

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Promoting Labor Rights in the Cut Flower Industry

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Thank you, Representative McGovern and Representative Smith, for inviting me to testify today.

Introduction

I conducted ethnographic research on labor and environmental issues in the Kenyan cut flower industry between 2004 and 2014. This involved interviews with people working at all levels within the industry – from low-wage workers to farm managers and owners to government agents tasked with designing and enforcing industry regulations.¹

Background

Kenya directly supplies about 34% of the cut flowers imported to the European Union and around 8% of those imported to the UK. By contrast, Kenya likely supplies only 1% of the flowers imported to the U.S. Kenyan growers would ideally like to access U.S. markets, but there are serious logistical and financial barriers to this, mainly a lack of direct cargo flights, high transport costs, and competition from exporters in Colombia and Ecuador. Although few Kenyan flowers circulate in the U.S., there are lessons from the Kenyan case study that could be useful for thinking about how to address human rights and environmental concerns in the global cut flower industry more generally.

In Kenya, floriculture directly employs around 200,000 people, 65-75% of whom are women. Most of these farm workers migrate from other parts of rural Kenya to the major sites of Kenyan flower production; they are drawn by the promise of permanent positions with wages/benefits that are low but still higher than those in other Kenyan sectors. Floriculture expanded quickly starting in the late 1990s and is now an important cornerstone of Kenya's export agricultural

¹ I published this research in my book, *Roses from Kenya: Labor, Environment, and the Global Trade in Cut Flowers* (Styles, 2019). Gerda Kuiper's book, *Agro-industrial Labour in Kenya: Cut Flower Farms and Migrant Workers' Settlements*, also provides detailed ethnographic insight into the cut flower industry near Kenya's Lake Naivasha (Kuiper, 2019).

sector. The industry has long been controversial because of concerns about labor and environmental issues. The principal human rights concerns involve: (1) low wages and long working hours, (2) exposure to workplace hazards like agricultural chemicals and extreme heat, (3) sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence, (4) procedures for filing complaints and the right to organize, (5) poor living conditions for workers (in on-farm worker housing and in off-farm settlements), and (6) broader environmental impacts (e.g., overuse of scarce water resources, point-source agricultural chemical pollution coming directly from farms, and non-point source pollution from industry-driven development in rural areas) that impact workers and surrounding communities.

Since I began researching Kenyan floriculture in 2004, there have been improvements in all but two of these areas (off-farm living conditions and off-farm environmental problems driven by unplanned development in flower-growing areas). Make no mistake – this industry is made possible and profitable by enduringly problematic forms of global inequality – but *on-farm* working and environmental conditions have improved. These reforms were made possible by a combination of local activism (the Kenyan Human Rights Commission made the cut flower industry a major target for reform in the early 2000s), consumer activism in the EU and UK (including boycotts organized by non-profit organizations), industrial self-regulation enforced by the major retailers and supermarkets who purchase Kenyan flowers, and UK/EU laws emphasizing traceability within agricultural supply chains.

Kenyan growers generally sell their flowers through two routes – (1) direct-buy contracts with retailers (especially supermarkets) and (2) the auction system, which generally absorbs higher quality varieties. In general, consumers in the UK and the EU are more concerned than U.S. consumers about ethical trade (Ziegler, 2010). Robust activist traditions inspire consumers to think about where products originate and challenge them to hold retailers accountable for labor and environmental conditions within their supply chains. Following struggles to maintain outbreaks of “mad cow” disease in the 1980s and 1990s, the UK and EU adopted laws that require food products to be traceable and hold actors along the supply chain responsible for ensuring safety standards (Freidberg, 2004). Following concerns about the spread of plant-born pests, the EU has also established inspection and traceability standards for imported agricultural products, including cut flowers.² Laws requiring traceability within agricultural supply chains (e.g., the 1990 Food Safety Act in the UK) have inspired many UK/EU retailers to establish integrated supply chain relationships with specific growers (e.g. a few key farms in Kenya) and/or purchase flowers from growers that participate in one or more ethical trade certification programs to comply with legal requirements and prove to consumers that they have done their due diligence and sourced flowers responsibly. Retailers and growers have responded by

² Although the EU has had stringent plant inspection regulations in place for some time, these were strengthened starting in April 2025 for roses imported from Africa, especially Kenya and Ethiopia, due to concerns about the False Codling Moth (*Thaumatotibia leucotreta*). For more information on these requirements see: <https://www.hsibv.com/stricter-eu-rules-on-imported-roses-are-you-prepared/>.

initiating their own certification programs, such as the Kenya Flower Council's Flowers and Ornamental Sustainability Standard (F.O.S.S).

