

By Banana Link international coordinator Alistair Smith

✘ Near the archetypal banana town of Changuinola in Panama's North Western province of Bocas del Toro, just a few kilometres from the Rio Sixaola - and Costa Rica on the other side - are three unusual banana plantations. Many would have predicted that these plantations would not survive the dramatic decline in Panama's banana exports that has taken place in recent years.

What makes the plantations unusual is that they are run by a cooperative of former Chiquita workers. But unlike a more recent cooperative of former Chiquita workers on the Pacific coast of Panama, this cooperative has survived the crisis.

The Cooperativa Bananera del Atlantico R.L., known as Coobana, has some 500 workers, 220 of whom are members of the cooperative; all are members of SITRAPBI, the Union of Workers for Independent Banana Producers, that represents employees in all the non-Chiquita plantations in the area.

Between them, the three Coobana farms cover some 550 hectares and export between 15 and 20 containers a week to Europe. A collective bargaining agreement between the union and the cooperative is currently being negotiated.

"I was one of the trade union leaders here at the time that 74 of us decided to create a cooperative back in 1991. At the time we were workers for a government-owned company on land that Chiquita had planted decades earlier," explained Chito Quintero, founding member and one of the key administrators. "We were the people doing the work, so why not manage it ourselves? Not everybody wanted to take the risk, but a large enough group of us did and Coobana was registered in 1992."

In common with the rest of the industry around Changuinola, some 85% of the workers - and therefore cooperative members - are from the indigenous Ngobe community. Although the number of women employed is starting to increase slightly, the proportion of women employed remains very low at around 8%.

In 2009-10, when many in the industry were doubting the future viability of Panama's banana exports, Coobana made two vital connections with market players in Europe that have shaped its recent history. Firstly, with the Cooperative Group of supermarkets in the U.K., a pioneer in fair trade bananas and a buyer that had been looking for cooperative partners for its product sourcing for some time.

The Cooperative Group not only committed to buying a stable volume at Fairtrade prices (plus the premium), but also invested US\$400,000 from its U.K. members' own special projects fund to boost social development in five of the communities where workers live. These monies have supported organizational capacity building, renewable energy (fuel-efficient stoves), sanitation, and access to water.

Dutch organisation Fair Taste was chosen to manage the project funded by the U.K. Cooperative Group and has been able to leverage funding from other donors in more sustainable production practices:

Black sigatoka (leafspot) control	Using helicopters for greater precision (although at higher cost)
Plastic bag for insect protection	Using a combination of chlorpyrifos-treated and untreated ('biflex') bags to reduce chemical use and exposure
Weed control	Using a combination of herbicide and manual weeding
Soil conservation	Using leguminous ground-cover species to reduce run-off and suppress weeds

The second vital connection was with Dutch-based Agrofair, an exclusively fair trade fruit company created in the lead-up to the global launch of Fairtrade certified bananas in the Netherlands in 1996. The partnership with Agrofair does not just ensure that nearly all of Coobana's fruit is now Fairtrade labeled (70% of which is marketed through Agrofair to continental European markets), but also means that Coobana is co-owner of Agrofair, through CPAF, the Agrofair Producers' Cooperative. Together with other tropical fruit producing associations and coops in Latin America and the Caribbean, Coobana is a shareholder in its own marketing company.

Agrofair South, with a regional office based in Panama, provides support in four areas of interest to the cooperative:

1. Quality, traceability and certifications
2. Productivity, cost-efficiency, cost monitoring
3. Organisation and management
4. Sustainability (environmental and social impact)

Although the challenge of managing a complex structure of unionised workers and cooperative members cannot be underestimated, Coobana has not only survived into 2013, but now benefits from Fairtrade prices for nearly all its exports. If it succeeds in sharing these new benefits equitably with its whole workforce through a new collective bargaining agreement, Coobana will indeed become a model for the whole industry.

If the experience succeeds, it will also prove that, with the support of all players along the supply chain from workers through to consumers, it is indeed possible to be a relatively high-cost producer providing decent work, promoting social development and surviving in today's ferociously competitive world banana market.

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