



BIRGIT DE VOS:

**‘Forced labour
is used in the
production of a
lot of food’**

Everyday products such as coffee, chocolate, sugar, and even fish and fruit leave a bad taste behind because of the likelihood that people have been exploited to produce them. Birgit de Vos studies human rights abuses in the food supply chain and helps companies find out what the risks of that are.

TEXT MARIANNE WILSCHUT PHOTOGRAPHY HARMEN DE JONG

Child labour, discrimination and exploitation are all in a day's work for Wageningen Economic Research scientist Birgit de Vos. As a social scientist, she studies labour conditions in the food supply chain in low-wage countries. She also represents WUR in The Sustainability Consortium, a global partnership on sustainability in the food supply chain between companies (such as Unilever and Walmart), NGOs and universities. Her recent achievements include Wageningen Humanity Views, an interactive world map which can show companies in which countries and sectors they run the risk of human rights abuses, such as modern slavery, child labour, and low wages in a specified supply chain.

I gather there's a lot of injustice on our plates. What goes wrong?

'Many of the products we consume daily, such as coffee, chocolate, nuts, spices, sugar, palm oil and rice, come from countries where there is a greater risk of the production involving child labour, or where matters such as safety, minimum wages, working hours and union rights are not regulated or are not well adhered to. And there are cases of forced labour – modern slavery. According to the United Nations' International Labour Organization, more

than 16 million people are victims of forced labour in the private sector, including agriculture. It is expected that this problem has been worsened by the coronavirus crisis.'

Where are these problems concentrated?

'They are everywhere, from Africa and Asia to Latin America, and in south-eastern Europe as well. However, there are differences between countries and between sectors. Child labour is more common in the cocoa sector, for instance. In Ghana, 55 per cent of the small-scale cocoa farmers have to make use of their children's labour. In Ivory Coast, that figure is nearly 40 per cent. Most of those children work with pesticides, machetes and other dangerous tools without any protective clothing.

'In the coffee supply chain, indigenous communities in Latin America and Asia are at risk of being discriminated against, and there is forced labour. In most countries, women are paid less than men for the same work. Membership of an independent union is out of the question in countries such as China and Laos. And many countries have an official minimum wage, but often that doesn't apply to jobs in agriculture. Along with domestic work, manufacturing and construction, agriculture is one of the sectors where the risk of exploitation is greatest.' >

‘Agriculture is one of the sectors with a high risk of exploitation’



Researcher Birgit de Vos shows how the interactive tool Wageningen Humanity Views works.

Why do these abuses mainly occur in agriculture?

‘Agriculture is an informal sector, and a lot of children work on their parents’ land. It is also a labour-intensive sector in which not many labourers have a permanent contract. There is a lot of seasonal labour, for which mainly temporary workers, often internal and foreign migrants, are hired without a contract. They work long hours under dangerous conditions. For fear of being sacked or deported, these labourers just do what they are told. And many plantations are in

remote areas, which makes it difficult to leave if you’re being exploited.’

And yet there are all sorts of fair-trade labels.

‘The countries where a lot of sustainability labels offer certification are those in which farmers and farm labourers are generally not protected or monitored by the local government. A certificate doesn’t change that overnight. To meet the label’s standards, farmers must invest, and those investments are often too high for them, and not fea-

sible. Another point is that even with the certificate, companies often pay hardly any more for the product. Farmers try and negotiate a higher price, but they come off worst. A certificate might give you a purchase guarantee for the future, but if you need food on your plate tomorrow, you will benefit more from a higher price, access to supportive credit conditions, and health insurance.’

Is it all gloom and doom?

‘There are companies that are prepared to pay the farmers a premium themselves. One example is Tony Chocolonely. On the whole, companies with a shorter supply chain and a single type of product, such as chocolate, coffee or bananas, are more willing to pay extra. For companies with many products and middlemen, a higher price is not often on the table because of the competitive market in which they operate. Sadly, I still see a lot of gesture politics there, and yet those kinds of companies could have a big impact. They join a round table or sign an agreement and carry out a few pilot projects here or there, but it’s a drop in the ocean. For example, Unilever recently made a statement about a living wage for all the direct suppliers in its chain. That sounds great, but it is essential that it includes indirect suppliers too, as they are often the poorest and most vulnerable, such as small-scale farmers and agricultural labourers.

