



Socks Instead of Gloves

Outsourcing and casualisation are main drivers to unsafe conditions of work in the cane and sugar sector of Kenya

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By comparison to other countries in the region, safety standards in the cane and sugar sector of Kenya are poor. A new Occupational Safety and Health Act was passed in December 2007, outlining a future shape

of and the improvement in safety conditions in the workplaces in the country, but labour practices, specially outsourcing and casualisation, have become a major drive for further deteriorating safety standards in the country's cane and sugar sector. This was observed in visits by a group of delegates of the Kenya Union of Sugar Plantation Workers (KUSPAW) and the IUF global sugar coordinator to sugar factories and cane fields in Chemelil (June 4 & 5, 2008) and Nzoia (June 9 & 10, 2008). The visits were part of workshops on Occupational Health and Safety held in the context of the IUF Global Sugar project in Africa.

Cane fields operations in Chemelil and Nzoia

Between 70 and 75 percent of the cane harvested in the world is manually cut. In many cane growing areas, an overwhelming proportion of field tasks, such as weeding and cleaning of fields, chemical application and the like, are also manually done, like in the case of the Chemelil and Nzoia sugar estates. Delegates visited the so-called "nucleus estate" of Chemelil on 5 June and Nzoia's on 10 June. A "nucleus estate" comprises the fields owned by the company, as opposed to those of independent farmers or "outgrowers," who also supply the factory. "Nucleus" also refers, although this aspect of the meaning is rapidly losing ground, to the direct control and management of the fields exercised by the mill or cane processor.

Workers were involved in line-trashing, weeding, herbicide application, and cane cutting and loading. "Line-trashing" (as observed in the previous two photos) is a post-harvest operation consisting in piling the cane leaves and other trash to allow a better ratooning of the cane. In the visit to Chemelil fields, three workers were engaged in line-trashing. Their task to complete was three "lines," each of about 320 metres long. The task was paid at 150 Kenya shillings

(about USD 2.50) and the workers said they needed from two to three days to complete it. The three workers were hired by a contractor, who gave them nothing to perform their work: no tools, no protective clothing, nothing.



The same conditions applied to a crew of twelve workers, mostly women, engaged in the weeding of fields. They were hired by the same contractor who hired the trash-liners, and provided them nothing to perform their job. Their task was also measured in lines, and payments were the same: the equivalent of USD 2.50 per three lines, which they could complete in two or three days, depending on the conditions of the fields, their physical prowess and abilities.



A women weeder in Chemelil. Note the socks in lieu of gloves and a shirt in lieu of a hat,



As happens in other countries, Kenya sugar workers try to protect themselves. A lady was kind enough to allow some photos of her to be taken. She used socks as gloves, and a shirt (yes, a shirt: look carefully) as a head gear to get some relief from the hot sun while working in the fields. The interesting fact is that weeding was efficiently done: the contractor good good

quality work even though he provided nothing to the workers, except the chance to earn the equivalent of about 80 US cents per day.

Nzoia weeders do an excellent job as shown in the picture below. None of them, however, wore any special clothing or gear. At least in one case from the five observed, the hoe used was quite short requiring the young guy to bend very low in order to remove the weeds. In addition, it was *his* hoe.



Socks are the most common glove-replacement gear used in Kenya, as confirmed by the visits to Chemelil and Nzoia cane fields; and Roundup is, purportedly, the world's most common herbicide in use. A short note obtained through the manufacturer's web site in reply to a question regarding what precautions should be taken and what protective gear should be used when applying Roundup said that the product *may* cause eye irritation, that contact with eyes or clothing is to be avoided, and that one has to make sure to wash oneself "thoroughly with soap and water after handling the product". And, of course, do not contaminate water sources when disposing of the chemical. These recommendations relate to the home use of Roundup, like for gardens and lawns. But the scale of exposure to the herbicide in commercial agricultural operations, such as cane growing, differs completely from home use, although the safety principles for its use remain in place. As shown in the photos of herbicide application in Chemelil (and Nzoia), none of these very simple and basic conditions were observed.



