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When workplace unionism in global value chains does not function well: Exploring the impediments

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Abstract

Improving working conditions at the bottom of global value chains has become a central issue in our global economy. In this battle, trade unionism has been presented as a way for workers to make their voices heard. Therefore, it is strongly promoted by most social standards. However, establishing a well-functioning trade union is not as obvious as it may seem. Using a comparative case study approach, we examine impediments to farm-level unionism in the cut flower industry in Ethiopia. For this purpose, we propose an integrated framework combining two lenses, namely a vertical one (governance and structure of global value chains) and a horizontal one (socio-economic context). We identify 10 impediments that point to three major dimensions contributing to unionisation. These three dimensions include awareness of, and interest from workers, legitimacy of trade unions, and capacity of trade unions to act. Furthermore, our results suggest that private social standards may, in certain cases, be counterproductive for the efficient functioning of trade unions. Although we argue that there is no 'quick fix' solution to weak workplace unionism at the bottom of global value chains, we stress the importance of considering the dynamics of, and interactions between, the impediments when designing potential support measures that mitigate negative impacts.

Keywords: *Global value chains, workplace unionism, working conditions, private social standards, cut flower industry, Ethiopia*

1. Introduction

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining are considered intrinsic principles of social justice (Anner, 2012; Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Elliott & Freeman, 2003). They aim to provide workers with a voice, most of the time through trade unionism, to formulate their grievances and enable them to negotiate specified conditions of employment in a collective bargaining agreement, such as minimum wages, working hours, and health and safety issues (Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Frenkel, 2001; Riisgaard, 2011). These are fundamental rights protecting workers and providing them with means to engage with their employers (Elliott & Freeman, 2003; Van Buren & Greenwood, 2008). Hence, when it comes to making sustained improvements on the shop floor, workers' voices and representation are considered vital (Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Greenwood, 2002; Ip, 2008). Although those rights are widely recognised, a key question remains: how to move from principles of freedom of association and collective bargaining (cf. ILO conventions 87 and 98) to implementation?

This question is even more salient at the bottom of a global value chain (GVC). Since the 1980s, globalisation and trade liberalisation have led to the relocation of labour-intensive production to low-wage countries where production workers within GVCs are seldom organised, and where experience with trade unionism is very limited (Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Lund-Thomsen, 2013). Over the last decade, the issue of workers' representation and collective bargaining in developing and export-oriented countries has attracted growing attention from scholars (Egels-Zandén & Hyllman, 2007; Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Riisgaard, 2009). Unionisation in the global South remains challenging for unions in terms of its formation and effectivity (De Neve, 2008).

Literature surrounding the GVC has approached the issue of worker's representation and freedom of association with a vertical lens, investigating governance and structure of GVCs. It has significantly contributed to a better understanding of the implementation of private social standards (PSS) and their impact on working conditions (Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Riisgaard, 2009; Wang, 2005). However, understanding the contribution of PSS to overcome impediments to workplace unionisation is arguably not straightforward (Braun & Gearhart, 2004; Compa, 2004).

GVC literature has been criticised for its overly vertical focus, emphasising the linear structures and underplaying the institutional and local dimensions (Coe, Dicken, & Hess, 2008; Neilson & Pritchard, 2009; Tallontire, Opondo, Nelson, & Martin, 2011). Some scholars, using a horizontal lens, have paid more attention to the socio-economic context to explore how labour can or cannot change their terms and conditions of employment (Neilson & Pritchard, 2009; Tallontire et al., 2011). In particular, the Global Production Network literature, by focusing on the social, cultural and political relations between actors (beyond suppliers) and institutions, has significantly contributed to this stream of study (Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Coe et al., 2008; Henderson, Dicken, Hess, Coe, & Yeung, 2002; Lund-Thomsen, 2013).

If both the horizontal and vertical perspectives provide key insights into understanding the challenges that trade unionism faces in developing countries, they each focus on distinctive sides of the story. This calls for a need to connect and empirically study the interaction between the two approaches (Neilson & Pritchard, 2009; Tallontire et al., 2011). Studies have begun to integrate the vertical and horizontal dimensions focusing especially on governance or labour agency (Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Gereffi & Lee, 2016; Lund-Thomsen, 2013; Riisgaard & Okinda, 2018; Tallontire, 2007; Tallontire et al., 2011). Yet, to our knowledge, none

have used an integrated analytical framework to study workplace unionism in GVCs. This paper contributes to this call by proposing a framework that integrates both vertical and horizontal perspectives to deepen our understanding of the impediments for the well-functioning of workplace unionism at the bottom of agricultural value chains.

For this purpose, we conducted an in-depth analysis of two farms in the cut flower industry in Ethiopia (one with a PSS and one without) which enabled us to identify ten impediments to workplace unionism. Our results show counter-intuitive outcomes, namely if both farms faced impediments, only the non-certified farm met the necessary conditions to move from individual grievance to collective action.

This study highlights the importance of considering both the vertical and horizontal theoretical lenses to understand workplace unionism in GVCs. Our integrated analytical framework offers a way to expand the vertical GVC approach in two ways. Firstly, it shows that the well-functioning of trade unions at farm level cannot be reduced to a one dimensional factor. It results from complex and sometimes conflicting dynamics of several forces. Secondly, it contributes in recognising the dimensions that can either reinforce or downplay the impediments. Hence, we argue that an integrated approach is needed to understand why workplace unionism in GVCs tend to remain on the fringes. These insights are imperative for those who wish to make collective organisation of workers possible.

The article is structured as follow. First, we review the vertical (GVC) and horizontal (local socio-economic context) forces. Second, we introduce the empirical context and methodology. Third, we present our results following our integrated framework. Fourth, we discuss our findings and ways to tackle the impediments. Finally, limitations and further research opportunities are presented.

2. Towards an integrated framework

A growing body of literature on labour agency in GVCs recognises that actors in production and the rest of the chain do not operate in isolation of others and of inter-firm and non-firm networks (Alford, Barrientos, & Visser, 2017; Hess, 2004). In their study on coffee and tea plantations in South India, Neilson and Pritchard (2009) challenge what they refer to as the 'uni-directional' focus on global, buyer-driven regulations of the value chain in the GVC literature by adding an understanding of the struggles of place-bound actors. As Gereffi and Fernandez-Stark (2011) argue, this is because all 'vertical' GVCs 'touch down' in landscapes formed by workers, firms and suppliers, their local realities and institutional environments which are themselves embedded in social, economic and institutional contexts (Coe et al., 2008; Gereffi & Fernandez-Stark, 2011).

In response to these limitations of the GVC vertical approach, some authors have used a Global Production Network (GPN) framework to analyse labour agency (Cumbers, Nativel, & Routledge, 2008b), even in developing contexts (Alford et al., 2017; Baglioniy, 2018; Riisgaard & Okinda, 2018). The GPN literature has a keen interest to study the dynamics of territorially and social embeddedness (Hess, 2004). It criticises the 'verticality' of the GVC analytical framework, and argues that "GPN configurations and characteristics are shaped by and, in turn, shape the geographically differentiated social, political and cultural circumstances in which they exist" (Coe et al., 2008) p.274). However, the embeddedness, which is considered not linear nor static, is not easily understood when it comes to workers employed in production networks/value chains in the South (Alford et al., 2017). Moreover, evidence is particularly scant on the (well) functioning of workplace unionism in global value chains at the farm level, a void this paper addresses.

Drawing from an extensive literature review, we have identified four vertical forces, namely demand fluctuations, just-in-time orders, downward pressures on prices, and private social standards. We have also identified five horizontal forces which include livelihood strategies, spatial location of workers, gendered economies, regulatory framework, and union tradition. Altogether, those forces draw the contours of our integrated framework. Although those forces are specifically relevant to agricultural value chains within a developing country context, they are not exclusive to this sector and production area.

