

Struggling to Compete: Liberalization and Belizean Banana Production

Karen Ross and Tony Weis

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the restructuring of the Belizean banana industry, following the phase-out of preferential trade. The industry has sought to access a high value export niche based on rigorous quality standards. Drawing from 121 qualitative interviews with plantation workers, managers, and owners, the analysis focuses on the tactics deployed by owners and management teams to maintain a reliable workforce while containing costs, and the responses of workers to the changing conditions of plantation labour. The banana industry's ability to access this competitive niche is precarious, as changing working conditions are undermining the labour force stability needed to meet quality standards.

Keywords: Bananas, Belize, trade liberalization, agrarian change

For over two decades, beginning in the mid-1970s with the Lomé Convention, banana exports from the African, Caribbean, and Pacific (ACP) group of countries had preferential access to the markets of the European Economic Community—later European Union (EU)—countries. The quotas and stable prices resulting from the EU-ACP system of preferential trade helped Belize to establish a considerable dependence upon banana exports, as was the case in a number of other small countries in the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) (Fridell 2011; Moberg and Lyon 2010; Myers 2004; Murray and Reynolds 2000).

The assurance of preferential markets was not without problems and debates. Some critics stressed their role in perpetuating, or even deepening, commodity dependence in the long run, and in providing unequal opportunities within and between exporting countries, since only some products and producers benefitted from enhanced market access (Slocum 2006; Reynolds and Murray 1998). Nevertheless, preferential trade agreements were widely considered to be relatively beneficial to important agro-export sectors in ACP countries as they provided a significant

degree of price and volume stability, along with a long-term European commitment to development assistance oriented towards both industry-specific investments, and broader community-based social improvements (Fridell 2013; Slocum 2006; Grossman 1998).

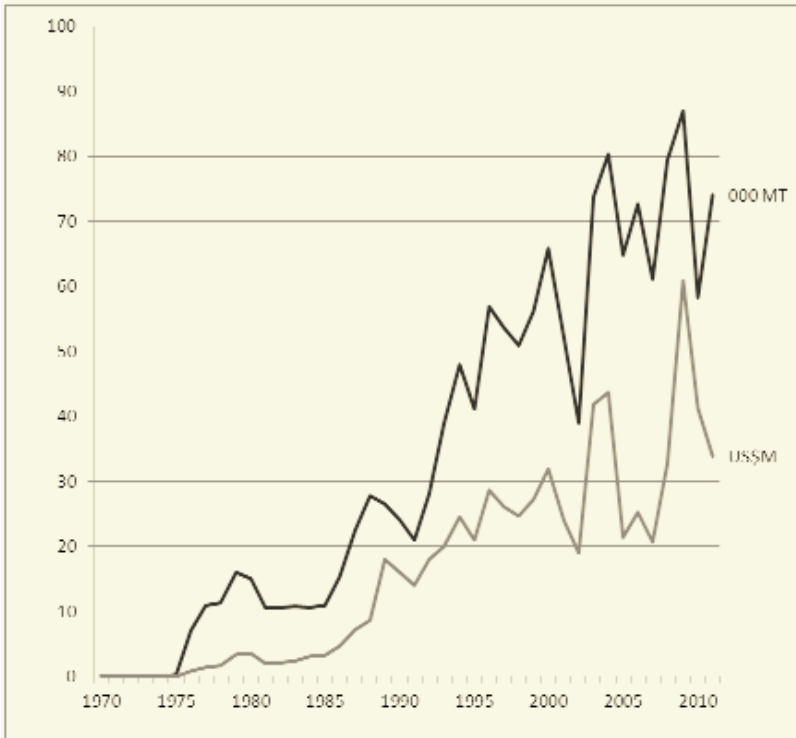
However, in the late 1990s this system of preferential trade was determined to be 'unfair' by the World Trade Organization (WTO), which ruled that it had to be phased out (Myers 2004). As European market access was liberalized, banana production and exports quickly collapsed in many ACP countries, most notably in the small Windward Island countries of the eastern Caribbean, where bananas had come to wholly dominate the export base (Anania 2008; Slocum 2006; Myers 2004; Moberg and Striffler 2003).

But in a few ACP countries, such as Cameroon, Cote D'Ivoire, the Dominican Republic, and Belize, banana exports increased as preferences and quotas were phased out (Anania 2008). With a population of just 320,000 people, Belize is the smallest country where banana exporting has expanded in the wake of liberalization, with an industry that covers around 2,400 hectares and employs roughly 3,000 people directly and 10,000 indirectly (MED and MAF 2011).¹ Though this is tiny by global standards,² in relative terms the industry is extremely significant to Belize, as bananas are the third largest export by value, responsible for about 15 percent of the country's total export earnings in 2012 (FAOSTAT 2014). Figure 1 indicates how Belizean banana exports grew steadily in terms of volume and value following the onset of preferential trade in the 1970s, and continued rising in the late 1990s even as these preferences were phased out. This figure also reflects the inherent vulnerability of the industry to severe weather events like hurricanes, which have been responsible for some sudden major dips in production, as well as the volatile relationship between volume and earnings.

1 Indirect employment is broadly defined as the auxiliary work beyond the plantations themselves; that is, work that is related to the banana industry but does not occur in the fields or the packing sheds. Some examples include: the truck drivers who drive the bananas from plantations to port, the staff at the port, and the market vendors who sell the lower grade bananas in the local market.

2 For a quick sense of scale, the world's largest exporting country is Ecuador, which exports on average more bananas in a week than Belize does all year (FAOSTAT 2014).

Figure 1: Belizean banana exports from 1975-2012, by volume (thousand MT) and value (million USD)



Source for data: FAOSTAT (2015)

To advocates of neoliberal development policies, agricultural growth is expected to be export-led under the discipline of trade liberalization, with land and labour focused on commodities that have a comparative advantage in world markets, while domestic markets are opened to everything else. The goal, in essence, is to ensure that the most cost-efficient commodity producers will have incentives to expand as much as demand allows, in order to maximize foreign exchange earnings and the capacity to purchase the cheapest goods from world markets (Weis 2007). Because large-scale farms have the greatest potential for specialization and labour-saving technologies, and hence are capable of greater output per worker, they appear to be more efficient than small farms—

according to a particular conception of agricultural efficiency premised on labour productivity (Weis 2010).

