



Kenyan Flower Farms and Global Notions of ‘Decent Work’

By Gerda Kuiper

Since the 1970s, the area around Lake Naivasha in Kenya has developed into a global hub of flower production. The Naivasha flower farms currently produce over 8,000 tons of flowers on a monthly basis. However, labour conditions within this flourishing industry are highly controversial. Since the early 2000s, NGOs and journalists have raised questions about the “decency” of Kenyan flower farms as employers. These reports have been particularly influential in the European markets. In order to counter such criticism and to secure access to markets, farms participate in certification schemes that standardize labour conditions (Kuiper and Gemählich 2017). Universal definitions – of, for instance, “decent work” – from international organizations such as the ILO form the broad framework and inspiration for such standards. The Fairtrade Standard for Hired Labour (2014: 3) – which also applies to Fairtrade-certified flower farms in Kenya – explicitly states: “When setting the Fairtrade Standards, Fairtrade International (FI) follows certain internationally recognized standards and conventions, in particular those of the International Labour Organization (ILO)”. As argued elsewhere (Kuiper and Gemählich 2017), these standards do not fundamentally alter unequal power relations within the flower industry. Nevertheless, conditions have changed to some extent. The global criticism of the “indecent” of flower farms as employers thus clearly has an impact.

I myself encountered the effects of such critical reports in reactions to my ethnographic research on labour relations within this highly contested industry. After public talks, audience members asked me why I was not more critical of the “exploitation” of workers by the farms. In personal conversations too, I have more than once encountered disbelief when I stated –based on my fieldwork experiences – that not all flower-farm workers evaluate their work and the labour conditions on the farms negatively. The variety of values attached to flower-farm work in Naivasha are reflected in this contribution by bringing together several fieldwork fragments (interview notes, observation notes, pictures, and secondary sources). This collage demonstrates the complexity of defining (in)decent work in a global industry.

An important point of critique of the flower industry is the low level of the wages when compared to the profits made by the farms. On August 18th, 2007, an article titled “Naivasha Town: Where poverty and affluence live side-by-side” appeared in the Kenyan newspaper *Daily Nation*. The author writes:

“Here, a privileged class of millionaire business people who run flower firms, lives side by side with local business people making a killing from an influx of job seekers, and casual workers who exist in abject poverty. It's a kaleidoscope of hope and despair.”

A few months later, on November 7th, 2007, a spokesperson of the Kenya Flower Council, the lobby organization of the Kenyan flower industry, reacted to such criticism in another Kenyan newspaper:

“(...) On accusation that farms pay peanuts to employees, Ms Ngige told *Business Daily* in a past interview that the industry was a mass employer of unskilled people, explaining that “80 per cent of the people employed on flower farms are unskilled. These are people who would not secure jobs anywhere else outside the farms.”

After my first interview with a foreign flower-farm owner and manager in February 2014, I noted in my fieldwork diary that “owners of farms feel proud to provide employment, because even if it's not much on an individual level, they bring in quite a lot of foreign capital when looking at the wages all together”. These managers feel offended by NGO campaigns that portray them as indecent and exploitative, especially after wages have risen considerably over the past years.

One of the labour officers of Naivasha sub-district told me in an interview in 2015 that the flower farms are the main employer in the area. I asked whether the flower farms are also a good employer. According to this government official they are, because compared to other sectors, this sector has a good structure to improve employment relations and solve disputes. He stated: “We feel that the workers are well-represented”. Most of the flower farms are members of the AEA (Agricultural Employers Association), which works together with the trade union KPAWU to improve conditions through negotiating a Collective Bargaining Agreement. An example of improved conditions is the protection of workers against the harmful effects of pesticides that are used in the production process. Picture 1 shows a sign that warns about poison at a pesticide valve. Whereas workers in the early years of the industry were for instance not regularly provided with protective clothing, a more careful handling of pesticides has now become the norm (see on this shift also Dolan, Opondo and Smith 2003).



A warning sign at a pesticide valve in a greenhouse. Image © Gerda Kuiper.