A close look at the pictures in this section shows that out of the 10 hands of five workers (above), only one (the third from left) wears what may remotely resemble a proper glove to handle the herbicide. The rest are socks. (The two bare hands are from a delegate who showed the workers how to show their hands for the photos.)

Information available on Roundup's impact on the health of agricultural workers underlines that the product itself is much more toxic than glyphosate, the product's main active ingredient, because the Roundups actually combines glyphosate with other chemicals, which can lead to human poisoning.





Another herbicide, Velpar 75 DF, is also used in Nzoia. A warning label from the manufacturer reads that the product may cause “serious eye damage,” and that while handling it people should use “protective clothing, namely gloves, boots, head-dress or face shield...” Also, people have to avoid breathing its vapours, and avoid contact with skin and eyes. After work, changing clothes, wash hands and faces, and carefully clean equipment and working clothes is recommended. None of these recommendations, however, were observed in the fields of Nzoia, as shown in the pictures below. As it also happened in a visit to another sugar estate, the South Nyanza Sugar Company in September 2007, “face shields” are absent. In fact, the “face shields” in use are to protect workers from cane leaves – which can be as sharp as knives – , which the workers improvise from plastics, mosquito nets, pieces of metal. One of the workers in Chemelil used a wool batakava under an orange mosquito net; another wore a part of a leg of a denim jean (yes, a denim jean!) under a metal mask that looked like a fencing mask. (The reader is asked to count how many workers appeared in the photo shown in the previous page.)

The workers applying Roundup in Nzoia were casual workers, as opposed to the ones hired by a contractor in the case of Chemelil. According to the Nzoia branch of KUSPAW, there were about 1,200 permanent workers in the estate, compared to a whopping 12,000 casual workers... who

are also hired by the company. Most of the casual workers labour in agricultural operations, but at least a couple of hundred casual workers labour in the factory.



Harvesting green cane is a widespread practice in Kenya which, according to some, was introduced as a result of environmental concerns. Manual harvesting of green cane is a very heavy job. Without the benefit of burning leaves and trash – and getting rid of animals and other residents of the cane fields – before cutting the cane, workers battle the sun and heat, cane leaves, and a difficult terrain because of trash and other matters.

A technical norm in the harvesting of cane is to cut it as close to or below ground level. This applies to manual as well as mechanical harvesting, and there are two main reasons for it: one is that sucrose content is higher in the portions of the cane stalks next to the ground; the other is that stumps left above ground will not develop a strong root system, leading to the delay and/or absence of ratoons from which new cane stalks grow. Ignoring these two basic principles lead to loss of sucrose, either by leaving long “stumps” in the fields (wasting sucrose already in the cane) or preventing efficient rationing (losing future production of sucrose). Some fields, we were told, have not been renovated for some 15 or more years.

An efficient harvesting of green cane requires an extremely well motivated labour force, willing and able to efficiently perform their job. To do their job, cane cutters require a complex set of conditions ranging from proper tools (e.g. cane knives) and protective gear (gloves, hats, shin protection, shoes, etc.) to adequate provision of drinking water, first aid, good work organization, experience in the job, and, of course, what the workers should consider an attractive pay for their job. None of these basic conditions were observed in the field visits to Chemelil (cutting and loading cane) and Nzoia (loading cane).

As happens everywhere, the first reaction (“resistance”) to poor working conditions and low work morale is not a strike but a job poorly done. While observing the cane cutters in Chemelil, it was evident that the workers were going “through the motion” in order to get through their day’s task— measured also in linear meters – and paying little attention to the sucrose left in the non-cut portion of the cane. Who can blame them? Even managerial personnel agreed, in informal talks of course, that very little or nothing can be asked from the workers. The main reason? Agricultural work has been outsourced in Chemelil, and the company hires casual workers in Nzoia. In the latter, cutters have no assurance that they would be hired the following day nor does the company have the possibility of demanding an efficient task given that it itself does not guarantee a job the following day. In an outsourced operation, like in Chemelil, the responsibility of an efficient cane cutting operation falls on the contractor’s lap. Contractors, however, are seldom present in the fields as they prefer to hire supervisors or just do no supervision at all.

