VOICES from around the world

02/2018

‘Decent Work’ – Historical and Cultural Varieties

Introduction

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Past ideas and present experiences concerning acceptable forms of work are broad and varied. Opposition to slavery, child labour, and long work days vividly illustrate how formerly acceptable notions of labour have changed over time and across cultures, even if none of these forms have been totally abolished. In 1999, in response to the persistence of coercive working conditions around the world, the International Labour Organization (ILO) linked its main institutional goals to a specific definition of ‘decent work’.[1]

The primary goal of the ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. This is the main purpose of the Organization today. Decent work is the converging focus of all its four strategic objectives: the promotion of rights at work; employment; social protection; and social dialogue. It must guide its policies and define its international role in the near future.

Though the ILO definition is heavily employed in many political and media debates, the ways in which people define ‘decent’ work vary across societies, and have also changed throughout history. Decent work also appears to be intimately bound up with ideas of a ‘good life’, yet

[1] https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm

another category that varies widely across times and places. While specific relations of coerced and precarious labour may appear as aberrations in the context of so-called 'regular employment', they are hardly exceptional when viewed through historically-informed perspectives from the Global South.

Beyond conditions of work itself, what is considered 'decent' work often relates to work's perceived contribution to society. In his recent book, *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory,*[2] David Graeber examines how some people consider the content and effects of their jobs to be useless for society at large, for example, because they profit from selling products that jeopardise consumers' health or even the entire planet. Financiers involved in speculation, may consider themselves as performing an essential social function, but there is a long history of others who judge their practices as socially undesirable and even pathological. But who decides what is a meaningless job and what is not? How and why does this change over time?

It is not surprising that especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, these and other questions regarding the purpose of work and the 'decency' of the conditions in which it is performed are regaining (the much deserved) attention. Karl Marx has once again become prominent in mainstream discussions, while also a concept such as universal basic income[3] neatly fits the increased attention. A basic income, after all, is about the connection between decency and work – or better said, lack of work, because the aim is to also offer the ones who may not be able to find employment, decent or not, to live decently.

For this issue of *Voices from Around the World*[4] we have gathered contributions that explore and critically reflect on notions of decent versus indecent work from a global and comparative perspective, with the aim of achieving a more detailed understanding of labour relations worldwide. By bringing different discourses of (in-)decent work into dialogue, we aim to stimulate debate on the values and ethics of work as viewed through a comparative perspective. On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the ILO in 2019, we consider this issue a timely contribution to general questions of work and the good life worldwide. In particular, socioeconomic transformations in the Global South and growing inequalities appear to create new exploitative labour relations and precaritization.

Reflecting on the history of ILO debates and initiatives, Oliver Tappe discusses colonial indentured labour as one of the key fields where discourses of forced labour and 'indecent' work were played out. 'Coolie' labourers in the colonial plantation economy often had to endure terrible working conditions, racialized violence, and legal insecurity. This reminds us of the precarious conditions of present-day contract workers, for example in the Arab Gulf States.

In her contribution on labour relations in Vietnam, Angie Ngoc Tran illustrates how neoliberal tendencies in a late-socialist environment create particular challenges for the workers. She

[2] http://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Bullshit-Jobs/David-Graeber/9781501143311
[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basic_income
[4] http://voices.uni-koeln.de/

focuses on a specific aspect of the 1999 ILO Decent Work Report – the 'social dialogue' goal – to show the difficulties of implementing ILO frameworks on the ground. So far, this dialogue seems to serve the interests of the management rather than to increase the bargaining power of the Vietnamese workers or improve their working conditions.
Gerda Kuiper, in her contribution, discusses labour conditions at the global hub of flower production around Lake Naivasha, Kenya. She demonstrates the complexities of defining (in)decent work conditions in a global industry, not least because what is considered 'decent' is often decided by (global) actors who are not directly involved. To gain a better understanding, Kuiper argues, we need to also pay attention to how local workers perceive the content of their work (and related conditions), instead of portraying them as actors without agency.

Introducing another example of a global commodity chain and related labour relations, Oliver Pye, Dominik Hofzumahaus, and Panitda Saiyarod take us to industrial banana plantations in Southeast Asia that mainly serve the huge demand of the Chinese market. They show how banana-related work has transformed from small-scale peasant production to a system of alienated wage labour. They conclude that this alienated labour cannot be decent, and that it is bound up with an alienated relation to nature.

Christal O. Spel takes us to real-life workers in the streets of Pretoria. She describes the rough yet structured everyday life of cardboard collectors and self-employed street vendors. These street workers, Spel argues, do not fit into conventional, narrow definitions of work, decent work, or other concepts based on formal employment relations. Her reflective piece is at once poetic and at the same time realistic – detailing how these people invent labour to survive in the streets.

Finally, Gilles Reckinger alerts us to look at our own societies to find the predicament of decent work today. Taking the example of Italy's orange plantations, Reckinger shows how the current European border regime promotes slavery-like working conditions for migrants. His descriptions of precarious working and living conditions of African refugees in Europe are just another illustration of the manifold challenges that the ILO and other actors concerned with decent work are facing at the moment.

‘Indecent’ Work? The Case of Colonial Indentured Labour

by Oliver Tappe

After the foundation of the ILO in 1919, a key element of the organization’s activities was the fight against forced labour – as it were, ‘indecent’ labour relations – worldwide. Many decades later, following numerous campaigns against ‘modern slavery’ and in favour of decent labour, this struggle is far from over. Global variants of contract labour, in particular, still recall colonial systems of indenture that often implied coercion and violence. The ILO’s engagement with colonial labour relations was a precursor of the ongoing global battle for decent work.

