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The Living Wage Debate in the Kenyan Cut-Flower Industry

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Abstract

Over the past three decades, the Kenyan cut-flower industry has come under intense scrutiny for its environmental impacts and poor labor conditions, including low wages. A multitude of certification schemes have been introduced to address this criticism, each with its own regulations and standards. However, these certifications have had little impact on industry wages. Even though the most well-known standard, Fairtrade, explicitly targets living wages, wage levels remain well below living wage calculations for Kenya's flower-producing hubs. This article explores this discrepancy. First, I discuss local experiences with wage levels in the major flower-growing hub at Lake Naivasha. This discussion indicates that local evaluations of wage levels in the flower industry are more differentiated than global discussions on the living wage suggest. Secondly, I argue that certifications, including their measures to support living wages have a depoliticizing effect and side-line local mechanisms for setting wage levels. Consequently, living wages in the Kenyan flower industry are still a long way from materializing.

Keywords living wages, flower industry, Kenya, certifications, depoliticization

1. Introduction

Kenya has witnessed steady, foreign investment-driven growth in the production of cut flowers since the 1970s. The country has become the largest exporter of flowers—especially roses—to European markets. The labor-intensive flower industry provides employment for tens of thousands of wage workers. However, the flower farms' labor conditions, particularly their wage levels, have been heavily criticized in international media and by NGOs (Gemählich, 2020; Kazimierczuk et al., 2018). In this article, I move away from these global debates to instead interrogate local perceptions of wages in Kenya's main flower-growing hub, located at Lake Naivasha, some 100 kilometers north of Kenya's capital, Nairobi. Secondly, I examine whether certification schemes like Fairtrade influence overall wage levels in the Kenyan flower industry.

The next sections introduce the study methodology, the development of the Kenyan flower industry, and the concept of "depoliticization." In the empirical section, I review workers' and other industry parties' perceptions of wage levels on Naivasha flower farms. I compare these perceptions to arguments in the wider debate on living wages and describe how certification schemes approach this issue. I conclude that attention to living wages does not automatically result in sufficiently higher wages. Technical solutions such as labor standards have a depoliticizing effect and ignore existing local processes for setting wage levels.

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2. Study Background

2.1 Methodology

This contribution is based on a broader anthropological project on labor relations in the Naivasha flower industry. I conducted 13 months of fieldwork between 2013 and 2016 (see for details on the methodology Kuiper, 2019, pp. 8–15). This article is primarily based on an analysis of grey literature such as labor standards, court cases, and newspaper articles, collected during my fieldwork. In addition, I conducted an online search for more recent documents in 2022. I supplemented this analysis with perceptions on wage levels that emerged during semi-structured interviews with farm workers, managers, and other industry stakeholders during my fieldwork in Naivasha.

2.2 The Development of the Kenyan Flower Industry

The first large-scale cut-flower farms in Kenya were established in the 1970s, with a cluster of farms emerging at Lake Naivasha. At first, these farms exported seasonal flowers such as chrysanthemums and carnations. They therefore initially hired migrant laborers from other parts of Kenya, who only stayed in make-shift, on-farm compounds in Naivasha during the flower-growing seasons. However, over the last 30 years, most farms have shifted from the outdoor cultivation of seasonal flowers to year-round production of roses in greenhouses (Kuiper, 2019, p. 63; Riisgaard & Gibbon, 2014, p. 271). The migrant farm laborers now reside in Naivasha throughout the year. Many bring their families along, for which they also have to provide. Another significant shift affecting the calculation of living wages is that most present-day farms no longer provide housing. The majority of the workers rent one-room apartments in informally developed settlements. Although workers usually receive a housing allowance which covers the rent, Naivasha's urbanization has raised the general cost of living in the area tremendously (Kuiper, 2019; Volpato et al., 2022).

Gemählich (2022) describes the development of a new, additional value chain. While seasonal flowers are mostly sold through the auction in the Netherlands, roses are increasingly exported via so-called "direct sales." In this new value chain, a handful of large supermarket chains place large orders with individual farms for bunches of roses. This value chain has subjected the industry to more criticism regarding its labor conditions, including wage levels. To counteract this criticism, supermarket chains demand that producers (i.e., farms) acquire various certifications.

