

The banana agribusiness in the Dominican Republic and Costa Rica: rich ground to create green jobs

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LIMON, COSTA RICA – Bananas are the second most important agricultural export of the Dominican Republic and they represent a major source of employment and income. But with the growth of their production an increase in the amount of waste has been detected, affecting the environment, damaging communities, businesses and workers.

The Dominican banana agribusiness faces a challenge managing its waste, particularly the disposal of the plastic bags used to protect the banana bunch during its growth. Aware of this situation, the ILO, through the Joint Program for strengthening the Banana value chain by Growing Inclusive Markets, invited a delegation of fifteen technicians and producers of bananas from the Dominican Republic to visit Costa Rica to learn about the experience of this country's banana sector in plastic recycling as well as environmental and labor practices.

"Back in the Dominican Republic, the plastic waste is sent to a collection center, but it is not compacted, so the plastic bags escape to the roads, the highway or they stay on the farm, polluting the environment," said Ricardo Borbon of the United Banana Growers Association (Asociación de Bananeros Unidos, ASOBANU) regarding the problems that the Dominican banana industry faces.

Previously, the Costa Rican Caribbean also faced the challenge of managing the plastic waste of the banana agro-industry. Plastic bags used to pollute rivers and lagoons, or were burnt. Given this strong environmental impact, two banana companies (Del Monte and Dole) and a plastic manufacturer (Yamber) joined forces to properly dispose the plastic waste generated in the banana agriculture and created the company Recyplast.

Recyplast developed a process in which plastic waste (bags, bottles, containers, and disposable tableware) is treated and merged to create a resin that comes to serve as a new raw material. This resin is used in the production of corners, which are the parts that limit the groups of banana boxes when they're exported.

With the resin that Recyplast has produced in more than 14 years of work, 72 million of corners have been produced which have helped export about 864 million boxes of bananas. Making the corners with resin instead of the traditional wood has avoided cutting down 432,000 trees.

Recyplast, which generates 110 direct jobs, has extended its area of action and now recycles plastic waste from diverse activities (agricultural, industrial and residential) from different provinces of Costa Rica and from other Central American countries, generating many indirect jobs linked to reducing and reusing waste, recognizable as green jobs.

Green jobs reduce the environmental impact of enterprises and economic sectors to sustainable levels; in this case, they do so by reducing waste and pollution. Green jobs, developed as decent work contribute to

achieving two of the Millennium Development Goals: 1. Poverty Reduction and 7. Protection of the environment.

The Dominican banana producers also got the chance to participate in a discussion with the chemical engineer Carlos Gomez, where they were shown the experience of innovative uses of the banana's stem, traditionally seen as waste material.

The banana's stem has no commercial value and it's the main waste of the fruit's packing plants. The banana producers learned about the manufacture of "banana paper", made from banana's stem. With the banana paper it's possible to make office supplies such as notebooks, folders and notebooks, among others.

The use of the banana's stem in the manufacture of paper can help manage the problem of the environmental pollution caused by the waste and, in turn, it can become a business choice that serves as the basis for the creation of craft microenterprises.

Good environmental and labor practices

To get to know the experience of a banana plantation that runs a waste management program, the delegation of Dominican producers and technicians visited the School of Agriculture of the Humid Tropical Region (Escuela de Agricultura de la Region Tropical Humeda, EARTH), an academic center that seeks to reconcile agricultural production and the preservation of the environment.

EARTH's campus has a commercial farm dedicated to agricultural activities. In this farm the process of planting and caring of bananas in the particular conditions of the area was shown. Also, the banana packing plant was visited. The packing plant receives and prepares banana to be exported and in this process the waste is collected to be later converted into either banana paper or fertilizer.

The school EARTH has a comprehensive waste management program that has allowed them to reduce, reuse and recycle tons of waste through the years. This program, that involves all students, has achieved a rapprochement with the near-by communities, training groups to properly dispose waste. Thus, new initiatives for microenterprises on waste collection and management have appeared.

"Seeing the classification of plastics, environmental care and the commitment they have in improving the environmental management help us collect experiences that we can bring to our country. And, together, continue to make an effort to improve the waste disposal and develop a harmonious management with the environment in the Dominican banana industry" said Eddy Cabrera, of the Dominican Association of Banana Producers (Asociación Dominicana de Productores de Bananos, ADOBANANO).

The Dominican delegation also had the opportunity to learn about good labor practices in the banana sector. "Many of the ideas that make this business move, grow and innovate come from the workers. This is one of the lessons we have learned" said Marco La Touche, manager of labor relations for the banana company Chiquita Brands Costa Rica, in a talk which highlighted the dialogue as a good practice for the improvement of both working conditions and company's performance. Dialogue provides a more collaborative work environment that allows more creativity and innovation on the part of employers and workers. Also a meeting on dialogue and negotiation in the banana sector was held with the participation of the workers' union and the labor relations management of Dole Costa Rica.

Export ideas

The visit also facilitated a meeting on strategies to advance the banana sector, at the National Banana Corporation of Costa Rica (CORBANA), the entity responsible for the development of the banana industry in this country.

Heriberto Abreu, of the Dominican Banana Cluster, which includes banana producers, transporters and suppliers, said that following the visit "the Cluster will develop a plan of action in plastic management, which is a problem we have that we're facing immediately and must be quickly addressed with concrete actions; with the experiences that we've shared in Costa Rica we will strengthen what we do in our country."

The visit allowed the producers and technicians to get to know new tools and strategies that, properly incorporated into their production processes, will help to raise the value chain of their product and, simultaneously, will benefit the development of better labor and environmental practices. One example is the plastic waste compactors, which are made with simple and accessible technology. The preparation of homemade compactors to reduce pollution by plastic bags will be a first step that producer associations will implement, since they belong to the provincial environmental committees.

ADOBANANO, after the visit, agreed to start a plastic recycling plan and a campaign to sensitize the producers about waste management, with support from the Joint Program for strengthening the banana value chain.

"The experience, provided through the Program, has been very helpful because it puts us in touch with another reality, helps us to collect experiences that we can bring to our country and together continue making an effort to improve the Dominican banana industry," concluded Eddy Cabrera from ADOBANANO.