Variants of indentured or contract labour constituted the pillar of colonial labour relations after the abolition of slavery. So-called ‘coolies’ signed work contracts for a specific number of years, and for that time became bound to their employers, with a high risk of exploitation. Within this framework, millions of Indian and Chinese labourers were shipped around the globe to work in labour-intensive sectors such as plantations, mining, and infrastructure projects. The legacy of indenture is reflected by the demography of créole societies such as Mauritius, where the first large-scale experiments with Indian indentured labour were begun in the 1830s (Northrup 1995; Allen 2014).

Established as an alternative to slave labour, contract labour was indeed advantageous for the colonial powers and their claim to be undertaking a ‘civilizing mission’: under the guise of an allegedly voluntary recruitment, with good payment and legal security for the workers, the Asian ‘coolies’ became a disposable labour force, since colonial capitalists had to invest less in the workers’ bodies than in the case of slavery. They benefited especially from a continual flow of impoverished people from the vast hinterlands of China and India who signed often treacherous labour contracts to work in unknown places abroad.

In British South Africa, for example, the plantations and mining industry relied on itinerant and bonded labour. While Indian ‘coolies’ were mainly employed by the sugar and tea plantations of Natal, Africans from the whole southern part of the continent worked in the gold mines of

the Transvaal, from 1904 supplemented by 63,000 Chinese indentured labourers (Lindner 2016). Colonial capitalists were obliged to provide suitable lodgings, food, and medical care. However, breaches of these obligations were common, in addition to illegal floggings, withheld wages, and sexual assault (ibid.).

Nationaal Archief [CC0], via Wikimedia Commons[5]

Thus, colonial contract labour revealed similar aspects of coercion as slavery had before, and was already being condemned as a "new system of slavery" in British Parliament in 1840 (Tinker 1974). For the time under contract, labourers lost basic rights and were subject to exploitation, racism, and violence. Even when conditions were not as extreme as under chattel slavery, coerced labour still tolerated labour relationships that implied violent control, economic exploitation, forced immobilization, and oppressive debt obligations (Zeuske 2018; van der Linden and Rodríguez García 2016; Damir-Geilsdorf *et al.* 2016; Hu-DeHart 1993).

[5] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chinese_Coolies_and_Overseers,_Bestanddeelnr_815_13.jpg

Progress in securing workers' rights in the metropole did not find an equivalent in the colonies, where 'native labourers' were often considered racially inferior, and forced work a means to discipline and 'educate' the non-European population (Maul 2007; Lindner 2011). Unsurprisingly, the Indian nationalist movement under Gandhi attacked the racist system of indenture, and in 1917 achieved a ban in India (Sturman 2014). However, in most colonies the system continued, as in the case of French Indochina, where a European 'might believe he had the right to beat, sometimes fatally, a worker whom he perceived to be lazy or rebellious' (Brocheux and Hémery 2009: 193).

This double standard of workers' rights challenged the internationalist and humanitarian aims of the ILO. When it was founded in 1919, the organization problematised the fact that definitions of slavery remained narrow, restricted to the possession of one person by another, meaning that other forms of coerced and forced labour thus counted as 'free' (Maul 2007). Some of the operational indicators of unfree labour defined by the ILO – for example, in the context of Asian contract labour in the Gulf States – still help to explain degrees of coercion within colonial contract labour: 'Unfree recruitment', which means coercive as well as deceptive recruitment; 'Life and work under duress', including limited mobility, withholding of wages, forced overtime work, and the retention of identity papers; and the 'impossibility of leaving the employer' as exemplified by the various penalties for 'breach of contract' on the colonial plantations (Damir-Geilsdorf 2016; Aso 2018).

Rubber plantations in Indochina are a case in point. During the rubber boom of the 1920s, an average of 12,000 Vietnamese labourers from densely populated coastal Tonkin were brought to the upland plateaus of southern Indochina where locally available labour was scarce. The Vietnamese 'coolies' endured scandalous sanitary and medical conditions, miserable housing, and insufficient nourishment, and faced severe corporal punishment for the slightest offence (Tappe 2016). A system of advances and withheld salaries, various penalties, and the need to buy food and goods from plantation-run shops entailed indebtedness that forced many workers into signing consecutive contracts (Aso 2018; Boucheret 2008). This situation fits the criteria to be classed as forced labour, which the ILO Convention 29 from 1930 defined as "all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily"[6].

In late-1920s France, the Ministry of Colonies had started to pay more attention to the human factor on behalf of an ongoing justification of colonial rule, and a new leftist and internationalist government had received the message of the ILO positively. Thus, they allowed some improvements to be made to the 'coolies'' plight. According to historian Marianne Boucheret (2001), the Ministry of Colonies opened a Pandora's box in 1926 when it initiated surveys on living conditions and became interested in social questions. Inspectors produced disturbing accounts of insufficient housing and sanitary conditions, arbitrary violence, and relentless exploitation of the workers' bodies. Resulting reforms to improve the conditions – while meeting fierce resistance from the planters' lobby – were still mainly directed at continual justification of

[6] https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C029

the system of indentured labour, which was considered indispensable for a functioning colonial economy, and basically thought beneficial for the colonised (ibid.).