To enter these certification schemes, farms must adhere to specific environmental and social standards. However, buyers do not require the same certifications, so farms must participate in an ever-growing number of certification programs to retain access to markets (despite participation being officially voluntary). The direct sales value chain is strongly buyer-driven, reinforcing hierarchies in the global industry and putting the farms as producers under the strict control of multinational companies (Gemählich, 2022). The most elaborate certification scheme—at least with regard to labor conditions—is Fairtrade. The first flower farm in Naivasha became Fairtrade-certified around 2003 (Kuiper & Gemählich, 2017). According to Fairtrade Africa's website, there are currently 11 Fairtrade-certified farms in Naivasha (Fairtrade Africa, 2023).

2.3 Certifications and Depoliticization in the Living Wage Debate

Labor conditions on Naivasha farms have only moderately improved since certification schemes entered the scene. Moreover, these improvements largely stemmed from changes in the production process, not the standards themselves. For instance, year-round rose production necessitated permanent, not seasonal, employment. The standards' impact on labor conditions is limited because they do not challenge underlying power relations and hierarchies in the industry (Hale & Opondo, 2005; Kuiper, 2019; Riisgaard & Gibbon, 2014). In fact, certification schemes run the risk of depoliticizing labor relations (Kuiper & Gemählich, 2017).

Anthropologist James Ferguson (1994) used the term *depoliticization* to describe the workings of development projects in Lesotho, which rendered complex political roots of inequality invisible through a focus on purely technical solutions. Political ecologists deploy a similar usage when analyzing environmental governance (Huber & Joshi, 2015). For example, Eric Swyngedouw (2014) used the term to draw attention to the rise of "a consensual mode of governance that has reduced political conflict and disagreement" (p. 123). This type of "post-democratic" governance does not "fundamentally question the existing state of the neo-liberal political economic configuration" (Swyngedouw, 2014, p. 123). Certification schemes in the Kenyan flower industry engage in this type of post-democratic governance; they work *within* the industry's neoliberal logic, as their own regulations tend to replace state legislation (Kuiper & Gemählich, 2017).

The remainder of this article explores how *living wage* methodology also runs the risk of depoliticization and disempowerment. This method calculates "living wage" amounts for specific localities and industries (Anker & Anker, 2014). Despite its attention to local circumstances, the methodology remains a standardizing technical measure that glosses over what a living wage means to wage earners themselves. This study investigates the effects of debating the living wage in such a technical, anti-political manner and considers whether wage negotiations in the Kenyan flower industry are depoliticized.

3. Wage Levels and Wage Perceptions in the Naivasha Flower Industry

3.1 Setting Wage Levels

It is first necessary to explain how wage levels were set in the flower industry before the introduction of the living wage concept and the elevated importance of certifications. Kenya has long had a statutory minimum wage; however, the minimum wage for agricultural labor is set with the expectation that workers live in rural areas with low costs of living. In 2014, the minimum wage only amounted to 4,854 Kenyan Shillings (KSh) per month—equivalent to 56 USD[1]—hardly sufficient for agro-industrial production sites like Naivasha (Anker & Anker, 2014). A growing number of (especially larger) Kenyan flower farms are unionized. In these companies, Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) are negotiated between the trade union and the Agricultural Employers Association (AEA) to set basic wage levels and other types of allowances. Unionized farms, and most other farms, pay their workers considerably more than the statutory minimum wage (Kazimierczuk et al., 2018; Kuiper, 2019). However, they also pay considerably less than the estimated gross living wage for flower farm workers, which in 2014 amounted to 18,542 KSh (216 USD; Anker & Anker, 2014).

About 90% of the workforce belongs to the lowest-paid category of workers—the general workers. However, earnings are quite diverse, even within this category. Firstly, not all farms pay wages according to a CBA; some might not even pay the statutory minimum wage.[2] Secondly, even on unionized farms, general workers do not earn the same amount. In addition to basic wages, CBAs also prescribe considerable yearly increments, so those who landed a job early earn more. There are also several types of bonuses, for instance for packhouse workers. Nevertheless, even general workers with the highest incomes do not earn a living wage. Table 1 provides examples of wages paid in the industry in 2014. At this time, nominal wages had increased considerably from previous years, but real wages had declined sharply due to inflation and increased costs of living. When calculated in USD, per-farm labor costs also increased, diminishing room for future salary increments (Anker & Anker, 2014; Kazimierczuk et al., 2018).

