

Flower Producer Speaks On The Impact Of COVID-19

- COVID-19 poses a threat to the existence of flower farms and the lives of thousands of workers depending on the industry for their livelihood.
- We spoke to Charity Opon, Human Resources Manager at Bigot Flowers Kenya Ltd in Naivasha. She speaks of how COVID-19 has changed the flower industry and how the Fairtrade Certified flower producer is coping with current times.

Counting Losses

With key events such as the UK Mother's Day and Easter celebrations around this time, this is traditionally a peak season for the flower industry. For Bigot Flowers, daily production would be anything between 300,000- 400,000 stems out of which 90% would be shipped.

"We've now gotten to a level where we're dumping 90% and only selling 10%," Charity says.

"It is a huge loss for us because once a flower gets to a level where it can be harvested, you have already spent a lot of money on inputs such as fertilizer and pesticides, paid for labor and incurred costs on other components that come with growing flowers," she adds.

Adjusting to Changing Times

As many other producers are forced to bend to the pressures of current times by releasing their workers, Bigot Flowers continues to do its best to maintain its workforce.

"We don't know what is going to happen. We have had to operate with half of our staff at any given time meaning that they work on a 15-day shift. So far, we have managed to keep all of our 1,075 workers on payroll."

The flower producer continues to hold up with revenues from the past but are uncertain of what May will look like as resources continue to deplete.

Safety Net for Workers

Last month, Fairtrade provided new guidelines on the use of Fairtrade Premiums to allow producers more flexibility in how they spend the funds. This means that funds can be utilized as pay out to workers or procure essential items such as masks, sanitizers and food for workers.

"We received the news and are very grateful to Fairtrade International. We have however decided to reserve the funds because employees are still on full pay. Our workers have made it very clear that Fairtrade Premium will be used to purchase food if and when we're forced to go into half pay or no pay," says Charity.

Workers Health

As Bigot Flowers proceeds with its operations, albeit on low gear, farm management is doing everything possible to minimize chances of COVID-19 infections amongst its workers.

"We are making sure that the staff bus is sanitized every day. We have also increased handwashing points within the farm. We have several at the gate where we ensure that all workers wash their hands when they arrive in the morning and are given hand sanitizer. Their temperature is also measured to check for any possible abnormalities and each of them provided with masks."

At the farm's packhouse workers easily maintain a safe distance of 2m apart given the fewer



numbers per shift. The farm is also doing its best to emphasize messages from the Ministry of Health by displaying information on notice boards. The resident nurse further complements this by continuously sensitizing workers and asking anyone with flu like symptoms to go to the clinic.

L: Workers at Bigot Flowers queue to wash their hands before reporting to their work stations

R: A worker gets his temperature checked

Message to Fairtrade Flower Buyers

“Buying flowers may look like a luxury. However, the flower industry employs hundreds of thousands of workers in Kenya and East Africa. It may be a luxury but so many livelihoods depend on the flowers that you buy. Keep buying and buy more whenever possible.”

As she concludes, Charity acknowledges that governments across Europe have a role to play. She wishes for flexibilities within reason that will allow flowers to once again find their way to homes across Europe. “If this industry goes down, over 300,000 workers not to mention other indirect income dependents such as suppliers and service providers will go without jobs. I don’t want to imagine what that world will look like,” she says.
