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Corporate labour standards and work quality: insights from the agro-export sector of Guanajuato, Central Mexico

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ABSTRACT

In this article we analyse how workers perceive corporate labour standards and the related work conditions in the agro-export sector of Northern Guanajuato, Central Mexico. We do so by first comparing labour standards on local farms to labour standards at an international fresh vegetable production, harvesting, processing and export company that has explicit corporate labour standards. Second, we present how workers from two rural communities of landless workers employed in the agro-export industry perceive the differences between work at local farms and work at the agro-export company. Our results show that better pay and secondary benefits resulting from corporate labour standards do not necessarily translate to perceptions of better work quality. This relates to the broader work conditions in which these labour standards are inserted. Many workers prefer work with lower labour standards but that has more convenient working hours and enables engagement in family and social activities alongside the job. Based on these results we argue that, from a sociological perspective, work quality is a situated and very context-specific notion. Therefore, higher labour standards and better pay even in contexts of cheap labour and widespread poverty are not necessarily associated by workers with higher work quality.

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Introduction

Transnational outsourcing of production has increased concerns over labour conditions because it enables global buyers to access cheap labour in developing countries with or without entering into formal contractual relations with these workers (Locke and Romis 2007; Merk 2011). Due to the absence of legal ties between global buyers and the wide network of suppliers – and given that many developing country governments are either unable or unwilling to enforce their own labour legislation – pressure on transnational corporations to address the labour conditions throughout their supply chain has increased (Barrientos and Smith 2007; Locke, Amengual, and Mangla 2009). Concerns over the negative impacts of labour-intensive industries on employment, human rights and the environment,

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especially in developing and emerging economies, have triggered a variety of corporate responses (Barrientos 2008; Bigg and Ward 2003; Donaghey et al. 2014; Egels-Zandén and Lindholm 2015). Global corporations have implemented a growing number of voluntary codes of conduct (CoCs) to reduce exploitation of workers, ensure fair compensation and eliminate degrading and dangerous work conditions in supply chains (Locke et al. 2007; Coslovsky and Locke 2013; Locke 2013).¹ Many CoCs have centred around *labour standards* that establish guidelines on issues such as child labour, working hours, wages, health and safety for direct employees of businesses and in the whole supply chain (Blowfield and Dolan 2008; Vogel 2006). However, CoCs within corporations lack external regulatory coercion (Levy and Kaplan 2008). Critics point to the phenomenon that corporations tend to engage in, showcase and brand these activities to gain the moral trust of their consumers and other stakeholders by contributing to the improvement of their environmental and social performance (Blowfield and Dolan 2008; Pedersen and Andersen 2006). While some scholars embrace such CoCs as a more humane approach to capitalism, others deride it as a form of symbolic management and corporate 'greenwashing' which distracts stakeholders and consumers from corporations' socio-environmentally unsustainable activities (Barrientos and Smith 2007; Jackson, Doellgast, and Baccaro 2018).

Within this broader discussion on CoCs, in this article we aim to develop a better and more nuanced understanding of how corporate labour standards are implemented on the ground and how they are perceived by workers. We do so by answering the following question: *How do corporate labour standards and coupled work conditions relate to workers' perceptions of work quality?* We explore this question based on an analysis of rural labour conditions and how workers perceive them in the agro-export sector in the north of the state of Guanajuato, Central Mexico.

Internationally the agricultural agro-export sector, in which wage labour is and has historically been precarious and flexible, lags behind in the adoption of CoCs despite important international investments. This, coupled to the facts that supply chains in the sector are short, that rural labour conditions remain precarious and that rural poverty indexes are high, makes the agro-export sector an interesting lens through which to analyse whether and how corporate labour standards contribute – or can contribute – to a better work quality as perceived by workers.

Our analysis is informed by research conducted from June to August 2016 in two rural communities, in the municipality of Dolores Hidalgo, northern Guanajuato, Mexico. Field research consisted of a workers' survey and semi-structured interviews with workers and employers. A total of 58 workers (31 female and 27 male; ages 17 to 71) were interviewed and surveyed. Respondents were found and approached through contacts in the two communities. This served to create trust among the respondents and to find workers at different companies who had similar jobs. The surveys with the employees served to gather data about the labour conditions at the different companies, such as working hours, transportation, salary, social security and other benefits as perceived by workers. Semi-structured interviews with the survey respondents were used to gather more information about the motivations of these workers for their current and past employment choices. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed to inform our analysis of work quality perceptions. These results, interviews with personnel of the management department of the company whose CoC labour standards were studied (the Company²), and interviews with 10 other employers of the local agro-production and export industry informed our analysis.