Vertical lens

A vertical GVC approach explores how global industries are organised and structured (Gereffi, 1994). Kritzinger, Barrientos, and Rossouw (2004) wrote that GVCs are about linking local producers from developing countries to international markets. This approach helps to identify the different actors involved in a given industry, as well as the role and power they have in controlling the production (Kritzinger et al., 2004). Moreover, the GVC lens has been widely adopted to study the impact of a value chain's structure on working conditions at the point of production (Barrientos, Dolan & Tallontire, 2003; Nadvi, 2008; Riisgaard & Hammer, 2011).

Applying a vertical lens to agricultural value chains helps us to understand that producers face several, sometimes contradictory, forces when they enter competitive global markets. These forces have important implications for working conditions and labour strategies (Kritzinger et al., 2004). Most agricultural value chains are buyer-driven, which means that the power lies with the buyers, in other words, large retailers, branded marketers, international processors, and international traders (Riisgaard & Hammer, 2011). They dictate the terms and conditions under which the chains operate, despite the fact that they do not have any production capabilities (Gereffi & Fernandez-Stark, 2011). Retailers determine the specifications of supply

and the high technical, environmental, and social standards which producers need to meet. They allow the market to set the prices and offer little guarantees of purchase (Barrientos & Kritzinger, 2004), which in turn affects the conditions against which workers are hired.

From the literature review, we identified four forces that may affect unionism within the agricultural value chain arising from vertical integration. Firstly, the *seasonal demand for the produce and demand fluctuations* may potentially affect workplace unionism. Industries such as fruit, vegetables, and flowers are all characterised by high levels of insecure and seasonal employment (Barrientos, 2008; Tallontire, Dolan, Smith & Barrientos, 2005). As a result, workers employed on an insecure basis may not be interested in collective action because they only have a short-term vision of their work. Many of them may also be scared to join a union because they may be on short-term contracts that can easily be terminated by management (Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Tjandraningsih & Nugroho, 2008). At the same time, a highly fluctuating workforce makes it extremely difficult to keep up with union recruitment, organisation, and activity (Wills, 2005).

As a second force, buyers try to overcome demand instability by seeking greater organisational *flexibility* and to place *just-in-time orders* (Kritzinger et al., 2004). By doing so, they pass on costs of risk and uncertainty to producers. To be able to meet the ever-changing requirements, producers need a flexible workforce that is willing to work long hours and do overtime to provide high quality products within specified delivery times (Riisgaard, 2009). This means that workers, who in horticulture are predominantly women, face a 'double burden' (Kidder & Raworth, 2004) where it is quite challenging to combine reproductive work with productive work that requires working weeks of 48 hours and excessive overtime. Hence, workers often have too little spare time to take part in organising campaigns (Wills, 2005).

Thirdly, workplace unionisation may be affected by the *downward pressures on prices* that producers face due to high levels of competition and price volatility (Barrientos & Kritzing, 2004). This is at the expense of workers who are paid extremely low wages for their work. These low wage levels may hamper workplace unionism in direct and indirect ways. Smith et al. (2004b) found that workers were reluctant to pay membership fees because they preferred to use their money for current concerns rather than invest it in uncertain long-term changes. In response to this, unions lowered membership fees, which resulted in limited resources, thus obstructing the unions' recruitment, training, and collective actions. As was argued by Smith, Daskalaki, Elger, and Brown (2004a), this created a vicious circle, whereby the workers most in need of union representation, namely low-paid and insecure workers, were the least likely to be recruited.

Fourth, in order to meet consumer concerns, some large supermarkets demand from agricultural producers that they adhere to strict *private social standards (PSS)*, which labour can exploit to their advantage (Riisgaard, 2011). These standards require farms to promote and respect core ILO conventions, including the right to collective bargaining and freedom of association (87, 98 and 135, respectively) (Barrientos & Smith, 2007). Hence, labour could use the PSS of the firm as leverage and be more effectively organised on certified farms than on farms that do not adhere to PSS.

Many studies confirm that PSS have played a crucial role in improving working conditions and encouraging workers' trade union (Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Niklas Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Riisgaard, 2009; Wang, 2005). Moreover, trade unions may be a critical partner in creating a conducive firm/farm environment to the success of PSS in improving working conditions, or failure in case of limited support (Riisgaard, 2011). Although trade unions and

organisations issuing the PSS strive for the same goal, namely better conditions for the workers, their relationship is complex and may involve tensions (Braun & Gearhart, 2004; Compa, 2004). Past research argued that current monitoring mechanisms of the PSS are unable to detect violations of trade union rights (Anner, 2012; Brown, 2013; Vegt, 2005; Wang, 2005). Research that pointed at these limitations in the monitoring systems suggests that PSS may even undermine trade union rights by allowing parallel means of workers organisations, and by lacking effective grievance mechanisms (Brown & O'rourke, 2007; Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Yu, 2009). Tensions may arise when unions are perceived or presented by the firm as a 'proof of compliance' to the social codes rather than being recognised as representation of the workforce (Staelens, 2016); or if unions conceive the way forward to improve working conditions differently as to what is prescribed in the PSS (Braun & Gearhart, 2004; Compa, 2004). Moreover, actors in the value chain, including buyers and suppliers, may have limited incentives to actually promote and respect trade union rights (Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Jiang, Baker & Frazier, 2009; Sum & Ngai, 2005). In addition, as shown in this research, unions and worker collectives may succeed in protecting workers' rights even without PSS, with or without external support, for example women workers' committees in the flower sector (Jacobs, Brahic & Olaiya, 2015). These previous studies suggest that PSS criteria, in principle, may provide workers with some room to organise themselves collectively, yet in practice, this is not necessarily guaranteed.

Horizontal lens

The 'horizontal' approach accounts for the local socio-economic – embedded - context in which labour-intensive industries operate (Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Coe et al., 2008; Tampe, 2018). It explores the role of local factors in facilitating or constraining workers' ability to

improve their overall working lives and livelihoods (Lund-Thomsen, 2013), which aligns with the local and institutional axes provided by the GPN literature. Although we do recognise that organised and collective forms of resistance represent only one of the possible options to act by labour (Wills & Simms, 2004), we believe that collective forms of labour agency are the most promising when it comes to improving working lives (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Within literature, we identify five horizontal forces that may facilitate or hinder workplace unionism at the bottom of agricultural value chains in developing countries.

The first force, *livelihood strategies*, refers to the portfolio of activities and social support systems on which households can build their livelihoods (Ellis, 1998). The number and combination of strategies that workers have at their disposal can facilitate or constrain workplace unionism. In many developing country settings, individuals engage in multiple income-generating activities. For instance, agricultural activities are combined with petty trade and/or formal wage work so as to cope with potential income shocks and to improve one's standard of living (Barrett, Reardon & Webb, 2001; Ellis, 1998). Workers who have several livelihood options may find it easier to opt in and out of wage work. Furthermore, workers whose income is entirely dependent on one income source and who have few alternatives to turn to may find it much more difficult to leave a formal job. Industries that employ workers of whom the vast majority can decide to opt in and out of work (because of their alternative livelihood options) are much more difficult to organise than industries with a stable workforce of workers whose sole income is dependent on this wage work (Wills, 2005). Whether individuals have the opportunity or not to engage in several income-generating activities is dependent on local factors such as location, access to assets (for example, land), barriers to entry, and seasonality (Ellis, 1998).

Secondly, the *spatial location of workers* in terms of the distance between a worker's home and workplace, and also between co-workers, may facilitate or hinder workplace unionism (Lund-Thomsen, 2013). Labour markets for low-paid jobs often attract a broad range of workers, including workers living in urban settings, workers residing in rural areas surrounding the factories, and migrant workers who left the countryside to take chances in new factories (Carswell & De Neve, 2013). This segmented nature of the labour market could raise problems with regards to communication and a differentiated identity, which makes it particularly challenging for unions to organise workers collectively (Wills, 2005). Moreover, the distance to and from the workplace, when combined with a lack of mobility, may hamper the possibility to participate in union activities such as attending union meetings held outside the workplace or helping to organise campaigns.