Table 1 Wage Levels in the Naivasha Flower Industry in 2014–2015

Type of wage	KSh (monthly, without allowances)
General worker, employed for 0 years, under CBA	5,401
General worker, employed for 17 years, under CBA	10,252
Supervisor (court case)	16,594
Supervisor (interview)	20,000
Accountant (court case)	503,392

Note. Table by the author based on the following sources: Anker & Anker (2014); Delvin Bosibori Nyachoti v Maridadi Flowers Limited (2014); interview by the author with a supervisor on 26 May 2016; Patrick Chebos v Stokman Rozen Kenya Limited (2016).

Table 1 also shows that higher-ranked staff tends to earn more than a living wage (sometimes much more, though the high accountant salary is probably an outlier). The exact wage gap is hard to estimate since higher-ranked staff negotiate their wages individually; the amounts are not public and my interviewees did not like to discuss the topic in detail. However, Kazimierczuk et al. (2018, p. 34) found that managers earned 10 times more than general workers (or even more). Remarkably, this immense wage gap is not an explicit part of the living wage discussion.

By 2022, the statutory agricultural minimum wage had increased by roughly 50% to 7,544 KSh per month (Government of Kenya, 2022). In the 2021 CBA between the AEA and KPAWU, the negotiated basic salary for new unskilled employees on unionized farms also rose, but only just above the minimum wage: 7,600 KSh.[3] Moreover, inflation continues to be a major obstacle for the attainment of living wages. Between March 2014 and December 2021, total inflation topped 55% (Andersen et al., 2022). High inflation rates have certainly persisted since then, considering recent global developments. The calculated gross living wage has increased from 18,542 KSh (216 USD) in 2014 to 32,488 KSh (276 USD) in 2022 (adjusted for inflation and changes in statutory deductions). Thus, the gap between industry salaries and the living wage only seems to be widening.

3.2 Debates on Industry Wages in the Kenyan Public Domain

Intense debates and conflicts over wage levels in the industry did not start with the recent interest in living wages—wages have been a feature of the Kenyan public sphere since the industry was established. Wage levels and generally poor labor conditions have long been criticized in Kenyan newspapers: "Some of the investors have taken advantage of high levels of unemployment and outdated labor laws to pay low wages" (Mwangi, 2007). Lawmakers and judges have pointed out that the low wages are not in line with Kenyan legislation. For instance, the Naivasha MP, Mr. Kihara, raised the topic in parliament in 2002, stating that only 11 of 36 Naivasha flower farms were paying more than the statutory minimum wage (Kenya National Assembly, 2002). In 2011, a new MP, Mr. Mututho, deemed the industry's wages to be "slavery wages" (Kenya National Assembly, 2011). He demanded "living wages" instead.

Wage levels are usually also the main point of disagreement in CBA negotiations between the flower farms and the KPAWU trade union (Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers' Union—until recently, the only registered trade union for floriculture workers). Government and union officials explained that conflicts over wages are usually resolved through negotiations and, if necessary, court cases. In one such court case, the judge ruled that fair remuneration was a constitutional imperative and awarded a somewhat higher wage increase than the farm had been willing to pay (*KPAWU v Shalimar Flowers [K] Limited*, 2014).

Notably, workers themselves are not involved in wage negotiations. Many critique the top-down labor union, which has a reputation for supporting government interests and political elites over workers (Kazimierczuk et al., 2018, p. 22; Riisgaard & Gibbon, 2014, p. 281; Styles, 2019, p. 9). There has been little political space for workers to demand higher wages beyond trade union officials' negotiations. In 2020, after years of pushback from KPAWU, Kenya's supreme court determined that a second trade union for the floriculture sector—the Kenya Export Floriculture, Horticulture and Allied Workers' Union (KEFHAU)—could no longer be stalled (*KPAWU v KEFHAU & Registrar of Trade Unions*, 2020). This new union also negotiates CBAs, including basic wage levels, with the AEA for its member farms (Mwale & Rasto, 2022). However, KEFHAU and KPAWU work within the same system of industrial relations, so it is unclear whether this new union will give workers more opportunities to have their voices heard in wage negotiations.

