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By Fred Searle

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## ***New ethical banana brand plays it fair***

Despite social and environmental progress, issues of low wages and weak job security persist in the banana value chain. A new Dutch brand called BeFrank Bananas is determined to do things differently. Fred Searle speaks to its founder Franklin Ginus



The brand aims to improve working conditions and wages

**W**ith European banana prices hovering at around €0.99 per kg for the past 20 years, and loose bananas currently sold as cheap as 15p each at UK retailers, the fruit's value chain has long been problematic.

Exploitative wages, weak job security and employee intimidation are just a few of the social problems still suffered by workers on banana plantations around the world. And it should not be forgotten that production can place huge strain on the natural environment through unsustainable land and water use and frequent overproduction.

From the farm workers' perspective, the introduction of Fairtrade bananas in the 1990s has gone a long way to improving working conditions and wages, while Rainforest Alliance certification (favoured by the likes of Tesco,

Morrisons, Asda and Lidl in the UK) is principally designed to conserve ecosystems, protect biodiversity and waterways, conserve forests and reduce agrochemical use.

This is laudable progress, but the much-vaunted certification arguably doesn't go far enough. A picker on a Fairtrade farm could still be earning as little as \$2.80 an hour, and many believe we can and should insist upon fairer returns for those further down the supply chain.

One company that has made it its mission to do business differently is BeFrank Bananas – a Dutch start-up headed up by the former Chiquita director Franklin Ginus.

The brand, which just launched in the Netherlands and is currently being sold by three Dutch wholesalers, is based on

the belief that transparency, equal sharing of returns, and care for the environment should be central to the value chain.

As such, the per-kilo price of BeFrank bananas is significantly higher than that of most suppliers', with 100 per cent of hidden environmental and social costs covered by the company.

BeFrank's bananas are being sold at €2.49/kg for conventional and €2.79/kg for organic product, and although this is roughly 30 per cent higher than the price at most Dutch retailers, Ginus is confident of finding his first retail partner soon. "We need a hero that can prove us right," he says. "Consumers are willing to pay more for their goods, but we have to be transparent."

There has been recent progress on the

<http://www.fruitnet.com/americafruit/article/1474/parts-of-san-diego-quarantined-as-psyllid-count-mounts>

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Dutch retail front with all of the country's major supermarkets agreeing to ensure a 75 per cent living wage for banana workers in the international supply chain by 2025. Nevertheless, Ginus acknowledges it is a pity it has taken so long for retailers to make this commitment.

BeFrank Bananas, which uses Fairtrade as its base certification, also has room to improve on this front. When it comes to ensuring everyone in its supply chain is paid a living wage, there are still "gaps to close", Ginus says. "We are talking with local authorities and partners to get a flavour of what the gap really is."

The brand's aim is to expand beyond the Netherlands,

eventually to other products besides bananas. "In every country, and on all fruits and vegetables, our brand could prove popular as long as we have the same mission," Ginus says. "We know this can be done but you need heroes to follow up and act from a real sustainable strategy."

Ultimately, it could prove difficult to encourage Europe's major retailers to rethink their banana prices. Average loose prices have finally started creeping up in the UK – from 77p/kg in 2018 to 80p/kg in 2019 – but these are still far from allowing retailers to reward producers properly for the social and environmental investments that are needed.

The commodification of the product and a race to the bottom on price has stripped the value out of the category in the past 20 years, affecting everyone in the supply chain. However, Ginus is confident there is space for an ethical brand in bananas, and he thinks consumer responsibility will be what drives this.

"We believe consumers like cool brands – brands that are transparent and honest, brands that are willing to change the dynamics in traditional food supply," he says. "We have to do business with our heart. We have to make sure our mission is a not just a dream, but a reality."