However, colonial contract labour in many respects still resembled forced labour more than what would count today as decent labour according to ILO definitions.[7] Aspects of security in the workplace and social protection for families, as well as freedom to express concerns and to organize, were unknown to many 'coolies'. Rather, exploitation and violence prevailed on some plantations, as literary memories of former plantation workers illustrate (see for instance Binh 1985). In the 1930s, plantation workers organized strikes and started to respond to the emerging anticolonial and communist propaganda in Indochina: the Vietnamese 'coolie' became a prominent symbol of colonial oppression (see Brocheux and Hémery 2009; Tran 2013).

In Indochina and elsewhere, after colonialism this system of indentured labour seemed to disappear. The ILO shifted its focus to human rights issues, in particular with regard to forced labour in socialist countries. Meanwhile, newly established systems of contract labour, most notably the state-sponsored labour migration in the Philippines from the mid-1970s, resembled the mechanisms of colonial indenture (Piper et al. 2016; Derks 2010). The ILO now has to face new global challenges: today, Asian construction workers in the Gulf States and workers in the global care economy have to balance economic opportunity with precarious living and working conditions, legal insecurity, and racial and sexual harrassment (see e.g. Gardner 2012; Kitiarsa 2014; Nguyen 2015; Killias 2018).

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[7] https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm

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'Decent Work' Examined:
Eyes Wide Open in Labor Relations in Vietnam

by Angie Ngọc Trần

The primary goal of the 1999 ILO Decent Work Report has four laudable strategic objectives: the promotion of rights at work; employment; social protection; and social dialogue.[8] I focus on the "social dialogue" goal, because it is one of the most oft-cited ways to reduce industrial conflicts in a country that has witnessed thousands of wildcat strikes, mostly over basic labor rights (wages, benefits, working conditions). These strikes, led by workers not the unions, have gained only short-term fixes.[9]

The definition of social dialogue, one of the four Decent Work objectives**,** is progressive and encompassing, as it: "requires participation and freedom of association, and is therefore an end in itself in democratic societies. It is also a means **of ensuring conflict resolution, social equity and effective policy implementation**. It is the means by which rights are defended, employment promoted and work secured" (my emphasis).[10] The tripartite system is prominent in the ILO Decent Work declaration to engender social dialogue: "Governments, employers and workers have to accommodate their different interests in creative ways to respond to the demand for decent work placed upon them by individuals, families and communities everywhere."[11]

However, the assumption that the three sides in the enshrined tripartite structure have equal voice at the negotiating table does *not* reflect the reality in Vietnam. I argue that the implementation of social dialogue has *not* genuinely benefited workers when the three sides in this framework do not have equal voices at the negotiating table. As demonstrated in the three

[8] Decent Work. International Labour Conference, 87th Session 1999. https://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/P/09605/09605(1999-87).pdf, p. 3.
[9] Tran, AN (2013) Ties That Bind: Cultural Identity, Class and Law in Flexible Labor Resistance in Vietnam. Southeast Asia Program (SEAP), Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY; Anner, Mark and Liu, Xiangmin. Harmonious Unions and Rebellious Workers. *ILR Review*, 2016, 69(1):3-28.
[10] ILO 1999, pp. 3-4.
[11] ILO 1999, p. 4.

cases below, labor relations in Vietnam have witnessed the strengthening of the state-management alliance and the weakening of labor, represented by one overarching labor union, the Vietnamese General Confederation of Labor (VGCL).[12] Moreover, the actual implementation of social dialogue at the factory level focuses on only conflict resolution, missing the other two goals: social equity, and effective policy implementation, which would have addressed the deep-rooted problems in labor relations and improved workers' lives.

Vietnam has an even more rigorous periodic workplace dialogue, which I have called "democratic dialogue."[13] After the peak of the strike wave in 2011, the government became wary of this instability and required periodic workplace dialogues, as stated in the 2012 Labor Code revision.[14] A year later, the government introduced the progressive Decree 60 – Grassroots Democracy Regulation in the Workplace, to implement this workplace dialogue provision, specifically detailing the purpose, forms, and content of these dialogues.[15] Democratic dialogue at the factory level requires management to disclose financial information to workers, which can empower workers and unions in collective bargaining. Every three months, employers are required to hold discussions, during which they must publicize a long list of information, including, but not limited to, the following three key items: production and business plans, wage scales and grades, and the annual financial statement on all items related to workers.[16] Clearly, this long list requires *management's compliance* with transparency, and if enforced properly, can level the power relations in the labor–state–management tripartite system.

The VGCL had tried in good faith to implement democratic dialogue but was mostly unsuccessful. They formed a Department of Labor Relations, focusing on harmonizing labor relations on the factory floor based on the laws, and holding management accountable to social insurance contributions in 2014.[17] In 2015, they issued a resolution called "Pushing Forward Workplace Dialogues in Enterprises" and published guidelines for management and the unions to facilitate democratic dialogue at the enterprise level. Unfortunately, they were not able to articulate the guidelines clearly, partly due to their unrealistic expectation of "harmonious relations" between