A third factor may facilitate or hinder workers wishing to collectively organise themselves on the shop floor, namely *gendered economies*. The notion of gender is used to describe how male and female roles are socially constructed (Annandale & Clark, 1996). Gender studies aim to understand how these constructed gender roles influence both the productive and reproductive economy (Barrientos et al., 2003). With regards to the productive economy, it appears that men in developing countries have access to better paid and more stable jobs compared to women, who often need to engage in more temporary, low paid and informal jobs (Barrientos et al., 2003; Lund-Thomsen, 2013). This gender division becomes even clearer in the reproductive economy, where women are often solely responsible for unpaid domestic work and child care-related activities (Barrientos et al., 2003).

At the bottom of agricultural value chains, and in particular in horticulture, the majority of the workforce are women who are hired in for low-skilled, routine jobs such as picking and

packing, and processing activities because they are perceived as more productive and responsible, and more skilled at performing delicate tasks (Kidder & Raworth, 2004). Men on the other hand are hired for hazardous work or supervisory jobs, which have a more permanent nature and are better paid (Barrientos et al., 2003; Korovkin & Sanmiguel-Valderrama, 2007). Existing gender roles also affect union participation and, more generally, workplace unionism. Historically, trade unions have been organising working men, while women appeared to be left out of these organisations (Wills, 2005). As previously mentioned, time is often an issue where women face a double work burden, in the sense that they combine both productive and reproductive activities, and therefore often have little spare time to take part in organising campaigns (Kidder & Raworth, 2004; Wills, 2005). Hence, in sectors dominated by female workers, which is the case for most low-technology, labour-intensive industries where we see a 'feminisation' of the workforce (Barrientos et al., 2003), it may be particularly difficult for unions to enter the workplace.

As a fourth horizontal force, the *regulatory framework* within the country may facilitate or hinder the development and functioning of a workers' organisation. In countries where policies legally constrain union activities, workers' voices are effectively smothered (Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014). Government may indirectly affect workers' ability to act collectively, for example through favourable investment laws and incentives. The absence of a minimum wage or ill-designed labour laws (for example, making strike action illegal, or not protecting union representatives on the shop floor from being fired easily) may also hamper workers' collective strategies.

A final factor affecting workplace unionism is the *union tradition* in the host country. The question whether workers can defend their interests in export industries is to a large extent

dependent on the network they can draw upon. Within an organisation, shop stewards play a crucial role in recruiting, organising, and mobilising the workforce. However, without any support from the outside, success remains limited (Blyton & Jenkins, 2013). In settings with little tradition of trade unionism, it may be extremely hard to negotiate better working conditions. In many export-oriented countries, unions are often highly fragmented, lack funding, and are sometimes even corrupt (Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014). In contrast, where unions have strong historical roots, there is scope for collective organisation. Workers employed in factories that are clustered even enjoy an extra advantage: local clusters offer a particularly high potential for local joint action since union representatives from different farms can collaborate, exchanging information and threatening widely-supported boycotts and community-based actions (Lund-Thomsen & Nadvi, 2010; Riisgaard & Hammer, 2011; Wills, 2005).

The four vertical forces and five horizontal forces we have presented in this section draw the contours of our integrated framework. We argue that both sets of forces generate impediments to collective labour organisation at the bottom of global value chains.

3. Methodology

Context: The cut flower industry in Ethiopia

One of the characteristics of the cut flower industry is the existence of two value chain strands for flowers, namely the auction and the direct strand. Moreover, the industry comprises both adopters and non-adopters of PSS, which allows a close comparison between different value chain governance structures. The *auction strand* is the most popular mechanism through which flowers from East Africa are sold (Riisgaard & Hammer, 2011). Auctions are basically distribution centres where large quantities of flowers are sold to buyers all over the world.

These market-based transactions provide little transparency and are characterised by a weak tie between buyers and suppliers. PSS are not a requirement to sell flowers through the auction (Hale & Opondo, 2005; Riisgaard & Hammer, 2011). The *direct strand* mainly involves European retailers who directly source from flower farms, hereby circumventing the auction (Riisgaard, 2011). This strand is more strictly co-ordinated and buyer-driven than the auction strand. In response to consumer concerns, large retailers often require strict social standards from the growers. These standards facilitate coordination between buyer and supplier by providing information on the nature of the flowers and the conditions under which they have been grown (Henson & Humphrey, 2010; Ponte & Gibbon, 2005; Riisgaard, 2011). Hence, growers who wish to sell directly are obliged to comply with the external certification of standards (Hale & Opondo, 2005; Riisgaard & Hammer, 2011). Dolan and Opondo (2005) as well as Riisgaard (2011) identified at least 20 different social and/ or environmental schemes in the cut flower sector. One of the most important and oldest is the Milieu Programma Sierteelt (MPS). It was created in 1995 in the Netherlands by Dutch growers together with the Dutch flower auctions. It has an environmental label (MPS A, B and C) with a social option (MPS-SQ). The latter is based on universal human rights and requires the enforcement of core ILO conventions, including promoting freedom of association and collective bargaining, no discrimination, no child nor forced labour (Barrientos, 2008). MPS-QS is very similar to the more generic Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) label that originates from an alliance of United Kingdom (UK) companies, NGOs and trade unions (Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Hughes, Buttle, & Wrigley, 2007). As noted by Riisgaard (2011), MPS-SQ focuses on process rights rather than outcomes. Appendix 1 provides an overview of the working conditions that are included in the MPS-SQ standards as compared to those included in the ILO norms, the Ethiopian labour laws and the ETI. The monitoring of the MPS certification is done by certification bodies that

employ auditors. Audits are carried out in a cycle of three years during which compliance to the requirements are being checked (MPS-SQ, 2002).

Another particular characteristic of the flower industry is that the demand for flowers is seasonal which has a direct impact on labour conditions. European consumers tend to buy cut flowers for Valentine's Day and Mother's Day, whereas they buy fewer flowers during the summer period (June-August) (Hale & Opondo, 2005). As a result of these uneven demand patterns, workers are often hired on an insecure basis and are required to work very long hours during months of peak demand (Barrientos & Kritzing, 2004). In Ethiopia, workers can easily work up to 60 hours a week during peak production periods (48 hours a week topped with 12 hours of overtime) (Staelens, Desiere, Louche & D'Haese, 2016). Finally, the world market for cut flowers has grown consistently since the early 1980s as more countries started producing cut flowers. However, the demand has not grown at the same pace. This has resulted in a high level of competition and downward pressure on prices (Riisgaard & Hammer, 2011). Consequently, this has led to extremely low wages dominating the industry. In Ethiopia, wages are around one dollar per day (Staelens et al., 2016). The characteristics presented here highlight the relevance of vertical forces, which have been identified in the previous section, in this industry.

In Ethiopia, the cut flower industry is a relatively young, but rapidly growing sector. The first flower farms started their operations in the early 2000s. By early 2008, it was estimated that 64 farms were already operational (Mano, Yamano, Suzuki & Matsumoto, 2011; Melese & Helmsing, 2010). This success can be attributed to the Ethiopian government, which managed to create an attractive investment climate, and to the cheap labour supply, partially due to the absence of minimum wages (Mano et al., 2011). Ethiopian flower farm workers earn up to

three times less than neighbouring Kenyan flower farm workers (Riisgaard & Gibbon, 2014). As with most labour-intensive industries, the large majority of people employed in the cut flower industry are women who live either in the rural surroundings of the farms or in neighbouring towns.

Trade unionism in Ethiopia is relatively young, even by African standards (Praeg, 2006). It can be described as an under-developed and rather anti-union context with, according to ITUC, 'systematic violations of trade union rights' (ITUC, 2018). The constitution of Ethiopia provides for the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, although civil servants and some other important section of the working class are denied this right (Egulu, 2004). As shown in Annex 1, the Ethiopian labour laws protect certain worker rights. Yet, at the same time, the Ethiopian government has put considerable efforts in attracting foreign investors through favourable investment laws and incentives (such as relax taxation, relax regulations, and offering affordable land rents) that have an indirect negative effect on workers. Labour is presented as 'abundant' and 'cheap', creating an environment allowing to pay extremely low wages (Getu, 2009). In 1963, an alliance of trade unions in Ethiopia created the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU). CETU is organised in departments to support different sectors, including the agricultural sector. However, CETU, just like most of the trade unions operating in developing and transition economies, faces many challenges such as a lack of funding and bargaining experience, a lack of control from the governmental bodies, the close interference with the government, and regular threats towards union activities (Egulu, 2004; Praeg, 2006; Rahmato, 2002). CETU also reported on the difficulty of organising workers who are eligible to form unions and the denial of the rights of workers to form unions by most private employers (CETU, 2012). Although allowed by the constitution, unionism in Ethiopia does not go by itself.