The Company, a USA-based salad and fresh-cut vegetable manufacturer and exporter, was chosen because it has a CoC and because it buys produce from many local commercial farmers under contract. Because of its size it is one of the main employers in the region.

This article is structured in the following way. After this introduction, we review key aspects of the corporate labour standards debate and introduce the notion of work quality as a means to overcome some of the limitations of the current debates on labour standards. Then, we present the context of Mexico and the study area as a background to the research. This is followed by an analysis of how working conditions on local farms compare to those of 'the Company'. Finally, we analyse perceptions of work quality among workers in the agro-export sector. In the conclusions we reflect on how labour standards relate to work quality, arguing that the latter should be seen as a situated and context-specific notion that can help inform the development of more locally meaningful labour standards and CoCs.

Corporate labour standards and work quality

Corporate labour standards in global supply chains

As part of the global neoliberal restructuring that started in the 1970s, flexible labour and free international trade coupled to rapid economic globalisation, deregulation and liberalisation was promoted as 'the' pathway to 'growth' and 'development' (Barrientos and Smith 2007). This marked a break with the previous decades in which governmental institutions were expected to establish the preconditions for the proper working of markets and workers' well-being through public governance such as 'hard laws', regulations and fiscal mechanisms imposed by the state (Amaeshi, Osuji, and Doh 2011; Barrientos et al. 2011; Scherer and Palazzo 2008). Individual governments have limited abilities to regulate multinational corporations. This has spurred civil society, consumers and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to increase pressure on the private sector to assume a more active role in societal well-being through the protection of labour rights within a company and its supply networks (Bair 2017; Kolk and van Tulder 2010). As a result, governance over labour has increasingly migrated from government institutions to private and non-governmental actors (Gilberthorpe and Rajak 2017).

Corporate labour standards are a private governance mechanism. Their widespread implementation was fuelled by a perceived 'governance deficit' in the regulation and implementation of national and international labour standards in the global economy. Corporate labour standards are voluntary and internally regulated CoCs of businesses, most of which take the International Labour Organization (ILO) and national labour regulations as departing point. These imply compliance with *labour standards* such as national labour legislation and international conventions about treatment of employees, and sometimes the protection of *labour rights* within the company. Corporate labour standards have tended to focus mainly on complying with national labour standards regarding on-the-job conditions related to hazards and security, remuneration and secondary benefits such as pension plans, vacations and social security of workers (Blowfield 2005; Blowfield and Dolan 2008; Locke, Rissing, and Pal 2013). Debate remains regarding whether this is a step forward or backward for *labour rights* (Anner 2012; Locke 2013). Although such corporate regulations can contribute to greater adherence to national labour standards and better on-the-job conditions and remuneration, some scholars have pointed to the threat that such mechanisms pose to state regulation while undermining labour unions and other forms of workers' organisations.

Anner (2012) shows that corporate codes tend to focus on the implementation and monitoring of minimal labour standards to gain legitimacy, but usually fall short on the issues related to the rights of workers in relation to freedom of association as expressed through independent trade unions, collective bargaining and strikes.

Many corporations have drafted labour CoCs that extend to their suppliers and subcontractors as a means to govern their supply chains in relation to their corporate labour standards (Distelhorst et al. 2015). Through corporate labour standards, buyers seek to influence the labour conditions for workers in their outsourcing networks (De Neve 2014). Distelhorst et al. (2015), amongst others, show that compliance with corporate labour standards is often better in countries that have stronger national labour law enforcement. Another important factor that has proven to support improvements on the side of suppliers are a relatively free press, a denser NGO network and openness regarding factory-level assessments through which civil society can monitor compliance (Robertson 2020; Short, Toffel, and Hugill 2020). While not legally binding, compliance with these corporate labour standards has increasingly become an important condition for suppliers to gain and maintain access to global markets (Auret and Barrientos 2004; Donaghey et al. 2014). For buyers, these corporate labour standards are seen as a strategy to reduce the reputational risks in the marketplace as well as to improve supplier relations (Hassel 2008).