Outsourcing is a widespread practice in several economic sectors around the world, including cane and sugar sectors. However, in some cases, the result is exceptionally illogical, as in the case of herbicide application observed in Chemelil: the fields, the herbicide, the truck and equipment to spray Roundup were owned by the company; the company also hired the driver of the truck, and paid a supervisor (to supervise the contractor!) and security personnel (to prevent theft). This begs an obvious question: why was the contractor needed? The only possible answer was: to allow the company to cut social costs. Previously, workers in these tasks were hired by the company, and the workers used to get some equipment and basic protective gear; enjoyed some social benefits and basic health care. Through outsourcing the company avoids paying for these expenses. It is not clear, however, what long-term benefits companies get in terms of growing good quality cane, proper harvesting, and efficient mill crushing operations. Outsourcing and casualisation deteriorate safety conditions for workers but also seem to be working against the long-term sound economic performance of the companies.

Cane mills operations

Chemelil factory produces some 50,000 tonnes of sugar per year, on year-round operations, and the number of workers fluctuates around 1,200. The KUSPAW branch in Chemelil estimates that at least 300 workers in the factory are employed on a casual basis, with no long-term or permanent contract, even though they are in the factory day in, day out; and their job is to be done every day. As a casual worker, however, he or she has no real contractual relationship with an employer, whom may or may not provide them with equipment and tools.



The photos in this section are from casual workers in Chemelil. One worker (above) is cleaning the mud to de-clog drains through which served water from the mill runs; the other two are from a worker cleaning, with bare hands, filter mud. An observation was made during a group session during the OHS workshops that in the first case the worker needed long trousers, rubber boots and gloves, and long sleeve shirts, but the hard helmet (such a fetish of the PPE family!) may not even be needed. In the second case, the worker had been given a dust mask, probably useless for the job he does and which he wore on the back of his head anyways. We don't need to remind the reader that filter mud or filter cake are residues after the cane juice has been clarified and its final composition depends on the precipitation and/or flocculation aids used.

Filter mud is normally used as soil conditioner and fertilizer. But, what is/can be the long-term impact on the health of a person bare-handling filter mud eight hours a day?



Some equally worrying safety issues, not directly related to outsourcing or casualisation, were shared by workers in other areas of the factory. While both companies stressed the need for safety practices, clearly reflected by their concern on fire prevention (e.g. Nzoia just acquired a new fire truck, equipped to fight fires of different sources), structural challenges need to be overcome. A telling story is the workers' exposure to high temperatures in the power house in Nzoia. It was reported by the union branch that several workers complain of many ailments, among them negative impact on their sex life ("networking" they call it), which appeared directly related to their exposure to very high temperatures. Employees in the laboratory reported the use of lead in the analysis of the quality of cane juice (probably as lead acetate). It is well known that lead affects the human nervous system, and the employees said that they use it because there was no replacement for it. (Since then this writer, through an empirical search on the Internet, found that in one case lead acetate was replaced with poly aluminium chloride, which appears to be relatively a bit less risky than lead – if it is properly handled, of course.)

Markets and development

In recent years a major discussion in and around the cane and sugar sector in Kenya has been the importation of sugar, particularly from members of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). Being a sugar-deficit country, Kenya relies on imports to satisfy the domestic demand: in 2007 the country produced about 550,000 tonnes of sugar and consumed about 750,000 tonnes.

On the reverse, deficits in domestic supplies can be translated in opportunities for expanding production, as the recently announced investment in the Tana River District shows. The new

Tana Integrated Sugar Project (TISP) has a reported price-tag of 24 billion Kenya shillings (USD 380 million), and aims to produce some 180,000 tonnes of sugar per year. The project will have a mill with a daily crushing capacity of 8,000 tonnes of cane (expandable to 10,000 tdc within three to four years of the project), which will be supplied by a 16,000-hectare nucleus estate and some 4,000 additional hectares under outgrowers. The new facility would also generate 34 megawatts of electricity and some 23 million litres of alcohol per year. The project is a partnership between Mumias Sugar, by far the country's largest sugar producer, the Tana and Athi Rivers Development Authority (TARDA), and some other "stakeholders". It is estimated that 20,000 direct and indirect jobs will be created. Of course, a major question is what kind of jobs these would be and what conditions would be attached to them.

