

Human Trafficking and Other Labor Risks in the Agriculture Sector

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Verité

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1. Introduction

1.1 Objective

This report provides an overview of forced labor¹ risks in the agriculture sector globally, including in the United States. In some cases, the report also discusses other serious labor abuses as indicators of conditions or practices in the working environment that contribute to workers' vulnerability to forced labor.

The objective of the report is to raise awareness of the forms that forced labor may take in the agriculture sector, the structural causes, and the combination of factors that may bind workers to their jobs. The intended audience for these findings includes government and industry actors seeking to strengthen their human rights due diligence approaches to manage the risks of forced labor, as well as workers and their advocates, civil society, and consumers.

Agriculture sector entities operate within an increasingly stringent regulatory environment that demands proactive measures to prevent human trafficking. Federal legislation such as the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the Tariff Act of 1930, the Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015, the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act, the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, as well as relevant regulations like the Federal Acquisition Regulation and various state-level requirements, establish clear expectations for businesses to monitor and address trafficking risks within their operations and supply chains.

Agriculture sector entities also face compelling business reasons to implement robust due diligence systems. The reputational damage from association with human trafficking operations can result in immediate loss of contracts, particularly with government agencies and major corporations that have adopted zero-tolerance policies. Furthermore, the operational disruptions caused by trafficking-related

¹ Note: The United States recognizes two primary forms of trafficking in persons: forced labor and sex trafficking. For the purposes of this report, several terms are used, such as "trafficking in persons," "human trafficking," and "forced labor." In this report, these terms refer to a crime whereby traffickers exploit and profit at the expense of adults or children by compelling them to perform labor.

investigations can significantly impact service delivery and customer relationships, while the financial costs of remediation and legal proceedings can be substantial.

Guiding frameworks used to benchmark practices and conditions in this sector include, but are not limited to:

- [ILO Convention 29 – Forced Labour Convention, 1930](#)
- [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#)
- [C129 - Labour Inspection \(Agriculture\) Convention, 1969 \(No. 129\)](#)
- [C184 - Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention, 2001 \(No. 184\)](#)
- [R192 - Safety and Health in Agriculture Recommendation, 2001 \(No. 192\)](#)

1.2 Scope

In this report, agriculture refers to the production of crops (e.g. cereals and grains, vegetables, fruits, roots/tubers, legumes), livestock (e.g., cattle, poultry), and animal products (e.g., milk, meat, eggs). This report covers the recruitment, contracting, and management of labor involved in the production of agricultural goods, including meat. For information on the human trafficking risks associated with particular agriculture commodities see the following commodity reports available on the [Responsible Sourcing Tool website](#): Bananas; Beans (green, soy, yellow) and Pulses; Cattle; Citrus; Cocoa; Coffee; Corn; Cotton; Flowers; Melons; Nuts; Palm Oil; Pineapple; Rice; Rubber; Strawberries; Sugar; Sunflowers; Tea; Tobacco; Tomatoes; Wheat; Wool. Workers in focus include seasonal and year-round agricultural workers, household workers performing work on family farms, animal husbandry workers, and meatpacking workers. Forced labor is a risk faced by any worker with one or more of the vulnerabilities discussed in this report and is prevalent in the agriculture sector around the world, including the United States. Attention is given to research indicating acute vulnerabilities faced by migrant,² seasonal, and/or subcontracted workers (workers who are supplied by third-party providers), who are often exposed to deceptive recruitment, charging of fees to secure a job, debt bondage, excessive working hours,

² In this report, the term migrant worker refers to a person who migrates, or has migrated, from one country to another, with a view to being employed by someone other than him/herself, including any person regularly admitted, as a migrant for employment, and/or to seek temporary or permanent residence in another country. This definition is aligned with [ILO Convention C097 – Migration for Employment Convention \(Revised\), 1949](#) and the [U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Office of Homeland Security Statistics](#).

retention of identity documents and other impediments to their freedom of movement, and unsafe working and living conditions.

1.3 Context and Methodology

1.3.1 Risk Factors, Risk Indicators, and Analytical Framework

As is the case across most industries, certain workers in the agriculture sector are more vulnerable to forced labor risks than others. This is based mainly on their ability to decline or leave a job in order to protect their welfare. Verité’s research has found that the greatest risk of forced labor is at the intersection of worker vulnerability and employment practices, including recruitment, that exploit that vulnerability. There are often overlapping characteristics of work and workers at this intersection, such as those in low-paid, low-skilled, dirty, dangerous, and demeaning (“Three D”) jobs; subcontract workers and workers hired by third-party intermediaries; migrant workers; workers compelled by severe economic drivers; and workers subject to coercion by the state. This report examines both socio-demographic and employment practice-related *risk factors*, which contribute to worker vulnerability, and *risk indicators* or signs, which help identify cases of forced labor. Risk factors and risk indicators have overlapping elements and causes. To help contextualize the many indicators highlighted by the research, Section 3 organizes them into the four most common **risk factors** that underlie them:

- The involvement of labor contractors, recruiters, agents or other middlemen in the labor supply chain
- Migrant workers and immigrants with precarious residency status
- Workers experiencing poverty, marginalization,³ and absence of alternative income options
- State-imposed forced labor

³ The [ILO Global Guidelines on the Prevention of Forced Labour Through Lifelong Learning and Skills Development Approaches](#) notes that people most at risk of forced labor are those that are vulnerable and includes marginalization among the common characteristics of vulnerability, along with suffering discrimination on the grounds of age, ethnicity, disability, gender, migration status, race, religion, or sex, etc. leading to social and economic exclusion or marginalization.