The private regulation model assumes that buyers have to create incentives that move suppliers to increased compliance through rewards such as more orders. However, Amengual, Distelhorst, and Tobin (2020) show, based on an analysis of purchasing data and compliance records, that improved compliance with corporate labour standards and other corporate CoCs does not necessarily translate to increased orders. The complexity of the supply chain structure makes it difficult to enforce standards throughout the chain. In particular, less-resourced small businesses and producers face constraints in adopting labour standards in accordance with required CoCs without support for meeting compliance costs (Barrientos 2013; Genier, Stamp, and Pfitzer 2009). Finally, the structure of the supply chains can generate important constraints on the use of incentives that aim to align sourcing practices with corporate CoC compliance (Amengual, Distelhorst, and Tobin 2020).

Much of the literature on corporate CoCs has focussed on better understanding supply chains, how these work and how compliance can be improved and lead to better labour standards. Several studies point to the continued need for institutional change aimed at making private regulation work better. One important element in bringing this about is the ability of civil society to expose labour standard violations (Short, Toffel, and Hugill 2020). Other elements include institutional changes at different scales (from local to global) (Bair, Anner, and Blasi 2020), and broader collaboration among buyers and brands to ensure consistency in compliance along the supply chain (Kuruvilla et al. 2020). Yet most of these studies say little about how such improved compliance with corporate labour standards translates to how workers experience it in the broader set of work conditions, as explored in the next section.

From corporate labour standards to situated experiences of work quality

One of the critiques of corporate labour standards is the lack of insight into the perspectives of target beneficiaries (Spencer 2018). Suppliers along the supply chain tend to prioritise the agendas and views of corporate entities and protect their reputations rather than protecting the targeted workers. This results in a disjuncture between corporate discourses and practices on the one side, and the perceptions of workers on the ground on the other (Banks

et al. 2016; Barkemeyer 2009; Gilberthorpe and Banks 2012). In this contribution we aim to bridge this gap through the analysis of work quality as perceived by workers.

In the literature on work quality, economic approaches have often used pay as the single factor representing quality of work. Sociological approaches have shown the limitations of such an approach by highlighting that no single feature alone can be identified as determining work quality because the context within which the job is situated is crucial (Cooke, Donaghey, and Zeytinoglu 2013). Departing from such a broad notion, more recent studies on work quality analyse how workers perceive their jobs and related work conditions in the wider contexts in which individuals work and live (Cooke, Donaghey, and Zeytinoglu 2013). This broadens the scope of the more common studies of on-the-job quality and experiences in an organisation. This job experience is determined by conditions such as pay and benefits, opportunities for advancement, autonomy, skills and effort, job security, work intensity and social conditions of work, amongst others (Gallie 2003; Wright and Dwyer 2006). This quantitative approach has the limitation that it does not connect directly with the broader and contextualised work experience of workers (Sengupta, Edwards and Tsai 2009).

Sociological approaches to work quality broaden the notion of work quality by considering the wider social and economic environment that influences the individual perception of workers in relation to their jobs, other work and social life (Cooke, Donaghey, and Zeytinoglu 2013). It is affected by job factors such as pay, benefits and working hours, autonomy, effort and social contacts. At the same time, it is importantly shaped by extrinsic enabling factors that can create conditions for fulfilling personal goals and enhancing life in the broader context of different personal, community and social relationships and factors that fall outside of the job sphere (Cooke, Donaghey, and Zeytinoglu 2013). As a result work quality is a highly situated notion when studied using sociological approaches, as is done in this contribution. Thus, in similar jobs, work quality can be perceived very differently between people within similar socio-economic contexts, and even by the same people in different stages and moments of their lives. These perceptions are formed by, on the one hand, the personal life circumstances of workers, and, on the other, by the macro socio-economic contexts in which corporations as well as workers operate and relate to each other.

In our analysis, we aim to create a bridge between the scholarship on corporate labour standards and that on sociological approaches to work quality as a new means to identify and better understand the relations between corporate labour standards and how these are perceived by the populations these standards aim to target. To do so we compare the labour standards (compliance with national labour regulations regarding remuneration, pay of extra hours, social security, pension, paid vacations and other benefits) of an international agro-export company (the Company), with a clear corporate CoC, with those of other local agricultural companies of the region, while also exploring whether and how the Company deals with compliance with CoCs by its suppliers. Then, we present how workers experience the work conditions and thus work quality under corporate labour standards as compared to work on local farms. Before turning to those results, in the next section, we first present how the broader labour conditions have developed in Mexico.