[12] Vietnam still has not yet ratified ILO convention #87 (freedom of association) which would have allowed many unions to compete to represent workers.
[13] Tran, Bair and Werner, "Forcing change from the outside? The role of trade-labor linkages in transforming Vietnam's labor regime," *Competition and Change*, October 2017
[14] The 2012 Labor Code, Chapter 5, "Dialogue at the Workplace, Collective Bargaining, and Collective Labour Agreement"
[15] Ministerial Decree 60/2013/ND-CP. Available from: http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/natlex4.detail?p_lang=en&p_isn=94441&p_country=VNM&p_count=532
[16] The rest of the required management's disclosure includes: rules and regulations on recruitment and employment, bonuses, and labor protections; implementation of policies especially on severance allowance, wages and bonuses, social insurance, unemployment insurance and medical insurance for employees, collective labor agreement of enterprise, the use of funds contributed by employees, management's contribution to the union's fund and payment to social, medical and unemployment insurance funds.
[17] Pham Chi (2014) Thực hiện 5 nhiệm vụ trọng tâm về quan hệ lao động. Lao Động, April 18. http://laodong.com.vn/cong-doan/thuc-hien-5-nhiem-vu-trong-tam-ve-quan-he-lao-dong-194259.bld

labor and management in a market system.[18] Moreover, the union representatives at the workplace level lack the capacity to carry out these tasks.

With the VGCL's inability to implement democratic dialogue, the ILO intervened by using "social dialogue," as a form of workplace dialogue, in the platform that it created in 2007 and developed in Vietnam in 2009. In consultation with the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs and the unions, Better Work Vietnam (BWV) is a social compliance auditing service provider, funded by global capitalists (including the International Finance Corporation, industries and businesses). The ILO funded the Research Center for Employment Relations, a private labor consultancy, to create a manual for unions and employers on how to conduct these periodic dialogues, in collaboration with the management association (the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce and Industry) and the unions.[19] The manual includes management interests and admits that the main goal is to help "minimize labor conflicts."[20] For instance, it elaborates a step-by-step procedure for "emergency dialogues" to deal with *potential strikes*, sudden policy changes that can negatively affect workers without their input, and external conditions such as inflation and natural disasters. Again, the focus on conflict resolution ignores the other two goals – social equity and effective policy implementation – which would have addressed the root causes of these strikes.

I present the following three cases to demonstrate that the implementation of social dialogue will *not* genuinely benefit workers when the three sides in a tripartite framework do not have the same power at the negotiating table.

Lopsided Tripartite Structure: The National Wage Council

Strikes are costly, so promoting harmonious relations between labor and management to avoid strikes is important. Since most strikes are about non-livable minimum wages, the formation of a National Wage Council (NWC) to bring all three sides to the table in a transparent manner should be a good thing. However, the reality is more complex. The NWC was formed in 2013 to advise the prime minister on annual minimum wage increases.[21] Using the ILO tripartite structure, the 15 representatives are divided equally among the three interests: five members for each side; the state's interests, business interests, and labor interests. A downward trend of minimum wage increases over seven rounds of negotiations by the NWC confirms the strengthening of the state-management alliance and the weakening bargaining power of the VGCL to establish livable wages for workers. Here is the evidence of eroding annual minimum

[18] Pham thi Thu Lan (2017) Why always wildcat strikes in Vietnam? Global Labour Column, University of Witwatersrand Johannesburg, October.
[19] Do, QC, Nguyen LA, Nguyen VQ, et al. (2016) Social dialogue at the workplace: Manual for unions and employers. Research Center for Employment Relations, VCCI, VGCL: Hanoi
[20] Do et al., 2016
[21] Prime Minister Decision 1055/QĐ-TT formed the National Wage Council (NWC), 2013. Available from: http://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Lao-dong-Tien-luong/Quyet-dinh-1055-QD-TTg-thanh-lap-Hoi-dong-tien-luong-quoc-gia-nam-2013-198352.aspx

wage increases since the formation of the NWC: 29.5% (2013), 22.9% (2014); 14.3% (2015), 12.4% (2016), 7.3% (2017), 6.5% (2018), 5.3% (2019).[22] A study by the Institute for Workers and Trade Unions argues that while the 2018 increase (6.5%) addressed some inflation and labor productivity concerns, it failed to address the basic necessities of workers.[23] The average monthly wage of a factory worker in Vietnam is less than $150 a month,[24] which is not a livable wage and thus requiring a second (or third) job to make ends meet. Newspapers have exposed the hard lives of workers, their substandard housing, and inadequate nutrition for them and their children.[25]

Better Work Vietnam, or Else!

Better Work Vietnam (BWV) opened its office in Vietnam in 2009. It is a one-stop shop, providing services for a fee, such as organizing social dialogues, providing assessment and compliance audits, and other management services. This program demonstrates how social dialogue has been used to promote management's key goal: reducing industrial conflict. While harmonious labor relations benefit both employers and workers, this issue represents only one third of social dialogue's charge (ILO definition), and falls far short of demanding management's compliance as required in *democratic* dialogue (Vietnamese definition). Corporations in the global supply chains claim to use "social dialogue" to comply with Vietnamese labor laws and ILO's Decent Work to appease conscientious global end-users. Global brands and retailers, local suppliers, factory owners, and managers pay fees to receive detailed compliance reports gathered by audits on participating factories, not available to the public.[26]

BWV is a watered-down version of its predecessor in labor-monitoring programs.[27] Better Factories Cambodia (BFC) is a much more rigorous and robust factory-monitoring program, arising from a binding trade–labor linkage model between the U.S. and Cambodia to ensure labor compliance for access to US markets. The BFC auditing program creates the Transparency Database Report, which provides detailed information regarding violations at particular factories, including the factories' full names so the general public can monitor these and the remediation processes.[28] On the other hand, after a lot of foot-dragging, BWV finally published their

