasons to believe that many research findings are relevant for the whole banana industry as the global banana production and trade is heavily based on giant agro-industrial plantations. There is, indeed, information from different important banana producing countries indicating that working conditions in the industry all too often include forced labour, child labour, lack of job security, low wages, and health and safety problems. The banana industry, as well documented in this article, is also linked to a range of harmful environmental impacts, including loss of animal habitats and biodiversity and pollution of land and water. Land conflict is one of the biggest problems associated with the production of banana and, therefore, banana industry is strongly connected with the political and economic basis of those societies where banana industry has become a major actor.

KEYWORDS

Development, Multinational Corporations, Supply Chain Agriculture, Sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Cameroon is a country endowed by nature. It has a large natural resource potential such as soil, hydrology and minerals that predisposes it to be a true Garden of Eden in the agro-pastoral domain. As a result, the bulk of its economic strength was built on this agropastoral potential. The political and institutional authorities who controlled the commands of state power since independence in 1960 and 1961 have indeed made agriculture a major axis of Cameroon's economic development (Bella, 2009).

The option of organizing the economic development of Cameroon around agriculture as a preferred mode of development enabled both the private and public authorities to have a valuable source of financial income, while making sure the rural populations, whose key pursuit is agriculture, equally benefit from this activity as a source of income. Improving living conditions of rural populations was a key element in the establishment of a planning policy that targeted a substantial increase in agriculture, food and agro-industrial productivity. Since then, this sector has employed between 50 and 60% of the working population in Cameroon (Atanga, 2006). In 2003 agriculture generated close to 1,300 billion CFA francs of gross domestic product (GDP) or about 20% of global GDP and more than one-third of foreign exchange earnings for the country (Bella, 2009).

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Banana cultivation has long been a key aspect of agricultural development in Cameroon, actually taking advantage of this incentive impetus created for agricultural development. In the late 1970s, the Office Camerounaise de Banane (OCB), a state parastatal was put in place to regulate the banana industry in Cameroon. It received the mandate to organize the marketing chain of Cameroonian bananas (UNECA, 1981). To better realize this mission assigned to her by the State, OCB was endowed with financial autonomy guaranteed through the allocation of public subsidies, ensuring the channeling of production, supervision of producers and access to credit and agricultural inputs to operators in the banana sector in Cameroon. The attractive and enticing prospects of a booming banana market and opportunities for land acquisition in a banana field that was seen as *terra nullius* aroused the interest of many international operators for the Cameroon banana sector. Until 1988 the banana sector in Cameroon was organized around coexistence between food crops and industrial cultivation. Since 1988, the organization of the productive system changed with the dissolution of the OCB in 1993—effectively signaling the end of small banana farms (Anania, 2014, p. 173). Consequently, the field was left free to banana agribusiness consisting of giant multinational corporations. Under the impetus of these large industrial groups, Cameroon's banana industry experienced tremendous growth. Thus, the industry pointed to the first largest export crops in Cameroon, imposing itself as a crucial economic activity (Atanga, 2006).

The Cameroonian banana industry was among the world top producers. It had ambitions of posing as a major banana exporter in the Africa - Caribbean - Pacific (ACP) region. This sector was one of the main providers of employment in Cameroon. In 2011, close to 297,210 tons of bananas were exported while the business generated about 170 billion CFA francs per year for an average production of 300,000 tons. At the heart of the activity of the banana sector in Cameroon are land concessions exploited by major agro-industrial groups operating in the Mungo Division in the Littoral region and Tiko in the Fako Division of the South West Region of Cameroon (Anania, 2014, p. 179).

The implication of these regions in the banana industry was motivated by their fertile volcanic basements, mild climate, availability of plantation labor, as well as a long entrenchment of culture of plantation economy that was installed since the colonial era. These areas were the chosen lands of the banana agro-industries in Cameroon: both have a long and rich economic history for banana cultivation with major plantation activities (Anania, 2014, p. 182). For several decades, Njombe-Penja and Tiko have served as host to many operators engaged in the cultivation and exportation of bananas. The main actors in this sector were the Cameroon Development Corporation, with plantations in Tiko and *Plantation de Haut Penja (PHP)*, which is an affiliate of the french fruits giant, *Compagnie Fruitière* with plantations in Njombe-Penja. While this activity has generated a lot of benefits to the multinational corporations that operate the plantations, the labourers and the communities in which these plantations are found have suffered injustices in the hands of the companies. It is against this backdrop that this paper sets out to make an appraisal of some sustainability issues that have gone a long way to affect the lives of both the workers and the communities.

To understand some of the sustainability issues in the Cameroon banana industry, this study will rely on oral interviews documentaries like, *The Big Banana* that critiques the human and environmental impact of banana plantations in Cameroon. The documentary begins by presenting an aerial view of the Njombe-Penja community where the banana wealth goes to the multinational company, *Plantation du Haut Penja (PHP)*, while most members of the community remain poor. PHP workers are shown as they labor to cut down the bananas and transport them to the processing station. The profit generated by company came at the expense of the workers, who were paid paltry wages in contrast to the high salaries and benefits of the expatriates. It is therefore not surprising, that European consumers of the bananas are appalled upon hearing the actual wages of the laborers who produce the commodity. A consumer in the UK aptly calls the situation “slave labor,” while another expresses her “disgust” at the laborers’ working conditions (The Big Banana, 2009). These workers are not only underpaid; their health is at risk from exposure to toxic chemicals (pesticides, fungicides, fertilizers, and other agro-chemicals). The film indicates that four out of five farmers suffer from eye problems due to

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