Research for this report identifies and discusses the following indicators of forced labor in the agriculture sector:⁴

- Deceptive or fraudulent recruitment (regarding the nature and terms of the job and/or the working and living conditions)
- Debt linked to recruitment practices
- Hazardous or degrading working conditions
- Onerous working hours or work schedule
- Degrading work-related living conditions
- Inability to terminate employment
- Physical violence
- Abuse of isolation
- Restrictions on workers' movement
- Retention of workers' personal documents
- Withholding of wages
- Abuse or manipulation of debt
- Abuse of vulnerability

⁴ The ILO Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No.29), defines forced labor as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily.” To support front-line actors in the identification of situations of forced labor, ILO Indicators of Forced Labor - 2025 Revised Addition includes 11 of the most common signs observed in forced labor cases. They comprise situations that qualify as the menace of any penalty (also called coercion) and the absence of voluntary consent, or the ability to withdraw that consent, in other words, the workers' freedom to leave the job. (To meet the threshold of forced labor, a situation must have some *combination* of these two types of abuse.) The 11 indicators do not map exactly to the ILO 's earlier, more granular 2024 *Hard to See, Harder to Count: Handbook on Forced Labour Surveys*, which describes 22 circumstances commonly giving rise to involuntary work or qualify as forms of coercion. The list of indicators here are drawn from both these ILO documents as well as Verité' research for this report.

1.3.2 Sources of Information and Criteria for Inclusion

Sources of information for this report include a broad range of publicly available materials, including civil society publications, journalistic investigations, academic research, and government reporting. These sources were used to identify documented or credible allegations of labor exploitation across agriculture sector operations. We note that the absence of documentation (e.g., research or investigative reports) pertaining to certain geographic locations or types of agricultural businesses does not signify low or the absence of risk and conversely, more available information on locations does not necessarily mean the risk is higher.

Further, allegations were not required to meet a legal or prosecutorial threshold to be included in the analysis, and not all findings presented here meet the legal definition of human trafficking. Labor exploitation occurs along a continuum, from fair, safe, and legal work, in which employment is freely chosen, to situations characterized by a combination of involuntariness and coercion.⁵

2. Overview of the Agriculture Sector

2.1 Background

According to the ILO, nearly one billion people work in the global agriculture sector, roughly half of whom are waged workers.⁶ Agriculture continues to offer a key source for livelihoods, food security, and rural development in many countries, even as farming has become more mechanized in some contexts.⁷

While agricultural work is an important source of income, the sector is characterized by high levels of informal work and weak regulatory frameworks. The sector employs local workers, migrant workers, immigrant workers, refugees, adults, and children across the globe, commonly on a seasonal or temporary basis. Agricultural work is often strenuous, hazardous, and with low pay, making it less

⁵ For operational forced labor indicators of involuntariness and coercion developed by the ILO, please refer to the International Labour Organization's [Hard to See, Harder to Count: Handbook on Forced Labour Surveys \(2024\)](#). The presence of an indicator alone does not necessarily confirm a legal finding of forced labor but signals elevated risk, especially when multiple indicators are present simultaneously.

⁶ ["Agriculture, Aquaculture, Plantations, Other Rural Sectors." International Labour Organization.](#)

⁷ ["Agriculture, Aquaculture, Plantations, Other Rural Sectors." International Labour Organization.](#)

attractive to workers with other options. Low commodity prices and volatile markets result in perennial pressures to reduce labor costs.

Agricultural production methods and labor structures are diverse, as the amount and type of labor needed vary depending on the nature of the specific crop and its production requirements. These variations have different implications for forced labor risks. For example, labor-intensive crops, such as those that are hand-picked, are usually more likely than mechanically harvested crops to carry labor rights risks. Agricultural workers generally earn low wages and earn less than workers in industrial settings. The wide variety of employment arrangements and the high levels of informal agreements lead to low levels of organization and unionization. Further, agricultural workers are often excluded from legal protections in areas such as wages, hours, and working conditions. The different types of production and the labor needed – and how this translates to forced labor risk – are discussed below.

2.1.1 Types of Labor

There are two primary groups of farm workers: subsistence farmers and their family members, and waged workers. Subsistence, also called own-account, farmers and their family members farm their own land or rented land and sell their produce to a variety of buyers or on the open market or consume it themselves. Waged workers do not own or rent the land on which they work or the tools and equipment that they use; instead, they are hired to perform work on farms and agricultural plantations.⁸ There are many different agricultural employment arrangements, including permanent agricultural workers; temporary agricultural workers; seasonal/casual agricultural workers; piece rate workers; or workers receiving in-kind payments, such as sharecroppers who receive a portion of the crop as payment.

Family members often contribute by working informally and do not receive payment for their work. Instead, they support the primary wage earner by increasing the volume of their output. Waged workers can be taken advantage of through exploitative recruitment, hiring, and employment practices, as discussed further in Section 3.