[22] Tran "Contradictions of Multi-Stakeholder Framework in the Transformations of Vietnamese Labor Relations," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Vietnam*, edited by Jonathan London, et al., forthcoming in 2019.
[23] The 2018 minimum wage increase was discussed in 2017. This is cited in Thuy Truc, Tăng lương 13,3% để đáp ứng mức sống tối thiểu, *Kinh tế và đô thị*, reprinted in *Nguoi Lao Dong*, https://nld.com.vn/cong-doan/tang-luong-133-de-dap-ung-muc-song-toi-thieu-20170726142732634.htm
[24] Voice of Vietnam, Average Salary https://www.vietnamonline.com/az/average-salary.html , accessed December 5, 2018.
[25] Tran, 2019 and photos.
[26] Bair J (2017) Contextualizing compliance: Hybrid governance in global value chains. New Political Economy 22(2):169–185.
[27] See Tran, forthcoming 2019, for more in-depth analysis on the formation of BWV (with a strong ILO role) and impacts of BWV.
[28] BFC (2018) Welcome to Better Factories Cambodia's Transparency Database. http://betterfactories.org/transparency/en/ (accessed on July 24, 2018).

transparency database to make available publicly a list of labor violations at participating factories. The BWV factory-level compliance report database provides a skimpy bullet-point list of generic violations of selected international core labor standards and domestic laws, with no details about how violating factories address their violations.[29]

BWV claimed to have successfully fulfilled the social-dialogue requirement,[30] but this claim is questionable at many levels. First, the mechanism used to promote social dialogue, the worker–management bodies known as Performance Improvement Consultative Committees (PICCs), shifts the responsibility for improving the company's–performance to workers, instead of management as required by the original democratic dialogue. The key intention of PICC is to use social dialogue to reduce strikes, so listening to workers' grievances can help bring about "harmonized relations" by pre-empting strikes. Second, PICC's claim that using social dialogue has a spillover effect in reducing strikes has been called into question by scholars, noting that strike statistics actually increased, not decreased, after BWV opened offices in Vietnam.[31]

Taking Power to the Street, not at the Table

In 2015, the seven-day Social Insurance strike demonstrates the power of collective action by workers who rose up to protect themselves when the unions did not represent their interests and the state tried to enforce a law that does not protect workers from footloose employers. These irresponsible employers (mostly foreign) abandoned factories, avoiding social insurance contributions and leaving workers stranded without pay. These rampant management behaviors resulted in underfunded social insurance, job insecurity, and precarious work conditions that led workers to select the second-best option, withdrawing a single lump-sum social insurance payment, to protect themselves.[32] In an ideal situation, workers would benefit from accumulating 20 years' worth of social insurance payments and collecting them after reaching their retirement ages (60 for men and 55 for women). However, given the above realities, this law, if implemented, would have forced workers to be exploited by the global supply chains when their bodies are exhausted way before their official retirement ages.

It took the collective action of over 90,000 workers to pre-empt the 2014 Social Insurance Law, which was to take effect starting January 1, 2016. This 2014 law required that workers reach their respective retirement age before they can receive their monthly pension after accumulating 20

[29] Statistical Data. Better Work. https://portal.betterwork.org/transparency/compliance# (accessed on July 24, 2018).
[30] BWV, Presentation at the Ton Duc Thang University Labor conference in 2015.
[31] Tran "Contradictions of Multi-Stakeholder Framework in the Transformations of Vietnamese Labor Relations"; Anner, M (2017) Wildcat strikes and Better Work bipartite committees in Vietnam: Toward an elect, represent, protect and empower framework. Better Work Discussion Paper No. 24. Available at: https://betterwork.org/blog/portfolio/12829/ (accessed 5 July 2017); Chae, S (2013) The Political Economy of strikes in 2011: the cases of four Korean garment factories in Binh Duong, unpublished report for the ILO-Vietnam Industrial Relations Project, Chonbuk University, South Korea.
[32] Tran Ties That Bind, 2013.

years of social insurance payments. Thus, it denied workers the right to withdraw a single lump-sum social insurance payment (based on their total contributions) when they stopped working before reaching their retirement age.[33] When the workers understood the negative ramifications of the 2014 law, they went on a massive strike in the Taiwan-listed PouYuen Vietnam Co. Ltd. (manufacturing sports shoes and apparel for the world's biggest brands) in Ho Chi Minh City, which then spread to sympathetic strikes (many took place in BWV factories) in nearby provinces.[34] As a result, the workers won a small victory: on 2 April 2015, the Prime Minister issued a decree which was ratified by the National Assembly on 22 June 2015. This measure allows workers to receive a single lump-sum payment of their social insurance benefits whenever they stop working, even if they have accumulated less than twenty years' work time.

Conclusion

Realities in Vietnam show that the ILO tripartite framework is lopsided, and that well-intentioned social dialogue can be appropriated by management to be a cost-effective risk management tool, not benefiting labor as intended. To be fair, one should not expect the PICC model to do the union's job of collective bargaining, but it is important to note that as currently practiced in these PICCs, social dialogue serves the interest of the side that holds the most power in the tripartite system: management. As such, social dialogue not only falls short of the ILO definition, it is much more limited than "democratic dialogue," as defined in Vietnamese labor law. Without a level playing field in the tripartite system, a limited implementation of "social dialogue" (strike reduction) can lead to an illusion of harmonious industrial relations, which do not genuinely improve workers' conditions. Moreover, the continuous downward spiral of the annual minimum wage increase demonstrates clearly that management garners more power when their position receives support from the state, leaving the unions in the minority at the tripartite negotiating table.

