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HOW GREEN ARE YOUR BANANAS?

European retailers have imposed 'ethical' certification processes on their banana suppliers, but reports from Ecuadorian plantations reveal serious weaknesses in the schemes that leave workers poisoned and abused.

International certification schemes have evolved to respond to market demands for ethical products. Banana exporters can no longer sell to the European market without being certified by GlobalGap, which requires them to adhere to a strict set of health, safety, environmental and labour codes. Retailers such as Tesco have gone even further, moving to work directly with their banana suppliers. Britain's largest supermarket has developed a scrupulous certification scheme that suppliers must comply with if they want their fruit to appear on the retail giant's shelves.[...]

"The certification schemes have led to a lot of positive changes for the workers", claims one Ecuadorian producer. "We had to make the packing plant safer and affiliate all our employees to the national social security scheme."

Inspections of certified exporters are conducted once a year to ensure they continue to comply with the regulations. Company representatives claim that the inspectors are free to select which employees they wish to speak to.

But workers tell another story. [...] The claims made by workers clearly call the efficacy of international certification schemes into question, and the issue is made more complex by the use of third-party suppliers. A considerable portion of Ecuador's plantations is made up of relatively small-scale producers, and most cannot meet their export targets simply by using their own fruit. They fill the gap by purchasing bananas from smaller plantations, ones not subject to the same worries about certification because they are not selling direct to the European market.

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