⁸ ["Agriculture, Aquaculture, Plantations, Other Rural Sectors." International Labour Organization.](#)

2.1.2 Scale of Production

The scale of agricultural production shapes both how labor is organized and the types of labor risks that may arise. Smallholder farms, large-scale commercial farms, and plantations⁹ can differ in the volume of labor needed, types of workers engaged, and means of recruitment and hiring.

Smallholder Farms

Smallholder farms are characterized by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as “using mainly family labor for production and using part of the produce for family consumption.”¹⁰ Family labor creates a risk of unlawful child labor, especially hazardous child labor, depending on the crop being produced.¹¹ Small-scale farmers may also work seasonally or part-time as waged agricultural workers to supplement their income. Small-scale farms are more likely to operate informally. For example, those that hire only a few workers on a temporary basis often rely on verbal agreements in place of contracts.¹²

Large-scale Commercial Agriculture

Commercial agriculture or large-scale farms refers to farms intended to maximize profit through economies of scale rather than meet basic subsistence needs. Due to their size, these operations have typically required more labor than smaller farms and have therefore relied more on labor contractors, brokers, and recruiters to provide workers. Increasingly, however, mechanized production methods used in a growing number of commercial crops have decreased labor needs.¹³

⁹ Agricultural plantations are a specific type of commercial farming. Plantations typically use hired workers and are distinguished by their monoculture production of crops such as oil palm, tea, pineapple, coffee, sugar, and coconut.

¹⁰ [“Smallholders and Family Farmers.” Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(FAO\), 2013.](#)

¹¹ [“Child Labour in Agriculture.” International Labour Organization.](#)

¹² [“Diagnostic Analysis of Informality in Agriculture, Agri-Food, and Construction.” International Labour Organization, 2024.](#)

¹³ [“What Is Commercial Agriculture? Types, Features and Growth Strategies.” AgriERP, 20 Oct 2025.](#)

Even on commercial farms, agricultural workers are often excluded from labor protections afforded to other sectors.¹⁴ Wages are often lower than in other sectors and are commonly paid on a piece-rate or quota basis. Piece-rate wages (paid by volume, weight, or number of products harvested) create a risk that workers will earn extremely low wages, often under the legal minimum wage. Further, piece-rate wage structures create disincentives for workers to take breaks, increasing the risk of heat- and strain-related illnesses.¹⁵ Quotas are known to result in financial penalties for workers who fail to meet them. Additionally, wages may vary from month to month, as earnings can be withheld for such things as food consumed and interest on loans taken from farm owners. Both piece-rate and quota-based wage structures also encourage workers to use family or informal subcontracted workers, including children.¹⁶ These risks are also found in raising livestock, as discussed in 2.1.4.

2.1.3 Production and Land Use Arrangements

The type of production and land-use arrangements shape how control, risks, and income are distributed between farmers and landowners. These arrangements typically determine who provides land, inputs, credit, technical assistance, and labor, as well as profit share, and who absorbs losses when yields are low or prices fall. Depending on the arrangement, the farmer can function more like hired labor than a fully independent operator. In any of these arrangements, the farmer responsible for agricultural production may also hire or engage workers. In these cases, conditions for additional hired workers are impacted by the financial security of the farmer.

Contract Farming

Contract farming, also called outgrower schemes, refers to agricultural production that occurs under a contractual agreement between farmers and buyers for the production of a certain amount and quality of a specific crop. The buyer is often involved in the production process through providing inputs at subsidized rates, credit, and technical assistance. The buyer may also maintain strict quality controls. Contract farming can also involve intermediaries who contract with a large number of farmers,

¹⁴ [International Labour Organization. *Extending Social Protection Coverage to Workers in the Agricultural Sector*. International Labour Organization, Apr. 2026.](#)

¹⁵ [“1.7 Piece Rate Pay.” International Labour Organization, International Labour Organization, 2015.](#)

¹⁶ [“1.7 Piece Rate Pay.” International Labour Organization, International Labour Organization, 2015.](#)

aggregate the produce, and then sell it to the buyers.¹⁷ Contract farming has some similarities with the leasing arrangements described below, with the primary difference being that in contract farming, the farmer accesses the land independently from the buyer. Contract farming can create and exacerbate forced labor risk because of the asymmetrical power relationships between producers and buyers and because it pushes price and production risks onto farmers, encourages informal subcontracting, can result in debt bondage and coerced family labor, and can create dependencies on single buyers with limited freedom to exit production relationships.¹⁸

Tenant Farming

In a tenant farming arrangement, the farmer rents the land from the landowner for a fixed amount of cash or a set amount of the crop.¹⁹ Because the rent is a fixed cost, the tenant farmer operates much like an independent business owner, keeping the remaining profits after the rent is paid, but also carrying all the financial risk if the harvest fails or market prices drop.²⁰

Sharecropping

In sharecropping arrangements, the farmer does not pay cash rent but instead splits the actual harvest or profits from the harvest with the landowner.²¹ In this setup, the landowner usually provides the land along with essential farming inputs like seeds, fertilizer, and tools, while the sharecropper provides the physical labor.²² This arrangement shares the risk between both parties, but it often leaves the farmer with very thin profit margins after the landowner takes their designated share. There can also be a risk to the farmer if the landowner does not meet terms that were initially promised, such as increasing costs charged to the farmer for pesticides or fertilizer.