Research design

To identify the impediments that can help us to understand why workplace unions are not well-functioning at the bottom of the agricultural value chains, we chose an explorative and comparative case study approach (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Case studies are well suited to answer ‘why’ questions and allow for in-depth and context-rich analysis (Carson, Hagen & Sethi, 2015; Yin, 1994). While it does not allow for the generalisability of the findings, it is ideal as it regards the theoretical gap that we aimed to address (Siggelkow, 2007).

In terms of a theoretical sampling strategy, we chose to focus on two well representative farms in which unions were active. The farm-level unions were close to what is called ‘enterprise union’ as they were, at least on paper, independent from management and rather independent in terms of organisation (Benson & Gospel, 2008). However, the workplace unions remained under the umbrella of the sectorial branch of CETU, which also helped to establish the workplace unions.

The two selected farms showed various similarities that were essential for comparing them. Both cases were geographically situated close to one another within a single cluster of flower farms. This means that they were exposed to the same institutional forces (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). In addition, both farms began their operations during the 2005-2006 period, were similar in land size and workforce size, and were owned by Ethiopian investors. Nevertheless, they had a major difference that permitted to contrast the two cases as only one farm had adopted a PSS, more specifically the MPS certification, as both were targeting different markets.

Our sampling strategy enabled us to minimise extraneous variability and at the same time to observe contrasts through the examination of polar examples (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003).

Table 1 provides a detailed overview of the two cases.

Insert Table 1 about here

In terms of unionisation, we found great differences when comparing these two farms, which allowed a rich investigation of the impediments to workplace unionism. Table 2 provides an overview of the trade unions and their main characteristics for each case study. As shown in Table 2, union density on the non-certified farm is higher than on the certified farm and the union was positively perceived by workers while on the certified farm it suffered from a negative image. In both cases, the link between the farm union representatives and the federal union CETU was extremely weak or almost non-existent. CETU's role limited itself to the election of the union's representatives and ensuring a gender-balance committee during the establishment of the farm-level unions. Although CETU was supposed to hold regular meetings with farm-level union's representatives, our cases revealed that CETU was challenged by the high turnover of the representatives, making it difficult to build a relationship or simply to organise meetings. At the time of data collection, none of the farms had yet reached a collective agreement (CA), although it was very close to completion in the non-certified farm. The CA is a necessity for the union to be fully recognised by CETU, but not a requirement to receive the MPS certification.

Insert Table 2 here

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Data

We collected data at three different levels (worker, farm management, and farm cluster) and during two different time periods (June and July 2013). To ensure data validity (Yin, 1994), we collected data through different means, namely a survey, interviews, and focus group discussions.

Data collection at the worker level involved face-to-face interviews. They were conducted by Ethiopian female Master’s students fluent in Amharic and Oromo, the mother tongues of the flower farm workers. Prior to data collection, we provided training to the students on how to conduct the interviews and lead the focus groups. Random sampling procedures were used to ensure adequate representation. Interviews were held with 75 workers per farm performing different job functions. A total of 150 responses were collected for the two case studies. After accounting for missing data, we obtained a final sample of 143 cases (96 women and 47 men). The survey included both open and closed-ended questions. The first section of the survey focused on socio-demographics, working conditions, and workers’ well-being. Then a specific section covered issues around trade unions: (a) workers’ awareness of union presence on the farm, (b) union membership and, (c) personal motivation for (not) being a member. The last part of the survey was captured with open-ended questions. Based on the survey, Table 3 provides an overview of the workers’ characteristics.

Insert Table 3 about here

In addition, we held three focus group discussions; one focus group per farm and one focus group combining workers from both flower farms. Focus groups consisted of female workers, as they represent 90% of the workers on the farms. Moreover, we wanted to ensure a safe space for discussion. The focus groups consisted of 5-14 participants and had a duration of approximately two hours. Each focus group discussion was held off-site, in an informal setting and took place on the workers' day off. After each focus group session, a debriefing meeting was held between the moderator (the Master's student) and the researcher. The purpose of the focus group discussions was to gain a broader picture of workers' perceptions of their working life and of their ability to change or influence their work environment. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed. The accompanying researcher took extensive observation notes during the discussion.

We also conducted interviews with the head of the trade union representative of each farm (both were women). Union representatives had the mission of bargaining the collective agreement, collecting membership fees, being aware of workers' concerns and raising these concerns with management. These semi-structured interviews took place off the farm, in an informal setting. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. The purpose of these interviews was to gain insight on the origins of the union, the challenges they faced, as well as the experiences they had with workers, management and external stakeholders (e.g. auditors and CETU).

At management level, we conducted in-depth interviews with the general managers of each farm. The interviews lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. Although the interviews did not necessarily focus on workplace unionism, the issue emerged during the discussion. For

the purpose of this study, it was fruitful to uncover management perceptions of unionism to triangulate and corroborate the research results that we obtained through other data sources.

At cluster level, we conducted an in-depth interview with two representatives of the labour and social affairs department of the region. This interview had a duration of one hour and was particularly relevant in the sense that it provided a clearer picture of labour issues and trade union rights across sectors within the region. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted in two phases. This process allowed us to move back and forth between data and theoretical concepts (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

Phase I: Identifying the impediments to workplace unionism

We took an inductive approach to analyse the data through an open coding of all the information collected. This provided us with a first structure. To begin with, and as a way to become familiarised with the data, we listed all the reasons mentioned by survey participants explaining why workers did not belong to a trade union and did not engage in union activities. Thereafter, we identified the challenges mentioned by union representatives during the interviews. Finally, we coded the information retrieved from the focus groups and interviews with managers and representatives of the labour and social affairs department. From this analysis, 10 major impediments to workers' representation and collective bargaining emerged.

Phase II: Making sense of the 10 impediments

We conducted a cross-case analysis to identify similarities and differences in terms of experiencing the impediments across the studied farms. It became clear that the unions on

the two farms were both in the early stages of mobilisation — in the sense that neither of them had yet succeeded in agreeing upon a collective bargaining agreement with management. The cross-case analysis also revealed that the union on the non-certified farm had more potential than the union on the certified farm. There were two striking differences between them, namely the union density and workers' perceptions of the union. When we tried to explain these differences, we realised that the impediments on the non-certified farm were not as constraining as they were on the certified farm.

To make sense of the impediments and understand the differences between the two farms, we turned to the existing literature and our integrated framework. First, we applied a vertical GVC lens to interpret our data. Applying this lens helped us to understand that the differences between the unions could be largely attributed to the presence of PSS on the certified farm. At the same time, this lens allowed us to understand the root causes of other obstacles mentioned by workers and union representatives.

Furthermore, we realised that overcoming these vertical forces would not necessarily result in functioning workplace unionism since these obstacles were also rooted in socio-economic realities. Hence, we applied a horizontal lens to understand the forces in the socio-economic environment that also gave rise to impediments. Finally, we looked at the interactions between the vertical and horizontal lenses and created an integrated matrix of combined forces hampering unionism.

4. Results

This section discusses the 10 impediments revealed by the analysis of our two flower farms in Ethiopia. For this, we build on our integrated framework, which combines the vertical and horizontal forces creating barriers to trade unionism. Although most of the impediments to

trade unionism were common to the two cases, the analysis revealed some differences. Figure 1 provides an overview of the impediments to trade unionism in the cut flower industry in Ethiopia.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Lack of awareness and lack of interest

On both farms, the workforce was highly unstable, leading to high levels of labour turnover. One of the reasons behind this phenomenon is the seasonal nature of flower demand (vertical force). Thus, peak demand is on Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day, while most demand in Europe is low during the summer period (June-August) (Riisgaard, 2011). Consequently, many workers were employed on a short-term basis and were given a seasonal or temporary contract (Barrientos et al., 2003).