As a result of these food scares, concerns about invasive pests, and consumer activism, European consumers are more familiar than Americans with labels that certify that products were grown or manufactured according to ethical standards and make these products traceable to the farm (not just to the country of origin). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, NGO campaigners in Kenya and the EU focused on rallying consumer support for ethical trade initiatives in the cut flower industry specifically. As a result, most retailers and auction houses in the EU and UK now require Kenyan cut flower suppliers to follow specific labor and environmental standards that they enforce through third-party auditing. Major Kenyan flower producers generally participate in one or more certification schemes that signal their compliance with ethical standards, and they are audited (sometimes 3-4 times per year) by external organizations to ensure their compliance. These certification schemes have introduced important (albeit limited) reforms to many Kenyan flower farms, including minimum wage standards, worker housing allowances, standardized working hours, zero tolerance for sexual harassment, maternity leave, personal protective equipment, and access to basic medical care.

Based on the example of the Kenyan flower industry, I offer four policy recommendations:

Policy Recommendations

1. Policies ensuring that cut flowers sold in the U.S. can be traced to the *specific farms* where they originate (not just country of origin) could make it possible to selectively eliminate products from farms that do not meet minimum labor and/or environmental standards. These minimums would ideally be specified in additional rules and regulations. Traceability of this kind makes it easier for consumers and human rights organizations to hold retailers accountable for conditions within their supply chains. It also provides retailers with additional levels of transparency so that they can more carefully control their supply chains and clearly demonstrate a commitment to responsible and ethical sourcing.
2. Policies that require (or incentivize) retailers to participate in one or more ethical trade certification programs (e.g., Fair Trade or Veriflora³) can also help eliminate flowers produced by farms that engage in poor labor and environmental practices. While voluntary regulation and certification schemes are not enough to address the many human rights concerns at work within the cut flower industry in Colombia and Ecuador (as evidenced by my colleagues' testimony today), policies requiring or incentivizing retailers/importers to

³ Catherine Ziegler (2010) compared labeling initiatives in the global trade in cut flowers. She notes that, in 2010, Veriflora standards were much less specific (and therefore possibly less effective) than those included in other certification schemes (e.g., Fair Trade).

choose certified flowers could be an important interim step for raising consumer awareness and increasing the percentage of certified flowers entering the U.S.

While these policies are a start, they still place the burden on consumers to do their research and make informed choices based on product attributes other than price. Certification schemes also require constant vigilance on the part of consumers and human rights organizations to ensure that standards remain high and are enforced consistently. Not all certification schemes are as robust as others, and although they create minimum standards, their existence can stifle demands for more profound structural reforms (e.g., robust labor laws that empower unions) that allow workers and advocates to push for further improvement. When a major flower farm changes hands or fails, these protections for workers and the environment also evaporate quickly. I witnessed this with the collapse of Sher Karuturi, a major Kenyan flower farm, in 2014 (Ramella, Schmidt, and Styles, 2023).

These caveats inspire my third recommendation.

3. Increasing the capacity/desire of the governments in flower producing regions to better regulate floriculture can provide a more direct route to improving labor and environmental conditions. This is obviously more difficult to do using the U.S. policy process, but it could be possible to provide rewards (e.g., in the form of more favorable trade conditions or specific forms of development aid) to countries that demonstrate a commitment to an ethical and environmentally responsible flower industry.

My colleagues testifying today make strong recommendations about how the agreements specifying terms of trade between the U.S. and Colombia and Ecuador could be amended to strengthen protections for freedom of association and union organizing in the cut flower industry.

In the context of my own research, I am more familiar with the ways that European governments have invested in specific development initiatives to increase Kenya's capacity to effectively govern the natural resources (e.g., water) necessary for flower production. For example, the Netherlands has been centrally involved in restructuring Kenyan water management, partially out of a desire to protect Dutch interests in the Kenyan cut flower industry, which has been accused of depleting scarce freshwater resources.⁴

This example demonstrates the power of carrots (as well as sticks) in thinking about mechanisms for structural change that could help address human rights conditions in the flower industry. In exploring these avenues, I also want to stress that the *environmental* impacts of floriculture may also have significant human rights implications for workers and

⁴ For a recent example of this on-going partnership in water management, see <https://www.esi-africa.com/business-and-markets/kenya-netherlands-sign-agreements-on-water-renewable-energy/>.

for people who live near sites of flower production. Communities living adjacent to flower farms may be struggling with access to land, water, and other critical resources increasingly devoted to, depleted by, and or polluted by floriculture (and/or the forms of rapid rural development that it drives). Human rights problems in this industry are not limited to on-farm labor conditions.

Lastly,

4. I also encourage you to continue supporting social science research (e.g., through competitive grants) investigating human rights issues within the cut flower industry in the context of workers' lives and in the broader political, ecological, and social context. National Science Foundation (NSF) grants, for instance, can be a critical source of funding for scholars researching human rights and environmental conditions in floriculture and other global industries. Public investment in social science research yields results and insights that inform policy decisions (as well as advancing science and theory in these disciplines).

The improvements in working conditions that I describe here have made employment within floriculture more *bearable* for Kenyan workers; however, the social and environmental effects of this industry are complex. Research on cut flower farming can help identify additional points of leverage for reform and empower changes that will be the most meaningful from the standpoint of people working in and living directly with the effects of floriculture.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share these recommendations. I look forward to further dialogue on these issues.

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