¹⁷ [Fair Labor Association. *Fair Compensation for Farmworkers: Good Practices and Challenges*. Feb. 2017.](#)

¹⁸ [U.S. Department of Labor. *Child and Forced Labor in the Malawi Tobacco Supply Chain*. Bureau of International Labor Affairs, Sept. 2024.](#)

¹⁹ [“Leasing Arrangements.” *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*.](#)

²⁰ [“Leasing Arrangements.” *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*.](#)

²¹ [“Leasing Arrangements.” *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*.](#)

²² [“Leasing Arrangements.” *Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*.](#)

2.1.4 Livestock and Meat Processing

Livestock production is a highly varied global sector that includes cattle, poultry, pigs, sheep, goats, and other animals raised for meat, milk, eggs, hides, and other products. Production systems range from smallholder and pastoral systems, where animals are closely tied to household livelihoods and local food security, to large industrial operations.

Meat processing, downstream from livestock production, includes slaughter, cutting, deboning, chilling, packing, rendering, and further processing into products such as sausages, cured meats, and ready-to-eat foods.²³ The structure of the sector differs by region: some markets rely heavily on informal or small-scale slaughter and local distribution, while others are dominated by consolidated processing firms, cold-chain logistics, export certification systems, and just-in-time retail supply. Poultry and pork production are often more vertically integrated than cattle or small ruminants, meaning that breeding, feed, raising, slaughter, and processing may be coordinated by the same company or a tight group of contractors.²⁴ The labor risk implications in livestock production and meat processing are significant because both industries often depend on workers in physically demanding, low-wage jobs with relentless pacing.²⁵ Many of these workers are in precarious work arrangements, as they may be migrants or temporary workers engaged by recruiters or subcontracted workers and therefore have less power to advocate for safe working conditions or to refuse extremely hazardous work.²⁶ On farms and in feedlots, workers are known to face risks related to animal handling, long hours, heat exposure, isolation, exploitive recruitment, and limited access to grievance systems. Their housing – often provided by their employer – is often unsafe and unsanitary.²⁷ In feed houses, slaughterhouses, and

²³ [Thornton P. K. \(2010\). Livestock production: recent trends, future prospects. *Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological sciences*, 365\(1554\), 2853–2867.](#)

²⁴ [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Meat Markets and Trade.](#)

²⁵ [“Meatpacking: Hazards and Solutions.” *Occupational Safety and Health Administration*. Food Safety and Inspection Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Meat and Poultry Hazards and Controls Guide*. Mar. 2018.](#)

²⁶ [“Meatpacking: Hazards and Solutions.” *Occupational Safety and Health Administration*. Food Safety and Inspection Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Meat and Poultry Hazards and Controls Guide*. Mar. 2018.](#)

²⁷ Leibold, M., et al. “Immigrant Workers in the Meat Industry: Comparing Governmental Protection and Labor Precarity.” *Global Public Health*, 2024.

[Housing Assistance Council. *The Housing Needs of Hire Farmworkers: A Report on the HAC National Farmworker Housing Survey*. Rural Home, 2002.](#)

processing plants, other risks include repetitive motion injuries, line-speed pressure, sharp tools, cold environments, and exposure to biological hazards.²⁸

3. Forced Labor and Other Labor Rights Risk Factors Associated with Agriculture

Forced labor and vulnerability to forced labor in the agriculture industry have been documented in almost every country around the world. The United States Department of State's *2025 Trafficking in Persons* report noted evidence of forced labor (or risk of forced labor)²⁹ in the agricultural sectors in the following 140 countries: Afghanistan, Argentina, Armenia, Australia, Austria, Bahrain (risk), Bangladesh, Belgium, Belize (risk), Benin, Bolivia, Botswana, Brazil, Brunei (risk), Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burma, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cambodia, Cameroon, Canada, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, China, Colombia, Comoros, Costa Rica (risk), Côte d'Ivoire, Croatia, Cuba, Cyprus, Czechia, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Democratic Republic of Congo (risk), Denmark, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea (risk), Eritrea, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Fiji, Finland, France, Gabon, Gambia, , Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Guinea-Bissau, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras (risk), Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Israel (risk), Italy, Jordan (risk), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Laos, Latvia (risk), Lebanon (risk), Liberia, Libya, Lithuania (risk), Madagascar, Malawi, Malaysia, Mali, Mauritania (risk), Mauritius, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia (risk), Morocco (risk), Mozambique, Namibia, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand (risk), Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, Norway (risk), Pakistan, Palau, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines (risk), Poland, Portugal, Republic of Congo, Romania, Russia, Rwanda, Senegal (risk), Seychelles (risk), Sierra Leone, Slovak Republic, , Slovenia (risk), Solomon Islands, Somalia (risk), South Africa, South Korea, South Sudan, Spain, Sri Lanka (risk), Sudan (risk), Suriname (risk), Sweden (risk), Switzerland, Taiwan (risk), Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Togo, Tunisia, Türkiye (risk), Turkmenistan, Uganda, Ukraine, United Kingdom, United States, Uruguay, Uzbekistan (risk), Vanuatu, Venezuela, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

The following sections discuss common factors and employment practices identified across many geographic locations, including the countries listed above, where risks and situations of forced labor in

²⁸ ["Meatpacking: Hazards and Solutions." *Occupational Safety and Health Administration*.](#)

[Food Safety and Inspection Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. *Meat and Poultry Hazards and Controls Guide*. Mar. 2018.](#)

²⁹ Risk of, or vulnerability to, forced labor in the agriculture sector, as opposed to documented evidence of forced labor, is indicated by the inclusion of "(risk)" following the country in which the risk or vulnerability was reported.

the agriculture sector have been identified. These factors and practices are often interrelated and can compound each other.

