



Plantation Workers by Definition: The Changing Relevance of the ILO's Plantations Convention

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Abstract. The ILO's Plantations Convention is intended to provide a standard for plantation labour. The Plantations Convention defines plantations – and thus plantation labour – in terms of the production of specific crops in the tropics and subtropics. This paper examines world production of these crops over time to determine the proportions accounted for by labour in countries that have ratified the Plantations Convention. The Convention is shown to have limited reach, with only a minor proportion of plantation crops produced by labour in ratifying countries. The structural conditions under which the Convention's purpose was formulated have altered and the plantation's significance in the global division of labour has diminished. Although the ILO's general approach to agricultural labour is consistent with changes in the sector, the Organisation nevertheless continues to apply its inappropriate definition of plantations in its attempts to extend the reach of the outdated Plantations Convention. The article contributes to an understanding of the complexity of applying labour standards in the parts of global value chains that are located in the global South. It points to the need for revisions to better serve the South's export agricultural workers.

Introduction

The International Labour Organisation's Plantation Convention of 1958 was a path-breaking instrument of reform. It offered a standard against which to assess and improve living and working conditions for workers producing agricultural exports in the global South. However, this attempt at international reform was made at a time when economy and society on a world scale were entering a period of restructuring that would undo the Plantation Convention's potential in the longer term.

David Lincoln, Department of Sociology, University of Cape Town, Private Bag, Rondebosch 7700, Cape Town, South Africa. E-mail: david.lincoln@uct.ac.za. I am grateful to the IJSAF's editors and anonymous referees for their helpful recommendations. My thanks also go to the Chief Librarian of the University of Mauritius for granting me access, while I was away from my own university, to ILO documents that are not available online. My interest in plantation agriculture and more particularly sugar production in south eastern Africa have led me to the research question addressed in this article.

In the immediate post-World War II period there were distinctive economic and political impulses for reform and regulation on a world scale. These impulses stemmed in part from a determination to entrench peace by having the state and international organizations take charge of world economy and polity. The pursuit of social welfare and economic regulation in Northern countries was accompanied by the spread of Northern capital and markets into countries of the South that in turn were striving to industrialize and needing to maintain the stability of their emerging industrial workforces (Silver, 2003, pp. 151–156). Regulatory oversight of the transforming post-war world economy was assumed by newly established international financial and trade organizations (notably World Bank, International Monetary Fund, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), while the United Nations and its tributary organizations attempted to initiate and implement development on a world scale (impeded until the late 1980s by US hegemony; Arrighi, 1994, pp. 67–69). That these themes of a world ‘development project’ gave way to the ‘globalization project’ (to borrow McMichael’s 1996 formulation) is a reflection of the wider restructuring that occurred with enhanced financial mobility and new production possibilities. The structures that prevailed when the instruments of global reform were created were transformed within a few short decades, with the overarching international institutions adapting or transforming in tandem and some of the lower order instruments fading away (such as the international commodity agreements for tropical export crops; Gibbon and Ponte, 2005, pp. 48–49) or surviving as anachronistic relics of the world development project.

Amidst the sometimes contradictory and widely varied restructuring of the post-war period, agriculture saw significant change regarding the location and the organization of production, markets and consumption patterns. The tightening embrace of agriculture by international economic structures meant an acceleration of commercialization, corporate control and depeasantization (Araghi, 1995). With the global restructuring of agro-food systems, agriculture’s position in the division of labour was transformed (McMichael, 1994; Talbot, 2002). Agricultural exporters of the South were particularly affected by the intensified competition in the post-war period as most aspects of production, prices and markets – other than labour – moved rapidly beyond their national control. The implications for plantation agriculture were especially pronounced, the plantation having been the pre-eminent organizational form and farming unit of pre-war export agriculture in the former colonies.

Plantations and their fate became a tooth-breaking bone of contention for adherents of opposing political and theoretical perspectives in post-World War II anti-colonial struggles. Without any resolution of the contention, the plantation remained important in the post-colonial pursuits of international development and international labour standards. A leading body in this respect has been the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The ILO has recognized the plantation as a distinct employment site and plantation workers as a distinct category of labour. The distinctiveness of plantations and of workers in plantations relates to the history of export agriculture in countries of the South; an agriculture whose processes, labour forms

and markets set it apart from those agricultures that have been geared to meeting subsistence needs and supplying the domestic markets of colonial and former colonial societies.

There is a vast scholarly literature on plantations, much of it historical and focused thematically on slavery, colonialism and/or sugar, and regionally on the United States, the Caribbean Basin, South America and South East Asia. Within the social sciences – notably in sociology and geography – the decades of the 1950s to the 1980s saw extensive discussion about the plantation as an exceptional institution. These studies tended to approach the contemporary plantation either in organizational terms or in systemic terms; that is, either in terms of its internal functioning or by regarding the plantation as being integral to a larger system and referring then to plantation systems, plantation societies and plantation economies. But if theory and empirical evidence once spoke of plantation exceptionalism, export agriculture in the South today occurs at points in global value chains that do not necessarily exhibit the same exceptional internal and contextual features.