For Belize, this prescription has meant continuing to struggle to compete in bananas following the loss of preferential trade, though the industry lacks the economies of scale and cost efficiencies of its competitors. The key to its survival in this changing context has been the establishment of a niche export market that is contingent on new quality standards, and that generates higher prices than could otherwise be earned in world markets. A central objective of this research was to understand what these competitive pressures entail on the ground, and in particular, how this restructuring is affecting the conditions of agrarian labour. Through this grounded understanding of changing working conditions, the research seeks to problematize the nature of comparative advantage in the global marketplace, and show how this advantage ultimately rests on precarious social relations. This demonstration, in turn, sheds light on some of the tensions associated with continuing dependence on the export of tropical agricultural commodities.

PREFERENTIAL MARKETS AND THE MAKING OF THE MODERN BANANA INDUSTRY IN BELIZE

Bananas are the most traded fruit in the world, with over seventeen million tonnes exported in 2011 (FAOSTAT 2014). As with most tropical commodities, banana exports have earned low prices that have steadily declined in real terms for decades, owing to a range of factors, most centrally the intense competition between more than fifteen producing countries, while a small number of transnational corporations (TNCs) dominate world markets. Thus, the nature of banana production and exporting provides a window into the interrelated problems of dependence upon tropical agricultural commodities, the earnings of which have tended to be highly volatile in the short-term, while declining steadily in real terms over a period of decades (Fridell 2011; Myers 2004; Moberg and Striffler 2003; Robbins 2003).

A small number of US-based TNCs (principally Dole, Del Monte, and Chiquita) have historically controlled much of the trade derived from production on large plantations in Latin America. The well-known phrase 'Banana Republic' has marked the ugly nature of this industry throughout the region, in particular, the powerful

alliances between US-based corporate interests, landed elites, and national political and military leaders, which ruthlessly exploit plantation labour (Chapman 2007; Moberg and Striffler 2003; Schlesinger and Kinzer 1982). Although the United Fruit Company (UFC) cleared two thousand five hundred acres of land for banana production in the Stann Creek district of Belize in the early 20th century,³ this production was relatively unsuccessful and quickly abandoned—sparing Belize from the fate of becoming a ‘Banana Republic’ like its neighbours (Moberg 1997; Schlesinger and Kinzer 1982).

After the demise of this effort by the UFC, banana production in Belize (then British Honduras) did not expand again until after the Lomé Convention (Myers 2004; Josling and Taylor 2003). The advent of this preferential market was crucial to the establishment of the modern banana industry in Belize, as the assurance of stable prices and volumes made exporting seem viable, even with unit production costs that were considerably higher than on other Central American plantations. Banana plantations were targeted for the same general region the UFC had abandoned earlier in the century, the southern part of Stann Creek, along with the northern part of the adjoining Toledo district (see Figure 2). The re-birth of the ‘banana belt’, under the leadership of the Banana Control Board, was intended to stimulate development in a region that suffered from the highest levels of poverty in the country (Moberg 1997).

The Banana Control Board was initially composed of roughly 20 growers, who either represented their own large-scale plantation or smaller cooperative units, but this system was quickly replaced with the Banana Growers Association, composed of only 9 large-scale growers. This rapid consolidation of power reflected some of the challenges in building this industry from scratch. First, significant capital investment was needed for things like cable ways, irrigation systems, packing sheds and equipment, and large volumes of agro-chemicals, as plantation owners pursued economies of scale (though, as noted, Belizean plantations remained relatively small in comparison to those in other parts of Central America). Second, the risks of this capital investment were compounded by the fact that the cost of plantation labour was

3 The first banana exports from the colony actually date to the early 1800s, though production never took off.

Figure 2: The location of the 'Banana Belt' in Belize



Produced by: The Cartographic Section, Geography Department, Western, 2014

relatively high in Belize,⁴ and while the volume of exports took off quickly in the late 1970s, exports quickly plateaued in the early 1980s. To improve their margins, Belizean plantation owners sought to reduce their labour costs, and in this, benefitted from the immense political upheaval in Central America at the time (Moberg 1997).

As revolutionary forces in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador fought against US-backed dictatorships and counter-insurgencies in the proverbial ‘bloody 1980s’, hundreds of thousands of people were killed or displaced in the region. Waves of desperate migrants flowed out of these countries, with some spilling over into Belize. Belize was not only viewed as a safe haven in itself, but for some migrants was also perceived as a potential stepping stone (as an English-speaking country with a relatively stronger currency than its war-torn neighbours) to a bigger and brighter destination with greater opportunities: the United States. The coupling of these migratory pressures with the desire of Belizean plantation owners to cut labour costs, meant that Central American migrants (predominantly mestizos but also a small number of Mayans) quickly came to constitute the large majority of banana plantation workers in Belize—a shift that coincided with the dramatic surge in banana exports after 1985 (see Figure 1) and which was marked by violence, insecurity, and displacement. Given that the roots of this lay in the enduring legacies of the ‘Banana Republic’ era, it is a bitter irony that the Belizean banana industry grew in this way (Koeppel 2009; Chapman 2007; Bucheli and Read 2006; Moberg 1997; Schlesinger and Kinzer 1982).

Ultimately, the desperation driving the migration of this era served as a powerful discipline on plantation labour, magnified by migrants’ knowledge that many others were seeking work beyond the border. But it was not only desperation, or hopes for a path to the United States, that caused some of the migrants to set down new roots in Belize. The expansion of bananas in the 1980s, and into the 1990s, was accompanied by the European development commit-

4 Belize is now classed as an ‘upper middle income’ country by the World Bank and has a ‘medium’ Human Development Index ranking according to the UNDP. Its per capita GNI (around \$7600 in 2012) is considerably higher than many other banana producing countries, which translates into higher relative wage levels than its competitors – even if plantation wages are among the lowest in the country.

ments associated with the Lomé Convention, including support for rural electrification and sanitation, housing, roads, schools, and medical facilities. So while migrant workers initially moved into extremely impoverished living and working conditions (Moberg 1997), there were measurable improvements in things such as the housing stock and basic health and education services over time.

