

MM Flowers – Resilience in the face of COVID-19



Who is MM Flowers?

MM Flowers is a grower owned, vertically integrated cut flower company. Established in 2007 to provide UK retailers with high quality, innovative cut flowers from transparent and sustainable sources, including the majority of supply coming from its own shareholder farms, Veg Pro and Elite. MM sources daily from 300 grower sites across the world; predominantly Africa, Europe and South America. In the UK, MM has a workforce of about 400-600 employees at their processing/ packing sites, virtually doubling during flower 'peak' times of the year. MM's ranges include Fairtrade roses and bouquets.

Summary

This project was about building resilience in Kenyan flowers by addressing the needs of workers and growers, and engaging suppliers, retailers and customers, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. It ran from June 2020 to July 2021.

This project was funded under the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)'s [Vulnerable Supply Chain Facility](#), to help build resilience of workers in East Africa and address the impact of COVID-19 in flower and agriculture supply chains. The flower supply chains focused project was supported by Co-op alongside other retailers and suppliers, [Fairtrade Foundation](#) and the [Ethical Trading Initiative](#).

The '[Building Resilience in flower supply chains](#)' project was built on existing partnerships and business relationships which represented the entire supply chain. There were three main delivery areas of the project:

- 1) addressing the immediate needs of the workers through practical short-term support for workers in health and food security,
- 2) creating a stronger and more resilient worker and grower base to ensure a more sustainable supply chain through training and support for income and farm diversification; and
- 3) making a robust business case for ethically traded flowers and providing insights for other countries and supply chains through retailer roundtables and research into ethical trade and purchasing practices.



This case study has been developed with the support of Co-op as part of Co-op's 2021 'Treating People Fairly Awards', at which MM Flowers was the overall winner. The awards celebrate excellence in human rights practice, encourage suppliers to learn from each other and inspire new ways of mitigating future threats to worker welfare. Supplier entries were assessed by an independent, expert panel and awards were presented at a Co-op supplier event. Click [here](#) and [here](#) to learn more about human rights at Co-op.

What prompted the action?

The floriculture sector was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. In early March 2020, retailers reduced their flower orders to prioritise essential goods, flights were grounded, and governments banned public gatherings. The falling sales took their toll on a sector with very narrow margins. Freight became harder to access, more expensive, and less frequent, prolonging the financial troubles faced by the suppliers and growers. All of this contributed to Kenyan flower exports falling as low as 20% of normal levels in April 2020². While exports had risen to 65% of normal levels by May 2020³, [Kenya Flower Council](#) estimated that it would take the sector a full year to fully recover.

Flowers are an important sector for Kenya, worth \$1.15 billion annually and employing over 150,000 people directly (majority women) and an estimated 2 million people indirectly⁴. It was estimated that the sector was losing \$300,000 each day in March/April 2020, with over 50 tonnes of flowers being dumped daily and an estimated 50,000 people losing their jobs.

Flower workers are vulnerable due to a number of factors, including food insecurity, poor access to water and sanitation, lack of transport and job insecurity; all exacerbated by low wages and non-existent savings. Women are disproportionately affected as they traditionally made up the majority of flower workers. Many have additional caring duties, are in low-valued and low-paid jobs, lack access to financial support, lack worker voice and, due to lockdowns, were suffering an increase in gender-based discrimination and violence.

² <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-22/lockdown-easing-in-europe-revives-kenyan-flower-industry>

³ http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-05/27/c_139092465.htm

⁴ <https://www.fairtrade.org.uk/media-centre/blog/kenyan-worker-tells-her-story-of-a-flower-industry-devastated-by-covid-19/>

Taking action

This 12-month project delivered immediate relief and started the process of building resilience, which can be scaled up across the flower supply chain. It was jointly managed by MM Flowers and Fairtrade, with funding from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) of the UK Government, in partnership with various retailers including Co-op, Tesco and M&S. The project engaged with over 60 farms in different ways, both Fairtrade and Non-Fairtrade, but this case study focuses on engagement with farms owned by Veg Pro (VP) and Elite.

