We devote this newsletter to the Knowledge Exchange held in Costa Rica in December 2012 and attended by the research teams of the following trade union confederations: Central del Movimiento de Trabajadores Costarricenses (CMTC), Confederación General del Trabajo Colombia (CGT-Colombia), Central General de Trabajadores Honduras (CGT-Honduras) and the Confederation of South African Workers Union (CONSAWU).

The seminar provided an opportunity to discuss lessons learned in the CNV-Confederations-Fairfood project and to explore new strategies to improve working conditions at the start of agri-food chains in an era of global trade. Delegates worked hard at the seminar but had the satisfaction of achieving their objectives. Congratulations to all participants. Thanks for your contributions and goodwill!

Access to information
The seminar began with a pooling of the research teams’ most important findings and went on to discuss the challenges facing participants. Some confederations raised the problem of access to information: companies generally refuse to dialogue with workers. The CGT-Honduras has used the strategy of “remote observation” combined with using members’ contacts. Piet du Plooy (CONSAWU) emphasised the importance of building a relationship with key contacts, which requires time.

Gender equity
In the session on gender equity, the group formulated a common definition: “equal opportunities for socioeconomic, labour and cultural access, while taking into account the differences between men and women”. Some participants agreed the issue was important but felt it is difficult to satisfactorily incorporate it into the research.

Quality criteria
At the end of the event, the group agreed that, in the context of global trade, the project’s success depends on whether the organisations seeking improvements make strategic alliances in both producer and consumer countries. It is also important that research findings are sufficiently robust to stand up to critical review if they are to be useful in the day-to-day work of the confederations, for example, in educational campaigns, awareness-raising and meetings with key actors. Research must therefore meet quality criteria, such as the use of a transparent methodology, robust and reliable sources and consistent content.

On the second day of the event, a panel of experts on voluntary initiatives, a phenomenon that is growing quickly in the agri-food production sector, joined us. The experts were Omar Salazar, a trade union consultant, Bernardo Vargas of the National Platform for Responsible Production and Trade Of Pineapple (Plataforma Nacional de Producción y Comercio Responsable de Piña), Costa Rica, Ana Lucia Corrales of the Rainforest Alliance (RA) and Guillermo Quiró, Rector of the San Juan de la Cruz University. Piet du Plooy (CONSAWU) and José Adrián Bustillo (CGT-Honduras) also shared their experiences of working with this type of initiative.

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Omar Salazar, a sociologist and trade union consultant on sustainability and corporate social responsibility, started the day off by outlining the context in which these initiatives emerged. Salazar has spent a long time working with trade unions and noted that companies are increasingly implementing “private initiatives” in response to growing consumer demand for sustainable products. Ana Lucía Corrales, representing the RA, a certifying organisation, emphasised that the social and environmental standards that producers must comply with to obtain the RA seal are more stringent than the legislation in force. Examples are the use of a social and environmental management system, ecosystem conservation, good working conditions, occupational health, good relations with the community, a waste management plan etc. Private initiatives therefore do not replace the national laws that companies must comply with, but constitute additional measures.

The initiatives
The speakers touched upon the power of the market as a motive to comply with these initiatives, even though they are voluntary in nature. The RA seal is well-positioned in the European and American markets and membership brings financial benefits for producers. Although the RA has no legal powers to sanction participants in its certification scheme, it expels companies that do not meet the organisation’s requirements. As 95% of members participate in order to enjoy commercial benefits, this type of market penalty forms a strong motive to comply with the scheme’s criteria, said Corrales. Similarly, Piet du Plooy showed that the Sustainability Initiative of South Africa (SIZA) has a strong business case: SIZA unites fruit producers that export mainly to the European market, where there is considerable demand for fruit and vegetables produced on a sustainable basis. Du Plooy said that, for example, supermarkets in the Netherlands have signed an agreement to stock only sustainably produced fruit and vegetables by 2020.

The Pineapple Platform is a multi-stakeholder initiative of actors who are interested in promoting good social and environmental practices, while increasing competitiveness. Costa Rica is one of the leading pineapple exporters. In plenary sessions, working groups and debates, the Platform has encouraged constant dialogue between representatives of all participating sectors. Both Corrales and Vargas agreed that, for the moment, they have not succeeded in achieving close cooperation with the trade union movement and that this relationship is essential to safeguard improvements in the conditions of workers in the agri-food chains.

Sharing experiences
Two of the confederations participating in the exchange shared their experiences. Piet du Plooy (CONSAWU) explained that many workers in South Africa have only temporary employment contracts, limiting unions’ scope for recruiting new members. Having been excluded from tripartite dialogue mechanisms by the government, CONSAWU’s frequent contact with companies as part of the CNV-Confederations-Fairfood project led it to seek direct cooperation with employers in order to address this situation. CONSAWU discovered that Fruit South Africa was developing a code of ethics for the sector and joined this initiative to try and to ensure that producers comply with the code’s standards. This is how they got involved in the Sustainability Initiative South Africa (SIZA). Producer members of SIZA agree to comply with certain social and environmental standards and the organisation offers them training on how to monitor compliance. Members must also submit to three audits every year to ensure continuous improvements for the workers.

Adrián Bustillo (CGT-Honduras) closed the session by describing how the confederation used international consumer power to put pressure on a transnational company. In 1998, Nike made certain statements about working conditions at its Asian suppliers. After former athlete Mark Kasky denounced Nike for making exaggerated claims and false commercials, some consumer groups decided to boycott Nike products, for example, universities in the United States. The CGT-Honduras put pressure on Nike to improve working conditions at Nike’s suppliers in Honduras and won US$1.5 million in compensation for 1800 workers, the reopening of factories that had closed, reinstatement of sacked workers, one year of health insurance and vocational training.

The CGT Honduras’s success shows the importance of strategic alliances with the major consumer markets to use consumer protection legislation and judicial impartiality to achieve its ends. Marionne Lips (CNV) described how a strategic alliance could be created in practice: CNV’s new strategy to promote improvements in working conditions and decent work is based on creating warning systems. In such systems, trade unions report violations of labour rights at the beginning of the production chains, and then CNV and other organisations can use their international network to support those local unions.

In brief, private initiatives are global tools that are complementary to and not substitutes for national legislation for improving the situation of workers. Trade unions can use them to achieve concrete improvements in working conditions. They provide an innovative way forward and should be used and analysed more when working together to formulate new strategies.