THE DEMISE OF PREFERENTIAL MARKETS AND COMPETITIVE RESTRUCTURING ON THE GROUND

Although the EU-ACP preferential trade regime represented a relatively small share of global trade in bananas, the United States along with leading Latin American banana exporting countries (pressed by the US-based TNCs who dominated world trade), challenged its legitimacy through the WTO, shortly after it had come into effect in 1995. The ensuing legal battle—famously dubbed the ‘banana wars’—played out over the late 1990s as part of the deepening institutionalization of trade liberalization, and, in the end, the WTO forced the EU to phase out the preferential access afforded to ACP imports.⁵

As noted at the outset, while many banana exporters in ACP countries have proven unable to compete without their share of the guaranteed ACP market, the Belizean banana industry has managed to ramp up production and exports in the wake of liberalization, despite the elimination of quotas and the dramatic reduction and simplification of tariffs. This growth has hinged on the successful cultivation of a high quality brand reputation for premium freshness and packaging, which rests on contracts with a single TNC. This entity, Fyffes, employs quality-based branding, encapsulated in the marketing slogan: *‘Fyffe times better than your average banana.’* According to some powerful metrics of development, like rising production and export earnings, this growth might

5 The WTO was critical of the EU’s banana licensing regime and ruled that preferences based on negotiations between groups of states constituted an ‘unfair’ trade practice. The EU challenged this ruling, but it was upheld upon appeal. Under preferential trade, the EU maintained volume quotas for ACP bananas that had ensured each country a certain percentage of the negotiated total, while imposing tariffs on all non-ACP bananas to increase their price in EU markets. Liberalization entailed both progressively reducing ACP quotas and eliminating non-ACP tariffs, with the result that ACP bananas were put into direct competition with one another and with more cost-efficient producers in non-ACP countries.

be seen to be a great competitive success story, with liberalization having forced new efficiencies.

However, there is an underbelly to this restructuring, as the contract relationship with Fyffes has intensified corporate control over the production process, with rigorous quality standards leading to increased demands being placed on owners, management and plantation workers. In order to understand the changing conditions of banana plantation labour, this research sought to explore whether farm owners and management teams were enforcing new disciplines or changing managerial tactics, and if so, how farm workers were responding to the range of managerial strategies being deployed. The study is based upon five months of immersed fieldwork in 2012 and a two week scoping exercise in 2010, and included 121 qualitative interviews with six owners (all male), fourteen managers (twelve male), ninety-eight labourers (sixty-four male), three government/corporate officials (two male), countless informal conversations, and extensive participant observation with plantation workers, farm managers, landowners, and relevant government officials.⁶

The research approach took inspiration from Tsing's (2005) ethnography of the logging industry in Indonesia, which considered the 'friction' at the intersections of structural political economic forces, operating at multiple scales, and the responses of different actors. This research also followed Tsing (2005) in attempting to understand how the complex tensions associated with highly unequal social relations play out in the course of production, and how they can fester or get ameliorated in ways that are often not unified or coordinated, with a recognition that there are many blurry lines between things like legality and illegality, public and private, discipline and manipulative exploitation, and submission and resistance.

The complex picture that emerges from this analysis is one of difficult working conditions and mounting social tensions, which

6 Most interviews were recorded and transcribed. Interviews with workers and managers were mainly conducted in Spanish and subsequently translated into English, while the majority of interviews with owners and government officials were conducted in English. Interview data was analyzed according to themes that were drawn from the literature and that emerged throughout the course of fieldwork. Participant observation was especially helpful in triangulating interview data on subjects where participants were less forthcoming.

could threaten to undermine a key foundation of the Belizean export niche. That is, a key aspect of the contract relationship between Belizean plantations and Fyffes is the pressure to adhere to high quality standards. This, however, is reverberating in conditions that threaten the reproduction of the sort of stable labour force that is needed to meet these standards—contradictions which highlight the precariousness of this new ‘comparative advantage’.

THE RESTRUCTURING IMPERATIVE

Before approaching the question of how the Belizean industry has sought to compete in a liberalized trade environment, it is important to first recognize that the question of whether alternatives should have been considered as the preferential market collapsed, barely registered among any research participants, from workers to managers, to plantation owners, to government officials. Responses to such counterfactual questions can shed important insights into the balance of social forces at work, including the sort of radical imagination that could help to fire alternatives like redistributive land reform or, as in this case, how their absence can perpetuate the status quo.

The vast majority of participants interviewed, from the highest to the lowest levels of the banana industry, framed the process of restructuring with a sense of inevitability. A rhetorical question that recurred again and again in interviews was simply: “if not bananas, then what?” Embedded in this is the assumption that Belize’s agricultural economy must be heavily export-oriented, that there is little room for manoeuvre, and that the unavoidable challenge is to find some way of competing in world markets. For plantation owners and managers, this general view was augmented by the capital expended on banana-specific infrastructure over the past four decades, and the forbidding costs of converting physical equipment and inputs and building new technical expertise. Government officials also expressed concerns about squandering past private and state investments in bananas, while raising questions about labour absorption and fears of widespread unemployment—in a region already plagued by high levels of un- and under-employment—and the lowest socioeconomic indicators

in the country (UNDP 2013; MED and MAF 2011).⁷ These fears also echoed loudly in the responses of many plantation workers, who regularly acknowledged their nervousness about having low levels of education and few transferable skills, and who had difficulty envisioning employment opportunities in the absence of banana plantations.

In short, for varying reasons and from different class perspectives, participants expressed a powerful sense of inertia about the need to somehow make bananas work. In this light, it is hardly surprising that amidst the phase-out of preferential markets, the leaders of the Belizean banana industry were interested in an offer presented by Fyffes, an Irish-based TNC, in 2007, to supply carefully packaged bananas that are above world-market standards, in return for above world-market prices. (This was before Fyffes merged with US-based Chiquita Brands to form the biggest single player in the global trade in bananas).

This contract relationship was presented as ‘win-win’ for both Fyffes and the banana industry in Belize, as Fyffes sought to respond to increasing quality demands in the European consumer market, while Belizean plantations needed a price premium that would compensate for their higher costs of production. Here, the relatively small size of the Belizean banana industry was seen as an advantage for this higher-value niche market, as it was seen to be more capable of implementing and enforcing higher quality controls over growing and packaging than could occur in larger sectors, as in the leading Latin American exporters.