The ILO's adoption of the Plantations Convention in the late 1950s was the outcome of a political process that resonated with social scientific thought of the time in delineating the plantation as a distinct site of production. Subsequently, however, the meaning of the plantation has changed significantly in empirical and theoretical terms, and the value of current policy based on a specific, earlier meaning comes into question. This article argues that the ILO's Plantations Convention is based on a time-bound plantation concept that is of limited relevance today.

The article begins by identifying themes in post-World War II thought about the contemporary plantation. This review is followed by an exposition of the Plantations Convention itself. An analysis of the Convention is then made in three sections and by reference to data about plantation production. Finally, the conclusion provides closing comments on the declining relevance of the Convention. This assessment of the Plantations Convention contributes to our understanding of the broader matter of international labour standards in the context of a global division of labour.

The Contemporary Plantation as a Distinct Production Site

When I refer to the contemporary plantation, I have in mind the plantation as analysts and policy-makers find it to actually exist. It is the views of post-World War II observers of plantations in the global South that are of interest here. The first of three noteworthy themes in their observations is the way in which they've regarded the plantation for its role in development. In the immediate post-World War II years development was often construed in terms of policies of decolonization and/or reconstruction, and the plantation's potential was contentious. In Java and Sumatra of the late 1940s, for instance, it appeared that the 'greater efficiency and foreign exchange earning capacity of the plantations are more than outweighed by their unfortunate impact on the social and political life of the nation' (Jacoby, 1961, p. 73). At about the same time, the 'Malay world's' plantations were portrayed as successful results of scientific agriculture, which variously competed against and co-operated

with successful peasant agriculture, the small holdings of which 'seem to be indispensable to social equilibrium' (Robequain, 1958, p. 366). Amidst struggles over nationhood and land, and trying to balance the quest for advantageous trade with that for affordable food, many newly independent countries of the South thus contemplated the plantation as both an exploitative colonial relic and a profitable link to the world economy. If these struggles usually culminated in decolonization and deep political changes, the plantation nevertheless remained in notable cases one of the post-emancipation state's unchanged institutions (Lamusse, 1980).

The social sciences held two, alternative perspectives on the development contribution of this contradictory institution. Sometimes referred to as a unit of production and sometimes in systemic terms, the plantation was seen capable of either uplifting (in the sense of modernizing) or debilitating (in the sense of underdeveloping) societies. By the early 1960s, these divergent identities of the plantation had firmed up as integral elements of either the dependency or the modernization schools. Each school saw the plantation as a pivotal instrument either in retarding or promoting development, and each rejected the other's premises. The plantation encapsulated the challenges of the newly independent states of the South, with its critics – notably Beckford (1972) – condemning it as an institutional survival from the era of slavery and colonialism, and its proponents – notably Graham (1984) – exalting it as a bridge-head for modernization. As suggested below, this debate's intensity would later fade as the global division of labour developed and the plantation became less conspicuous on the South's export agricultural landscape.

The second of the post-World War II themes is the recognition of the plantation as a context for particular social and economic activities. Analyses of the plantation's social life gave it the semblance of a 'total institution' and recurrent reference to management-labour relations emphasized this as a cardinal feature of the 'modern' (by contrast to the slave or paternalistically run) plantation's economic culture. The fullest statement of the plantation's wholeness was Thompson's (1975) definition of a multi-dimensional institution,

'settled on its own land and occupying its own space [with] ... an industrial dynamic exercised through agricultural rather than through manufacturing production ... [with an] economic dynamic [that] is built into its geographic location, its territorial expansion, its authoritarian structure, and the way it shapes the lives of its people' (1975, pp. 32–34).

Thompson famously found, amongst other characteristics of the plantation, those of a 'race-making situation' (1975, pp. 115–117). Whereas Thompson concentrated on the social and cultural dimensions, Courtney (1965), and Jones (1968) too, brought to the fore the economic activities that defined the modern plantation's purpose and the related organizational features that gave it a unique identity. In Courtney's words,

'More significant in making a plantation a distinctive type of tropical crop producing unit than mere size, origin of labour force or nationality of controlling interest is the way in which production is organized ...[with] the scientific management of land, the employment of skilled personnel, both

technical and operational, the organized recruitment, housing and supervision of labour, and the constant seeking after improved crop varieties, better cultural practices and more efficient processing techniques' (Courtney, 1965, p. 52).

From another perspective – that of structural class analysis – the plantation's distinctiveness as a production site has predictable social consequences; plantation workers are predisposed to reformist rather than revolutionary forms of collective action due to their relationship to plantation owners and the way in which they encounter income-earning possibilities (Paige, 1975).