Moreover, flower farm workers on the two farms also left their jobs voluntarily (horizontal force). During the focus group sessions, workers made it clear that jobs on flower farms were regarded as a last resort. Wages were considered too low to make ends meet and rumours went around that female workers employed in greenhouses had trouble falling pregnant due to being exposed to pesticides. As a result, many workers aspired to a better job. Furthermore, 62% of the 143 interviewed workers had less than one year of work experience on their farm. Workers explained that they kept juggling between different livelihood and income-generating activities, including short-term assignments such as road construction, farming activities or long term jobs in the metal, plastic and garment industries. Some female workers also left the country to work in the Middle East as maids.

Ironically, however, these individual 'exit' strategies, which were meant to improve the daily impoverished reality of individual workers, subsequently hampered their ability to collectively improve working conditions on flower farms. Given that on both farms the majority of workers (62%) had less than one year of work experience, many of them (34.3%) were unaware of the existence of the trade union. Those workers who knew about the union were often uninterested in joining because they were not planning on staying in the job for long. On the certified farm, 43% of the workers who did not want to join the union were planning to leave. Even more workers on the non-certified farm (83%) who were not a union member explained that they were not planning to stay in the job for long. Moreover, high labour turnover also affected the workers who were unionised and, even more problematically, those who were trade union representatives. During the interviews, the union representative of the certified farm said that more than half of all representatives elected the year before had already left the farm. In sum, our findings show that, as was also found by Carswell and De Neve (2013), workers' focus on individual interests and individualised tactics restricted their ability to engage in collective action on both farms.

No common identity, isolation of workers, and exclusive membership

To be able to handle demand fluctuations (vertical force), and consequently the fluctuating nature of the workforce, managers used workforce segmentation based on the spatial location of workers (horizontal force). Rural women, who were likely to leave their jobs to work on their own agricultural lands, were appointed to greenhouses. Urban women, who were generally the more stable workers, were assigned to work in the pack houses. The reason behind this segmentation was that work in the pack houses required some training, whereas work in the greenhouses could be reshuffled if workers suddenly left. The segmented nature

of the workforce, however, had negative repercussions on workplace unionism in several ways.

Firstly, the difference in work units meant that there was a difference in working conditions. On the one hand, urban workers employed in pack houses worked overtime and thus earned a higher wage. They also worked in the shade and were not directly exposed to chemicals. Rural workers, on the other hand, were said to have more freedom to do their work since there was less supervision in greenhouses. However, due to the heat and exposure to pesticides, the work was perceived as more difficult and since there was no scope for overtime, remuneration was lower.

In addition, rural and urban workers did not have any contact. Outside the farm, they did not speak to one another. Rural workers walked to the flower farms while urban workers were bussed in. Inside the farm, there was hardly any time to talk to workers of other work units since the only break (lunch) lasted no longer than half an hour and took place in separate shifts and in different places on the farm.

Management benefitted from the lack of awareness of workers about experiences in other work units. For example, during a focus group discussion, one worker narrated that on one occasion there was unrest in the greenhouse where she was working because workers had not received their full wage. As a way to express their disagreement, they stopped working. When the manager arrived, he claimed that they were the only greenhouse complaining. He told them that if they were unhappy they could just go (without getting their wages). The worker who narrated this event added that she did not know whether or not they were the only greenhouse complaining. Yet, none of them had dared to face the manager and continue

the 'strike' as they feared the consequences it might have. She also said that this was the only time that they had stopped working.

Our survey data revealed that a large majority of unionised workers were urban workers. Only 4% of union members were rural workers. When we asked them why they were not members, rural workers answered that they had not been invited to be part of the union ("*...it is exclusive*"; "*I wasn't invited (as a rural worker)*") and because they came from a rural area, they had no need to spend time with the union ("*I come from the village and so I don't need to spend time with them*").

Differences in working conditions between urban and rural workers and the lack of communication between workers made it difficult to foster a sense of collective identity or to stand up for common concerns. As some scholars have pointed out, the ability to form a collective identity is a key ingredient for effective bargaining (Kelly & Kelly, 1994; Kelly, 1998; Wills, 2005).

Time constraints

The cut flower chain is characterised by organisational flexibility in combination with just-in-time orders (vertical forces) and, in Ethiopia, by a gendered economy (horizontal force). Together, these forces created time constraints which had a direct impact on trade unionism. Historically, trade union organisations have been male bastions. Women's representation remains disproportionately low — even in those unions where the majority of union members are women (Smith et al., 2004a; Wills, 2005). Throughout the focus group discussions, women argued that they did not have any time to engage in union activities. On average, a work week is 48 hours spread over six consecutive days of eight hours, followed by one day off. Women combined this work in the productive sphere with work in the domestic or reproductive

sphere. On their day off, women went to the market and prepared food, did the laundry and took care of children. Being actively involved in a trade union, for example as a representative, was described as time consuming and demanding, while the benefits for taking all these responsibilities were considered low. Thus, due to the dual role of women in Ethiopia, there was little spare time for them to actively engage in union activities and meetings. As further evidence, it became clear during the interviews with union representatives that more men than women were representatives even though the majority of the workforce were women.

Membership fees

Due to the downward pressures on prices (vertical force) and the absence of minimum wages within the regulatory framework (horizontal force), monthly wages on flower farms ranged between 550 and 600 birr / month (€23 to 25 / month). This amount corroborates the wages Women Working Worldwide found in their study across East Africa in 2013 where it was concluded that flower farms in Ethiopia paid the lowest wages in the flower sector especially compared to Kenya and Tanzania, and to some extent Uganda (Mlynska, Wass, & Amoding, 2015). The majority of the survey respondents (88%) considered this wage too low to cover their basic needs. The membership fee for the union amounted to 1% of this monthly wage. On the certified farm in our case study, some workers stated they were not a member because they thought that it was too expensive to join the union, especially since they perceived very little or no benefits from being unionised. On the non-certified farm in our case study, however, workers did not complain about membership fees.

On the non-certified farm, membership fees were automatically deducted from workers' wages (through a check-off system), which was not the case on the certified farm. According to the representative of the non-certified farm, membership fees were deposited in one bank

account. All three auditors, working in different departments of the farm, had access to the account as a control mechanism to make sure that the money was not used inappropriately.

“The money is automatically taken from the wage. The auditor will take it and put it in the bank. We have a bank account on the name of three auditors. To make sure that one person would not abuse it” (union representative, non-certified farm).

On the certified farm, however, union representatives had to collect the membership fees personally at the end of each month from each individual member. This appeared to be very difficult. Members argued every month, asking about what the union had achieved so far, or claiming that they did not have enough money to pay the fee. To attract new members, the union on the certified farm was planning on lowering the membership fee to less than 1% of their income (3 birr instead of 5 birr), hoping they could retain the remaining members.

The way in which membership fees were collected played an important role, which needs to be understood in the context of a lack of trust that is explained in the following section. We noticed that on the certified farm, having to face workers each month and ask them for money allowed them to question the *raison d'être* of the trade union every time and, thereby, decide whether or not to pay the membership fee. On the non-certified farm, this decision had to be taken only once and therefore was less dependent on the concerns of the day.

Lack of external support, trust, and bargaining power

The presence of PSS (vertical force) and the low tradition of unionism in Ethiopia (horizontal force) gave rise to three impediments related to the support that trade unions may receive, the question of trust by the workers, and bargaining power.

Both unions were facing a lack of external guidance and support. Union representatives had well understood that the national federation (CETU) had limited power to actually make

changes on the ground as none of the farms had reached a collective bargaining agreement. Therefore, they felt very much isolated, with no external support. As the representative from the certified farm put it:

“Even last time, the president of the confederation came, but I don't know if they don't have time to follow up... They didn't change anything. Sometimes we don't pay to the confederation monthly, and they didn't even ask why we didn't pay” (union representative, certified farm).