3.3 Local Perceptions of Wages

There are discrepancies between the living wage calculation and how flower farm workers themselves perceive wages. While flower farm workers generally consider their wages to be insufficient (see Styles, 2019, p. 83), the level of dissatisfaction varies. Evaluations of wage levels largely depend on workers' individual situation, such as marital status, partner income, number of children, and whether they own land in their home areas and can potentially diversify their income sources. Previous experiences also shape workers' expectations. One worker considered the farm she worked for to be a good employer, explaining that her salary had increased from 2,600 KSh in 2004 to about 9,000 KSh in 2015. Finally, secondary labor conditions—such as housing allowances and yearly travel allowances during the annual leave—also enhance workers' satisfaction with their wages. The increasing prevalence of permanent contracts allowed permanent employees to participate in popular Saving and Credit Co-operatives (SACCOs). The leader of a company SACCO for a medium-sized unionized farm told me that about half of the employees participated in the SACCO, which required a minimum savings of 700 KSh per month. Most participants saved at least 1,000 KSh each month. These savings and the ability to borrow money enabled permanently employed workers to pay yearly school fees or even buy a small plot of land (Kuiper, 2019, p. 152–153; see also Styles, 2019, p. 67). These possibilities enhance workers' satisfaction with their wages, even if they are generally considered too low.

Notably, migrant workers in Naivasha have other options for earning an income. A labor officer for Naivasha Sub-County listed vegetable farms, construction companies, and tourism as other important sectors for low-skilled employment. However, none of these sectors provide the security and stability of the flower industry. Furthermore, average wages in these sectors tend to be even lower. The job stability and income differences between the flower and vegetable industries are particularly noteworthy; vegetable farm workers are clearly disadvantaged compared to flower farm workers (see for a detailed comparison Kuiper & Greiner, 2021).

In addition, the living wage calculation overlooks certain essential expenses for the migrant workers. For example, there is immense pressure on migrant workers to remit money to their relatives elsewhere in Kenya. Some workers would rather go hungry toward the end of the month than not send money to their families. A wage that does not cater for this redistributive need would, therefore, not really amount to a "living wage" in urban Kenya. The living wage calculations also fail to account for workers' aspirations for the future, such as schooling their children or buying a plot of land. Owning land allows one to fall back on subsistence farming; it is also of great cultural significance since many Kenyan ethnic groups bury a person on their own plot. These possibilities to shape their own future are more important to many workers than, for instance, improved housing during their time in Naivasha (Kuiper, 2019; Styles, 2019). In contrast, the living wage calculation emphasizes the housing situation in Naivasha (Anker & Anker, 2014). In short, even though this model is based on an assessment of the local situation, it continues to let researchers define what constitutes a decent life.

Finally, it is worthwhile to also briefly discuss managers' perspectives on wages. While intermediate-level managers are critical of the general worker wages, top managers justify them by citing generally low wage levels in Naivasha (Styles, 2019). In addition, whereas public criticism on wages in the industry often is directed towards the farms in Kenya, top arm managers also point to their relatively weak negotiating position vis-à-vis buying parties. One top farm manager, who had consistently increased wages, told me that he got a headache when thinking about this issue. While he viewed the increments as necessary, he feared people had gotten used to them and would expect similar increments in the years to come. According to him, the farm would no longer be economically viable if labor costs continued to rise steeply, as in previous years. Higher-ranked managers interviewed by Gemählich (2020, p. 101) concurred, asserting they could not pay a "living wage" without a considerable increase in the price of cut flowers. Since buyers (e.g., supermarket chains) were unwilling to pay more, they supposedly could not pay their workers higher wages.

