

**Organising workers by community** – Florida, USA. Oxfam America's partner, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers is a community-based organisation. Its 2,500-plus members are largely immigrants working in low-wage jobs at large agricultural corporations in the tomato and citrus harvests. CIW encourages coalition building across ethnic divisions, and helps members develop skills through community education. It also fights for fair wages, affordable housing, and workers' rights.

**Human rights organisation promotes workers' rights** – Morocco. Intermon Oxfam partner CDG - the Centre for People's Rights - campaigns to increase people's awareness of labor rights, particularly for women workers. It organises debates with legal representatives, counselors, unions, workers and inspectors, on workers' rights violations such as: unpaid wages, working conditions, illegal dismissal, and union membership. It also helps workers to appeal in cases of labor rights violations.

## 2. Government labour regulation and enforcement

In addition to national labour legislation, other government departments or local authorities may 'regulate', promote or enforce standards for agricultural waged workers e.g. environment/health ministries – health and safety standards; state authorities – minimum standards for workers in that area.

Workers in coastal towns of Bulacan in the Philippines organised and won a 30 per cent wage rate increase. This became the benchmark for the area's fishing communities. To achieve this they sought the support of local government officials acting on a municipal level, and organised dialogues between workers and proprietors at the village level.

## 3. Private sector policy and practice

In most contexts, agricultural producers and processors are organised in associations or

councils. There are opportunities to engage with these local or regional business councils to improve standards or clamp down on labour rights violations.

In Chilean law, temporary agricultural workers don't yet have the right to organise. Yet in Copiapó, representatives of 3,000 temporary workers negotiated with the producers' association and an export company, with government support. The agreement identified a living wage for temporary workers and other improvements. In Sri Lanka, negotiations with Café Direct have promoted stable, fair payments to both producers and the workers they employ in the tea industry.

## 4. Changing Beliefs

Local communities have beliefs about 'what is fair' for workers in certain occupations. No law or private sector voluntary policy is sustainable without changing these beliefs, and vice versa. However, beliefs *can* be changed regarding important issues e.g. child labour, equal wages, maximum hours etc.

Popular communications can help change beliefs. In Chile, the NGO Anamuri used colourful leaflets to inform women workers about their rights to an employment contract and to a 45-hour working week, Alicia Muñoz of Anamuri: "We have some good labour laws in Chile, but while the workers don't know about them, employers avoid applying the laws'. In Nicaragua, women workers' organisation Maria Elena Cuadra used radio spots to draw attention to hours and days off for domestic-household workers, and health and safety standards for clothing workers.



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All statistics in the text come from: 2005 FAO-ILO-IUF Report <http://www.fao.org/docrep/008/af164e/af164e00.htm>  
ILO 2008 report [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_091721.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_091721.pdf)

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# Win-win

Improving the livelihoods of smallholders and waged agricultural workers in sustainable rural livelihoods programmes

*"There are more workers in waged employment in agriculture today than at any time. The share of waged employment in agriculture, including wage-dependent smallholders, is increasing in virtually all regions, and is now a central feature of employment and income in rural areas."*

Food & Agriculture Organisation (FAO)-ILO-IUF Report Agricultural Workers and their Contribution to Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (2005)

Estimates put the number of people who work in agriculture at 1.1 billion. Over 40 per cent – about 450 million of agricultural workers – work for wages.

But having a job does not guarantee a way out of poverty. Around 60 per cent of agricultural waged workers live beneath the poverty line.

These workers are increasingly engaged on a casual or temporary basis, and typically find employment for only half of the year and have little income to sustain themselves between seasons. Waged work in agriculture also often means excessive hours, with unstable contracts, or no contracts at all, and no

provision for illness, maternity or incapacity.

Oxfam has successfully focused on smallholder agriculture within its sustainable rural livelihood programmes, centring on securing productive assets, building effective producer organisations, and better value chains. Investment in agriculture is on the rise due to global crises.

**Could Oxfam's programmes and partners have even greater impact if they also worked to improve conditions for waged workers in these same communities? This leaflet helps programme managers know where to start.**

## Why? Addressing questions about waged agricultural workers

### Isn't promoting smallholder agriculture the main strategy to reduce rural poverty?

Supporting smallholder agriculture is a vital strategy in sustainable poverty reduction. However, programmes need to recognise that smallholder families also can include waged workers – they may farm their own land and do paid work on other small farms or plantations, or themselves may employ other small farmers or landless families during peak seasons. Waged work is also under-reported when gathering project data. Beneficiaries may describe themselves as 'farmers', as being seen as 'labourers' is considered low status. Oxfam's research in Colombia, Honduras, India, Philippines, and Chile found 30-50 per cent of smallholder family income came from waged work.

