

Workers in Sustainable Agricultural Systems

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Agricultural systems are facing the global impacts from climate change and measures to make them resilient including the promotion of biodiversity, water management improvements, carbon storage, and soil protection amongst others.¹ Sometimes missing from this discourse is how workers should also be centered in sustainability measures. This is pertinent as food security cannot be achieved without ensuring a regular supply of workers to produce the food; workers who deserve safe and secure working places.

Globally, workers plant, grow, harvest and process the food that ends up on our plates. These workers are also exposed to the hazardous elements of climate change as their work is often located in outdoor environments. Agricultural workers face exposure to rising temperatures,² have work opportunities hindered by floods,³ and breathe in air filled with the smoke of wildfires.⁴

Integration of workers more regularly into agricultural systems to ensure sustainability means worker engagement and leadership are required. There are many methods that can be used to strengthen worker inclusion in decision-making and operations to improve agricultural sustainability. These include (amongst others): **worker-driven social responsibility schemes (WSR), unionization, and worker cooperatives.**



Worker Driven Social Responsibility (WSR)

WSR was established by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), and is implemented through schemes such as the [Fair Food Program](#). The organization led by workers has developed standards for the food industry and signed a number of retailers to their commitments in the US. It also promotes education and professional development for agricultural workers, and promotes independent auditing alongside legal obligations for members to abide by. As climate change worsens, the program has also adapted to include more stringent guidance on working conditions in situations of extreme heat to ensure workers get adequate shade, rest and water.⁵ Such schemes are beginning to expand beyond workers at the primary agricultural production stage across the US only, with workers in the US dairy sector also taking action through the [Milk with Dignity](#) program, and activities now underway in the [Scottish fishing sector](#).



Unionization

Unions have long been a staple of the fight for labour rights. Unions enable workers to exercise their right to collectively bargain for better working conditions - linked to safety, wages, and addressing non-compliance through grievance mechanisms. Across the world, wages and security have been improved for strawberry farm workers in Mexico, more representation and inclusion of workers from diverse migrant backgrounds in Morocco, and improvements to grievance mechanisms for workers in Guatemala.⁶ Collective action can help to ensure workers continue to improve their working conditions and can democratically exert their rights. However, union-busting must be prohibited and government policy needs to be aligned with workers interests to ensure this right is available to all.



Worker Cooperatives

Worker cooperatives enable direct control and decision-making ultimately enabling workers to benefit themselves (e.g., through shared profits, raised working standards, increased access to land and landownership); but they are often considered underutilised.⁷ Worker controlled and managed farms have had success - for example in The Philippines - which has led to training for members, diversification of crops, and the establishment of social security systems.⁸

Sources

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