3.1 Involvement of Labor Contractors, Recruiters, Agents, or Other Middlemen in the Labor Supply Chain

The practices of some labor recruiters or other third-party intermediaries who recruit, hire, and/or manage workers are known to increase the risk of, and in some cases create situations of, forced labor. These practices include deceiving workers about the nature, conditions, location, compensation, and/or duration of the job; charging recruitment fees; withholding identity documents; and isolating workers at or near work sites.

As discussed in Section 2 above, labor intermediaries are commonly used in the labor-intensive agricultural sector because production is seasonal, geographically dispersed, and highly time sensitive.³⁰ Farms often need large numbers of workers for more labor-intensive periods like planting, harvesting, pruning, packing, or other peak production tasks, but do not maintain a permanent workforce large enough to meet these temporary labor needs. As a result, many agricultural employers rely on a decentralized, crew-based contracting system rather than recruiting each worker directly.³¹ In this model, the farm, plantation, cooperative, or processor contacts a labor contractor, crew leader, supervisor, or broker to supply a group of workers for a specific task, crop cycle, or production period.³²

³⁰ [Gordon, Jennifer. *Global Labour Recruitment in a Supply Chain Context*. International Labour Organization, 24 June 2015.](#)
[ILO Regional Office for the Arab States. *Recruitment Mechanisms and Working Conditions for Workers in the Agriculture Sector in Lebanon*. ILO, Beirut, 2024.](#)

[“Agricultural Labor: Workforce Challenges in US and Global Farming.” *Global Agriculture Authority*.](#)

[“Farm Labor.” *Economic Research Service*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 18 Nov. 2025.](#)

³¹ [Gordon, Jennifer. *Global Labour Recruitment in a Supply Chain Context*. International Labour Organization, 24 June 2015.](#)
[ILO Regional Office for the Arab States. *Recruitment Mechanisms and Working Conditions for Workers in the Agriculture Sector in Lebanon*. ILO, Beirut, 2024.](#)

[“Agricultural Labor: Workforce Challenges in US and Global Farming.” *Global Agriculture Authority*.](#)

[“Farm Labor.” *Economic Research Service*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 18 Nov. 2025.](#)

[Barrientos, Stephanie Ware. “Labour Chains: Analysing the Role of Labour Contractors in Global Production Networks.” *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 49, no. 8, 2013, pp. 1058-1071.](#)

³² [Gordon, Jennifer. *Global Labour Recruitment in a Supply Chain Context*. International Labour Organization, 24 June 2015.](#)

The agricultural business communicates its labor needs to the contractor, including the number of workers needed, the timing and location of the work, and sometimes the expected productivity levels, task requirements, or terms of payment.³³ The contractor then assembles a crew of workers, often through prior employment relationships, current workers' family and community networks, local brokers, transport providers, or informal contacts in labor-sending communities. Workers are therefore usually recruited as part of a crew rather than through an open, individualized hiring process.³⁴

The contractor's role may be narrow or extensive depending on the product, migration system, and regulatory context. Some contractors primarily identify workers and arrange transportation to the worksite.³⁵ Others remain involved throughout the employment period and may manage attendance, assign workers to tasks, communicate instructions from the farm, track hours or output, distribute wages, provide or coordinate housing, arrange food or transport, and move crews between worksites as

[ILO Regional Office for the Arab States. *Recruitment Mechanisms and Working Conditions for Workers in the Agriculture Sector in Lebanon*. ILO, Beirut, 2024.](#)

["Agricultural Labor: Workforce Challenges in US and Global Farming." *Global Agriculture Authority*.](#)

["Farm Labor." *Economic Research Service*, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 18 Nov. 2025.](#)

[Barrientos, Stephanie Ware. "Labour Chains: Analysing the Role of Labour Contractors in Global Production Networks." *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 49, no. 8, 2013, pp. 1058-1071.](#)

³³ [Barrientos, Stephanie Ware. "Labour Chains: Analysing the Role of Labour Contractors in Global Production Networks." *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 49, no. 8, 2013, pp. 1058-1071.](#)

³⁴ [Barrientos, Stephanie Ware. "Labour Chains: Analysing the Role of Labour Contractors in Global Production Networks." *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 49, no. 8, 2013, pp. 1058-1071.](#)

[Fischer, Kaitlin. "Labor and Agriculture." *Everyone Needs to Eat: Introduction to Food Security and Global Agriculture*, Penn State University.](#)

[Ayoub, Samantha. "Debunking H-2A Myths." *Farm Bureau Intel Markets*, American Farm Bureau Federation, 15 Nov. 2024.](#)

³⁵ [Barrientos, Stephanie Ware. "Labour Chains: Analysing the Role of Labour Contractors in Global Production Networks." *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 49, no. 8, 2013, pp. 1058-1071.](#)

[Fischer, Kaitlin. "Labor and Agriculture." *Everyone Needs to Eat: Introduction to Food Security and Global Agriculture*, Penn State University.](#)