The third post-World War II theme is related to the development of the global division of labour. Before the 1970s, any commentary on an international division of labour revolved around the simple configuration of economically advanced North and economically retarded South, with the South's mines and plantations serving as key links with the industrialized North. When a 'new' international division of labour was conceptualized in the mid-1970s (Fröbel et al., 1980), manufacturing relocation from North to South was highlighted and agriculture all but overlooked. However, evidence of a global fruit and vegetable market was already being recorded (Mackintosh, 1977), and advances in transport and refrigeration technologies and globalizing capital flows provided a stimulus for the addition of 'non-traditional' agricultural products to those traditionally exported from the South. The new diversification of crops and of labour forms mirrored new ways of harnessing Southern agricultural labour to global markets and the 1970s and 1980s saw considerable expansion of non-traditional exports from the South (Islam, 1990). By the early 1990s, 'new agricultural countries' were being recognized (Friedmann, 1991), and social scientists were debating the precise form taken by the 'new' internationalization of agriculture (Raynolds et al., 1993). As global, and increasingly buyer-driven, agricultural value chains were being reorganized (Gibbon and Ponte, 2005), and efforts to optimize control and profitability gave rise to hybrid forms of labour regulation and risk displacement (Collins, 1993; Cid-Aguayo, 2007), export agriculture in the South steadily became dissociated from the plantation. The local politics of gender and of land tenure presented various alternatives to large-scale farming under single ownership and with a residential, wage-earning workforce. The increasing participation of women, especially in producing non-traditional exports, was a significant aspect of the transformation of labour forms in this sector (Korovkin, 2003; Dolan, 2004), and global value chains absorbed small-scale entrants where plantations might once have predominated (Little and Watts, 1994; Weis, 2007). As agrarian relations changed in such fashion, references to the plantation as a distinct contemporary production site became less frequent.

My intention in singling out these particular themes is to identify at a very general level aspects of scholarly thought that might be directly helpful in assessing the Plantations Convention. Taken together, the points raised here are indicative of transitions in both the historical and the conceptual status of the plantation. Change in global agricultural production has altered the plantation's identity and it is consequently in decline as a prominent contemporary institution with conceptual individuality. The

economic purpose of the isolated, enclave-like plantation is now being met under alternative and diverse production arrangements and the plantation worker too has been displaced or complemented by an export agricultural worker who works in any of a variety of production arrangements. In accordance with Graves's criticism of plantation exceptionalism – 'the plantation as an institution ... is not unique' – and his insistence that 'we should be ... looking at the nature of economies first and observing how plantations operate within them' (1986, pp. 279–280), analyses of export agriculture in the global South are now less about the effects of an inserted institution and more about the effects of incorporation in global value chains. Yet, as the next section shows, the Plantations Convention and its definition of the plantation worker are rooted in an anachronistic, distinctive site of production conception of the plantation.

The Plantations Convention

The ILO's Committee on Work on Plantations held its first session in Bandung at the end of 1950, and plantation workers were the first specifically agricultural category of labour to be covered by an ILO convention when the Convention concerning Conditions of Employment of Plantation Workers (or what I refer to here as the Plantations Convention) was adopted in mid-1958.¹

The Plantations Convention applied to workers on plantations, defining this work-site in geographical as well as product terms as follows:

'the term plantation includes any agricultural undertaking regularly employing hired workers which is situated in the tropical or subtropical regions and which is mainly concerned with the cultivation or production for commercial purposes of coffee, tea, sugarcane, rubber, bananas, cocoa, coconuts, groundnuts, cotton, tobacco, fibres (sisal, jute and hemp), citrus, palm oil, cinchona or pineapple; it does not include family or small-scale holdings producing for local consumption and not regularly employing hired workers'.

Ratifying countries were given the option of broadening the scope of this definition to cover any other crop produced on 'other plantations', or of including any production unit that was defined nationally as a plantation. Of the scores of tropical and subtropical countries to which the Plantations Convention might have applied, only 12 ever ratified it. Cuba was the first to do so (in 1958), followed in turn by Liberia, Mexico, Côte d'Ivoire, Guatemala, Brazil, Philippines, Ecuador, Panama, Uruguay, Nicaragua, and finally Sri Lanka (in 1995). Brazil then denounced its ratification in 1970 and Liberia followed suit the next year, leaving 10 ratifications in force today. While the broad terms have remained unchanged, a small but significant revision was made when Cuba and Uruguay ratified a 1982 protocol that excluded from the Plantations Convention's definition all production units of less than five hectares and with less than 10 workers at any time in a year.²

A first survey of conditions faced by plantation workers was published by the ILO in 1966 (ILO, 1966). It was an important but uneven report, undoubtedly limited by the unavailability of comparable international statistics of the time, yet pointing to the inferior working conditions and 'often very poor' (ILO, 1966, p. 262) living conditions endured by plantation workers. Two decades later, Sajhau (1986) contributed another report on plantation labour, concluding that while there had been significant change in plantation ownership and production, these had had little positive impact on the generally bad conditions of work and life on plantations. Sajhau's (1986) article, coupled with a more extensive study by Sajhau and von Muralt (1987), portrayed the plantation as a consistently low-cost site of agricultural production for world markets, with migrants from poorer countries sometimes replacing local workers who were repelled by its conditions (see also Lee and Sivananthiran, 1996). All told, the survival of the plantation seemed dependent on conditions that the Plantations Convention was aimed at reforming.

For all its intended reforms, the Plantations Convention today has fewer signatories than the number of crops contained in its definition of the plantation. Ratification behaviour has been not only restrained but also regionally concentrated, with a strong Latin American emphasis. These signs of disjuncture between intent and acceptance invite closer inquiry. The analytical purpose of the following sections of the article then is to explore levels of acceptance in terms of volumes of plantation crop production that have been accounted for by workers in countries that have ratified the Plantations Convention.