The research context: labour in Mexico's agro-industry sector

During most of the twentieth century, the Mexican state held a strong influence on the Mexican economy, its labour regulations and its labour unions (Blasco and Zølner 2010).

However, since the 1970s, gradual processes of neoliberal socio-economic modernisation, preempted on principles of privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation strategies, have drastically transformed state–business–labour relations through a process that Morton (2003) labelled ‘the passive revolution’. This ‘passive revolution’ was spearheaded by neoliberal structural adjustment policies. As a result, the Mexican economy turned from an import substitution industrialisation strategy with many state-owned companies to an export growth model dominated by private corporations, which Delgado Wise and Márquez Covarrubias (2008, 1374) characterise as ‘a cheap labour force export-led model’.

Since the end of the 1970s, Mexican policy led to a depreciation and precarisation of labour. This resulted in a growing wage gap, the weakening and dismantling of unions, longer working days, lack of employment security and reduced access to broader social benefits from labour (Weisbrot et al. 2017). Wage employment has become cheaper, more flexible and temporary; making it difficult for workers to organise and press for labour rights. In the agricultural sector, commercial farmers tend to evade labour contracts, social security payments and other legal responsibilities towards workers (Kay 2015). Another trend in the agro-export sector, as well as in other industries (most notably the *maquiladoras*), is the increased demand for women workers, who are perceived as less conflictive, more willing to accept lower wages and, sometimes, more precise (Kay 2015). The widespread growth of women as workers has increased the work force in the context of a generalised lack of sufficient formal, high-quality employment, and high levels of unemployment, under-employment and precarious forms of informal employment (Delgado Wise and Márquez Covarrubias 2008). As a result, labour mobility and flexibility have risen within Mexico, and notably in rural areas through circular and (increasingly) established migration across the border with the United States³ (Hoogesteger and Rivara 2020).

Although Mexico does have labour regulations, these have ‘degraded’ over the past 40 years to attract manufacturing industry and international investments. This has happened through deregulation, in a context (especially when it concerns rural labour) where there are few and very limited mechanisms to ensure compliance with existing labour laws. Therefore, violations of existing norms and legislative requirements are widespread (Logsdon, Thomas, and Van Buren 2006; Mendizábal 2013). Despite long working hours (legally 48 hours/week), wages in the production and manufacturing sector are low, and the majority of the small- and medium-sized companies do not provide their employees with the social security benefits to which they are legally entitled (Preuss, Barkemeyer, and Glavas 2016; Weyzig 2006). According to Delgado Wise and Márquez Covarrubias (2008, 1368), ‘in Mexico the hourly wage for a manufacturing job is \$2.57, while in the USA the formal employment rate is \$16.45’ – a gap that has gradually increased over the last four decades.⁴ According to Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL) (cited by Murray 2014), between 2005 and 2012, real labour income per capita fell 6% in Mexico, and real wages for those living below the poverty line keep falling. According to CONEVAL (2019), 41.9% of the Mexican population (52.4 million people) live below the poverty line⁵ and 36.2% (45.3 million) are vulnerable to poverty, whereas 21.9% (27.4 million) are not vulnerable.⁶

In this context of national deregulation and liberalisation, corporate policies of international (mainly foreign) companies, most of which come to Mexico for cheap labour, have been the key driving force of Mexico’s current CoC agenda (Blasco and Zølner 2010; Muller and Kolk 2010). An increasing number of companies (notably in the car, technology and manufacturing industries) are engaging in diverse national and international private CoCs.

These have tended to focus on international standards of quantifiable social and environmental contributions (Meyskens and Paul 2010).

In this context, Mexico's agro-export industry offers an interesting lens for analysis. This sector has flourished through market liberalisation and international and national investments. Over the past three decades, the country has become the leading fresh vegetable and fruit supplier of the United States (González 2020). Due to its fertile soils, high-quality groundwater, favourable climate conditions and cheap labour, and its proximity to important distribution centres in the US, Guanajuato has become one of the major centres of production and manufacturing of Mexico's fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables (Echánove and Steffen 2005; Hoogesteger 2018). Production is mostly organised by (inter)national companies through contract farming arrangements with local commercial farmers (Hoogesteger 2017). Rural communities form the most important source of labour for this sector.