The general manager of the Banana Growers Association of Belize summarizes the new reality, explaining that “Belize bananas are marketable because we have a consistent product that meets . . . standards,” which relates to both the fruit itself and its packaging. He also pointed out the importance of increasingly differentiated packaging in the definition of quality, explaining how there were only two basic packages twenty years ago, “small (from 6-8 inches) and large (8 inches up),” whereas size differentiation alone involves many more categories, with the industry now capable of managing “twenty-two packs every week and those change in numbers all the

7 According to a recent government report, in 2010 roughly 20 percent of the labour force in Stann Creek and the northern Toledo District was unemployed (MED and MAF 2011).

time.” One farm manager noted how “just today we’re packing single fingers, [and] bagged snack bananas . . . It never used to be like that.”⁸

Heightened product and packaging standards have significantly increased risks of wasted fruit. One manager contrasted how payment incentives for meeting quality standards under the preferential trade regime have been replaced with penalties for not meeting them, at the same time as new quality standards “have gone way high”—to the extent that, in one year “we had more [bananas in] waste than we were boxing.” The determination of sub-standard quality occurs for an array of reasons. For instance, if a sticker is placed on the bottom of the banana instead of on the top, if a banana has a brown damage spot on the peel, or if a 40 lb box reaches the export port more than 0.1 lb underweight, the whole box gets deemed un-exportable. The risk to the growers is magnified further still by the fact that an individual box found to be underweight, at either the export or import port, can lead to the rejection of the whole pallet of 60 boxes that it is part of.⁹

Another example of how heightened quality control standards serve to augment risks and costs for growers can be seen in the increased attention and management given to various agronomic processes, including sucker deviation, bunch bagging, deflowering, plant anchoring, spraying, cutting, and careful harvesting procedures. Sucker deviation was used to illustrate this general issue a number of times,¹⁰ with one manager explaining how failure to cut and move suckers on time can damage the bunch that is growing, so that it “won’t meet standards” with the result that even “if you get a big bunch, all of the fruit that has been scarred by the sucker

8 All direct quotes are based on author interviews unless otherwise indicated.

9 Fyffes has also exerted pressure to supply boxes up to 1lb heavier than the listed weight in order to compensate for the weight that it claims is lost as fruit shrinks during travel. But for growers, this entails lost profit since the extra 1 lb of fruit is not accounted for in box prices, as well as increasing the risks of bruising, since the boxes are intended for 40 lbs of fruit. Many growers believe that the risks of having boxes discarded for being underweight are less than the losses associated with essentially providing an additional pound for free coupled with the risks of damage from over-stuffing boxes.

10 This relates to the fact that multiple banana shoots (or suckers) grow out of the same root base, and only the one best positioned to thrive is left while a bunch is growing, with the others cut out. The process of sucker deviation concentrates the plant energy in order to encourage heavier bunch weights, but also to avoid damage on the bunch from the leaves of other suckers.

has to be thrown away. So it's very important and it's very challenging that you have everything done properly and on time by everyone." Others pointed to the careful harvesting procedures, including new cut-to-carry techniques to avoid bruising, and foam inserts to protect the bananas from one another while being carried.

Risks of wastage produce a range of pressures for owners. One basic response has been to try to increase output per acre. One owner described how his plantation had "been averaging 620 boxes per acre," roughly in line with the rest of the Belizean industry, but that his goal was "to reach one thousand boxes per acre" in order to be more profitable "with this competitive market, with the disappearance of the preferential market." In his words, "the only way we can survive" is to expand production while also enhancing quality and packaging: "we need to increase our bunch size, we need to increase the bunch weight, we need to throw away less fruit in the packing shed, and we need to pack the fruit to the quality. More sigatoka [a widespread disease affecting bananas] control, more irrigation on time, more nematicide [a type of chemical pesticide] when needed, fertilizer on time and as necessary." The owners made it clear that they perceived a trade-off between achieving higher yields of higher quality fruit versus incurring higher costs, especially because fertilizers and chemical inputs were becoming increasingly expensive.

One reason that inputs were seen to be rising is due to the pressure exerted by Fyffes to shift production schedules to better balance output over the year, and to increase production in the low-season. In addition to using increased inputs to stimulate plant growth at different stages, balancing annual output also entails more careful management of replanting, growing, and harvesting cycles, which is obviously more labour intensive and costly than having larger areas of land at the same growing stage. One owner complained about how the risks of rising input costs are entirely conferred by Fyffes onto producers, noting how "fertilizer was going up in price like crazy, we used to pay \$38 for fertilizer and now we're paying something like \$80," while Fyffes can hide behind a fixed purchasing contract. Another owner describes his sense of what Fyffes would say to any request for higher prices: "that [is] the price and take it or leave it, we [can] just go to another country and we get our bananas'. That's what they do." In short, growers perceived a serious power differential in the contract

relationship. In stark contrast to the initial 'win-win' imagery for Fyffes (getting high quality bananas) and the banana industry in Belize (getting relatively higher prices), noted earlier, one owner insists that these quality standards are "never a win-win" situation for producers. One farm manager lamented how he wished he "could say take it or leave it" on one hand, referring to better terms of trade, while recognizing that Belize had almost no leverage: "You could cry blood, but they don't care . . . When they [Fyffes representatives] come, they look for ways to bend you into submission."

Most plantation owners and managers expressed similar sentiments, conceding that the contract relationship was necessary yet despising the sense of domination. One manager described the extent of waste as "damning," and some expressed a belief that monitoring tends to go up when production levels are higher than Fyffes is prepared to receive—allowing them to discard packaged fruit (and project the wastes onto the producer) rather than purchase it. In the words of one manager, "they wouldn't say this, but it seems when the market is flooded, they f*#k you up . . . They want you to work as slaves [and] send guys from quality control and just throw away any pallet for any reason. They feel they are owners of your farm." Another manager lamented how "they are very demanding," and how "it is easy for them to tell us [that the fruit can't sell], but they don't know all the sh*t that we go through to meet what they are asking," while in the end noting that "if we want to produce and sell, we must abide as much as we can to it."