‘Reducing the risk of modern slavery in the supply chain starts with knowing who all the suppliers are, including the subcontractors. Many companies have no idea exactly what goes on further down the chain, and sometimes local companies withhold information about labour conditions.’

Does your Wageningen Humanity Views make a supply chain more transparent?

‘Absolutely. You can no longer hide behind the argument, “I buy through a trader and whatever went on with the product before that is not my business”. The tool that

‘I still see a lot of gesture politics in companies’

my colleagues at Wageningen Economic Research and I have developed is an interactive world map on which users can click on countries and products. It is an instrument for companies that makes it clear where problems with human rights occur along the production chain. It is a risk analysis, and we give a score of between one and five per country and per sector. Five is the worst score. We also distinguish between regions. In Brazil, India and Mexico, for example, there are big differences between regions in terms of decent labour conditions. We end up with an overall score that companies can use to see where child labour, modern slavery or discrimination take place. Once a company knows where the big risks lie, it can set up targeted programmes to reduce them. Or it might decide to change its sourcing policy. This tool makes it easier to set priorities.’

Have companies shown any interest yet?

‘We developed the scan and it was implemented for Olam, a major international player in the cultivation, trading and processing of agricultural products. But it could be used more broadly by companies, governments and NGOs, in fact by anyone who purchases coffee, cocoa, sugar, nuts, rubber, rice, cotton, dairy produce, chicken, timber and palm oil. Currently we have assessed more than 30 countries, and in future we aim to expand both the number of countries and the number of products.’

So this problem arises mainly in the agriculture and food sector, supremely Wageningen themes. Does Wageningen pay enough attention to human rights?

‘There is some action, but still not very much. My colleague Yuca Waarts, for example, does research on the living wage and incomes in developing countries. Nadia Bernaz, who works in the department of Social Sciences, studies international legislation in the field of labour law. And the Centre for Development Innovation does research on themes such as gender and youth. I’m also in a WUR-wide working group, which includes colleagues from Facilities and Services, looking at how we can make sure that WUR does not itself make use of modern slavery. You have to think in terms of the sourcing of fair-trade lab coats, electronics and food. That is the least we can do. Wageningen claims to stand for sustainability, but that is expressed primarily in research on boosting production and making it more efficient, responsible pesticide use, and combatting deforestation and food waste. There is not much attention to labour conditions, whereas human rights are surely very important if you’re talking about sustainability in agriculture.’

There are international rules for the safety of food and toys coming from non-Western countries. Does the will exist among companies and government bodies to really do something about child labour and social exploitation?

‘A lot of companies stay stuck at the level of philanthropy. And governments rely too heavily on voluntary agreements with companies. The success we’ve seen in establishing rules for food safety is because that affects the consumer directly. Companies and governments are afraid of food scandals, so you don’t want customers getting sick. But that the same consumer eats chocolate produced with child labour is no concern of theirs. Luckily there are more and more websites and apps with

which consumers can find out what their brand does to prevent modern slavery and child labour. Tony Chocolonely is now the most popular brand of chocolate bars in the Netherlands, so the demand is real.’

Is your tool suitable for consumers as well?

‘Not at present, but my colleagues and I would like to develop something like it for the social impact of food products.’ ■

www.wur.eu/livelihood

WAGENINGEN HUMANITY VIEWS

Wageningen Humanity Views is an interactive world map that reveals in which supply chains of products such as coffee, nuts, rice, timber and palm oil there is a risk of human rights abuses. Per product, the user can choose between one or more countries and eight types of human rights abuse, such as child labour, modern slavery or discrimination. The tool gives a score from 1 to 5 for each country and sector, with 5 as the worst score. The tool, which was developed by Wageningen Economic Research, is based on a large number of publicly available data sources that have been validated or adapted by means of a detailed literature study.