Subsequently, meetings were rarely held at cluster or industry level with representatives of other farms, which made it difficult for representatives to know what was going on in neighbouring farms. As a result, the unions operated in isolation from one another.

With regards to external support, union representatives explained that the government visited the flower farms annually, but that this was mainly a formality and did not have any impact:

“They [the government] don't care about the air pollution and soil pollution after the investor leaves. [...] They [the government] have communication with the farm, so they'll come just for the formality. They don't check that much. So, coming once a year means letting people to suffer more, the whole year.” (union representative, non-certified farm).

We expected to find some differences between certified and non-certified farms with regards to external support. Compared with unions on non-certified farms, unions on certified farms benefit from the advantage that they have established better links with campaigners in consumer markets. These campaigners can pressurise buyers to demand improvements in working conditions at the level of production (Riisgaard & Hammer, 2011). However, the

representative from the certified farm did not believe that PSS could help them improve their bargaining rights. On the contrary, whereas auditors may see these union representatives as preferred local partners because they are key informants, the union representative in our case study had a very different understanding of the role played by these auditors and their influence on daily operations, or the support that could be provided by these auditors. The representative on the farm with certification schemes mentioned that she avoided telling the truth to the auditors of these schemes for three reasons. Firstly, she felt that the changes that these auditors would bring would only last for one day. Thus, these changes would not be long-lasting improvements. Secondly, she felt that auditors were mainly concerned with the safety of workers and the environmental impact of pesticides rather than the grievances workers had on the ground. Thirdly, she thought that if auditors knew the truth, they would want to shut down the farm. In other words, the union representative believed that a bad audit would harm the workers rather than help them:

"[...] we don't tell them about this, because we don't want to get fired. [...] but if they would truly know what 's going on in the flower farms, they might shut down the farm [...] I don't want them to shut it down because there are a lot of workers who have nowhere to go" (union representative, certified farm).

While the union representative of the certified farm did not trust auditors from the PSS, workers on this farm did not trust the union representatives. Indeed, several attempts had been made to establish a trade union on the certified farm. Each time, it was the manager who had asked the workers to take the initiative to organise themselves. According to the interviewed representative on this farm, it was known that management had a stake in having a union at the workplace. Indeed, the PSS that this farm has adopted expected management

to respect core ILO conventions, including promoting freedom of association and collective bargaining:

“But around here, [the trade union] it is not functioning because we are under a lot of pressure. They [management] want the union only for certification. They don't care about the rights of the workers. But they're hurting their own citizens” (union representative, certified farm).

However, such a top-down initiative was not supported by the workers. Each time initiatives for collective action were taken, the union failed or fell into inaction. Workers on the certified farm said that previous union representatives had not achieved anything. Moreover, they were accused of having stolen membership fees and were perceived as being an extension of the manager's power. The current union representative was frustrated about the inability to change the union's reputation, which had been damaged by previous representatives. Although at the time of data collection, new representatives had been elected which made it difficult to gain workers' trust.

Contrastingly, on the non-certified farm, the union did not face any of the aforementioned trust-related problems. On this farm, representatives had been there from the very beginning and had been at the forefront of a conflict between management and workers. This continuity and positioning, together with the control mechanisms with regards to the fees, contributed to building up an image of experience and trust among workers.

A final impediment that we identified was a lack of bargaining power. Union representatives mentioned in both cases that one of the major challenges they were facing was reaching a collective bargaining agreement with management. On the certified farm, a collective bargaining agreement was viewed as a means to make a difference and gain power. As long

as an agreement had not been signed, they felt restricted in their actions and impacts.

However, at the time of the data collection, the negotiation had not even begun:

“Because you must have a 'collective work agreement' to say this is a problem or to say this is your fault to the management or to the workers. But still we don't have the agreement. The worker might be fired if he did something, for example if he fights, and then they'll come to us. Just because we don't have the agreement, all we can do is begging the management.” (union representative, certified farm).

On the non-certified farm, management and the union had started negotiating the terms and conditions of a collective bargaining agreement. Workers knew about this process and believed in the importance of having such a collective agreement. Nevertheless, it was a lengthy and difficult process as management did not fully agree with some of the conditions that the union was suggesting. Nonetheless, there were positive signs showing that a collective agreement could be reached at some point.

5. Discussion

Building on our integrated framework, which combines a vertical and a horizontal lens, the study yields a number of new insights into the challenges faced by trade unions in developing countries when it comes to getting organised on the shop floor. The two lenses were key to understanding the unique setting in which flower farms operate in Ethiopia and thereby recognising impediments to workplace unionism.

In the rest of this section, we wish to go beyond the identification of the impediments. We consider the interaction between the impediments and, more particularly, to what we call the ‘unionisation spiral’ that can weaken or strengthen trade unionism. We compare the two

cases through the notion of 'mobilisation process' and propose ways to move forward and tackle the impediments.

The unionisation spiral

Although impediments were analysed separately in our results section, it is important to consider the interplay between the impediments emerging from the vertical and horizontal forces. The interaction creates a certain dynamic that shapes and influences trade unionism.

The interplay affects three key dimensions with the first relating to awareness and interest.

As shown in the first part of our results, this dimension is necessary although not sufficient for workers to engage with and in trade unions. Our case studies revealed the importance of time, energy, financial resources, and information availability to raise awareness and gain the attention of the workers. The second dimension relates to legitimacy that is the "perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definition" (Suchman, 1995):574).

For unions to be active on the farm and function properly, they need to be regarded as legitimate actors especially by the workers. The lack of trust in trade unions, the low or non-existing perceived bargaining power of trade unions, and the lack of external support to the trade unions at the farms feed each other to create an anti-union environment. The third dimension is related to the capacity to act. If workers and trade unions function in isolation from each other and if rural and urban workers do not mix (as it was the case in the studied farms), it becomes difficult for workers and unions to build a common identity and act collectively. The capacity to act can also be reinforced through a strong link with the regional or/and national union's level, something that was missing in the cases investigated.

By acting on those three dimensions, awareness and interest of workers, legitimacy of trade unions, and their capacity to act, impediments can push the unionisation either up (strengthen unionisation) or down (weaken unionisation) the unionisation spiral. We argue that the downward spiral is both avoidable and reversible under many circumstances; but for that to happen, it is crucial to understand and act upon the interactions between impediments.

On the one hand, impediments can reinforce each other when each adds a layer making the hurdle higher. For example, the very low wages offered by cut flower farms explain why workers perceive union membership as too expensive, and at the same time also explains why workers seek alternative livelihood strategies and have a short-term vision of their jobs. The combination of those two impediments reinforces the lack of interest in collective action. Another example is the flexibilization of the workforce, which goes hand in hand with its feminisation. Those who are hired for seasonal, insecure jobs are women, and due to their dual role as a worker and householder, which leads to time scarcity, women find it more difficult to engage in trade union activities. These are clear impediments of which the interplay strengthens their impact on unionisation, which makes it even more difficult for trade unions to play an active role.

On the other hand, the impediments can neutralise or paralyse each other, thereby weakening negative impacts. For example, at the vertical level, buyers put pressure on producers into meeting high quality standards at competitive prices within specified delivery times. At the same time, these buyers ask producers to meet stringent social standards that demand good working conditions. These two impediments clearly contradict each other and thus could be used to neutralise each other. Another example concerns the interaction between two horizontal forces, namely the spatial location of workers and their livelihood strategies. These

two forces constrain each other as rural workers cannot benefit from better paid jobs in the city since they have limited transport options while urban workers cannot engage in their own agricultural activities due to a lack of access to land.