Latitude, Crop and Labour

The Plantations Convention refers to plantations as commercial agricultural 'undertakings' in the tropics and subtropics that produce coffee, tea, sugarcane, rubber, bananas, cocoa, coconuts, groundnuts, cotton, tobacco, fibres (sisal, jute and hemp), citrus, palm oil, cinchona or pineapple. Nevertheless, and especially if aimed at ameliorating conditions for workers in export-orientated agriculture in countries of the global South, the Convention's definition contains misleading geographical and product prescriptions. Geographically, Australia shares the subtropical sunshine with the likes of Burkina Faso, and some of the crops in the ILO's definition are as likely to be cultivated in the United States as in Mozambique. And as strongly associated as some of these crops may have been with colonial agriculture in the tropics and subtropics, the expanded range of agricultural exports from former colonies in these latitudes since the 1970s has dramatically changed the role of Southern agriculture in the global division of labour. With the spread into low-cost tropical and subtropical countries of horticultural and other fresh produce production for immediate consumption in high-wage temperate countries, and with changes in labour forms and tenure arrangements, the traditional plantation and its crops have been altered or sometimes displaced as the export agricultural norm in the global South (as shown by Collins, 1993; Collins and Krippner, 1999; Dolan et al., 1999; Reynolds, 2000; McCulloch and Ota, 2002; and in the ILO's own working papers by Asea and Kaija,

2000; Semboja et al., 2000). Consequently, the relationship between latitude, crop and labour is not as straightforward today as it may have appeared in the 1950s when the Plantations Convention was formulated.

ILO policy-making, when focused on international labour standards, proceeds on the basis of resolutions voted by participating national representatives; these being equal governmental, employers' and workers' representations from member countries. However, the countries that traditionally have possessed a plantation sector are widely known for their low levels of organized worker representation in agriculture and their heavy dependence on agricultural export earnings, and they typically have had neither the trade-union densities and capacities nor the governmental enthusiasm to concertedly uphold favourable labour standards. Under these circumstances, and as was seen in the ratification behaviour of potential signatories following the adoption of the Plantations Convention, its promise was never going to be realized easily. One of the key questions to arise from this situation is: what has been the extent of the ILO's Plantations Convention's coverage? Beyond simply listing the names of countries that have ratified the Convention, it is important to establish their respective contributions to world production of plantation produce over time. This after all may be the clearest measure of the Convention's relevance for workers in the global South's export-orientated agricultural sector.

The Plantations Convention's Changing Reach

There is no ready means of determining how many workers are and have been engaged in the production of ILO-defined plantation crops. In the absence of suitable workforce details, volume of production is used here as a surrogate indicator of labour's role in the production of these crops. Volume of production tells us nothing directly about the employment, organizational, technological or ownership variables that define specific forms of production, but it does serve as a convenient comparative measure of the Plantations Convention's changing reach over time. Employing data compiled by the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organisation (see Appendix), I've assembled a series of tables (Tables 1 to 12) to show change in the production of plantation crops by countries that have ratified the Plantations Convention.

Of the countries that have ever ratified the Convention, Brazil stands out for the large volumes of plantation crops it produces. Having contributed almost 40% of the world's coffee supply in the early 1960s, Brazil remains the single largest coffee producer. In the early 2000s, Brazil alone was producing about 30% of the world's coffee and of sugar cane, respectively. But because Brazil was only a Plantations Convention signatory for five years before withdrawing in 1970, its prominence as a producer has not helped to maintain the Convention's reach. Brazil aside, three signatories whose significant production of several plantation crops has consistently given substance to the Convention's impact have been Mexico (Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8 and 10), the Philippines (Tables 1, 4, 5, 8, 9 and 10), and Côte d'Ivoire (Tables 3, 5, 8 and 9). Other signatories that have accounted for significant output of one or two plantation

crops have been Sri Lanka (Tables 4, 9 and 11) and Ecuador (Tables 1, 3 and 5). For the most part, however, the combined production of the Convention's signatories has been of minor and quite varied proportions.

The only crops produced by all Convention signatories in volumes exceeding one fifth of world production have been cocoa beans (Table 3), bananas (Table 1) and coconuts (Table 4). With Convention signatory Côte d'Ivoire being the largest single producer of cocoa beans and commanding over one third of world production by the early 2000s, the Convention's applicability to cocoa plantation labour has remained statistically if not geographically more extensive than with labour producing any other crop. The next most significant crop, bananas, has had Convention signatories Ecuador and the Philippines accounting for relatively large shares of world production, with only non-signatories India, China and Brazil producing more than them in recent years. The production of coconuts by Convention signatories bears some resemblance to that of cocoa beans in that most production may be attributed to a single country, the Philippines in this instance, whose output has consistently exceeded one quarter of the world's total.