Workers generally appreciate these safety measures, but they do not necessarily value other “improvements” brought about by changing standards and the CBA. Picture 2 shows rows of company housing, located in front of a workers’ settlement with private housing, with a row of greenhouses from another flower farm in the background. The company housing was improved after the farm had become Fairtrade certified. A supervisor working for a neighbouring farm, which was also in the process of acquiring Fairtrade certification, mentioned such improved housing as one of the possible benefits. On the other hand, some employees of farms that provide good housing nevertheless decide to rent a house in one of the settlements. They do so to evade controls on receiving guests or to evade restrictions with regards to additional income-generating activities such as selling vegetables or keeping small livestock.



Housing provided by a flower farm. Image © Gerda Kuiper.

Flower-farm workers themselves thus have diverging opinions on the work conditions on the farms. In November and December 2014, I conducted several listing and ranking exercises focusing on job opportunities in Naivasha with small groups of flower-farm workers and other Naivasha residents. Whereas some groups ranked flower-farm work as low-income and of little desirability, other groups ranked it as high-income and as a type of job that is highly sought after. Appreciation of the work depended on the specific relation participants had to the industry, such as previous negative experiences or a lack of other opportunities for stable employment. It was also often pointed out that there are large income differences *between* the flower farms, and also between employees within the industry; that is, depending on the type of job.

Some participating groups contrasted flower-farm work – as the most prevalent type of wage labour in the area – with what they called “self-employment”. Having a successful small-scale business was favoured by many participants because of the independence it afforded. Indeed, leaving employment to start one’s own business is a common aspiration among flower-farm workers. However, other participants in the listing and ranking exercises favoured the stability of flower-farm work. As I noted: “Only within companies can you be sure about your income. For others, business can be low”.

The diverging opinions also became clear when I was interrupted during an interview in April 2015. I was interviewing Lawrence, a flower-farm worker who had decided to leave his job. He planned to move to his family plot in his region of origin to engage in small-scale cultivation. He stated explicitly that there was nothing wrong with the work on the farm. He had simply decided to go “home” to rest now, and he was enabled to do so by the gratuity payment he had received from the farm after many years of service. From my fieldwork diary: “When I interviewed Lawrence, a former colleague of his at Karibu Farm passed by and came in when he saw me. He immediately started to complain about their situation: according to him, life is very hard for the flower farm workers. They for example work without uniforms; they get paid only 4,000 KES a month; they sometimes work from six in the morning to six in the evening without having lunch; and the farms don’t provide health care. I was a bit surprised to hear this from a former employee of Karibu Farm, because at least for that specific farm I know most of this is not true. Lawrence seemed a bit embarrassed, and told me that the man had left the farm some time back voluntarily. However, he didn’t know why, or what he was doing now”.

The regular definitions of “decent work” focus primarily on the working conditions (which were also lamented by Lawrence’s former colleague) and pay little attention to the content of the work. However, the work itself is also evaluated differently, and appreciated or despised for various reasons. Whereas some workers enjoy the process of growing flowers or the competition in the packhouse, others find the work monotonous and boring. After one of my first interviews with a flower-farm worker in February 2014, I noted in my diary: “Flora herself has worked at Sharma Farm for eight years now in the production department. She worked for three years as a harvester, cutting the flowers, and then became a quality controller. She’s glad that she got promoted because as a controller you learn a lot and sometimes also get some time to relax. She said working as a harvester in the end makes you stupid”.

To conclude, globalization in the form of the relocation of agricultural and industrial production from countries in the Global North to countries in the Global South shows the difficulties involved in developing global notions of decent work. Notably, the discussions on “decent work” that shape conditions in the Naivasha flower industry through certification schemes largely take place elsewhere. Without denying the many difficulties that flower-farm workers encounter, I argue that the application of global ideas of what constitutes “decent” labour conditions might disguise workers’ own agency. Universal definitions of “decent work” do not engage or resonate with the lifeworld of the workers beyond the farm work, even though this lifeworld shapes the diverse needs and desires of the workers. Moreover, these universal definitions do not take temporalities into account, such as leaving employment to engage in small-scale commercial farming or simultaneous income diversification.

In short, globalization processes have driven the quest for universal notions of “decent” work. Yet these processes also show the impossibility of finding a definition that fits the needs of all (aspiring) workers and that makes cases truly comparable. I would therefore conclude that neither comparative research nor universal advocacy can be meaningful without paying attention to diverse perspectives and to industry-specific and locality-specific values of work.

References

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