A question lingered persistently while the visits to Chemelil and Nzoia were undergoing, and evidence of the deterioration of safety conditions – also as a result of casualisation and outsourcing – was being collected: One couldn't help thinking how a person earning about 50 shillings per day could be or become a market for anything or anyone. It would seem, for instance, that Coca Cola has won the cola wars in the Chemelil and Nzoia areas (where the IUF/KUSPAW workshops took place) because of the pervasiveness of Coca Cola drinks: Coke, Fanta, Krest – a bitter lemon soft drink –, and the absence of ads and products from PepsiCo and its relatives. However, a 300 ml bottle of any of the Coca Cola drinks sells for 25 shillings at a kiosk at the entrance of the Chemelil factory. A 500 ml bottle of Dasani water in the estate's guest house – the equivalent of a 5-star accommodation in the neighbourhood – sells for 40 shillings. It is not that drinking a Coke or a Dasani represents the pinnacle of a decent life, but having to work a whole day in very unsafe conditions and only be able to exchange 8 hours of hard hustling for two Cokes (or barely get a Dasani) is, to say the least, absurd.

Having the possibility to buy the product which one helps to produce may be a sign of a healthy society; at least it is this writer's opinion when talking about a basic food item such as sugar. In Chemelil, a kilogram of brown sugar sells for 75 shillings, according to Paul Menya, KUSPAW coordinator. The International Sugar Organisation (ISO) estimates that the annual per capita sugar consumption in Kenya is 22.9 kilos (ISO 2006). A simple calculation underlines the irrationality of the situation: the lady doing the weeding in the cane fields, wearing socks in lieu of gloves and a shirt instead of a hat, would need to work 34.3 days in order to buy what is the statistical annual per capita consumption for a Kenyan. (Of course, she would buy absolutely nothing else during those days.) The logical conclusion is that she does not buy the sugar she helps to produce and to which she is statistically entitled, even when she leaves her good health day after day in the cane fields. And her situation was shared by another eleven workers doing the weeding, the three workers doing the line-trashing, and about another 20 workers engaged in cutting and loading cane. The fact that agricultural cane workers find it difficult to become a market for the sugar they help to produce should be a major concern for the whole cane and

sugar sector, as well as for the industrial users, such as the soft drink sector, confectionary, and the like. Unless the latter's market live elsewhere.

Development economists might find this a useful example of a group in a situation of near-destitution poverty, immersed in a poverty trap from which it is extremely difficult to escape. The trap feeds a downward spiral, which leads to an eventual shut-down and collapse of the economy. But, maybe, the lady's life is near collapse already...

Proposal from the workshops

While the workshops aimed at sensitizing the unions members of the safety committees in Chemelil and Nzoia – in addition to delegates from neighbouring estates –, they were also an exercise in trying to chart a move forward on occupational health and safety matters. A key recommendation was given to the delegates, who need to take it to their own safety committees and make it happen in their estate, with the support of everyone: KUSPAW and its branches should work a memorandum of understanding with the companies' management on safety standards to be observed by contractors and the company itself. The document should reflect a comprehensive view of health and safety matters, from prevention to education to problems resolution, from reducing risks to eliminating hazards. Safety standards have to be observed no matter what the contract condition of the workers is. It is the law, following the Occupational Safety and Health Act approved in December 2007. It is a basis for national development because a country needs a healthy labour force. It is the right of the workers.

Participants in the Chemelil workshop (left) and Nzoia (right)



The IUF Global Sugar Program is conducting a long-term project in the sugar sectors of East and Southern Africa. IUF sugar affiliates from Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, Swaziland and South Africa are participating in the project, which has the support of the Social Justice Fund of the Canadian Auto Workers (SJF-CAW)

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