The primacy exhibited by some producer countries has as its corollary the spread of much plantation crop production amongst numerous far smaller producers. The Convention's signatories belong more often than not to this latter grouping of smaller individual producers. At the lowest representational extreme in this respect are the Convention signatories producing natural rubber (i.e. latex) (Table 9), palm oil fruit (Table 7), tobacco leaf (Table 12) and groundnuts (Table 6). Natural rubber production by Convention signatories expanded to 5% of the world total in the early 2000s (due largely to Sri Lanka's ratification in 1995) but remained a small side-show on a stage dominated first by non-signatories Malaysia and Indonesia, then by the same two in reverse order, and finally in overwhelming measure by Thailand, another non-signatory. Palm oil fruit, by far an African product in the 1960s, was produced thereafter in massively increased quantities especially by Malaysia and Indonesia, which today each produce more than three times the total for the entire African continent.

By the early 2000s, no more than 40% of any of the ILO-defined plantation crops was being produced by labour employed in countries that have ratified the Plantations Convention. This coverage of 40% was attributable to cocoa bean producers; it was followed by 33% for coconut, 22% for banana, 19% for pineapple, and 13% for coffee producers. No more than 10% of any of the remaining plantation crops under study here was produced by labour in countries that have ratified the Convention. In sum, the collective representational role of the plantation crop producing countries is minor. It follows that workers producing only a small proportion of ILO-defined plantation crops have recourse to the protective mechanisms offered by the Plantations Convention.

Between Definition and Ratification – A Discussion

The limited reach of the Plantations Convention is indisputable. While it is readily apparent that ratifications have been rare, the above section has confirmed that only

Table 1. Shares of world banana production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	<1	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Cuba	<0.5	<0.5	<1	<0.5	<0.5
Ecuador	–	8	5	8	8
Guatemala	1	1	1	1	1
Liberia	<0.5	–	–	–	–
Mexico	4	3	5	4	3
Nicaragua	–	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Panama	–	3	3	2	<1
Philippines	–	4	10	6	8
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	n.d.
Uruguay	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
<i>Total Share</i>	6%	21%	25%	22%	22%

Table 2. Shares of world citrus fruit production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Cuba	<0.5	<0.5	<1	<1	<1
Ecuador	–	<1	<1	<0.5	<0.5
Guatemala	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Liberia	<0.5	–	–	–	–
Mexico	4	5	5	5	6
Nicaragua	–	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Panama	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Philippines	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	<0.5
Uruguay	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
<i>Total Share</i>	5%	6%	8%	6%	8%

Table 3. Shares of world cocoa bean production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	14	27	30	35
Cuba	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Ecuador	–	5	4	3	3
Guatemala	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Liberia	<0.5	–	–	–	–
Mexico	2	2	2	2	1
Nicaragua	–	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Panama	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Philippines	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	<0.5
Uruguay	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
<i>Total Share</i>	2%	22%	34%	36%	40%

Table 4. Shares of world coconut production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	<0.5	<1	<1	<0.5
Cuba	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Ecuador	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Guatemala	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Liberia	<0.5	–	–	–	–
Mexico	4	3	3	3	2
Nicaragua	–	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Panama	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Philippines	–	27	24	23	27
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	4
Uruguay	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
<i>Total Share</i>	4%	30%	29%	27%	33%

Table 5. Shares of green coffee production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	6	4	3	2
Cuba	<1	<1	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Ecuador	–	2	2	3	1
Guatemala	3	3	4	4	3
Liberia	<0.5	–	–	–	–
Mexico	3	5	5	6	4
Nicaragua	–	–	1	<1	<1
Panama	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Philippines	–	1	3	2	1
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	<0.5
Uruguay	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
<i>Total Share</i>	7%	17%	19%	19%	13%

Table 6. Shares of world groundnut production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	<0.5	<0.5	<1	<0.5
Cuba	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Ecuador	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Guatemala	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Liberia	<0.5	–	–	–	–
Mexico	<1	<0.5	<1	<0.5	<0.5
Nicaragua	–	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Panama	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Philippines	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	<0.5
Uruguay	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
<i>Total Share</i>	<1%	1%	1%	1%	1%

Table 7. Shares of oil palm fruit production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	4	3	2	<1
Cuba	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Ecuador	–	<1	<1	1	<0.5
Guatemala	0	0	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Liberia	<1	–	–	–	–
Mexico	2	<1	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Nicaragua	–	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Panama	–	0	0	0	<0.5
Philippines	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	n.d.
Uruguay	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
<i>Total Share</i>	3%	6%	4%	4%	3%

Table 8. Shares of world pineapple production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	4	2	2	1
Cuba	<1	<1	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Ecuador	–	1	1	<0.5	<0.5
Guatemala	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<1	<1
Liberia	<0.5	–	–	–	–
Mexico	5	5	5	2	5
Nicaragua	–	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Panama	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Philippines	–	5	11	10	11
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	<0.5
Uruguay	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
<i>Total Share</i>	6%	16%	21%	15%	19%

Table 9. Shares of world natural rubber production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	<0.5	<1	1	2
Cuba	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Ecuador	–	0	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Guatemala	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<1
Liberia	2	–	–	–	–
Mexico	0	0	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Nicaragua	–	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Panama	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Philippines	–	<0.5	<1	<1	1
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	1
Uruguay	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
<i>Total Share</i>	2%	1%	2%	3%	5%