Understandably, top-down "democratic dialogue" requires the agreement to participate on the part of both management and workers, but it is important to stay alert to how "social dialogue" has been commodified, watered down, and used to divert our attention away from genuine efforts to empower workers from the ground up.

The Vietnamese case shows that workers and the unions should not settle for less, given both national and global labor standards. Attention should be paid to informing workers of their rights so they can seize their power effectively *at the table*. Unions need to push back and demand management's compliance to disclose, for instance, these three items: production and business plans, wage scales and grades, and the annual financial statement related to workers. This crucial information can empower the workers and the unions at the negotiating table, especially when

[33] This was permitted under the former 2006 Social Insurance law.

[34] Tran, AN (2015) "Small Victory, Systemic Problems: The Strike of over 90,000 Vietnamese Workers for Social Insurance Justice," New Mandala (Australian National University), April 30. Available from: http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/newmandala/2015/04/30/small-victory-systemic-problems/

bargaining for wage increases, decent benefits, and job security. Only then can we approach a more genuine tripartite framework to ensure “Decent Work” for the workers.

Lives of migrant workers and their children in a small rental unit in Ho Chi Minh City. Image © Lê Tuyết, 2018.

A Korean owner fled his factory in Ho Chi Minh City, leaving workers stranded without pay and no insurance (social, health, and unemployment). Image © Lê Tuyết, 2018.

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 "indecency" 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.

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Decent Work, Decent Bananas?

by Oliver Pye, Dominik Hofzumahaus, Panitda Saiyarod

There are over one hundred different varieties of bananas in Southeast Asia, and farmers have used a score of different kinds in each country, ranging from small and sweet ones for direct eating to large, savoury cooking bananas. There is also a huge variety in the cultural significance of bananas and in how and where they are grown. Increasingly, however, this variety is being replaced by the industrial production of one variety – the Cavendish banana – in monoculture plantations. This has been the case for several decades in the Philippines, but in recent years plantation production has expanded into Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand to service the growing Chinese demand for supermarket bananas. This shift has also seen the transformation of banana-related work from small-scale peasant production to a system of alienated wage labour in the plantations, transportation infrastructure, and retail outlets that now characterize banana production. This photo story shows that alienated work cannot be decent, and that it is bound up with an alienated relation to nature.

The following pictures were taken by the authors in July 2018 on a joint research and educational trip to two banana plantations in Northern Thailand (Pha Ya Meng Rai and Chiang Khong) as part of the EU-funded KNOTS (Fostering multi-lateral knowledge networks of transdisciplinary studies to tackle global challenges) project.[35] The project brings together partners from different Southeast Asian and European universities, which meet once a year to contribute to transdisciplinary research and teaching, focusing on the topics of environment, migration, and social inequality, and initiating a closer colloboration with the non-academic sector.

[35] Disclaimer: This project has been funded with support of the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be made responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Picture © Panitda Saiyarod

(PS) The main varieties of Thai banana are 'Hom Thong' variety (Gros Michel), 'Kai' banana or baby banana, and 'Namwa' banana. The Rim Kok sub-district, located in Mueang Chiang Rai District, is a well-known local banana community enterprise. The community has grown bananas for more than 20 years and sells them to local markets and in pop-up stores in front of the growers' houses. The agricultural system is mixed-agro-forestry production; farmers control the process of production and the various products of their labour.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Cavendish (OP): As consumers, we automatically associate bananas with one variety: the Cavendish Banana, which now dominates industrial production and supermarket distribution. The Cavendish cultivar replaced an earlier dominant variety, the Gros Michel, which was wiped out by the Panama disease in the 1950s. Today, a new variant of the Panama disease has hit the banana plantations in The Philippines, one reason for the expansion of monoculture production in mainland Southeast Asia.

Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Plantation and Rubbish (DH): The Pha Ya Meng Rai Banana Plantation is a typical example of the large-scale monoculture plantations that increasingly characterize banana production across the world. Four hundred and thirty-two hectares of banana plants are arranged in lines in a sea of mud. The plantation occupies 8km of the bank of the River Ing in Northern Thailand.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Mekong (OP): A view from the Mekong, facing the Lao river bank, with banana plantations and forested mountains in the background. Mainly Chinese-owned plantations have spread across Laos over recent years. In 2017 the Lao Government shut down scores of plantations and has imposed a ban on new operations. Serious health impacts on plantation workers are cited as one of the main reasons for the policy.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Truck (OP): A Chinese truck waits to be loaded at a small-scale banana plantation in Northern Thailand. A vast infrastructure, now being expanded within the One Belt One Road project, connects fruit production in Northern Thailand to Chinese cities. Truckers drive to a major distribution network in Mohan, in Yunnan Province. Fruit is also shipped down the Mekong to Guanlei Port and then distributed across the country.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Boxes (OP): The distribution structure dominated by large supermarket chains in China puts its stamp on the production and labour process. The commodity required is a standardized 30kg box of banana bunches. The guidelines are strict in order to meet the standards. If the banana bunches exceed the required weight, individual bananas are simply cut out and thrown away. All other work steps are geared toward creating this uniform commodity.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Loading (OP): Throwing, catching, and stacking 30kg boxes is hard and, if done all day long, can hardly be described as decent work. Plantation owners in Northern Thailand employ gangs of Chinese workers who spend a few weeks training up local workers to meet the standardized requirements.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Inside Plantation (OP): The picture of thousands of banana clusters all wrapped in plastic is one of the most enduring images from a visit to the plantation. Each cluster is wrapped in cardboard, foam, and plastic to protect them from insects and the rain, and to ensure a constant temperature. Permanent workers, in this case Hmong from the mountain areas, are allocated 2,500m² of the plantation to prepare in this way. They are paid 9,000 Baht per month, just half of the legally stipulated minimum wage of 15,000 Baht.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Pesticides and Hormones (OP): Each cluster is treated with pesticides, fungicides, and growth hormones. Due to the monoculture mode of production, without this chemical treatment, pests would soon decimate the plantation. Pesticides can cause irritation of the skin, upper respiratory tract, and eyes; fatigue, nausea, and dizziness; and vomiting and diarrhea in workers applying them. Workers complained that basic safety requirements are not upheld on the plantation.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Harvesting (OP): Harvesting is men's work. Harvesters are paid at piece rate, 8 baht per cluster. Workers carry the clusters, which can weigh up to 50kg, as fast as they can from the banana plant to the truck, wading through mud, jumping across ditches and ducking under the wires and strings that hold up the bananas to stop them falling down in the wind. Depending on their strength, they carry between 70-100 bunches a day. They can earn up to 800 baht (22 Euros), which is good money in the Thai context. The cost is their health – back pains and injuries are common.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Workers in Hut (OP): Workers resting in a makeshift hut in the middle of the plantation. Their physical exhaustion is evident. In a short discussion, workers stated that they hated their work and that the only reason they do it is to earn the wage. The product of their labour and the work process itself does not belong to them. They are literally just selling their labour power to survive.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Assembly Line (OP): At the centre of the plantation is a huge factory-like compound, in which workers process the bananas. Here female workers are stripping the clusters – which have been unloaded and hung on the 'clothes line' – of their various packaging. Women workers make up the main workforce in the factory line, earning 300 Baht (8 Euros) a day.

Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Factory (DH): Each worker at the packing station is responsible for certain steps in the packing process. Some of them try to protect themselves from the chemicals with often inadequate protective clothing, such as gloves or face masks. Despite harsh working conditions, the workers – who are mostly locals from nearby villages – confirm that they prefer to work here rather than on the plantation. The harvesting work mostly has to be done by the ethnic minority Hmong, who often have few or no alternatives to the harsh work between the plants due to their precarious situations.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Washing (OP): Before being cut into smaller fingers for the boxes, the bunches are washed and then treated in a wax-and-chemical water vat. Each work step, from unloading the clusters, unwrapping them, and cutting the bunches from the stem, to the washing and waxing, cutting into smaller fingers, and packaging, is done on an assembly-line basis. This makes the work extremely monotonous.

Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Barracks (DH): The workforce is typically made up of locals, who work as seasonal labourers at harvest times, and migrant workers responsible for more permanent tasks, who live on the plantation. The housing is very basic, one-room habitations made of cement blocks, without proper air circulation. Workers describe them as 'adequate'. Living on-site saves time and money, as arriving late leads to heavy deductions in pay.

Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Living Quarters (DH): Workers recreate some aspects of rural life in the plantations. To supplement their meagre wages, some basic forms of subsistence gardening are practiced, such as the cultivation of papaya and chickens. Motorcycles are the main means of transport, and are important for workers' mobility.

Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Break (DH): A worker sits at the assembly line behind a pile of discarded bananas and takes his break. The workers at the packing station work from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and have only two short breaks of 10 minutes a day, at 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. Mobile phones play an important role in coordinating protests over wages and work conditions, which have characterized labour relations in the plantation.

Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Mobile Phones (DH): The smell in the packing station is unpleasant, and the station is messy. A lot of plastic garbage from the banana stems is lying around in the dirt on the ground. Not a pleasant place for working, or in which to take a break; there are not even proper seats. Two workers at the packing station are sitting on improvised seats and are busy with their mobile phones during their break.

Picture © Dominik Hofzumahaus

Mud and Rejects (DH): The processing and packing station in the middle of the plantation is a sea of mud, rubbish and banana-rejects. Bananas do not always grow to the specified standard bunch. Any deviant banana is discarded. The amount of thrown away bananas is substantial. Workers or locals living nearby would not eat them anyway.

Picture © Oliver Pye

Waste (OP): The waste from banana plantations is tremendous. A toxic mix of foam, cardboard, plastic and chemically treated banana stems is dumped on the plantation site. The alienation of work is mirrored by the alienation of the workers from nature. Ecological impact costs are not of interest to the investor, while the state fails to regulate and enforce standards to protect the environment.