Owners repeatedly expressed frustration with the fact that the rigorous quality control standards, which demand greater inputs and labour and are increasing wastage, are generating only modest price premiums. In the most recent contract arrangement, meeting these standards increased the price of a box of Belizean bananas by less than US\$0.50 per 40 lb box (boxes sell for 20 percent more in the first half of the year than the second half).¹¹ One manager described how the increased prices are barely enough relative to "the amount we have to put in to make the packs work," noting that "it's hard to

11 There is a different price for the first half and second half of the year based on the variable supply in the international market. Although bananas are grown all year round in the tropics, the greatest export volume arrives in the second half of the year, which reduces global box prices. The range in the price premiums for meeting standards depends on how the bananas were packed according to differentiated quality standards and specialty packaging within the 40 lb box.

make sense of why we do it really.” These low margins were often described in relation to the fact that Fyffes had transferred the processes of specialized packaging from higher-waged European workers to Belize with unfairly low compensation. In short, plantation owners and managers were acutely aware of the fact that the vast majority of the profits in bananas are extracted at the later stages of the commodity chain.

Some plantation owners and managers described cutting their use of fertilizers and chemicals when rising input costs were making their margins untenable with fixed prices for banana boxes. This occasionally reverberates directly onto workers, as some reported that their pay was entirely withheld on occasion in order for the plantation to afford fertilizers or chemicals that were needed at key junctures, when the plantation could not simultaneously cover input and wage costs. In such cases, plantations were essentially projecting the burden of protecting their investments in the banana crop onto workers, and although this only happened on rare occasions, it forced workers to go into their savings to feed their families.

Yet workers were also concerned about reduced on-farm investment, since most are paid by piecework and recognize how production levels are bound to decline with low input levels, which would, in turn, serve to drive down their earnings in the future. As one worker explains, “without investment, the production and quality go down, so we get less boxes and then we all get less pay. The whole team loses. In the end, it hurts him [the owner] too. If production gets too low, he can’t get money either . . . [but] we’re the ones who hurt first and most from the lack of investment.” Other workers described similar frustrations about insufficient investments being made in production, reducing their prospects for piecework earnings. This was affirmed by one plantation owner, who described how declining margins had forced his farm manager to “cut our fertilizer program by 25 percent and cut irrigation by 25 percent and we’ve decreased pest control—no more nematicide—which of course means our production decreases,” while explicitly noting how it is the workers who are “the ones who suffer the most” from this in the end.

The difficult calculations and trade-offs associated with this cost-price squeeze are made even more challenging by the sporadic damage inflicted by extreme climate events like hurricanes and less

extreme ones like the 'chill effect' from cold temperatures,¹² and the fact that the nature of the contract relationship means that "all the risks are on the farm," as one owner put it. One owner explained how at least one big weather event happens almost every year. As an example, he described how the previous year "we had two winds that came down that blew us . . . and this farm lost 63 acres, totally needed to replant," as well as losing "40 percent of the plants that didn't fall because the fruits on the trees were battered and damaged." While climate and disaster-related losses affect owners, managers, and workers, one owner suggested that the temporary displacement of workers in the wake of disasters can also have a longer-term effect on production because plantations have "a hard time picking up again without a good steady labour."

In short, it is clear that both plantation owners and workers feel strained by the pressures associated with the terms of the contract relationship with Fyffes. Most owners described how they either had to re-invest more of their savings than they felt comfortable doing, take out new loans, or decrease investments, while recognizing that the latter route guaranteed a downward spiral of decreased production and quality, and impoverished livelihoods for workers. Most owners and managers are also well aware that the conditions facing workers are contributing to an unsustainable situation, in that they will find it harder and harder to reproduce the sort of workforce they need. It is to this that our attention now turns.

THE CHALLENGE OF REPRODUCING A STABLE AND DISCIPLINED WORKFORCE

Since the 1980s, migrants from other countries in Central America have made up the vast majority of the workforce in the Belizean banana industry, with Mayans from both Belize and Guatemala making up only a small minority. Although the wars and counter-insurgencies have ended, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua continue to experience high levels of crime and violence (much of it now related to gang activity and drug transshipment) and high levels of unemployment, which fuel continuing migration into Belize. Migrant workers on Belizean plantations typically have

12 The essence is that when air temperatures fall below 12 degrees Celsius it tends to scar the bananas, making them un-exportable.

deficient access to basic social services, and many fail to pursue citizenship, even after spending considerable amounts of time living in the country,¹³ but most tend to describe it as being safer and having better working conditions and pay than where they came from, as well as enhancing prospects to migrate to the United States.¹⁴ The way that Belizean banana plantations are viewed by many migrant workers is encapsulated well in the remark by one that “it’s not good, but it’s better.”

For plantation owners, the continuing flow of migrants is critical to their ability to buy labour at low piecework rates, and this dependence is explicitly acknowledged in a recent government report that migrant workers enable the industry “to keep costs down and be more competitive in the global market” (MED and MAF 2011, 12). Piecework obviously affords owners considerable advantages, enabling them to transfer some of the risks associated with production failures or sub-standard fruit wastage onto workers, and reflects the ‘flexibilization’ of labour that is increasingly characteristic of large-scale agriculture in Latin America and the Caribbean (Kay 2007) and of neoliberal work environments more generally.

But this comes with risks to owners too, as it is also undermining commitment and discipline among workers, and contributing to increasingly transient conditions; a veritable treadmill of poorly paid workers is routinely cycling through plantations. While migrant workers are willing to work for lower pay than non-Mayan Belizeans, most view their jobs as temporary and transitional, sometimes with very short-term exit plans. Many said things like “I’m here today, but I don’t even know if I’ll come again tomorrow,” as one worker put it, while another joked that his return the next day might depend on the weather in the morning.

These dynamics were openly discussed by owners and managers. One owner acknowledged simply that “low pay creates pressure on the workers so they are not compelled to stay.” This is

13 Part of this relates to the fact that some see Belize as a means to another migration northwards to the US, but it also relates to the fact that some migrants feel like the path to citizenship is intentionally made confusing and difficult for them.