3.4 Certification Schemes and the Living Wage Debate

Do certifications perhaps play a role in increasing wage levels? Many standards focus on job stability and workers' welfare, leaving wage levels as the elephant in the room. While certifications do increase unionization levels in the industry, the increased prominence of CBAs does not lead to a living wage (Riisgaard & Gibbon, 2014). The only certification that explicitly strives for a living wage is Fairtrade. Unlike other certifications, Fairtrade began as a charitable organization before turning to better payment for agricultural smallholders and wage laborers in the Global South in the 1990s (Braun & Gröne, 2021). However, even Fairtrade does not make a living wage a strict requirement, as indicated by its Standard for Hired Labour:

> If remuneration (wages and benefits) is below the living wage benchmarks as approved by Fairtrade International, your company ensures that real wages are increased annually to continuously close the gap with living wage. The incremental steps and timeline toward the applicable living wage are negotiated with trade union/elected worker representatives. (Fairtrade International, 2014, p. 31)

Fairtrade accepts farms' narrative that paying a living wage is not possible under current economic conditions and retains the central role of the trade union. A study of pay slips from 22 employees on four Fairtrade-certified farms and five non-Fairtrade-certified farms in Naivasha found that wages for seasonal workers were higher on Fairtrade-certified farms, but there was no noticeable wage difference for permanent workers (Happ, 2016). None of the farms provided anything close to the living wage. At the time, the Fairtrade standard was new, and farms were only required to increase their wages gradually. However, a more recent case study from Timau, another flower-growing region in Kenya, indicates that progress has been slow (Beutler, 2020). In this case, the non-certified farm even provided slightly higher wages and had more satisfied employees than the Fairtrade-certified farm. Therefore, Fairtrade's wage policies seem unable to open space for worker negotiation in the Kenyan flower industry.

Recently, the Fairtrade Standard for Flowers and Plants took an additional approach: the floor wage. This floor wage is calculated using the World Bank's global poverty line of 1.90 USD per person per day. This norm is more strictly enforced than the living wage norm (Fairtrade International, 2023). However, this measure specifically targeted the (even lower) wages on flower farms in other countries like Ethiopia and Tanzania (Fairtrade International, 2017). It does not help workers in Kenya, where the agricultural minimum wage fluctuates around the formal poverty line already, depending on shifting exchange rates (Kabiru et al., 2018, p. 3). Even when most farms pay slightly more than the minimum wage, a large gap remains between the floor wage and the living wage. This new approach might even make it more difficult for trade unions (and others) to demand more-than-floor wages, let alone the calculated living wage. Thus, in practice, the floor wage might actually become the ceiling, at least for now.

4. Conclusion

The wage-setting process in the Kenyan flower industry is depoliticized, despite the strong presence of a trade union and the existence of multiple standards. The system of CBA negotiations between the employers' organization and the trade unions leaves little space for workers' involvement in wage-setting processes. Most certifications do not engage with local contestations over wages and worker representation. They rarely attend to wages at all, instead focusing on secondary labor conditions and workers' welfare. Only the Fairtrade label explicitly aims for a living wage. However, it is unclear whether a living wage based on foreign perspectives and criteria (even when calculated based on local circumstances) can really generate what is important for the hopeful receivers of these wages. Norm-setting still takes place in the Global North, not in the production areas.

Secondly, with the increasing cost of living and the decreasing profit margins of individual farms, we must ask who is responsible for ensuring that workers receive a living wage. Current mechanisms put significant pressure on individual farms while leaving the industry at large unregulated. These mechanisms obscure or even consolidate existing hierarchies in the industry and depoliticize wage negotiations. Living wages are not merely a technical issue or a matter of calculation. The questions of what constitutes a decent wage and who should pay for it are ultimately political.

Notes

[1] Based on the exchange rate that Anker and Anker (2014) used to calculate the living wage for Naivasha (KSh86 to 1 USD). To enable the comparison, I start with examples from my fieldwork (2014–2015). I provide an outlook on current wages later.

[2] Around 15% of the Naivasha workers interviewed by Kabiru et al. (2018, p. 9) reported receiving less than minimum wage. However, it is not clear whether these workers reported the gross wage or the net wage, which can differ considerably due to individual deductions (see Styles, 2019, p. 67).

[3] Although I eventually succeeded, it was difficult to trace the current CBA for the flower industry. Farms and industry organizations are not allowed to circulate the CBA and it is not posted online (although older versions sometimes circulate). This lack of accessibility is indicative of the non-democratic and untransparent process of salary negotiations, even on unionized farms.

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