Decent Work: A Multiplicity of Meanings of 'Decency' in Work

By Christal O. Spel

While walking along the street in Pretoria, South Africa, one will often come across young men pulling large sacks. From their heads to their toes the men are covered with what appears to be accumulated dirt, brownish, blackish and greyish. Their clothes are either layers of various garments to give warmth during the cold days, or they are bare chested or wearing worn-out T-shirts/singlets. The large brownish and blackish sacks may be placed on rolling boards, or may be simply pulled along on the road. I met one of these men sleeping by the roadside under the midday sun, his large sack strategically placed to prevent pedestrians from walking over him. I met another, at the end of the day, laying his battered mattress on the pedestrian pavement. After carefully placing the mattress, sheets of cardboard, and blankets, all brownish and blackish like the bare soil by the side of the pavement, he lay on the makeshift bed, brought out a cigarette, struck a match and lit it. He turned to a bag by his side and brought out a bright and colourful magazine and appeared to be reading the pages of the magazine as he puffed on his cigarette. At one side, vehicles continued to zip past him; on the other side, pedestrians continued to walk by. Who are these men? Meet the workers at the lower end of the recycling chain in Pretoria: the big sacks they pull contain cardboard, paper, plastics, and other recyclable materials that they have rescued from the bins with their bare hands. They are not crazy people; they are workers, toiling to make a living wage.

There is another man; I walk past him every day on the way to my office. He comes out in the mornings, bringing his stool to sit on, a manually fabricated grill, and a bag of charcoal. He sells roasted corn all day, seven days a week. He said he wakes up very early to go to the farm market, purchases a sack of maize from farmers, and brings it to the city to sell. I asked if he makes enough profit: he responded: 'it is better than stealing'. He says he cuts his profits because buyers are unwilling to pay the right price, so rather than sell one cob of corn for 12 rand, he makes do with selling it for 10 rand. That way he makes enough to keep the trade going and keep 'something' coming in.

At the side of a road sits a woman with her young son. She solicits the drivers of cars for alms. She is called a panhandler. She makes her living income from panhandling. The government warns citizens not to give alms to beggars, rather advising them to give donations to the many NGOs and CSOs that provides food and care for the less fortunate ones. The panhandler sometimes benefits from the services from NGOs and CSOs, but still return to the streets because her needs are not satisfied.

The list goes on. Many people on this side of the world make their living in numerous ways; they do not *earn* their living (gain deservedly in return for one's behaviour or achievements); they *make* it – as self-employed persons. Their very presence provokes strong contestation of the conceptualization of 'decent work' as connoting access to jobs, an employment-centred conception that puts the heat on employers of labour to provide fair pay and safe and dignified conditions for work. Such a narrow conception of work excludes those that do not have 'work', but nonetheless generate a living income from other economic activities. The exclusion of these 'other' workers calls attention to the lopsided definition of work, and to the broader macro-economic and social conditions that gives 'decency' to work, beyond the rules and conditions of big organizations and other employers. In addition, such a narrow conception of decent work stigmatizes other forms of work that do not meet the criteria to be considered 'decent work' in ways that also hurt and demean the individual values that motivates people to engage themselves in such work. By extension, the social value of such labour does not benefit from the formally promoted criteria of what constitutes decent work.

To technicalize the conception of decent work reduces its multidimensionality and renders stagnant the cultural, social, and political dynamism that links the notion of decency to the variety of practical income-making activities in which real people engage.

Europe's Boat Migrants, Italy's Oranges and New Expressions of Slavery. Ethnographical Insights from Calabria

By Gilles Reckinger

My book *Bittere Orangen. Ein neues Gesicht der Sklaverei in Europa [Bitter Oranges. A new face of slavery in Europe]* (Wuppertal: Peter Hammer Verlag, 2018) addresses some desiderata in recent sociological and anthropological research about boat migration to Southern Italy by ethnographically following the migrants after they are brought from Lampedusa to the Italian mainland, and by trying to understand how the control of migration movements at national and EU levels are intertwined with precarious labour markets.

Bitter Oranges. A new Face of Slavery in Europe. © Gilles Reckinger, Magdalene Krumbeck

Thousands of immigrants arrive by boat to Italy every year, greatly overstretching the available provision of housing facilities and state support. More and more immigrants, including asylum seekers as well as refugees or those still in limbo, are left to their own devices. To survive, they have no other choice than to seek seasonal day-to-day labour on fruit and vegetable plantations in Southern Italy.

Harvest worker on fruit plantation in Southern Italy. Picture © Gilles Reckinger

With more nation-states closing their borders as the Schengen area falls apart, it has become impossible for many migrants to leave Italy, exposing them to severe exploitation and forcing them into slavery-like working conditions.

The harvest workers are hired on a daily basis, usually without legal contracts. On average, a daily wage for 12–14 hours of work amounts to a maximum of 25 euros. Competition is intense and most African harvest workers only find work a few days a month, resulting in monthly incomes ranging from 100 to 300 euros.

The Italian government is aware of the situation. In the past, it has only set up a few tent camps and, more recently, built some houses for the migrants, responding to this structural situation with a logic of mere reaction to what is wrongly conceived to be a sudden emergency, while it is really a consequence of the current European border regime and its structurally racist architecture.

As no proper housing is available for most migrants, they are forced to live in makeshift camps made of plastic and cardboard. In terms of hygiene, conditions are disastrous.

Precarious housing conditions. Picture © Gilles Reckinger

Precarious housing conditions. Picture © Gilles Reckinger

Precarious housing conditions. Picture © Gilles Reckinger

In my book, I ethnographically follow the everyday lives of the harvest workers in Calabria and elsewhere in Italy. I also analyze how their vulnerability is shaped by the specific conditions they are being brought into by European political decisions.

My book reminds readers that a treatment of this topic according to a logic of disaster management is counterproductive, because, while trying to combat symptoms, it distracts from the urgent need to find European, inclusive solutions that take into account Europe's human-rights heritage.