To secure their labour force and gain the trust of their consumers in the US, international companies in this sector have implemented CoCs. This is happening in a context of high levels of labour outmigration to the US, a rapid industrialisation of the area, very low demands from national labour legislation, low minimum wages and little to no control of state institutions over national labour standards. This makes the case of northern Guanajuato an interesting lens through which to analyse how CoCs relate to perceptions of work quality in rural settings.

Our analysis is based on the case study of two rural communities, situated in the municipality of Dolores Hidalgo, in the north of the state of Guanajuato. The expansion of fresh vegetable production for the agro-export sector in the region has increased employment opportunities. Not only has the demand for labour increased, it has also become more permanent when compared to the more seasonal demand for labour with traditional crops. Before the boom of year-round production of fresh vegetables, the majority of the respondents worked seasonally in the region's agricultural sector, with marked peaks during the planting and harvesting seasons but with little work on offer in between (see Figure 1). As one labourer put it:

I have worked at a lot of different farms, chillies, tomatoes etc., but that's all seasonal so you constantly have to search for other farms where they might have work, here [in the fresh vegetable production] we don't have to look for work all the time because there is always work'.

Labour standards in the agricultural sector of Northern Guanajuato

Comparing labour standards in the agro-export sector

Below we compare the labour standards of the Company as established for its harvesting teams with those of other employers of field workers that do similar unqualified work in the agro-export sector of the region. We do so by looking at how the different employers comply with the standards established by Mexican labour regulations. An overview of the most important elements of the Company's labour standards and how these compare to other local employers in the agricultural sector (who also supply/contract with the Company) are presented in Table 1.

As Table 1 shows, labour standards for field workers of the Company fully comply with Mexican legislation and offer various benefits that go beyond the legal requirements. The



Figure 1. Labourers planting lettuce (photo by the authors).

salary for field workers at the Company is more than twice the national minimum; overtime hours are paid double; social and medical security are covered through the national social security system, vacations are paid, Christmas bonuses are given out, and a bonus based on a percentage of the profits of the Company is paid out each year. Other benefits that go beyond the legal requirements are also included. Firstly, employees with young families receive school supplies for their children. Secondly, all employees receive a savings fund, which means that the Company reduces the salary of its employees by 10 pesos/week, which the Company matches and saves for the workers. The savings are given to the employees in December. All workers who do not miss a working day during the week receive a financial assistance bonus equivalent to one day's pay. Labourers are given working equipment and the necessary clothing. Working conditions in the field meet the required safety and hygiene standards as stipulated by the American Food Safety Regulations and its labelling agencies. These include mobile toilet facilities, specialised clothing and separate eating spaces.

As outlined in [Table 1](#), most other employers do not comply with the Mexican labour regulations, offer lower daily salaries and do not offer the extra direct and indirect economic and social security benefits that the Company provides for its workers. These standards are such that the direct and indirect economic remuneration for unskilled labour at the Company is the highest of the compared companies.

Labour standards in the supply chain of the Company

The labour standards that the Company requires of its suppliers farther down the supply chain require, on paper, compliance with Mexican labour regulations and compliance with regulations as established by the American Food Safety Regulations and its labelling

Table 1. Labour standards of different employers in the agro-export sector of Northern Guanajuato (authors' own elaboration).

	The Company	Farm 1	Farm 2	Farm 3	Farm 4	Farm 5
Minimum salary/ day, in pesos ^a	150	150	140	130	140	210
Premium overtime ^b	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Social security ^b	Yes	No	Some	No	No	Yes
Paid vacation and holidays ^d	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes
Christmas bonus ^e	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Profit-sharing bonus ^f	Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes

^aIn 2016 the minimum salary was established at 73 pesos (US\$3.88) per day.

^bThe first nine hours of overtime should be paid with a premium of 100%, and for the subsequent hours employees must receive a premium of 200% (Article 66–68).

^cThe Social Security Law (*Ley del Seguro Social*) of 1997 states that social security is mandatory for all employees (permanent or temporary).

^dPaid vacation: After at least one year of service with the employer, employees have the right to a paid vacation of at least six days; based on the seniority of the employee this period increases each year by two days (Article 76). Mandatory holidays: Eight days of the year are considered mandatory holidays, including New Year's Day, Constitution Day, Christmas Day, etc. (Article 74).

^eAll employees have the right to an annual Christmas bonus (*aguinaldo*). This should be equivalent to at least 15 days of salary (Article 87).