14 For example, one female migrant worker described feeling compelled to leave Guatemala to start over after her parents were murdered, while another noted that Belize “is safer for sure. You can go out, you can sleep well. It’s much more sane and healthy here.”

a serious contradiction which threatens the industry's survival, as it butts up directly against the demands associated with high quality control standards. One manager noted how "today I only have 17 workers and I need 23," and went on to explain that "it's such a problem because . . . everything needs to be done on time," but "it can't all get done" as a result of absenteeism. Another manager, noting how "timing is everything," explained how quality is only possible "if we have conscientious workers," and that problems tend to arise "when we have new workers and sometimes they just don't get it right for a while. There's lots to remember to get the best quality." One owner, after noting how "in the past we had no problem with [the supply of] workers," insisted that the challenge of maintaining workers is now "the hardest" one he faces.

In response, plantation owners and managers are employing a range of tactics to try to stabilize the workforce. The most widespread approach has been to use bureaucratic disciplines for migrant workers. Once in Belize, new migrant workers are forced to leave their passports and three pictures with management, and they are then distributed "to the labour and immigration department to get a work permit for that person." One manager explained that:

. . . before we send in the passport, we ask the person if they want to work for three months or six months or one year. This will say to work at farm number whatever, but it's valid at any other farm too. It's specific for bananas . . . So if they leave early, they lose their passport . . . So most stay for the 3 to 6 months. It's just to get their passport, if not, some of them would leave earlier.

Beyond this industry-wide practice, in general, plantation owners can be seen to be pushing much of the responsibility for stabilizing the workforce onto managers. However, many participants in this study, including both managers and workers, noted how some owners are much more present and visible on farms than in the past, and more active in directly overseeing workers and interacting with management on a day-to-day basis. Some even pointed out the fact that owners are increasingly seen in work clothes in the fields, and taking a more hands-on approach to training and instruction. Many workers described this behaviour in a positive light, suggesting that it showed a degree of concern about the conditions of the workers and a degree of humility, by not placing themselves above the hard and dirty physical labour of

plantation work. In general, this seemed to make both workers and managers feel assured that the owners understand the intricacies and laboriousness of their tasks and thereby serve to reduce perceptions about the relations of hierarchy and power.

Some owners have also sought to incentivize their workforce in creative ways. For instance, some have pitted management teams into informal fun competitions with one another over who can oversee the production of the largest quantity of the highest quality bananas, though with little more than pride and prestige at stake. In a similar vein, some managers then convey this sense of competition to workers, in ways that seemingly seek to obscure class hierarchies and instead foster a collective sense of teams competing against one another.

The building of teamwork and camaraderie was a powerful theme. Another way this could be seen was in the increasing participation of managers in manual labour, often even working overtime, in order to help cope with the added time-pressures associated with the quality control expectations. This of course brings greater socialization, and regardless of whether this is strategically motivated or leads to sincere friendships (indications of both were evident), it did seem to have had some role in reducing how power differences are perceived and some of the negative associations about new work disciplines. One manager encapsulated this general approach very well:

In terms of work dynamics, everybody needs to work as a team, because everyone pays for the mistake. I try to talk with the people so they are happy. They work hard, and the reason why is because when they work hard and carefully, they get more money. So we all need to work at this together. So I try to keep them getting lots of bunches.

The spirit of teamwork was also partly forged, whether consciously or unconsciously, by defining allegiance in the negative sense: that is, by cultivating a perception of a common enemy, as Fyffes was often made the butt of jokes by both managers and workers. There were also a few cases of managers making serious personal sacrifices to support their work teams in difficult times. In at least one case, a manager withheld a large proportion of his own pay when the cash flow was too weak to pay out all of the expenses,

instead choosing to ensure workers could receive the share of the wages owed to them.¹⁵

Another approach used to build a sense of community—and conceivably to soften how workers perceive the class differences in the industry—was to organize periodic celebrations. For instance, one worker described how “every Christmas, he [the plantation owner] has a party for the families,” where “he brings the food and the drinks and we sometimes get a bonus depending on how long we’ve worked there. He brings toys for the kids. He’s also given scholarships to the secretaries to go to school. Also, he runs a workers day in May with a party and food.” This worker went on to suggest that such efforts have greatly diminished conflicts with workers, though the causality is clearly hard to establish definitively. What was evident is that the general culture on some plantations is much more conducive to such approaches than on others, and occasional parties were not held on farms where the worker-management-owner relations were tenuous.¹⁶

Some owners and managers have made conscious efforts to improve the working environment for women in an effort to better retain trained workers, which is especially important given the highly gendered division of plantation labour. In this gendered division, men are predominant in the fields, and women are predominant in the packaging process that is key to achieving quality standards—work that involves long hours of repetitive, fast-paced work hunched over in a standing position with chronic exposure to cleaning chemicals and water. While maternity benefits are still modest, one improvement has been to hold jobs for pregnant women instead of simply replacing them. One woman noted how she was “pregnant and still here working, but this gringo lets me take two months off when I have the baby and he

15 There were also a few cases where managers drew members of their work teams into illicit acts, stealing from the plantation and then sharing some of the rewards. In one case, this involved stealing bunches of bananas and smuggling them out for sale through alternative channels, and in another case a few managers were caught forging the payroll to include fictitious workers and then pocketing the extra money and distributing a portion.

16 Another broad generalization is that managers who live in the same village or camp with their team of workers and socialize more together tend to manage less through penalties and more through moral suasion, whereas managers who were more socially distant from their work teams generally did not feel the social pressure to avoid stricter cultures of policing

guarantees me the job back," which she contrasted with "the other gringo on the other side," referring to a neighbouring farm in Belize. Also, one woman was promoted from packing shed labour to a packing shed manager, a position that had previously been solely given to men. Although gendered hierarchies still widely prevail through the banana belt, at that plantation it showed other women that a promotion to leadership was possible, and may have enhanced their commitment to work. In addition, many women in this packing shed indicated that it was easier communicating with a woman manager, and that she was more likely to have their best interests in mind when they raised complaints.