[Ayoub, Samantha. "Debunking H-2A Myths." *Farm Bureau Intel Markets*, American Farm Bureau Federation, 15 Nov. 2024.](#)

seasonal demand shifts.³⁶ In these arrangements, the crew is the basic work unit, and the contractor or crew leader serves as the main operational link between the workers and the agricultural enterprise.³⁷

These systems are often decentralized and multi-tiered. A primary contractor may contract directly with the agricultural business, while recruitment itself is carried out through smaller subcontractors, village-level recruiters, supervisors, worker networks, or informal personal relationships.³⁸ In some cases, the intermediary functions as the formal employer of record, while in others the farm retains the formal employment relationship but delegates recruitment, transportation, supervision, or payroll functions.³⁹ SaAcross these variations, the common feature is that recruitment and some aspects of labor management are separated from the direct hiring process of the agricultural enterprise, allowing farms to meet short-term production demands through flexible, crew-based labor arrangements.⁴⁰ It also reduces the company oversight of conditions that may include risks of forced labor.

³⁶ Barrientos, Stephanie Ware. "Labour Chains: Analysing the Role of Labour Contractors in Global Production Networks." *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 49, no. 8, 2013, pp. 1058-1071.

Fischer, Kaitlin. "Labor and Agriculture." *Everyone Needs to Eat: Introduction to Food Security and Global Agriculture*, Penn State University.

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³⁹ Barrientos, Stephanie Ware. "Labour Chains: Analysing the Role of Labour Contractors in Global Production Networks." *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 49, no. 8, 2013, pp. 1058-1071.

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⁴⁰ Barrientos, Stephanie Ware. "Labour Chains: Analysing the Role of Labour Contractors in Global Production Networks." *The Journal of Development Studies*, vol. 49, no. 8, 2013, pp. 1058-1071.

Fischer, Kaitlin. "Labor and Agriculture." *Everyone Needs to Eat: Introduction to Food Security and Global Agriculture*, Penn State University.

3.1.1 Illustrative Cases

United States Agricultural Workers

In the United States, farm labor contractors, often called crew leaders, are a central mechanism for supplying workers to agricultural employers during peak production periods. Rather than directly recruiting and maintaining a large seasonal workforce, growers often rely on contractors to assemble crews, arrange transportation, supervise work, track hours or output, coordinate housing, and move workers between jobs. This model is especially important in labor-intensive crop sectors: contractor employment is concentrated in fruit, tree nut, vegetable, and melon production and geographically concentrated in California and the Southeast. Contractors are attractive to producers because they specialize in recruitment, understand local labor conditions, and absorb some of the operational uncertainty associated with labor availability.⁴¹

This structure is known to contribute to forced labor risk because it reduces the visibility of the agricultural business, which benefits from the labor, into many of the workers' direct employment conditions.⁴² Contractors are the workers' primary point of contact for recruitment, transportation, housing, supervision, and wage payment, while growers commonly have limited visibility into what workers were promised, whether fees were imposed or debt created, whether deductions were lawful, or whether workers can leave freely.⁴³ Contractors are often paid to supply a certain number of workers

[Ayoub, Samantha. "Debunking H-2A Myths." *Farm Bureau Intel Markets*, American Farm Bureau Federation, 15 Nov. 2024.](#)

⁴¹ [Blau, Max. "The Dramatic Rise of Farm Labor Contractors Has Led to Rampant Abuses. Here's Why Regulators Have Failed to Stop Them." *ProPublica*, 5 Feb. 2026.](#)

⁴² [Blau, Max. "The Dramatic Rise of Farm Labor Contractors Has Led to Rampant Abuses. Here's Why Regulators Have Failed to Stop Them." *ProPublica*, 5 Feb. 2026.](#)

[Childress, Chase, et al. "Disrupting Labor Trafficking in the Agricultural Sector: Looking at Opportunities beyond Law Enforcement Interventions." *Victims & Offenders*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2023, pp. 473-511.](#)

⁴³ [Blau, Max. "The Dramatic Rise of Farm Labor Contractors Has Led to Rampant Abuses. Here's Why Regulators Have Failed to Stop Them." *ProPublica*, 5 Feb. 2026.](#)

[Childress, Chase, et al. "Disrupting Labor Trafficking in the Agricultural Sector: Looking at Opportunities beyond Law Enforcement Interventions." *Victims & Offenders*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2023, pp. 473-511.](#)

at a negotiated price, creating incentives to increase margins through underpayment, excessive deductions, cost-shifting for transportation or housing, or coercive control.⁴⁴

In a federal case concluded in 2021, labor contractors were found to have used the H-2A agricultural visa program to recruit migrant workers from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras under promises of lawful farm employment and wages of up to \$12 per hour, then subjected them to coercive and abusive conditions once they arrived.⁴⁵ Workers were placed on farms in Georgia, Florida, and Texas. Recruiters charged workers illegal recruitment fees, confiscated their identity documents, and used threats of violence, deportation, and retaliation to control them. Workers were required to perform physically demanding agricultural labor for little or no pay. They lived in overcrowded and unsanitary trailers in fenced and surveilled camps, with limited food, clean water, and plumbing. They were, however, charged mandatory high fees for these accommodations. Some were forced to harvest onions by hand for only 20 cents per bucket,⁴⁶ earning far less than the wages promised. Workers were threatened with guns, subjected to kidnapping and sexual violence, and, in some cases, sold or traded to other conspirators.⁴⁷ Authorities further reported threats or attempted violence against some workers' family members.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ [Blau, Max. "The Dramatic Rise of Farm Labor Contractors Has Led to Rampant Abuses. Here's Why Regulators Have Failed to Stop Them." *ProPublica*, 5 Feb. 2026.](#)