#### Waged agricultural workers...

- Work both on large farms and small farms
- Include men, women and children
- Comprise local people and migrant workers
- Are permanent, temporary or casual workers
- Can be both landless people and small-scale farmers.

Waged work provides an even more significant proportion of income for landless rural households. However, smallholders and waged agricultural workers have much in common in terms of issues which affect them e.g. the right to organise, health and safety issues on farms and plantations. Addressing waged work means a more holistic approach to agriculture.

### When farmers can increase their incomes, won't waged workers benefit?

Increasing farmers' incomes may not result in better conditions for their workers without explicit interventions. For example, Chilean smallholders interviewed in 2008 recognised that they were not good employers because they hadn't made improvements to pay full weeks, rest periods, or vacations.

### How would improving waged work help gender equality?

Decent waged work is critical for gender equality. Rural women's livelihoods strategies tend to

include multiple waged jobs - more than men's - so focusing on waged work as well as smallholder production will provide increased benefit to more women. Worldwide, women agricultural workers now account for about 20-40% of the waged workforce, and their participation is increasing. And on average, women labourers in all countries have more instability in contracts, lower skilled positions, and are paid lower wages than men.

Women depend more on their waged work. Chilean men interviewed, for example, described their work as 'lending a hand' on neighbouring farms, where women said they work for wages 'to be able to eat and live'.

### How can we advocate for waged agricultural workers without being unrealistic about labour standards?

Efforts to improve conditions in waged agricultural work can seek empowerment and incremental change, as do smallholder programmes. Partners and leaders can begin with workers' perceived needs rather than applying prescribed standards. The aim is to deliver gradual improvements for agricultural waged workers, in a relevant way.



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In South Africa, the NGO Women on Farms (WFP) organises women workers and their families on the wine and fruit sectors of the Western Cape, empowering women to campaign for better living and working conditions, especially for seasonal agricultural workers. WFP campaigned for portable toilets in the fields of fruit plantations – a major 'dignity and respect' issue for women working as temporary harvesters.

In Bangladesh, Oxfam and partners have asked for agricultural labour to be recognised officially and a minimum daily wage set in the sector for both men and women. These asks are part of a larger advocacy package about agriculture that addresses the needs of smallholder agriculture.

### Working for wages – an undesirable coping strategy for rural families?

Smallholder agriculture alone cannot alleviate rural poverty. Waged work is a significant and necessary livelihoods strategy to supplement incomes of smallholders and it is vital for those workers who don't own land. Next to rural on-farm employment, rural off-farm employment is also becoming increasingly important for rural development, income growth and poverty reduction. Overall numbers of waged agricultural workers are growing. They are among the poorest sectors of society – and this is something we cannot ignore.

### Where to start?

Addressing the problems of rural waged workers does not require new programmes or partners, as many smallholders already also work as labourers or on neighbouring small farms, and innovative programme components can be developed.



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Oxfam's Cotton-textile supply chain programme in South India introduced health and hygiene related measures for cotton pickers, which improved working conditions, and minimised contamination of cotton while picking. The programme also replaced wage payment on the basis of weight of cotton collected by hours worked. This removed any incentive for workers to mix cotton with foreign material thereby increasing returns for the farmers as well as workers' wages. This win-win approach has helped to establishing longer-term relationships between farmers and workers.

Start where the energy is and where there's opportunity for change – sometimes the issues of 'working conditions' are just as compelling as increased wages. Oxfam-supported programmes can help smallholder and rural partners to achieve 'win-win' improvements in conditions of waged agricultural workers.

*"As much as we promote smallholder agriculture, we also know that as a sector it is not going to absorb all the labour in rural communities, nor the youth who are already migrating. We have to address waged employment as a viable rural livelihood."*

Hilde van Regenmortel, Oxfam Solidarite

## How? Bringing about change

Good practice in Oxfam-supported waged-work programmes has identified four strategies that can achieve and sustain improvements in employment conditions, especially when used in combination.

### 1. Workers organisation, representation and negotiating improvements:

Labour organisation tends to be strong mainly on larger farms and plantations. In rural areas where traditional worker relations persist, and seasonal/casual employment on small farms predominates, only about 10% of waged agricultural workers are organised and able to bargain collectively or through a union. In these situations partners use innovative organisation strategies that allow workers to build power in other ways.

People who work for wages on small and large farms can be organised by district, or through women's organisations, by migrant or ethnic groups, or religious organisations. Some organisations, such as CONTAG, Brazil and APVVU, India, organise both waged agricultural workers and small-scale farmers.



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**Organising workers through women's groups – Bangladesh.** Oxfam GB's partner Karmojibi Nari, has helped more than 300 women's groups of agricultural workers organise. It has helped ensure the rights of sharecroppers, and wage increases for women agricultural workers in Rajshahi district. Female members in individual villages also bargained with landowners for increased wage rates for potato and onion picking.