Diversifying the Banana Farm: Beyond Fair Trade

By Brooke Edwards, Heifer International writer
Photos by Dave Anderson

MACHALA, Ecuador—Banana plantations, many guarded by electric fences, extend across this city known as the Banana Capital of the World. Farmers grow row after row for export under familiar logos like Chiquita, Dole and Del Monte. It's big business here: Ecuador's bananas represent 32 percent of the world's traded bananas and are the country's second-largest export after petroleum. The banana is the most popular fruit on the planet: Each year humans eat 100 billion of them. In the United States, the average person eats 26.2 pounds of bananas every year.

Yet high demand does not tell the whole story. Typical banana plantations on Machala's prime, flat real estate often pay low wages and offer few benefits to workers. Field workers are exposed to chemicals used to support the monoculture model (growing a single crop over a wide area). These high-production practices help keep bananas incredibly affordable to consumers; they sell for an average 60 cents per pound.

In the foothills of the Andes, just a quick drive from the flat, expansive plantations of Machala, a different model thrives. Small-scale farmers here brazenly fought their way into the international banana trade 15 years ago, and their fair trade, sustainable methods have taken hold.

In 1998, 14 small-scale Ecuadorian farmers made the risky move of shipping a single container (about 38,400 pounds) of bananas to Europe, hoping to sell directly to a supermarket. This first attempt was a success, and the Association of Small Banana Producers El Guabo was established, cutting out the middleman to gain direct access to the international banana market.

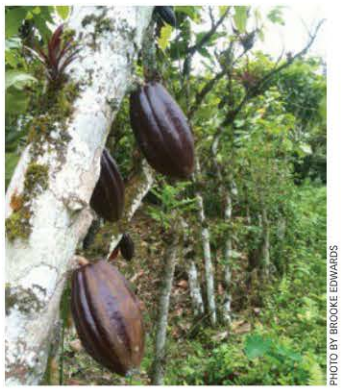
El Guabo member Alejandro Toro weighs bananas. Next they will be stickered and packed into a box for export.

Today, El Guabo unites 450 small-scale banana producers, divided into 14 small groups. The farms typically range from 12 acres to 25 acres. El Guabo exports bananas under fair trade conditions in partnership with Equal Exchange, a worker-owned cooperative that trades directly with farmer cooperatives around the world growing coffee, tea, cocoa, bananas and other products.

Membership in El Guabo brings a number of benefits. The fair trade certification earns a $1-per-box premium, which the group uses to make social and environmental improvements in the community. Decisions on how to allocate the proceeds must be made collectively and democratically. For 2010 through 2012, the group decided 20 cents of every dollar would be spent to pay teacher sala-

ries for nearby schools, including a school for children with special needs.

In previous years, proceeds paid for a medical clinic, health coverage and a social security system. Working on a banana farm is risky. Farmers may climb ladders hundreds of times a week to check or harvest their crops or to put protective bags on the ripening bunches to keep individual bananas from falling to the ground. If a farmer falls off his ladder and breaks his leg, he can afford medical care under El Guabo. That's not a luxury afforded a typical commercial banana plantation worker.



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Wilson Sanchez (left) demonstrates the bags used to protect growing bananas. Green "bio bags" are chemical-free but costly. Cocoa pods (right) grow on Sanchez's farm.

While El Guabo farmers earn a better price for their bananas, a constant $7.40 per box, they continue to live in relatively poor conditions. They farm on steep land and lack sufficient irrigation to increase their yields. Family diets lack nutritional diversity as most of the effort is put into growing bananas for export. This persistent poverty led El Guabo leaders to call on Heifer International for help.

Participants in Heifer's *Strengthening the Productive Diversity of Agro-Forestry Small Holders in El Oro, Azuay and Guayas Project* receive irrigation systems, livestock and agroforestry training. By growing five or six different crops—citrus and cocoa are common—they're not only diversifying their sources of income, but their diets as well. The project also teaches participants how to grow vegetable gardens for family consumption (kitchen gardens are uncommon in this part of the world so focused on raising food for export), which will allow them to feed themselves and rely less on external markets for food.

Heifer's work with banana farmers is similar to its work with coffee farmers in countries like Honduras. It is difficult to be a farmer raising staple crops for the rest of the world, even a crop like bananas that can be harvested nearly year-round. Working collectively and diversifying what they raise are two strategies that can serve these small-scale farmers well. With continued support and training, these Ecuadorian banana farmers and their families will finally be able to thrive on the lush land, instead of barely surviving. ■

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

EL GUABO REPRESENTS THREE TYPES OF FAIR TRADE BANANA FARMS:

CONVENTIONAL
Small family farms. Meet fair trade social requirements. Practice monoculture and use synthetic chemicals. Grow for export only.

ORGANIC
Meet all fair trade and organic standards, but still rely on the monocrop model. Grow for export only.

AGROFORESTRY
Meet fair trade standards and go beyond organic standards for biodiversity and environmental responsibility. Most farms are fewer than 25 acres and located in mountainous areas. Use traditional intercropping techniques to grow several crops together. Grow for export and local consumption.