New practices of selecting and training some workers for future managerial positions, including a few women, were another way that the divide between managers and workers was being slightly blurred, as managers were typically drawn from outside the population of workers in the past.¹⁷ Workers understand that the increased prospect of promotion is a tactic to keep the most disciplined among them around, which is especially geared to those who are first generation Belizean with parents who had immigrated and found work on the plantations. One worker noted how he was told by managers "that maybe they'll make another position for another captain, and . . . they could maybe take me they say." He then went on to describe how "it's better that the people here get to climb higher. So they give us the motivation that there could be a captain job, and it keeps us going and trying. Keeps us working hard and learning lots, and then we can hope that we get the opportunity." The prospect of moving up also aligns with the desire to foster a competitive team ethos noted earlier.

While many of the approaches to retaining qualified workers might be seen as different 'carrots', there are also proverbial 'sticks' at hand. On a few plantations, sometimes portions of worker's paycheques were withheld, or whole paycheques delayed, which some workers saw as a means to keep them around indefinitely.¹⁸

17 In the past, managers were sometimes recruited from banana plantations in neighbouring Honduras and Guatemala, targeted for their managerial experience, their knowledge of how to mold a disciplined and efficient workforce, and their capacity to speak Spanish and better understand the language and culture of a largely Hispanic workforce.

18 When owners and managers were confronted about this issue, they gave a variety of reasons why their cash flow was inconsistent, from banking problems to unpaid accounts to low production, along with assurances that better production

With tears welling up in his eyes, one worker described how regular delays in receiving his wages strain his ability to feed his young family, while living paycheque-to-paycheque. His frustration was exacerbated by a sense of powerlessness to confront what he knew to be an illegal practice, noting how the Labour Organization of Belize (a government department with office branches in each district) had no real presence on banana plantations and never “come here and check at the office” to see that workers were not always paid on time. A number of other workers echoed this frustration, describing how the practice of delaying wages could result in families going entire days with little or no food. Obviously this seems like an extremely desperate tactic that might help to secure labour in the short-term, but risks undercutting workforce stability in the long-term. The practice of withholding wages must therefore be seen to rest on the generalized sense of insecurity associated with the scale of poverty and unemployment in the region, which it then serves to further reinforce.

Yet it does push some workers towards breaking points that can tip them in different directions, from quitting and moving on, to organizing. A number of participants described how wage delays or low pay have pushed people to increase attention to their small farms and gardens at home, either for household subsistence or (if there are surpluses or cash is needed for bills) to sell in local markets. Some overt resistance has occurred recently in the region, including a few organized strikes, which were explicitly targeted for harvest days when box numbers were anticipated to be high, with striking workers refusing to harvest or pack any bananas that day. This meant that many bunches that were ready for harvest went to waste, as missed harvest times means the fruit gets too ripe to meet the quality standards. Some workers indicated that harvest day strikes sparked improvements like getting wages paid on time, but also conceded that changes were mostly short-lived. They also noted that strike leaders were fired, with owners attempting to publicly humiliate them as threats to the livelihoods of other workers, playing on the sense of team and community discussed earlier.

and pay were ahead. Though many workers did not buy such explanations, and saw it as a deliberate way of making them feel undervalued, most felt they had little recourse other than walking away.

The prospects for increasing class allegiance and worker organization on plantations are also inhibited by some of the enduring tensions and stereotypes that surround nationality, race, and ethnicity. Moberg (1997) examined the bases of these intra-workforce conflicts and rivalries in detail, and though they seem to have lessened from what he described, they have not disappeared altogether.¹⁹ Few non-Mayan workers spoke of open discrimination, but some conveyed feelings of being disrespected by their peers based on their nationality.

Many workers expressed a belief that nationality, race, and ethnicity serve to differentiate the possibility of achieving a promotion to a management position. As noted earlier, this is an incentive that is dangled more now than in the past, but, in reality, positions are few and ascension is rare, which contributes to perceptions of discrimination. Such perceptions are made worse by the history of racism and ethnic marginalization in the south of Belize, particularly towards the indigenous Mayan population, which suffers from high levels of poverty. For instance, one long-time Mayan worker from the Kek Chi community pointed out how the freshly inserted captain of his team “has no experience,” and that racism explains why someone like him will always be overlooked, before expressing a deep sense of resignation: “So it doesn’t make sense we fight to get up to a manager position. It’s not ours it never will be. They’ll never train me, it’s not fair.” Other Mayan participants expressed similar perspectives about prevailing racism and discrimination, like a Mayan woman from Guatemala who noted how “some people don’t like us because of who we are . . . I get along with some of the people but the others I can’t because they don’t like me as Indian.” Such attitudes were also noted to have reared up in organizing efforts. For instance, in describing the failure of a previous strike effort, one worker singled out Hondurans as not being in step with the majority of the other workers, and his reluctance to put his neck out “fighting for other groups.”

In sum, the combination of a generalized sense of insecurity, fears of punishment, and some persistent ethnic tensions, all inhibit

19 Various myths stem from the long history of violence, repression, and authoritarianism in the region, and Moberg (1997) argued that leaders of banana industry in Belize consciously manipulated these tensions as a means to helping control the workforce as it was coming to depend upon migrants in the 1980s.

more coordinated forms of resistance, and leave most workers to respond to exploitative management tactics in more atomized ways. By far the most pervasive response was simply to leave one plantation for another, whenever frustrations with things like withheld pay, disciplinary tactics, or insufficient or uncounted (for failing to meet quality standards) piecework became unbearable, and sadly some described this as the only way they could envision exerting any control over their work environment. Many workers also regularly engaged in what Scott (1985) famously termed ‘everyday acts of resistance’, which included things like stealing bunches, over-reporting completed tasks to increase piecework earnings, and failing to show up when bad weather made work more arduous, which was sometimes described as a way of undermining a particular owner or manager.

Yet though most workers expressed some degree of frustration with the overall conditions of work, it was rarely directed at particular owners or managers. Instead, most workers expressed a belief that they shared a common enemy with vastly wealthier plantation owners: Fyffes, along with a view that its power to determine quality control standards through the contract relationship, was the root cause of too much wastage and brought inadequate compensation for what these standards entailed.

