



Smiling today – but what of tomorrow?

Arid plains and barren landscapes have for a long time shaped the image of Ethiopia, yet today, bright blooms of roses, carnations, shrubs, summer flowers and trees blanket large swathes of Oromia region, protected under the glass sheets of large green houses.

The country experienced 11.1% economic growth in 2008, with flower exports generating \$150 million, double the amount earned by the industry just twelve months earlier. The 1000 hectares currently awash with vibrant floral colours is set to treble by the end of 2009. The sector currently employs around 60,000 workers, 70% of whom are women.

Zeway in Oromia, which in 2005 had a population of 50,000 and an unemployment rate of 50%. That was the year that Sher Ethiopia, today the country's largest flower farm, first took root. The farm is on its way to acquiring the internationally respected Socially Qualified Certificate from the Dutch organization, MPS, which acts as proof that employees enjoy good working conditions and that the farms fulfill specific criteria on health, safety and terms of employment, based on International Labour Organization requirements.

However, concerns have been raised over the working conditions of farm employees elsewhere in Ethiopia. For eight hours each day, workers toil in temperatures that touch 40 degrees Celsius. A single day-off each fortnight is the only respite. Workers earn around a dollar a day, much less than the price of a single stem bought in the streets of Amsterdam on Valentine's Day. Furthermore, one hundred and twenty chemicals are used in Ethiopia's floriculture industry, of which fifteen are classified as carcinogenic by the World Health Organization, and yet, workers have no collective bargaining power because they have been forbidden from forming trade unions

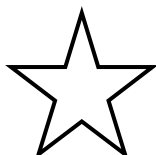


The destination for many of Ethiopia's flowers: the flower market at Aalsmeer, the Netherlands.

Instances have also been reported of excessive government pressure on local landowners to sell their plots of land to the expanding flower companies. Three in five farms are owned by foreign companies, and some Ethiopians believe their government is neglecting their duty to their own people when faced with the attractive prospect of cashing in on large profits. Many locals say they do not benefit at all from the flower farm presence.

It is up to the Ethiopian government to ensure that flower farms respect the environment and the resources upon which they draw and rely. For this to be successful, the international community should demonstrate the importance it places on sustainable economic development, not only for Ethiopia but also East Africa.

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**Union of Oromo Students
in Europe**
Flories de Cuyper Straat 31/3,
2640, Morstel, Belgium.

Tel/Fax: +32 (0)34 480459
E-mail: waarii@yahoo.com

**Unrepresented Nations and
Peoples Organization**
P.O. Box 85878, 2508 CN,
The Hague, The Netherlands.
Tel: +31 (0)70 3646504
Fax: +31 (0)70 3646608
E-mail: unpo@unpo.org