Immediate - COVID-19 relief

Over 6,000 health packages were distributed for workers and their families with masks and hygiene products, and assistance was provided in protection against COVID-19. Shared gardens were set up on farms and kitchen gardens at workers homes, for increasing food security. Awareness raising activities included spreading key messaging about protection from COVID-19 through radios, SMS and posters.

Longer-term - building economic resilience

COVID-19 brought to light the vulnerabilities in the flower supply chain, so activities were designed to build long term resilience, to improve farms and farm workers' ability to withstand future shocks from fluctuating demand.

The floriculture sector was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. The falling sales took their toll on a sector with very narrow margins.

Taking action

Income generation

The project partnered with the training organisation [Emerging Leaders](#) which provides interactive sessions with workers to develop 'leadership mindsets' including proactivity, working together towards a goal, and thinking of new solutions. The training also includes how to set up a local project to help the community, how to do basic budgeting and saving and how to set up an income generation project. Emerging Leaders worked on Income Generating Activities (IGAs) with 170 workers. Forty received a small seed fund, 100% set up IGAs and 64% made a significant profit in the first month. 45% of those who only received training also set up IGAs.

Farm diversification

Three local companies delivered farm diversification feasibility studies and training to four farms (Longonot, K-George, Star and Rainforest) on beekeeping, briquette making, packed at source (PAS) and breeding. From the four different diversification ideas, three came to fruition. A feasibility report, training and plantings were completed for the PAS and breeding; the effectiveness of these will be evaluated next year. The feasibility study for the briquettes showed overall it wasn't feasible, both because of the high moisture content of the flower waste and also because this would divert too much flower waste from the already successful renewable biomass energy project. The beekeeping feasibility study was a success, with the farm sending five members of staff for training. 20 hives were set up and by the end of the project they were producing honey, all of which will be sold in country. The farm has suggested profits to be ploughed back into the Fairtrade Committee, for the benefit of the community.

Gendered training

[Women Working Worldwide](#) (WWW) and [Response Med](#) produced a gendered COVID-19 training programme and practical gender toolkit. 93 trainers were trained in order to pass on the learning to others, with 86% saying they were more confident after the training. The toolkit was shared with over 60 farms who participated in the project.



Risk to action

Alice works at Longonot and received training and seed funding for starting an IGA. She says, "Before the training, I was always afraid of taking the first step in all that I do. I always felt dissatisfied with my current situation of earning a living but thanks to Emerging Leaders' Leadership for Life training, I was able to overcome my fears and am now running a profitable fish business!"

Additional nutrition

Working closely with the farm managers, two nutritional gardens were set up to grow vegetables. These are already supplying to the kitchens of the farms, which is providing additional nutrition to over 1,000 workers as well as offering horticultural advice and space for workers to grow vegetables.

Selina works at K-Gorge and received training and seed funding as part of the project's IGA workstream. She says, "Before the training I used to struggle a lot, I became a widow at a young age. With young children to raise I focused on raising them. After the training, I got past my hopeless thinking, learnt that even with my meagre finances I can still save up and set up a business. Thanks to the grant I received from Emerging Leaders, I have now started clothes selling business that is helping me to achieve my desired income."



Engagement with workers

The project involved extensive engagement with workers, through Fairtrade, [Partner Africa](#), &Wider as well as other local NGOs and the farm managers and HR departments, all organisations that workers know and trust. There were also opportunities to respond via anonymous routes such as phone calls and radio phone-ins. Partner Africa and &Wider worked to identify what workers felt had/hadn't worked regarding worker engagement/communication. &Wider technology allowed workers to easily and confidentially respond to questions on their mobile phone or via a call in service, and the collated anonymised results were able to be seen on a 'dashboard' for farm managers.

Monitoring, evaluation and learning

The Monitoring Evaluation and Learning (MEL) and Theory of Change for this FCDO project was extensive and included worker voice feedback on the programmes, farm manager surveys and 121 interviews with workers. Every element of the programme had evaluation built into it and all have reports and recommendations to inform future work.

Research and sharing learnings

[Coventry University](#) carried out [research](#) into market behaviours in the UK, including consumer and commercial partners' actions during COVID-19. Roundtables were held with retailers and suppliers to discuss trade models, terms of trade, and purchasing practices. A report was produced to disseminate good practices and learnings through the [Food Network for Ethical Trade](#) (FNET) and various presentations were given, including at FCDO, [Sedex](#), Co-op and Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) events.

