

A Scottish filmmaker is causing commotion in the banana industry with a collection of worker testimonies that paint a stark picture of plantations in Cameroon.

Jan Nimmo, an artist and filmmaker that has worked with banana-related topics since 2000, created the documentary "Portraits from Cameroon" with the hope of shedding light on a popular fruit that receives little thought from consumers.



Applying fertilizer. Photo: Jan Nimmo

"There are obviously very big political and commercial questions at stake but it's really to engage the consumer with workers and make them think, this is how my bananas are being produced," Nimmo said.

The film begins with the testimony of a female plantation worker who describes 12-14 hour days where workers are not provided water and subjected to chemical spraying.

The misuse of toxic chemicals is a central theme in the film.

"What worried me most actually was seeing people who were clearly being affected by the chemicals around them or they were directly applying, and that actually there's no kind of education about it," Nimmo said.

"To see pregnant women unfolding chlorpyrifos-coated bags was totally shocking."

Chlorpyrifos is an organophosphate used to coat bags that protect bananas. Exposure, according to the film, can cause numbness, weight loss, loss of libido, suicidal thoughts, respiratory problems and birth defects.

Another worker in the film says chemical sprayers often work with contaminated equipment or no protective equipment, causing workers to vomit, pass out or have skin problems while out in the fields.

Although aerial spraying should happen early in the morning before field workers arrive, several individuals in the film say that spraying occurs while people are out and about.

Wages serve as another major topic in the film, with one worker saying that pickers earn as little as US\$3.56 a day.

"We reckoned that they [wages] were a third of what they needed to be for people to actually earn a living. I believe that a fair wage shouldn't be about earning just enough

calorific intake to survive. It should be about being able to pay for a roof over your head, childcare and putting food in your children's stomachs, as well educating them," Nimmo said.

Although no organization or company is directly named in the film, media reports mentioning Fresh Del Monte and the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) have caused a stir.

In an official response to the film, Del Monte denied any ties to the footage.

"The video in question was shot in the Banana Expansion Project farm of CDC and not the TICO Banana Project farm from where the Del Monte bananas are exclusively supplied. Our Company's role in the TICO project is only that of a technical advisor. To that effect we issue Standard Operating Procedures to CDC for the activities involved in the operation of the TICO project," Del Monte said.



Aerial spraying. Photo: Jan Nimmo

CDC did not provide a response by the time of publication.

Nimmo explained her goal was never to attack a specific company, although she did say that a farm in question by Del Monte was, in fact, included in filming.

Since the project's conclusion in Cameroon, Jacqui Mackay of Banana Link, a film sponsor, said that Del Monte has not been in direct communication with them.

"We shared our reports with Del Monte when we first came back but we haven't had any kind of response from them. We did speak with Del Monte when we were in Cameroon and had honest conversations but we haven't had any direct follow up from them," Mackay said.

Banana Link works to promote fair banana production and trade, encouraging environmental, social and economic responsibility.

An association goal since filming in Cameroon has been to open dialogue with major players.

Mackay seemed hopeful about communication thus far with CDC, the organization that hires about half of Cameroon's estimated 15,000 banana workers.

"What we very much want to do and we feel we have is a constructive working relationship with CDC and the retailers that buy from them so that they can work with the trade union to

improve conditions. What they've shown so far is that they are open to understanding," Mackay said.

"What I think CDC wants to be able to do, like all banana producers, is differentiate their product. I think they are very keen to have high social and environmental standards."

Nimmo shared a similar hope to promote dialogue regarding industry standards.

"My hope is that all the stakeholders have an opportunity to sit down together and engage in a meaningful dialogue which will lead to an improvement in workers' conditions, wages and which will reduce the risks of agrochemicals on workers' health and the environmental impact, not just in Cameroon, but in all countries that export bananas to Europe and the U.S.," Nimmo said.

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