

Green flowers or greenwash?

Florverde ('green flowers') is the certification programme set up by the Association of Colombian Flower Exporters (Asocoflores) with the stated purpose of minimising the environmental impacts of the cut flowers industry and protecting workers' rights. UK supermarkets Marks & Spencer, Asda and Tesco became more interested in Florverde flowers after a 2006 visit to Colombia, and Marks & Spencer has significantly increased its orders as a result.²⁷

But while Florverde's standards are meant to ensure environmentally friendly practices and safe working conditions, we found the mark gives no such guarantee. On Florverde farms, 36% of the toxic chemicals used were considered to be 'extremely' or 'highly' toxic by the World Health Organisation, according to a 2005 study.²⁸

When we interviewed workers on Florverde farms they complained of job-related medical problems such as repetitive strain injury and were banned from organising a union to negotiate health safeguards and better pay. The real focus of the Florverde standard is not on improving working conditions but on trying to

improve the international competitiveness of the Colombian flower industry, as shown in Asocoflores' summary of the standard: "To make Asocoflores-related floriculture sustainable and competitive."

While the standard does nominally provide for trade union recognition, it offers no specific protection for independent unions. The assumption in the industry, and in the Florverde standard, is that there are no trade unions. The focus is instead on ways for the companies to supplant the role of unions with national associations and company-run complaints systems. Lidia, on a Florverde farm, confirmed that joining a trade union was difficult if not impossible. "The farm tried to bribe the workers to leave the union, and gave bonuses, vacations and food subsidies to workers who weren't part of the union. We are discriminated against because we are organised."

Without trade unions, workers are virtually unable to challenge farm managers about poor working conditions and breaches of flower standards.