Considering the interactions between impediments may add a level of complexity, yet it offers a more comprehensive understanding of the forces at play and provides some key points to avoid the downward spiral. Workers and trade unions can either endure the effects of the downward spiral or they can take a more agentic perspective, that is strategising and manipulating the impediments (Bandura, 2001). The notion of agency refers to the ability of individuals to “act otherwise” (Giddens, 1979). In other words, workers can be active agents with the ability to make things happen through their own actions rather than quietly accepting the impediments. It is related to the assumption that workers can be agents of power and change. Although external forces might constrain them, they have the capacity to make choices and act on those choices. The agency perspective has gained an abundance of popularity in the last decade especially around learning and development in work related contexts (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013; Goller & Paloniemi, 2017) and is emerging in the global production networks literature (Cumbers, Nativel, & Routledge, 2008a; Riisgaard & Okinda, 2018). The agentic approach offers a new way to explore the capacity of unions to improve the working conditions.

Differences between farms: Mobilisation processes

Although both farms were located close to one another, and therefore exposed to the same horizontal forces, we found some differences between them. These differences could be largely attributed to one vertical force, that is the presence of private social standards (PSS). The role of PSS in relation to trade union rights is peculiar. Given our context of low union

tradition, managers on the certified farm had an incentive to facilitate unionisation which, paradoxically, did more harm than good as it resulted in the distrust of the union by the workers.

Although the integrated framework — combining a vertical (governance and structure of global value chains) and a horizontal (socio-economic context) lens — was very useful in identifying impediments to workplace unionism, the analysis of the two cases brought another dimension into play: the importance of mobilising workers to move from individual grievances to collective action. This implies understanding forms of collectivism as much as the absence of collectivism. We therefore turn to Kelly's (1998) mobilisation theory to explain this specific aspect. For Kelly, injustice is the central organising principle for mobilising workers; it is the root of collective action (Kelly and Kelly, 1994).

According to the theory of mobilisation, several stages are necessary before collective action can materialise (Kelly, 1998): (1) the development of a collective sense of injustice, that something is "wrong" or "illegitimate" (Kelly, 1998: 27), (2) the identification of the employer as the cause of this injustice, (3) the recognition that collective action could rectify this injustice, and (4) leaders willing and able to mobilise. When comparing the two cases, we can see that the non-certified farm went through all four stages. As a result, collective action was possible, the union had a high membership rate and was positively perceived by most of the workers. This was not the case on the certified farm.

On the non-certified farm, it all began with a strong sense of injustice:

"They don't get paid a good wage and they don't have a good cafeteria. These are the reasons. And sometimes they would get fired without a reason, or they would reduce

their wage without a reason. Because of these reasons, instead of fighting alone, they thought it was better to organise” (union representative, non-certified farm).

Management on the non-certified farm was clearly viewed as the cause of workers' grievances. According to the union representative we interviewed, a first attempt to unionise was so forcefully suppressed by management that it had the adverse effect of creating more worker support than before. Besides, the union on this farm was ambitious. They were in the middle of negotiating a collective bargaining agreement. Moreover, they were already planning future collective action and agreements regarding the working conditions that they wanted to improve. These included four months of maternity leave instead of the current three months, buying an ambulance or establishing a clinic on the company site so that sick workers no longer had to use their own transport by horse cart, and they were also going to bargain wage increments. In addition, they were making plans to collect money and purchase basic products such as sugar and oil from the government, which they could then sell at a cheaper price, and so forth. Finally, union representatives on this farm had been there from the start of the union and had been at the forefront of the conflict between management and workers, making them experienced and trusted by workers. They had never breached this trust and had put control mechanisms in place to avoid misuse of membership fees.

On the certified farm, however, management interference appeared to impede all four stages of mobilisation. Consequently, the trade union established on the certified farm was smaller in size and did not enjoy the support of as many workers as the trade union established on the non-certified farm. There was no sense of injustice at its core. Instead, the union had been established with a top-down approach as management had asked the workers to take the initiative to organise themselves. Moreover, management underestimated the negative

consequences of initiating the unionisation and facilitating the election process. As a result, representatives felt deprived of their ability to raise problems that directly involved the management. By being so publicly in favour of having a union on the shop floor, management succeeded in creating the overall impression that they supported the trade union. However, according to the union representative, management strong-armed representatives by threatening to punish them at the time of wage evaluations. In other words, union representatives failed to differentiate themselves from management and did not manage to convince workers of the importance of concluding a collective bargaining agreement. Few workers on the certified farm believed that collective action could rectify injustice. In particular, because there had been more than one attempt to unionise, workers were not convinced that the union was going to be a motor of change or that it actually could make any changes on the ground. It simply was an empty box that did not have any power to change anything on the ground:

“In the past, trade unions didn’t work. So, this one will stop also” (answer to open survey question, worker from certified farm).

Finally, the union representative was less capable of mobilising as evidenced by one representative who was frustrated because she was neither able to make any changes on the ground nor change the image that workers had of representatives as ‘puppets’ of management:

“Even I am not happy to continue as a chairperson; I am considering to resign. Because sometimes when I read the rights of the workers and when I compare it to the facts on the farm, it is completely different” (union representative, certified farm).

Mobilisation theory helps us to conceptualise why the union on the non-certified farm showed more potential compared to the one on the certified farm.

Tackling impediments

Identifying impediments to workplace unionism contributes towards a better understanding of why labour remains unorganised at the bottom of global value chains, and ultimately helping those who wish to empower workers at the bottom of GVCs.

Our analysis shows that several impediments are rooted in socio-cultural norms and values. They are the outcomes of commercial dynamics inherent to vertical integration. Although eliminating these forces may be ambitious, we believe that there are ways to address them.

Making PSS on trade union rights more effective is a key aspect. However, answers are neither straightforward nor simple. As several authors have shown (Barrientos & Smith, 2007; Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Wang, 2005), there are many obstacles at different levels in the value chain that need to be addressed simultaneously before PSS can positively affect process rights. This study provides insights into the type of improvements that can be made, both at the vertical and the horizontal levels.

At the vertical level, our findings suggest a cautious and soft approach to PSS. Our study has shown that unionisation initiated by the management (such as in our certified farm) may hinder workers' mobilisation and thereby lead to ineffective workplace unionism marked by limited bargaining power and deficient worker trust. This is in line with the findings of previous studies that have criticised PSS for not correcting or remediating violations of trade union rights (Anner, 2012). Therefore, we call for a careful implementation of standards to avoid the risk of becoming merely an incentive for the management to pressurise their employees and thereby hindering the improvement of working conditions.

This does not mean that PSS have no role to play in relation to trade union rights. An actor that emerged as potentially key is the auditor. Although our study had limited data on auditors, it emerged as an area for further research. A key issue is to build a trusting relationship between auditors and union representatives for them to work as allies rather than enemies. Workers and union representatives have a misunderstanding and misconception of the role of the auditors. Auditing and standards organisations are changing their processes to change the relationship. For example, the Ethical Trade Initiative is moving from a narrow top-down approach to a sophisticated approach that involves not just audits but also activities aimed at empowering workers (especially women), building workers' understanding of their rights, and supporting suppliers to become better employers ((ETI, 2018; McAllister, 2011). However, our cases revealed that on the field, trust remains problematic.

Moreover, there is a need for the certification bodies to move away from a tick-the-box approach or at least complement it with an approach that allows room for representatives to indicate actual worker concerns, regardless of standard criteria. Although the MPS-SQ standard foresees confidential talks with employees, the more critical voices seem not to be heard.

Finally, freedom of association violations and the malfunctioning unions are rarely detected (N. Egels-Zandén & Lindholm, 2015) or effectively tackled. We believe the impediments identified in this study could help auditors to detect them earlier and more easily. The impediments could be used for the interview with the union representatives to ask probing questions on items such as the level of (voluntary) labour turnover, the composition of union membership, the way union fees are collected, the personality of the union representatives, and the state of the relationship with management. Based on our findings, we argue that the

identification of impediments is the first step towards tackling them and making workplace unionism possible.

