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# The Leverhulme Trust

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## Awards in Focus

### Social justice in the sugar cane industry: a sweeter deal for the rural poor?

For the last two decades the world production of sugar cane has grown at an average annual rate of three per cent. Close to two billion tonnes of cane are now harvested per year with an increasing proportion of this finding its way into developed countries, including the UK, in the form of raw sugar and biofuel ethanol.

The expansion of the industry and its exposure to consumers in the Global North has fostered increasing concern that its supply chain lacks sustainability. Specifically it has been charged that the sugar cane industry exploits workers through low wages and poor working conditions, expropriates peasants by claiming land or water resources, and excludes farmers by sourcing cane from company-owned plantations rather than small-scale outgrowers.

Where this has happened, poor and vulnerable groups of people have not received a fair share of the wealth flowing into the industry and may even have been harmed by its more rapacious practices. For an industry that supports around 100 million people worldwide, this is of significant concern.

To mitigate these negative outcomes a number of international initiatives have arisen to try to make the industry more

socially sustainable. This has involved encouraging greater respect for human rights, fairer terms of employment, better community consultation and increased involvement of small farmers. Three of the most prominent schemes are:

- Bonsucro – a multi-stakeholder roundtable that has developed a global standard for sustainable sugar cane production
- The Renewable Transport Fuel Certificate – the UK-government scheme that ensures suppliers of transport fuel provide a certain amount of biofuel and report on its sustainability
- The European Union's Sugar Adaptation Strategies – a €1.3 billion aid package to help African, Caribbean and Pacific countries restructure their sugar cane industries

I have been funded by the Leverhulme Trust to find out the extent to which these schemes have represented and addressed the needs of the rural poor. In November 2010, I visited the Dominican Republic and Trinidad in the Caribbean to find out how the challenges of sugar cane sustainability were being managed 'on the ground'.

The two countries provided contrasting stories. In the Dominican Republic, the industry is currently growing – although is unlikely to dominate the economy as it did during the reign of Trujillo. An important legacy from this era is the use of migrant labour from Haiti. The vast majority of these labourers were illegal, and have been subject to a depressing quality of life on the plantations. The Dominican sugar companies have begun to address this situation through new housing and employment projects, although the process of changing this entrenched situation is slow.

In Trinidad, meanwhile, the industry has recently closed after two hundred years of producing sugar. The issue here has been how to use the EU and domestic government funding to provide new jobs and redistribute the former sugar cane land. While the initial redundancy package was managed well and jobs found for skilled workmen, the long-term viability for the farming sector remains questionable.

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Ben was awarded an Early Career Fellowship grant in 2010.



A run-down batey (a sugar 'town' where Haitians reside) on a former government plantation in the Dominican Republic.



New housing built for workers in the Dominican Republic.