^fEmployees are entitled to a share in the company's profits; this share is currently fixed at 10% of the company's taxable income (Article 112). The division of the profit over all employees is based on the number of days worked (Article 123). This profit-sharing bonus (*utilidades*) is normally paid in May.

agencies. While the latter is controlled by external certification mechanisms as a prerequisite to being able to sell the produce in the USA, the Company monitors its suppliers regarding compliance with Mexican labour regulations. Our research amongst workers and suppliers of the Company shows that the monitoring of the Company is, by and large, limited to checking that no child labour is used in the production process and – to a lesser degree – registration of workers in the national social security system. The audits of the Company are sporadic and quite lenient. According to interviews down the supply chain, the impact of this monitoring on the producing farms appears to be restricted to control of child labour. As most farms that establish contracts with the Company also produce for other companies or sell part of their produce directly to the market where these labour standards are not required, a grey area appears with regards to who works in which production processes on one and the same farm. As shown in Table 1, most local farms that produce for the Company do not comply with Mexican labour regulations, which clearly shows that control down the supply chain is inconsistent and weak.

From a regulatory perspective focussed on compliance with CoCs and national labour standards, as well as from an economic perspective on work quality, the Company clearly scores much higher for its direct employees than do the other local employers. When assessing the labour standards of directly employed labourers, it would be easy to showcase this company as a success story in terms of CoCs. Its performance along the supply chain, however, would score much lower. In line with such an assessment, it would be expected that locally, most labourers would choose to work directly at the Company. The perceptions and choices of workers in the two studied communities, however, highlight another, more complex and situated reality. This is explored below by looking at work quality and considering the wider social environment that shapes individual perceptions of workers in relation to their jobs (Cooke, Donaghey, and Zeytinoglu 2013).

Work quality in the agro-export sector

Work conditions at the Company: beyond labour standards

As presented above, labour standards for direct employees have made jobs at the Company the highest paying unqualified jobs in the region. The economic attractiveness of these jobs has served the Company to secure, sustain and constantly renew a more or less steady labour force.

Our surveys and interviews show that the most important motivation of the workers of the Company is that this is the only employment in the region which enables them to earn 'a bit more'. Respondents indicated that this job enabled them to 'fix their house', 'sustain their family' and 'acquire a little extra'. The higher weekly salary mainly comes from the over-time work that is paid with the legally required premium of 100% (double wage for extra hours). A working week officially consists of a maximum of 48 hours (eight hours per day, six days a week), but as workers in the harvesting teams of the Company work 'until the job is done', most working days are 10–11 hours, commonly leading to a 60- to 70-hour work week. This means that, depending on the number of extra hours they have worked, the weekly salary of the workers amounts to around 1900–2000 pesos/week (around US\$100). This is significantly higher than the salaries the majority of the workers in similar positions receive at the other companies, where the weekly salaries range between 780 and 980 pesos (less than US\$50). However, respondents indicated they are paying a very high price for their higher salaries, especially in terms of their time and freedom. One of the main reasons their weekly direct pay is higher, compared to jobs at other companies, is due to the many hours they have to overwork. Workers in the harvesting teams of the Company work mostly at night and in the early morning (as this is the best harvesting time for fresh vegetables). The working day generally starts between 4:00 pm and 10:00 pm, when workers are picked up in the community by a transport bus belonging to the Company that takes workers to the fields where the produce (mostly lettuce) must be harvested. After a travel time of 1.5–3 hours (which is not paid) workers arrive at the working location. This marks the start of their 'on-the-job time', which finishes when the harvesting is done in accordance with the orders the Company receives. Work is followed by the unpaid commute back from the farm to their community. The result of this is that most days, workers spend 13–17 hours devoted to work. During harvesting peaks, workers are asked to work seven days a week whereby the whole seventh day is paid as overtime: 'Supposedly we work six days a week, and we have one day of rest, but there are occasions where we have to work 15 days in a row, when there are a lot of orders' (Survey 1). 'Sometimes seven, sometimes six, or sometimes three days a week. Our work is purely based on orders' (Survey 17).

The 'free' transportation implies that workers are 'forced' to work until the harvest is done. There is no option to leave before the transportation departs. Moreover, often they are informed very late whether and at what time the transportation will pick them up. As one labourer stressed: 'we cannot do anything, you are like a slave waiting until they tell you'. The recently introduced alimentary compensation (27 pesos/day) also implies they are not given time to eat during the long working hours. Moments of rest are scarce as 'they say there is no time because the work needs to be finished'.