CONCLUSIONS

That’s why the trade laws change, to exploit somebody.
– Belizean plantation manager

On a global scale, it is irrelevant whether Belize continues to produce bananas; indeed most other ACP countries that once exported bananas to Europe under the EU-ACP protected market no longer do so since its demise. According to the logic of comparative advantage, it is natural and necessary for less efficient producers to be pushed out, and into something else they might be competitive in. While the Belizean banana industry has not only survived but grown, since the phase out of preferential markets, this research reveals how this new competitive niche—which might appear on the surface to be a neoliberal success story in response to trade liberalization—contains serious contradictions. It also reflects how, for many countries of the Global South, the domestic

inequalities that are typically associated with large-scale agro-export production are compounded by unequal external relations, as large TNCs tend to accumulate most of the value within tropical agro-commodity chains and possess the flexibility to pit one against the next, allowing them to dominate the terms of engagement (Robbins 2003).

In the 1980s, as the Belizean banana industry grew, it came to depend upon the migration of workers from other Central American countries, who provided a relatively cheap, but also relatively transient workforce. Not only was the cost of labour partly depressed by the desperate conditions driving migration, but it was also partly subsidized by the development assistance for rural infrastructure that was coming from the EU, which declined as preferential trade was phased out. The contract relationship with Fyffes, a large TNC, provided a lifeline for the Belizean banana industry beyond the era of preferential trade, paying price premiums in a market niche based on higher quality standards. But the power balance is highly uneven, as Fyffes monopolizes control over the Belizean banana exports, sets rigorous quality control standards, and can still source cheaper bananas from other markets; while Belizean plantations have almost no leverage or flexibility. The power imbalance at this global scale clearly influences some of the ways that the power imbalances at the micro-scale of plantation production play out.

While the Belizean banana industry has grown since the demise of preferential markets, this research reveals how its new competitive niche—which might appear to be a neoliberal success story in response to trade liberalization—contains serious contradictions. In particular, it has explored how new quality standards entail multiple disciplines, yet generate only modest premiums, and how plantation owners and managers are combining ‘soft’ efforts to build allegiance with some ‘harder’ manipulative tactics in response to these pressures. These managerial strategies have been successful in inhibiting the organization of plantation workers, but worker dissatisfaction remains widespread, turnover is very high, and some ‘everyday acts of resistance’ are evident. The net result is that plantations are struggling to reproduce the sort of labour force they need to keep meeting the quality standards on which the premiums are based,

and this threatens to undermine the very basis of the competitive niche.

The restructuring of the Belizean banana industry shows how agro-export growth, not only does not necessarily translate to improved rural living conditions, but that, on the contrary, it can be implicated in worsening prospects for long-term development. The fact that such unstable livelihoods are both an *outcome of* and a *barrier to* competitive success in a higher value niche in the global banana trade, raises important questions about the pursuit of comparative advantage in an age of trade liberalization, and the precariousness of commodity export dependence for countries that continue to devote large areas of their best arable land to agro-exports.

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Esforzándose por Competir: Liberalización y Producción Bananera Beliceña

Karen Ross y Tony Weis

Este trabajo examina la reestructuración de la industria bananera de Belice, tras la eliminación gradual del comercio preferencial. La industria ha buscado tener acceso a un nicho de alto valor en el mercado de exportación siguiendo estándares rigurosos de calidad. El análisis parte de las 121 entrevistas cualitativas efectuadas con los trabajadores, gerentes y propietarios de plantaciones. Se centra en las tácticas empleadas por los propietarios y equipos de gestión para mantener una fuerza de trabajo confiable a la vez conteniendo costos y las respuestas de los trabajadores a las condiciones cambiantes de trabajo de la plantación. La capacidad de la industria bananera para acceder a este nicho competitivo es precaria, ya que las condiciones cambiantes de trabajo están socavando la estabilidad de la fuerza de trabajo necesaria para cumplir con estándares de calidad.

Palabras clave: bananas, Belice, la liberalización del comercio, cambio agrario

Du mal à rivaliser: La Libéralisation et la Production de la Banane Bélizienne

Ce document explore la restructuration du secteur bananier du Belize, à la suite de l'élimination du commerce préférentiel. L'industrie a cherché à accéder à une niche d'exportation à haute valeur basée sur les normes de qualité rigoureuses. S'appuyant sur les 121 entretiens qualitatifs réalisés avec des travailleurs, gestionnaires et propriétaires des plantations, l'analyse porte sur les tactiques utilisées par les propriétaires et les équipes de gestion afin de maintenir une main-d'œuvre fiable, tout en maîtrisant les coûts; et les réponses des travailleurs à l'évolution des conditions de travail sur les plantations. La capacité du secteur bananier d'accéder à ce créneau concurrentiel est précaire, puisque l'évolution des conditions de travail met en danger la stabilité du marché du travail nécessaire pour répondre aux normes de qualité.

Mots-clés: les Bananes, le Belize, la Libéralisation du Commerce, la Réforme Agricole

The research emphasis has been on labour market outcomes in developing economies with a focus on gender issues, ethnicity, and informal sector activity. He has in the past undertaken commissioned work for the World Bank and UNICEF on topics in these areas.

Karen Ross received her PhD in Geography from Western University in 2014, conducting research on the effects of trade liberalization on rural development in small banana producing countries in the Caribbean. She works as the Outreach and Development Coordinator at The Local Community Food Centre in Stratford, Ontario.

Lisa M. Samuel is Assistant Professor of International Studies at the College of Charleston in Charleston, SC, USA. Her teaching and research interests currently focus on justice and the politics of difference in international trade negotiations; multi-sited ethnography in the study of international negotiations; and China-Caribbean relations since 2000. She is preparing a book manuscript tentatively entitled *Transforming Resilient Injustice: Beyond Special and Differential Treatment in the WTO*.

Sandra Sookram is a Fellow at the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies (SALISES), The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago. She has taught several economic courses and now serves as a lecturer in Economic Development Policy at SALISES. Her current research interests include the economics of crime, poverty, the informal economy, and climate change.

Shamika Walrond is a Research Officer at the Central Bank of Barbados. Her focus is in the area of external sector analysis and international trade. She holds a BSc (Hons) in Economics from the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus.

Tony Weis is an Associate Professor in Geography at Western University in London, Ontario. He is the author of *The Ecological Hoofprint: The Global Burden of Industrial Livestock* (2013); *The Global Food Economy: The Battle for the Future of Farming* (2007), and co-editor of *A Line in the Tar Sands: Struggles for Environmental Justice* (2014) and *Critical Perspectives on Food Sovereignty* (2015).

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