With regards to the horizontal dimension, our results suggest that there may be room to strengthen unionisation at the cluster level. Currently, workers and representatives from different farms do not talk to each other. However, much can be learned from sharing experiences and comparing working conditions and union efforts. Both of the representatives we interviewed felt isolated and lacked support. They also expressed the need for external support. When exchanging experiences, representatives on non-certified farms may use the knowledge they have gained about better outcome standards on certified farms (e.g. work clothing, sanitary measures, paid leave) as leverage in their negotiations with their employers. In addition, representatives of certified farms may learn from union experiences on non-certified farms. Directing our attention to the Confederation of Ethiopian Trade Unions (CETU), we would therefore suggest that a platform where union representatives could meet be established and/or strengthened.

Furthermore, trade unions should make a concerted effort to become more appealing to female workers. On the shop floor, women have different concerns to men. By way of illustration, women on flower farms are hired on an insecure basis more often than men, (unannounced) overtime is more difficult for women to take on because they are also responsible for work in the reproductive sphere, pregnant women may be discriminated against, and female workers are more often the victim of sexual harassment by their male supervisors (Barrientos et al., 2003; Smith et al., 2004b). As a result, it is essential for women's voices to be represented in the trade union. This could be achieved by having predetermined seats for men and women in union representation, in combination with capacity-building

programmes (Smith et al., 2004b). Such programmes should focus on instilling women with more confidence in their own abilities and on changing the self-image that Ethiopian women have of themselves, which is rooted in prevailing socio-cultural norms. As evidence of these historic notions, more than half of the female respondents in our survey were convinced that men were better supervisors or managers than women.

6. Conclusion

To date, at the bottom of global value chains, labour organisation has remained at the fringes. While researchers who study this phenomenon tend to focus on different levels of analysis (i.e. GVC and local), there is a need for more integrated frameworks that explore how the interaction and competition between vertical and horizontal forces stifle workers' voices, such as the one outlined in this paper.

This study adds to the work on workplace unionism in agricultural value chains in several ways. Firstly, we showed that there were several impediments to workplace unionism. This brings to light the complexity of unionism at the bottom of the pyramid. While prior research has focused on studying and explaining the limited impact of PSS on trade union rights, this study tackled a much broader research question and attempted to explain why workplace unionism in general had undergone limited development. We consider the identification of these impediments as a first and indispensable step towards the improvement of workers' representation and collective bargaining ability.

Secondly, we developed a new way of identifying impediments to workplace unionism by developing an integrated framework of both horizontal and vertical forces. The interplay between these forces varies over time and place and could result in distinct outcomes in terms

of workplace unionism. While past studies have researched each type of force separately, we argue that any initiative to tackle impediments to workplace unionism must pay attention to the interaction between these forces. Short-term employment, for example, is caused by both vertical and horizontal forces. On the one hand, the seasonal nature of flower production means that flower farms need to hire seasonal labour (vertical pressure), while on the other hand, individual workers apparently seek better job opportunities and flower farms face high levels of voluntary labour turnover (horizontal pressure). If one aims to tackle the impediments arising from these forces (workers' 'lack of awareness' and 'lack of interest'), one needs to make sure that workers are employed on a long-term basis. It would however not sufficient to change the production pattern from one that targets peak demand to one that seeks a steady supply of flowers. Along with tackling this vertical pressure, one would need to tackle the horizontal pressure of workers seeking alternative livelihood strategies by offering better working conditions and, subsequently, raising job satisfaction. Hence, we argue that the identification of the impediments is an important first step, but that we need to go beyond it and understand interactions between vertical and horizontal forces if we wish to ascertain solutions rather than sustain the downward spiral towards failed unionism.

Thirdly, we broadened the research scope by including a non-certified farm in the study of workplace unionism. Past studies rarely compared the unionisation efforts of certified and non-certified farms. For our part, we showed how necessary it is to compare these farms, given that our results suggest that a union operating on a certified farm faces different, and somewhat more challenging impediments than a union on a non-certified farm. It is through such comparisons that one can truly explain the limited impact of PSS on trade union rights.

This study has a few limitations. First, we have studied two farms embedded in a specific institutional context and sector. This calls for some caution with regard to generalizing the findings. Future research could broaden the scope of cases in terms of both unionisation maturity and type of farms. The unions studied in this paper were in an early stage of development and had not reached a collective bargaining agreement at the time of research. Hence, it would be of interest to compare such farms with earlier stages of collective bargaining to those who are more advanced, and that have reached collective bargaining agreements. It may also be of interest to search for cases where the levels of regulatory support from national and sector unions would differ. This could provide further insight into how impediments may be altered through a learning effect or through external support. Further research could investigate more specifically how PSS impacts trade union rights in settings with a long union tradition. To question whether managers in such settings also interfere and facilitate unionisation on their farms seems relevant. This area would further increase our understanding of the conditions under which, perhaps, PSS could positively impact trade union rights.

Second, future research is necessary to continue the task of conceptual clarification of the impediments to workplace unionism. This article advanced our understanding by identifying the horizontal and vertical forces that matter for workplace unionism. However, it remains unclear how and when these forces interact or contradict, reinforce or neutralise one another. This particular area clearly deserves further analysis and research. Future studies should aim to make it more explicit which combinations of impediments really make collective organising impossible. We also need to pursue studies that focus on understanding whether and how certain impediments could be overcome.

7. References

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Annex 1. Overview of working conditions by MSP-SQ compared to ILO and the Ethiopian labour law

	ILO Conv.	Ethiopia Labour law	ETI	MPS-SQ
Wage				
Wages shall, at the least, meet national legal or industry (CBA) minimum standards, whichever is higher, and always be sufficient to meet basic needs and to provide some discretionary income.	110	No	Yes	Yes
Pay should be in cash.		No ⁱ	No	Yes
Information on wages shall be available to workers in an understandable and detailed form.		No	Yes	Yes
Deductions are not to be used as disciplinary measure.		No ⁱⁱ	Yes	Yes
Contract				
All employees must be issued with a written employment contract which is legally binding.		Yes	Yes	Yes
A person may be employed for a probation period which shall not exceed 45 consecutive days.		Yes	No	No
A contract of employment may be concluded for a definite period in the case of seasonal works.	110, 170	Yes	Yes	Yes
Work hours and overtime				
Normal hours of work shall not exceed eight hours a day or 48 hours a week.		Yes	Yes	Yes
Overtime shall be voluntary and not exceed 12 hours per week; is compensated at a premium rate.		Yes	Yes	Yes
Paid leave				
Workers must have at least 3 weeks of paid leave per year.		No ⁱⁱⁱ	No	Yes
Healthy work environment				
Companies shall comply with internationally recognised health and safety standards.	170	No	No	Yes
There is a coherent policy for Occupational Safety, Health and Working Environment.	155	Yes	No	Yes
There should be regular monitoring of workers' health and safety.		Yes	No	Yes
All employees have access to drinking water, clean toilets, suitable rooms with eating and storage facilities.		No	Yes	Yes
Work clothing				
The company must supply its employees, free of charge, with suitable clean working clothes that, preferably, are to be washed by the company in order to avoid contamination in the workers house.		Yes	No	Yes
Child labour				
No workers under the age of 15 years shall be employed.	182, 138	No ^{iv}	No ^v	Yes
Young persons under 18 shall not be employed at night or under hazardous and unhealthy conditions.	184	Yes	Yes	Yes
Trade union				
The rights of all workers to form and join trade unions and bargain collectively shall be recognised.	87, 98	Yes	Yes	Yes
Workers' representatives shall not be subject of discrimination and shall have access to all workplaces necessary to enable them to carry out their representation functions.	135	No	Yes	Yes

Women committee

The farm should encourage the election and implementation of a Workers Committee for Women, whose role is defined by gender related issues.

No No Yes

Source: Staelens, 2016

ⁱ Payment in kind is possible as long as it does not exceed 30% of wage paid in cash.

ⁱⁱ Except where it is provided otherwise by law or collective agreement or work rules or in accordance with a court order or a written agreement of the worker. The amount in aggregate that may be deducted at any one time, from the worker's wage shall in no case exceed one-third of his monthly wages.

ⁱⁱⁱ Workers must have at least 2 weeks of paid leave per year.

^{iv} It is prohibited to employ persons under 14 years of age.

^v Follows the Ethiopian labour law.