The broader work conditions that being employed by the Company implies are perceived as very restrictive for the deployment of other, non-job related activities. Its demands restrict social reproductive tasks, which are assumed by either the workers' spouses or their extended

families. These conditions severely impact the perceived work quality of jobs at the Company. Many respondents working at other jobs had worked for a period of time at the Company for the higher pay, but chose to leave despite lower labour standards at other employers. Most indicated that the demands the job places on their lives are very high and that they prefer to take other jobs with more freedom despite lower labour standards.

Choosing 'other' work quality

Although the Company offers higher labour standards and – in an economic sense – better jobs, many workers choose 'other' work quality at local commercial farms. The single most important factor that respondents mentioned was that jobs on local farms give them more time for other personal and social activities. As one respondent stated: 'We earn a bit less here, but since we have normal working hours, we can eat our beans with tortillas every day'. Another put it as follows: 'I would not want to stop sleeping just for the money, they almost don't have time to sleep and they don't have time to eat properly either'.

Short commutes as well as control over transportation enable workers to determine whether or not to over-work. Most travel as a groups to the farm in a pick-up or van belonging to one of the workers; others ride their own motorcycles, and some farms transport their workers in pick-ups. Another aspect that enhances the work quality at local farms is the more or less fixed daytime working schedule of 7:00 am to 3:00 pm, six days a week. This working schedule, which largely overlaps with school hours, gives workers more time and freedom to engage in personal, social and reproductive tasks within their households and community. As put by a former labourer of the Company: 'with the Company you can earn a lot more sometimes, but you also think about the working hours. Now that my children are small I could not be there for them, so I left'. Some local farms offer wages for work done (number of harvested boxes or weeded area) on a temporary basis, rather than fixed salaries. This gives workers even more freedom in terms of the time they spend on the job.

Although local workers have more time and flexibility, some workers indicated they are concerned about not being enrolled in the social security system through their jobs, since this negatively affects them in three ways. Firstly, this implies that their medical costs are not covered; secondly, they do not receive a salary when they are sick or on pregnancy leave; and, thirdly, they are not accumulating a pension. Although the majority of the respondents did think their employer would make sure that an injured employee receives the required medical attention in case of an accident on the job, they were not certain whether the employer would take responsibility for the entire period of recovery. As one respondent stressed: 'If I have an accident at work and I cannot work for a while I don't have any protection, so I lose'.

Due to the high labour demand in the agro-export sector in the region, the majority of the interviewed workers feel they can take the liberty to decide what days they want to work. Since most farms struggle to obtain and maintain their labour force, they are usually allowed to return to their job with, as the only consequence, the loss of their weekly or monthly assistance bonus. If the Company does not accept them anymore, they indicate they would easily be able to find a new similar job. The Company, for instance, continuously searches for workers; as one interviewee put it: 'you can always work there, they are always looking for people'. Many commercial farmers indicate they have difficulty finding enough workers.

Our interviews with workers brought to the fore that respondents choose different jobs (either with the Company or on local farms, or often labour migration to the USA) at different moments in their productive lives. These choices are linked to the specific circumstances in which people find themselves and which make them value and weigh aspects of work (pay, secondary benefits, security, liberty) and ultimately work quality differently, according to their situated realities.

Conclusions: understanding the limitations of labour standards through work quality

In Mexico as well as internationally, CoCs (also referred to as corporate social responsibility or CSR) have been lauded as an important tool for improving the impact businesses have on social welfare. One important aspect of CoCs is improving labour standards such as salaries and on-the-job conditions and ensuring compliance with national labour standards, for both direct employees of the companies and for suppliers (although most fail to address issues related to workers' rights; see also Anner 2012). The generalised labour depreciation – (especially in the developing world) aimed at attracting international capital through 'a cheap labour force export-led model' (Delgado Wise and Márquez Covarrubias 2008) – has become fertile soil for the development of CoCs. In these specific contexts, little has been written about the relation between corporate labour standards and work quality (see Barrientos and Smith 2007; Barrientos et al. 2011; Egels-Zandén and Lindholm 2015; Sengupta, Edwards and Tsai 2009). To fill this gap, this research was guided by the following question: How do corporate labour standards and related work conditions influence workers' perceptions of work quality?