[Childress, Chase, et al. "Disrupting Labor Trafficking in the Agricultural Sector: Looking at Opportunities beyond Law Enforcement Interventions." *Victims & Offenders*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2023, pp. 473-511.](#)

⁴⁵ [Associated Press. "24 Charged with Forcing Migrants into 'Modern-Day Slavery.'" *AP News*, 10 Dec. 2021.](#)

⁴⁶ [Associated Press. "24 Charged with Forcing Migrants into 'Modern-Day Slavery.'" *AP News*, 10 Dec. 2021.](#)

⁴⁷ [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. "Human Trafficking, Forced Labor Charges Are First Under ICE's New Labor Exploitation Program Focusing on Abusive Employers." 29 Nov. 2021.](#)

⁴⁸ [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. "Human Trafficking, Forced Labor Charges Are First Under ICE's New Labor Exploitation Program Focusing on Abusive Employers." 29 Nov. 2021.](#)

Federal officials reported that at least two workers died because of workplace conditions.⁴⁹ Prosecutors brought charges against 24 defendants for human trafficking and related financial crimes.⁵⁰ The final sentencings included prison terms as well as monetary restitution of over one million dollars.⁵¹

Italy

In Italy, an informal but organized system of contractors – sometimes referred to as “gangmasters,” or “caporali” – manages the labor of migrant workers, predominantly from African countries, although workers from other regions, including India, are also present.⁵² This system informally manages the labor supply for farms, primarily in southern regions. Workers face conditions including long hours, abuse, harassment, hazardous conditions, and sub-minimal wages.⁵³ The caporali tightly control the laborers by extracting arbitrary fees for daily transportation to the fields, food, and water. Working locations can be highly isolated and workers live in segregated, informal settlements that lack basic electricity, plumbing, or sanitation.⁵⁴ Further, the caporali often keep identity documents of migrant

⁴⁹ [Associated Press. “24 Charged with Forcing Migrants into ‘Modern-Day Slavery.’” AP News, 10 Dec. 2021.](#)

⁵⁰ [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. “Human Trafficking, Forced Labor Charges Are First Under ICE's New Labor Exploitation Program Focusing on Abusive Employers.” 29 Nov. 2021.](#)

[Cawthon, Graham. “South Georgia Farm Trafficking Case Ends With Prison Terms.” WJCL, 12 June 2026.](#)

⁵¹ [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. “Human Trafficking, Forced Labor Charges Are First Under ICE's New Labor Exploitation Program Focusing on Abusive Employers.” 29 Nov. 2021.](#)

[Cawthon, Graham. “South Georgia Farm Trafficking Case Ends With Prison Terms.” WJCL, 12 June 2026.](#)

⁵² [“Caporali: Italy's Forced Labor Secret.” Freedom United.](#)

[Scaturro, Ruggero. “Modern Slavery Made in Italy: Causes and Consequences of Labour Exploitation in the Italian Agricultural Sector.” *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2021, pp. 181-189.](#)

⁵³ [“Caporali: Italy's Forced Labor Secret.” Freedom United.](#)

[Scaturro, Ruggero. “Modern Slavery Made in Italy: Causes and Consequences of Labour Exploitation in the Italian Agricultural Sector.” *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2021, pp. 181-189.](#)

[Lo Cascio, Martina, and Domenico Perrotta. “The Intertwinement of Symbolic and Structural Violence: Migrant Agricultural Labourers in Two Regions of Southern Italy.” *Race Discrimination and Management of Ethnic Diversity and Migration at Work: European Countries' Perspectives*, 2019, pp. 175-200.](#)

⁵⁴ [“Caporali: Italy's Forced Labor Secret.” Freedom United.](#)

[Scaturro, Ruggero. “Modern Slavery Made in Italy: Causes and Consequences of Labour Exploitation in the Italian Agricultural Sector.” *Journal of Illicit Economies and Development*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2021, pp. 181-189.](#)

[Lo Cascio, Martina, and Domenico Perrotta. “The Intertwinement of Symbolic and Structural Violence: Migrant Agricultural Labourers in Two Regions of Southern Italy.” *Race Discrimination and Management of Ethnic Diversity and Migration at Work: European Countries' Perspectives*, 2019, pp. 175-200.](#)

workers, preventing them from traveling.⁵⁵ Because a significant portion of these laborers have irregular (illegal) status, intimidation and document retention may also prevent them from expressing grievances or seeking medical care when needed.