Table 10. Shares of world sugar cane production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	0	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Cuba	8	8	8	5	2
Ecuador	–	<1	<1	<1	<0.5
Guatemala	<0.5	<1	<1	1	1
Liberia	<0.5	–	–	–	–
Mexico	5	5	4	4	3
Nicaragua	–	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Panama	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Philippines	–	5	4	3	2
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	<0.5
Uruguay	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
<i>Total Share</i>	13%	20%	18%	14%	10%

Table 11. Shares of world tea production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Cuba	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Ecuador	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Guatemala	0	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Liberia	n.d.	–	–	–	–
Mexico	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Nicaragua	–	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Panama	–	0	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Philippines	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	9
Uruguay	–	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.
<i>Total Share</i>	0%	<0.5%	<0.5%	<0.5%	10%

Table 12. Shares of world tobacco leaf production by Plantations Convention signatories (percentages per annum).

	1962–1964	1972–1974	1982–1984	1992–1994	2002–2004
Brazil	–	–	–	–	–
Côte d'Ivoire	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Cuba	1	<1	<1	<0.5	<0.5
Ecuador	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Guatemala	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Liberia	n.d.	–	–	–	–
Mexico	2	1	<1	<1	<0.5
Nicaragua	–	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Panama	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
Philippines	–	1	1	1	<1
Sri Lanka	–	–	–	–	<0.5
Uruguay	–	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5
<i>Total Share</i>	3%	4%	3%	3%	2%

a minority of plantation crops come from the ratifying countries. As might be expected, then, subsequent ILO resolutions related to agricultural labour have included appeals to non-signatory members to ratify the Convention. Such appeals typically separate the 'core' conventions (which commit signatories to the protection of workers' fundamental rights), from those conventions focusing on agricultural labour as such. Some of these agricultural conventions relate to aspects of work on farms (e.g. wages or occupational health), to the personal status of workers on farms (e.g. gender, age, migration) or to the organization of workers on farms, but there is only one other ILO convention apart from the Plantations Convention that is comprehensive in its treatment of all aspects of workers' conditions in an agricultural setting, namely the Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention (referred to here as the Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention).³

Since its adoption in 1969, the Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention has been ratified by 43 countries,⁴ including three Plantations Convention signatories: Côte d'Ivoire, Guatemala and Uruguay. Applying to agriculture anywhere in the world, the Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention nevertheless offers a potentially effective alternative to the Plantations Convention to protect commercial agricultural workers in the global South. Unlike the coverage of only specified crop production under the Plantations Convention, ratification of the Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention means that a country will subject all its agricultural undertakings to inspection. On the other hand, whereas the Plantations Convention recognizes that there are workers whose conditions of social existence as well as work demand protection in the plantation's more or less total institutional setting, the Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention pertains to a system of inspection that would expose adverse working – but not living – conditions in virtually any farming context. Bearing in mind these differences, it is instructive to assess the application of the Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention to the ILO-defined plantations discussed in this article.

Again, I use volume of production, this time to compare the relative impacts of the Plantations Convention and the Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention. In the case of six of the 12 plantation crops examined here, the early 2000s saw a greater volume produced by workers in countries that have ratified the Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention than by workers in countries that have ratified the Plantations Convention (see first two data columns of Table 13). The most striking differences concern tobacco leaf (where almost five times more was produced by Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention signatories than by Plantation Convention signatories) and groundnuts (where almost four times more was produced by the former than the latter). Similarly, but with smaller differences, the Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention signatories exceeded production by the Plantations Convention signatories in the cases of citrus, coffee bean, tea and palm oil fruit production. To give this a positive interpretation, it may be said that ILO-defined plantations producing these six crops (i.e. tobacco leaf, groundnuts, citrus, coffee beans, tea and palm oil fruit) in countries that have ratified the Agricultural Labour Inspection Conven-

Table 13. ILO Conventions 110 & 129 and plantation crop production.

Plantation crops	Share of 2002–2004 world production by Plantations Convention signatories (average % per annum)	Share of 2002–2004 world production by Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention signatories (average % per annum)	Share of 2002–2004 world production by countries that are not signatory to either Convention (average % per annum)
Bananas	21.7	11.9	68.1
Citrus	7.7	17.8	75.0
Cocoa beans	39.6	36.9	58.8
Coconuts	32.7	1.2	66.6
Coffee beans	13.0	19.1	73.0
Groundnuts	1.1	4.3	95.0
Palm oil fruit	2.8	3.8	94.7
Pineapples	19.1	15.4	67.6
Rubber (natural)	4.6	2.2	95.3
Sugar cane	10.0	9.4	82.1
Tea	9.5	13.1	77.4
Tobacco leaf	2.4	11.9	86.2

tion are open to regular labour inspections even though the Plantations Convention has not been ratified there.

These comparative numbers may not have direct significance for ILO policy-making, particularly as the two Conventions were differently conceived and therefore cannot strictly be regarded as alternates. What does have significance is that the overwhelming bulk of plantation crop production is performed by workers whose countries have ratified neither the Plantations Convention nor the Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention (see third data column of Table 13, noting that three countries have ratified both Conventions so that row totals exceed 100). Cocoa bean production is best off in the sense that no more than 59% of the world's annual crop in 2002–2004 came from countries that have ratified neither Convention; at the worst extreme is natural rubber, where 95% of the world's annual crop in 2002–2004 was produced in countries that have ratified neither Convention.

