Water Footprints:

Lessons from Kenya's Floriculture Sector

By Wayne Visser

There are flowers to fit every occasion. But if you are celebrating WorldWater Week (26-31 August), you might want to think twice. A single rose – grown in Kenya, as many of the world's cut flowers are – takes around 10 litres of water to produce, with the so-called water footprint, or virtual water export, of Kenya's floriculture industry having more than doubled over the past 15 years, mostly to supply the Netherlands (69%), the UK (18%) and Germany (7%).

This notion of virtual water – the water embedded in the things that we trade – is gaining visibility as awareness of our global water crisis increases. I remember first getting to grips with the idea a few years ago when I interviewed Fred Pearce, author of When the Rivers Run Dry, for the University of Cambridge Top 50 Sustainability Books project. According to his calculations, to get us through the day, it takes about a hundred times our own weight in water.

Of course, water footprints are not the only impacts we find in our global supply chains. There are issues of labour rights, climate change, transparent governance, biodiversity loss and economic development, to mention but a few. The challenge is to manage and minimise the negative impacts. This is where I believe the example of Kenya's cut-flower industry can help us to tease out some hard-won lessons, starting with the story behind the Horticultural Ethical Business Initiative (HEBI).

The seeds of the HEBI process were sown in November 1999 when local civil society organisations mounted a successful campaign against workers' rights violations in Cirio Delmonte, one of Kenya's largest pineapple growers. The success of this campaign raised concerns in the flower industry, prompting stakeholders to develop the Kenya Standard on Social Accountability and a Voluntary Private Initiative to oversee its implementation.

However, the real impetus for HEBI came from the pressure exerted by transnational alliances of NGOs and consumer groups. The Kenya Women Workers Organisation (KEWWO) was funded by the UK-based Women Working Worldwide (WWW) to gather evidence of the Ethical Trade Initiative Base Code violations. Their report catalogued various unacceptable conditions, from pesticide poisoning to sexual harassment and rape, and spurred a campaign dubbed Produce Safely or Quit. At the same time, the Kenya Human Rights Commission issued a three month ultimatum to flower producers to improve working conditions, failing which they would go international in their campaign.

When the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) was alerted to these serious labour rights violations in 2002, several of their corporate and NGO members visited Kenyan flower producers. In fear of losing their most significant market, Kenyan stakeholders came together for the first time to lay the groundwork for the formation of HEBI. What I find particular interesting is that the Horticultural Ethical Business Initiative (HEBI) did not arise from a vacuum of voluntary codes. On the contrary, there were already seven different international ethical codes being applied. However, they seemed to lack effectiveness and credibility.

What made HEBI both necessary and different was the need to involve all stakeholders. As academic experts Catherine Dolan and Maggie Opondo put it: "In contrast to the Fresh Produce Exporters Association of Kenya, the Kenya Flower Council and the Voluntary Private Initiative, which were locally initiated attempts to protect the image of the industry in overseas markets, HEBI was a product of direct Northern involvement. While ETI and WWW only performed a facilitative role in the process, they were nonetheless pivotal to the establishment of a locally owned multi-stakeholder process."

Today, according to ETI, there is still a lot of work to be done and plenty to criticise, but changes to the audit process and the purchasing practices of ETI members have led to a number improvements for workers in Kenya. For example, there are now more permanent contracts, establishment of worker welfare and gender committees, better provision of protective equipment, stricter pesticide controls and extensive improvements in housing. Furthermore, more women now have access to day-care facilities and there is general acceptance that pregnant women should have light duties.

Most encouragingly, Kenya's convoluted and painful journey to creating their multi-stakeholder sector code has set a benchmark for other standards, like the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), to learn from and emulate. It has also inspired complementary programmes like The Floriculture Sustainability Initiative, part of the Dutch Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH), which aims to accelerate and up-scale sustainable trade by building impact oriented coalitions of front running multinationals, civil society organisations, governments and other stakeholders.

So, yes, flowers do have footprints. But perhaps, if we learn from Kenya's experiences, we can lighten the tread and ensure those footprints are heading in a more sustainable direction.

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