Our analysis shows that for the studied case, the international company has developed quite high labour standards that go beyond national labour regulations for its direct employees. These corporate labour standards result in higher direct and indirect remuneration for labour through direct pay, social security and pensions as well as other benefits for workers. This culminates in labour standards that far surpass those of similar jobs on local farms in the region.

When it comes to the implementation of labour standards down the supply chain to the suppliers, the performance of this company's CoC is low and mostly limited to control over child labour. This results from low monitoring from the buying company and no incentives to comply with these higher labour standards (see also Distelhorst and Locke 2018 for the same phenomenon in other contexts).

However, despite the higher local labour standards at the Company, the work quality as perceived by employers is not highly valued. This is related to the fact that the higher labour standards are coupled to working conditions that most workers do not value. The long work weeks (that often enable workers to earn twice as much as on local farms) on average comprise 60+ hours of work and a daily 3–6 hour commute, reducing the perceived work quality of these jobs. These working conditions severely constrain workers' ability to engage in family and community reproduction tasks and relegate their role in these social spheres to little more than money earners. This means that for workers the work quality at the Company is attractive only under specific circumstances and only in certain periods of their lives, which explains the high rate of labour desertion when workers prefer to engage in family and community tasks.

For many workers, perceptions of work quality change over time and relate not only to labour standards but, importantly, to their capacity to combine their jobs with their personal and broader family, household and community work and ambitions (see also Cooke, Donaghey, and Zeytinoglu 2013). In the studied case this pertains to shorter travel times, shorter work days, more convenient working hours, no 'forced' overwork and more flexibility of working times, all found at jobs on nearby farms – despite significantly lower direct and indirect remuneration for the work. The implementation of labour standards throughout the supply chain, which at present is rather weak despite clear guidelines, can form an important instrument to improve the work quality of workers through higher labour standards in the less time-demanding and more flexible jobs at suppliers' companies.

These results bring to the fore some of the limitations that a pure focus on CoCs, corporate labour standards and a compliance model (and research on it and its limitations; see for instance Locke, Amengual, and Mangla 2009) has in terms of understanding how these improve the lives and work conditions of the target beneficiaries. More specifically, it shows how favourable corporate labour standards and adherence to national labour regulations (Locke, Rissing, and Pal 2013) say little about the broader working conditions under which workers have to operate. Therefore, they also say little about how the work quality of these jobs is valued locally by the targeted beneficiaries. To bridge this gap, an understanding of work quality through a broader sociological lens has proven very insightful. This notion points attention to the situated and highly context-specific personal perceptions of the targeted beneficiaries (both men and women workers) and how these translate to local understandings of work quality (Pearson 2007). Such an understanding can further debates about the effects of corporate labour standards and national labour regulations on workers' well-being, and support the development of more meaningful ways in which CoCs can improve work quality and, through it, the social welfare of the targeted beneficiaries in very diverse contexts around the world. This requires that the voices, preferences and concerns of the targeted populations are heard and taken into account for the development of new governance mechanisms and policies. Advancing *labour rights* is a first and critical step. Through it organised workers can voice and advance demands that meaningfully contribute to a higher work quality in the specific context of their work and their socio-economic context (see also Anner 2012).

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Notes

1. In the literature and in practice these initiatives have also been discussed and treated as elements of corporate social responsibility (CSR).
2. We have chosen to keep the names of the two rural communities and the analysed agro-export companies anonymous, in compliance with established research ethics.
3. In 2017, almost 13 million Mexicans lived abroad (of whom 12.68 million were in the USA) compared to fewer than 2.5 million in 1980 (CNP-BBVA 2018).
4. For 2019, the hourly wage is estimated at \$2.60. See <https://www.ivemsa.com/manufacturing-in-mexico/Mexican-labor-rates/> (accessed October 16, 2019).
5. The poverty line as referring to income was established at 1713 pesos/month per person for rural areas and at 2654 pesos/month for rural areas in August 2016 (CONEVAL 2017).
6. INEGI (2019) reports that of the working population (employed and self-employed) of almost 55 million, about 20% receive one minimum salary, 32% one to two minimum salaries, 18% two to three minimum salaries, 8% three to five minimum salaries, and 3% more than five minimum salaries, and the remaining 19% is not specified. The minimum salary is established at 102.68 pesos/day for 2019.

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