With ratification behaviour around the Plantations Convention and the potentially complementary Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention shown above to hold such limited benefit for ILO-defined plantation labour, the ILO's definition of the plantation and plantation labour finally warrants some further discussion in the light of recent ILO approaches to agricultural labour in the global South.

Sajhau's review of plantation labour two decades ago contained an acknowledgement that the ILO's definition of the plantation 'had not yet earned universal acceptance' (Sajhau, 1986, p. 73). Aside from Kirk's (1987) comprehensive bibliography based on a similar definition, it is questionable whether universal acceptance has been earned to date. Usage of the term within the Organisation itself suggests that the formal definition has given way to a more general reference to the plantation as a farming type. This accords with the move within the ILO towards a more general treatment of workers, including those in agriculture. As far as plantation workers are concerned, this shifting policy approach has been reflected in the dissolution of the ILO Committee on Work on Plantations: it was constituted and began meeting in 1950 and it served the plantation sector until its tenth session in 1994 (ILO, 1994a).

But even as the Committee on Work on Plantations was coming to the end of its days, the Plantations Convention's continued viability was not doubted. At the opening of the tenth session of the Committee on Work on Plantations, after the Secretary General of the ILO had drawn attention to the changes over recent decades in the 'geography of production and trade in plantation commodities' (ILO, 1994b, p. 8), the Worker Member of the Governing Body's delegation encouraged the Committee to call for the ratification of the Plantations Convention by 'all relevant member States' (ILO, 1994b, p. 9). In the course of its final session's subsequent proceedings, the Committee on Work on Plantations resolved to invite the ILO's Governing Body (in the manner of such procedures) 'to facilitate the implementation of the Plantations Convention' (ILO, 1994b, p. 52).

Thereafter, we usually see the ILO considering all agricultural workers together as a single class of labour. This was apparent at the ILO's 1996 Tripartite Meeting on Improving the Conditions of Employment and Work of Agricultural Wage Workers in the Context of Economic Restructuring, and then again in 2000 at the Tripartite Meeting on Moving to Sustainable Agricultural Development through the Modernization of Agriculture and Employment in a Globalized Economy (ILO, 2003, p. 2). Despite this tendency towards more generalized approaches to agricultural labour, the Plantations Convention continued to be promoted as a relevant labour standards setting instrument. Thus, although the aforementioned 1996 Tripartite Meeting considered a report containing the acknowledgement that '[t]he level of ratification of ... various instruments differs considerably and the trend towards more general instruments that apply to all categories of workers has led to many of these instruments being revised' (ILO, 1996, p. 21), it went on to resolve to invite the ILO's Governing Body to urge member countries to ratify a range of fundamental rights conventions as well as the Plantations Convention and several others 'of particular significance to the agricultural sector' (ILO, 1997). The Plantations Convention had not been revised and nor was there any suggestion that revision was in the offing.

There was no direct reference to the Plantations Convention in the 2000 Tripartite Meeting's proceedings, but it was resolved to invite the Governing Body to urge member countries to 'ratify the eight core Conventions and other relevant, up-to-date labour standards concerning the agricultural sector' (ILO, 2000, p. 47). It was not clear whether the Plantations Convention was seen as one of these 'up-to-date labour standards'. In any event, if the Plantations Convention went without direct mention at the 2000 Tripartite Meeting, references indeed were made to plantations and also to 'farms and plantations', without explaining the distinction. These references implied that plantations were understood to be a type of commercial agricultural setting in which workers also lived, possibly accompanied by dependant children. Although the ILO's definition of the plantation and plantation labour was neither invoked nor contradicted in the report on the 2000 Tripartite Meeting, the 2003 paper entitled *Decent Work in Agriculture* evidently did not hold to – and thus indirectly challenged – the ILO's definition.

Decent Work in Agriculture seems to regard plantations essentially as residential workplaces, and accordingly makes references to 'plantation communities'. This per-

spective allows for discussion of traditional and non-traditional plantation crops alike and for statements, for example, about 'plantation agriculture, particularly non-traditional export crops' (ILO, 2003, p. 8). While the ILO's Plantations Convention might actually accommodate some elements of these recent analyses, its specific geographical and crop parameters are not necessarily heeded by those writing for or within the Organisation today. The definitional ambiguities are heightened when Decent Work in Agriculture notes of 'waged agricultural workers' that they are 'engaged predominantly in cultivation and harvesting in plantations, commercial agriculture, horticulture and primary agricultural processing' (ILO, 2003, p. 6), and later when child labour is seen as having been 'very much part of employment in plantations and commercial agriculture' (ILO, 2003, p. 27). It would appear that these work settings are regarded as mutually exclusive types, yet the possibility cannot be denied that plantations might subsume primary processing or even non-traditional horticulture, let alone that plantations are actually commercial agricultural enterprises. Confusion reigns in the absence of comprehensive formal definitions.

