



Cornelius Lynch, Banana Farmer, St Lucia, Windward Islands

Fairtrade has had a huge impact on me and our communities in many ways. Beginning with improving the standard of living, changing the mind-set of little or no regard for the environment, bringing people of common objectives together, empowering producers and communities, and the list goes on. In short, Fairtrade has proven to be our window of hope in this global environment.

Cornelius Lynch, January 2009

INTRODUCTION

Cornelius Lynch and his wife Eudoxia live in the Mabouya Valley community in the Dennerly quarter on the east coast of St Lucia. They have two daughters, Joy, 7, and Niah, 4, and three sons, Melius, 19, Quain, 11, and Germaine, 9. They are all still at school except Melius who teaches at nearby Micoud Secondary School.

Cornelius has been a farmer for 23 years and for the past 17 years has combined it with various jobs in the banana industry. For many years he grew bananas on a small 0.8 hectare (2 acres) plot owned by his family. The land was very steep and difficult to farm, with no prospects of expanding production or improving his income. In 2002 he leased 1.7 hectares (4.3 acres) of flat, fertile land, a 10-minute drive from his home, which he hopes to be able to buy in the near future. Bananas are grown on 1.5 hectares (3.7 acres) and the remainder is planted with crops such as watermelon, cucumber, beans, and salad plants for home consumption, with any extra sold to the local community.

BACKGROUND

The day-to-day work on the farm is mainly carried out by Eudoxia and a hired worker. For the fortnightly harvest, six more workers are hired to cut, wash and pack the fruit in the on-farm packhouse, ready for export. On average they harvest 85 boxes (1,542kg) every fortnight. Cornelius goes to the farm most mornings to discuss what work needs to be done and spends one full day a week there. He has had to significantly reduce the time spent on the farm over the last three years because of the growing demands of his job as manager of the St Lucia National Fairtrade Organization.

Cornelius was closely involved in the establishment of the Fairtrade movement in St Lucia in 2000 and was among the first group of farmers whose bananas were exported as Fairtrade in July of that year. This was made possible following the three-year collaboration between the Fairtrade Foundation and the Windward Islands Farmers Association (WINFA) to put in place the structures necessary to enable the banana farmers to meet Fairtrade standards, including organising farmers into Fairtrade groups across St Lucia, St Vincent, and Dominica.

Cornelius spends five days a week at the offices of the St Lucia National Fairtrade Organization where he oversees the operation of the island's 13 Fairtrade groups and their 1,300 farmers, ensuring they are able to comply with Fairtrade standards and principles. His work includes making farm inputs and packing materials available to members at the best possible price and liaising with partner organisations to improve the various services provided to the farmers. Cornelius also helps with the implementation of community projects funded by the Fairtrade premium – an additional \$1 a box paid by banana import companies.

Cornelius gained the expertise for this role from his wide experience of the banana industry. He started out as a supervisor on a local 100-acre banana plantation then worked for two years for the Ministry of Agriculture as an Extension Officer providing technical support to farmers. This was followed by 12 years in senior technical and management positions with the St Lucia Banana Growers' Association where Cornelius first became involved with the nascent St Lucia Fairtrade Organization. This led to a three-year period with WIBDECO, the Windward Islands Banana Development and Exporting Company Ltd, whose main role is the marketing and distribution of bananas and fresh produce from the Windward Islands.

THE WINDWARDS BANANA INDUSTRY

Bananas have been crucial to the national economies of the Windward Islands for more than 50 years. Successive reforms to the EU banana regime introduced in 1993 have steadily eroded the protection traditionally

given to the islands' producers, resulting in a dramatic decline in the fortunes of the banana export trade. Compounded by global oversupply and low UK retail prices, the islands' market share has been eroded by large-scale, lower-cost producers from Latin America. This has resulted in falling production, reduced revenues, and an increase in unemployment and related social problems. On top of this, farmers have to deal with natural disasters. In 2007 Hurricane Dean destroyed almost all banana crops in Dominica and wiped out 75-80% of bananas in St Lucia and 10% in St Vincent.

For St Lucia, banana production and export is the most important activity in the agricultural sector. But between 1992 and 2008, annual export volumes fell from 135,000 tonnes to 30,000 tonnes, revenues crashed from US\$71m to US\$22m, and the number of banana farmers fell from 10,000 to around 1,500. In total, the number of small-scale banana growers in the Windwards has fallen from 25,000 in 1992 to less than 4,000 in 2008.

Trade ministers from the EU and banana exporting countries were on the verge of signing a historic breakthrough deal on bananas at the WTO Doha Round meeting in Geneva in July 2008 to end two decades of trade disputes. But the deal fell through amid the collapse of wider trade negotiations to cut tariffs and subsidies for farm products. If a similar deal is resurrected in 2009, it would see the tariff paid by Latin American producers gradually reduced to a level which Caribbean producers believe would put them out of business. Cornelius says that the banana industry is already facing a number of challenges including the dramatic increase in the price of farm inputs and the fall in the value of the pound. 'However, my biggest fear,' he said, 'is the WTO ruling to effect a reduction in the tariff further in favour of the multilaterals, that may not be complying with the socially and environmentally friendly practices as the Windwards. This definitely is worse than any hurricane for us if it ever happens.'

FAIRTRADE: A GROWING SOLUTION

Of the just under 4,000 remaining banana growers in the Windward Islands approximately 3,400 are members of the 48 Fairtrade groups across the Islands. With more than 85% of all bananas grown in the Windward Islands now Fairtrade certified, it is only access to Fairtrade markets that is enabling the Windward Islands industry to survive.

When Sainsbury's announced it would convert all of all its banana supplies to Fairtrade, Dr Kenny D Anthony, Prime Minister of St Lucia, said:

'In this era of competitive global trade, small-scale farmers like ours have little or no chance of survival without the kind of market intervention that is provided through Fairtrade. Not only does Fairtrade guarantee a fair price to our farmers, but the social premium that is generated through the Fairtrade sales provides invaluable support for projects in rural communities throughout the Windward Islands.'

FAIRTRADE PREMIUM USE

Members of the 13 Fairtrade groups of the St Lucia National Fairtrade Organisation meet once a month to discuss farming issues and get updated market information. But a big part of the meetings is to discuss what projects they want to fund with the Fairtrade premium and decide on their work plan for the year.

The premium has been used for a range of projects: small local projects like buying fans for a medical centre to keep the patients cool in the tropical heat; an autoclave – expensive sterilising equipment – for one of two hospitals on the island; medical assistance for farmers and their dependents across the island; educational projects such as a computer lab for a primary school and a new resource room at a secondary school, complete with computer equipment and new reading materials; and a new truck to distribute banana packaging materials and deliver farm inputs such as fertilisers which are provided to all Fairtrade groups at minimum cost.

At the launch of Fairtrade Fortnight 2007 Roosevelt Skerit, Prime Minister of Dominica, said:

'What Fairtrade has done for bananas in the Windwards has been nothing less than phenomenal... Fairtrade has brought about a reversal in the declining fortunes of the banana industry. As a result, the production and export of bananas under the Fairtrade label have contributed to the economic growth in Dominica.'

Support Caribbean farmers – buy Fairtrade Windward Islands bananas from ASDA, Co-op, Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury's, Spar, Tesco, and Waitrose.

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Look for the FAIRTRADE Mark on products. It's your guarantee that disadvantaged farmers and workers in the developing world are getting a better deal.

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