

Namibian Charcoal Trade



Background

Over 40% of charcoal sold in the UK comes from Namibia.^[1] Invasive bush encroachment affects around 26 million hectares of Namibia's farmland. As a way of managing this problem, farm owners have turned to charcoal production, using the cleared bush to create charcoal. The Namibian charcoal industry is informal and fragmented, mired with exploitation of workers and preventable environmental degradation. Namibia has high levels of poverty and unemployment. Charcoal workers are often migrants from Namibia's poorest region, Kavango. They come seeking a small wage under harsh and dirty conditions, with little chance of breaking the cycle of poverty.

Social Issues and Exploitation

- Living on isolated farms, workers may have to buy food from the farm owner, sometimes at inflated prices and/or on credit. Repayments are taken from wages, often significantly reducing workers' take-home pay.
- Workers are hired as individual contractors and therefore do not have the benefits of employees. For example, their collective bargaining abilities are compromised.
- Workers are paid per tonne of charcoal produced, rather than by hour, which encourages group and family work, and felling of larger protected trees. Entire families can live on site and be involved with charcoal production but payment tends to be through the (male) head of the household.
- Worker's accommodation is basic, often made out of plastic sheeting. They have limited or no access to drinking water, sanitary toilets, washing facilities or electricity.
- The children of migrants can have difficulty in accessing education. There is some evidence of children working alongside their parents.

Health and Safety

- Physical nature of work and a lack of shade and drinking water increase the risk of heat-related illnesses.
- Fumes and smoke from the burning charcoal increase the risk of respiratory diseases including lung diseases.
- The physical nature of the job can lead to back pain.
- Workers do not consistently wear personal protective equipment

Facts

- *Namibia is the world's sixth largest charcoal exporter.*^[2] *The UK received 22% of Namibia's charcoal exports in 2015.*^[3]
- *The Namibian charcoal industry employs domestic migrants, often from the poorest region in Namibia – Kavango, where over 50% of households are classified poor or severely poor.*^[4]
- *85% of workers have no written contract.*^[4]
- *2/3 of workers aren't provided with the correct protective equipment.*^[4]

Charcoal Supply Chain

Wood is collected by workers on farms. The wood is then burnt into charcoal, often in inefficient, mobile kilns on the farm and sold onto packing factories. It is sorted and bagged and then sent to distributors who supply UK retailers.



Photo taken during TFT field assessment. Smaller mobile kilns emit fumes that are dangerous to humans and nature alike. This way of preparing the charcoal also loses much of the potential energy of the wood, with 82% of wood energy lost before the product is burnt by the end-user.^[5]

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(PPE). When farmers do provide PPE, they sometimes charge for it.

- There is often limited access to medical supplies or facilities.
- The rural location of the farms means that there is an increased risk of injury from wild animals e.g. snake bites.

Environmental Issues

- Protected tree species are at risk of harvest due to lack of awareness of workers.
- Namibia's 2001 Forest Act also stipulates that "trees with more than 15 cm in diameter should not be harvested for charcoal production" Workers are paid according to the volume of charcoal they produce thus encouraging them to harvest trees illegally.
- Manually clearing bush encroachment species for the purpose of charcoal production has been shown to be ineffective without proper post clearing care and techniques, so its long term effectiveness is questioned.
- Fumes from inefficient kilns are released when the wood is burnt, as well as at the final use by the consumer. This contributes to localised air pollution as well as global climate change.

What can UK Retailers do?

NGOs are working to raise the profile of issues within charcoal supply chains. There are strong calls for charcoal to be included within the European Union Timber Regulation. The UK's Modern Day Slavery Act, introduced in 2016, mandates companies to make regular public statements about the steps they are taking to eliminate slavery in their supply chains.

UK Retailers must:

1. Ensure they have a responsible sourcing commitment for charcoal that is robust and reflects the specific industry issues, particularly with exploitation in Namibia.
2. Have full supply chain traceability, know where their charcoal is sourced from and the reality on the ground.
3. Through this insight, develop and implement solutions that drive transformation.
4. Verify the transparency and transformation, allowing consumers, NGOs and others to trust that reported achievements are real.



Photo taken during TFT field assessment.

Bush encroachment affects much of the country; charcoal production is believed, by many, to combat it.

How can TFT Help?

We assist committed charcoal businesses in exploring and reforming their informal supply chains, where natural resources are sourced and where the risk of exploitation and environmental degradation is greatest. We help our members gain transparency of their supply chains, an essential step in transforming them towards more ethical and sustainable charcoal. We then work with sites on the ground to improve conditions, providing practical advice and capacity-building training to solve complex problems.

Additional Information and Resources

- [Child labour factsheet](#)
- [Health and safety factsheet](#)
- [Forced and bonded labour factsheet](#)
- [Modern Slavery Act](#)
- [No Exploitation of Workers](#)
- [TFT Transparency Hub Charcoal Page](#)