Conclusion

Struggles for amelioration, recognition, inclusion or any other social reforms are rooted in the hope that human agency will triumph over structural conditions. The global division of labour is one of those contexts where, paradoxically, the triumph of reform can mean the eventual weakening of the beneficiaries' structural position. Where a workforce – typically workers in a country of the global South – occupies a position in a global value chain and participates in the global division of labour on the basis of its comparatively low cost or ease of control, reform can mean reducing these 'comparative advantages'. On the other hand, although the post-war restructuring that has come to be denoted as globalization depends upon and leads to the undermining of workers' rights (Tilly, 1995), there is a structural imperative for the stability of at least some workforces of the global South. In this context, instruments of global reform such as ILO conventions potentially play a moderating role.

The Plantations Convention, however, is of limited value as a standards setting instrument for labour employed in the production of the crops contained in its definition. In the time since its adoption, the Plantations Convention has lost (or rather, not gained) relevance in terms of:

1. the extent of ratification – at any one time there have been no more than 10 ratifying countries, the last addition having been over a decade ago;
2. the share of production accounted for by ratifying countries – the upper limit of world share of designated plantation crops ever attributed to these countries is 40% of all cocoa bean production in the early 2000s; and
3. the undermining of its definitional scope by changes in the global division of labour – the diversification of crops and of labour forms in tropical and subtropical agriculture has seen a relative decline in the significance of the activities to which the Plantations Convention applies.

The nature of commercial agriculture in the South, notably export-orientated agriculture, has so changed since the 1950s that lines of latitude or type of crop are hardly appropriate criteria by which to specify international labour standards. What the ILO's Plantations Convention regards as plantation labour would be better served if it were categorized according to its status in the global division of labour. Recognizing the inherent practical difficulties of matching global social criteria with national borders, this categorization might be along the lines of, say, agricultural labour in non-OECD countries or, perhaps, agricultural labour in countries whose income from agricultural exports exceeds a given proportion of total national income.

There is little prospect in the short term of the World Trade Organisation building ILO labour standards into its rules (Myers, 2004, p. 166). Moreover, analyses of recent employment codes and consumption codes have alerted us to the possible limitations of such attempts at regulation, whether the obstacles take the form of production-site politics, notably around gender (Tallontire et al., 2005; Barrientos and Smith, 2007), or wider political economic factors (Utting-Chamorro, 2005). Clearly further analysis and negotiation are called for and consideration has to be given to other labour codes and to fair trade and similar arrangements that might already involve the countries and crops that are targeted by the Plantations Convention.

The Plantations Convention and renewed appeals to ratify it may be unintentionally quite diversionary. Time has surely come for the Convention to be replaced by a formal international labour standard that more appropriately serves the South's agricultural workers.

Notes

1. Convention concerning Conditions of Employment of Plantation Workers, 1958 (No. 110) (Adopted 24 June 1958; came into force 22 January 1960).
2. Protocol to the Plantations Convention, 1958 (Adopted and came into force 18 June 1982).
3. Convention concerning Labour Inspection in Agriculture, 1969 (No. 129) (Adopted 25 June 1969; came into force 19 January 1972).
4. Signatories of the Agricultural Labour Inspection Convention: Argentina, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Burkina Faso, Colombia, Costa Rica, Côte d'Ivoire, Croatia, Denmark, Egypt, El Salvador, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Guatemala, Guyana, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Latvia, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Madagascar, Malawi, Malta, Republic of Moldova, Morocco, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Syrian Arab Republic, Ukraine, Uruguay, Zimbabwe.

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Appendix: Methodological Notes

The tables are based on data from the United Nations’ Food and Agricultural Organization’s statistical databases (FAOSTAT). The on-line source is archived primary crop production data at <<http://faostat.fao.org>>.

For each primary crop, annual production in metric tonnes was determined at one decade intervals over the course of the ILO Plantations Convention’s existence. To minimize the possible impact of atypical change in any single year, these production data were averaged over the three years 1962–1964, 1972–1974, 1982–1984, 1992–1994 and 2002–2004 (2004 being the latest year of record in this particular FAOSTAT series). Each country’s average annual production of each crop was then converted to a percentage of annual world production over the respective three year periods.

Percentages in Tables 1 to 12 have been rounded to whole integers, except those less than 1% of annual world production; these low percentages have been entered in the tables as either <1 or <0.5 or, where the FAOSTAT records show zero production, as 0. Percentages in Table 13 have been rounded to one decimal place for close comparisons.

Where a relevant country's name does not appear in a FAOSTAT list of a particular crop's producer countries it may be assumed to produce no or negligible amounts of that crop. In such cases, n.d. (no data) has been entered in the tables.

Only unprocessed primary crop data have been considered. Thus, where the Plantations Convention refers to coffee, green coffee bean data have been used; for palm oil, data on oil palm fruit; for cocoa, data on cocoa beans; for rubber, data on natural rubber; for groundnuts, data on groundnuts in their shells. The composite crop type 'fibres (sisal, jute and hemp)' has been excluded. No data are available in the same FAOSTAT primary crop data archive for cotton or for cinchona (whose bark yields quinine) and these crops are not considered.