The project partners produced a [report](#) and joint statement to take to the government in UK and also in Kenya, to use learnings to inform policy. The FCDO and project partners all expressed interest in continuing the relationship and collaboration, and the partners proposed setting up a UK Floriculture Covenant.

Impact

- The immediate COVID-19 assistance was successful with over 6,000 workers receiving health packs, almost 3,000 workers benefiting from increased food security through the set-up of gardens, and over 100,000 people reached with health information through the COVID-19 and gender communications and awareness campaigns.
- The long term resilience elements of the project were also successful with 3 farms implementing diversification programmes, 171 workers receiving training on income generating ideas and seeding funding being provided to 40 workers. 71% of those trained started an income generating project and 64% made a significant profit in the first month.

Training in progress at Elite's Rainforest Farmlands Kenya Ltd



Making an impact

Lessons learnt

- Ensuring effective monitoring and evaluation is built into a project like this from the start is essential, and this must include effective and accessible ways to get feedback from workers. However, it's important to ensure that surveys and reporting isn't too burdensome to the farms.
- The feedback from workers needs to be built into the Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence (HREDD) and forward planning for the farms. MM Flowers will continue to stress the importance and work with suppliers to embed this into their operations.
- The income generation training and projects with Emerging Leaders were really effective and showed that initiating programmes like this are really worthwhile, so workers can raise their overall income and resilience, although ensuring workers are paid a living wage/income is the overarching goal.
- A few of the key difficulties in delivering the programme was that the main period of activity was during the COVID-19 pandemic and that they realized that the time frames originally set were unrealistic.
- Regular communication was essential. Monthly meetings with the funder FCDO were supplemented with weekly partnership meetings and regular roundtable meetings with retailers.



Moving Forward

The project has shown that it's possible to start to deliver a fairer, more resilient, sustainable supply chain. MM Flowers will take the learnings of this project to scale up across their flower supply chain and the learnings can also be used in other sectors.

The project partners have proposed that, to address the longer-term challenges facing the floriculture industry, a 'British Covenant' be set up similar to the Dutch Covenant for Responsible Business Conduct in Floriculture. Based on the findings of the project, such a Covenant could take action in four areas: emergency preparedness so that flower farms are better able to absorb future shocks; actions to increase wages towards a living wage; climate change adaptation and gender equality.

Since the end of the project, the project partners have brought together key players in the floriculture industry for a meeting to discuss the way forward. They have also engaged with [The Sustainable Trade Initiative](#) (IDH) to set up another meeting in July 2022 to progress the Covenant and get buy-in from the wider industry and commitment of time and resources from all stakeholders.

"We will continue to work collaboratively with all our partners to deliver innovative and impactful programmes to address the issues highlighted and we will engage on the progression of the idea of a UK Covenant, in order to build a truly sustainable business for all."

- Colum Donnelly, Technical Director, MM Flowers.



What makes this a leadership approach?*

Proactivity

MM Flowers took proactive action to pull together the partnership and apply for funding from the UK Government to get the project off the ground, in order to meet the needs of vulnerable workers in their supply chain. They were acutely aware of the devastating impact of COVID-19 on the workers and on the supplying farms. They wanted to take action to give immediate assistance and to also start to tackle the underlying insecurities of the current model of trade and supply.

Ownership

MM Flowers took leadership and ownership of this project, together with Fairtrade, facilitating the partnership with the retailers, NGOs and farms and driving the completion of the activities on the ground.

Partnership

This project built on existing partnerships with suppliers, academia, NGOs and retailers. It was set up to incorporate the entire supply chain and worked in various different and creative ways to encourage a collaborative partnership and engagement approach, from roundtables, to individual interviews and from radio programmes to formal training. This creative approach gave everyone the opportunity to learn from the various partners and from on-the-ground experience of workers.

* Key behaviours that Co-op champion are proactivity, ownership and partnership. Click [here](#) to learn more about Co-op's supplier engagement programme. Co-op's 'Supplier's Guide to Ethical Trade' sets out the standards suppliers are expected to meet.