Malaysia

Foreign migrant workers are central to Malaysia's agricultural labor force, particularly in palm oil, which is one of the country's most labor-intensive agricultural sectors.⁵⁶ Plantation work requires large numbers of workers for harvesting, collecting, transporting, and processing fresh fruit bunches, and employers have long relied on migrants to fill these roles. Migrant workers in Malaysian palm oil come primarily from Indonesia, but also from Bangladesh, Nepal, India, the Philippines, and other countries. An estimated 80 percent of the workforce on Malaysian palm plantations are foreign migrants.⁵⁷

Recruitment into Malaysian agriculture often occurs through layered labor migration systems involving employers, recruitment agencies, brokers, and sometimes informal intermediaries in workers' countries of origin. Workers are known to pay recruitment fees, borrow money to migrate, or receive incomplete or misleading information about wages, job duties, deductions, housing, or contract terms. These arrangements often create vulnerability before workers arrive at the plantation. Once in Malaysia, workers are commonly tied to a specific employer, live in employer-provided housing, and work in remote plantation areas where transportation, the ability to communicate in a language they understand, legal assistance, and outside support are limited.⁵⁸

Migrant workers in the Malaysian palm oil sector are often recruited through a layered recruitment chain that includes licensed recruitment agencies, local sub-agents, and village- or district-level

⁵⁵ [Maggiore, Gabriel. "Unintended Consequences: The Effect of Harsh Italian Migrant Policies on Irregular Agricultural Work." *Refugee Law Initiative Blog*, 31 Oct. 2023.](#)

⁵⁶ [Crowley, Megan. "Foreign Labor Shortages in the Malaysian Palm Oil Industry: Impacts and Recommendations." *Asian Journal of Agriculture and Development*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1-18.](#)

⁵⁷ [Fair Labor Association. *Protecting Palm Oil Workers in Malaysia*. 2022.](#)

[Crowley, Megan. "Foreign Labor Shortages in the Malaysian Palm Oil Industry: Impacts and Recommendations." *Asian Journal of Agriculture and Development*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1-18.](#)

⁵⁸ [Fair Labor Association. *Protecting Palm Oil Workers in Malaysia*. 2022.](#)

[Crowley, Megan. "Foreign Labor Shortages in the Malaysian Palm Oil Industry: Impacts and Recommendations." *Asian Journal of Agriculture and Development*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1-18.](#)

contacts.⁵⁹ These intermediaries help identify job seekers, communicate job opportunities, collect documents, arrange passports, medical checks, contracts, and pre-departure briefings, and organize travel to Malaysia. In practice, workers commonly have most of their contact with local sub-agents rather than the employer, which means the information they receive about the job, worksite, wages, contract terms, and costs may be incomplete or inaccurate. Recruiters and sub-agents are known to charge high or poorly explained fees, require payment before a job is secured, fail to provide receipts, or offer loans that workers must repay after arrival.⁶⁰ This is known to leave workers indebted before employment begins and less able to refuse altered job terms, leave a plantation, or challenge poor conditions once they are in Malaysia. In some cases, workers are given contracts only shortly before departure, receive contracts they cannot fully understand, or arrive at a different worksite or in a different sector than promised.⁶¹

3.2 Migrant Workers and Immigrants with Precarious Residency Status

Both internal and international migrants make up a significant source of labor for the agriculture sector around the world, with many countries addressing labor shortages through the use of migrant workers, refugees, internally displaced workers, and others whose legal, economic, or social status limits their bargaining power.⁶² These workers may be more likely to accept poor conditions because they need immediate income, lack local language fluency or social networks, depend on employers or intermediaries for housing and transportation, or fear losing legal status, future work, or the ability to remain in the country.⁶³

⁵⁹ [International Organization for Migration. *The Cost of Hope: Stories of Migrant Workers in Palm Oil Plantations in Malaysia*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 19 Feb. 2023.](#)

⁶⁰ [International Organization for Migration. *The Cost of Hope: Stories of Migrant Workers in Palm Oil Plantations in Malaysia*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 19 Feb. 2023.](#)

⁶¹ [International Organization for Migration. *The Cost of Hope: Stories of Migrant Workers in Palm Oil Plantations in Malaysia*. Geneva: International Organization for Migration, 19 Feb. 2023.](#)

⁶² [Gilothe, Emma, and Ariela Levy. "Managing Migrant Labor Human Rights Risks in U.S. Food Value Chains." *BSR Insights+*, 5 Mar. 2025.](#)

⁶³ [Gilothe, Emma, and Ariela Levy. "Managing Migrant Labor Human Rights Risks in U.S. Food Value Chains." *BSR Insights+*, 5 Mar. 2025.](#)

3.2.1 Illustrative Cases

Spain

Spain is a major agricultural producer in Europe, with a large number of farms and a wide range of agricultural products tied into global agri-food supply chains. Much of this production depends on a labor-intensive model, particularly in sectors where crops require significant manual work rather than mechanization.⁶⁴ In the Almeira region of Spain, winter crops grown under plastic rely on more than 80,000 migrant workers, approximately 70 percent of whom are foreign migrants, primarily from Morocco and West African countries.⁶⁵

Nearly 25 percent of migrant agricultural workers in Spain are female.⁶⁶ Women typically receive wages up to 30 percent lower than those of men for similar roles.⁶⁷ In some cases, migration is facilitated by intragovernmental MOUs. For example, bilateral recruitment arrangements allow Moroccan women to travel to Spain for temporary work during the red fruit harvest.⁶⁸ Under this program, Moroccan women who have young children are recruited by third parties and required to pay fees, leaving them indebted. Young mothers specifically are recruited because it is believed that the presence of their young children

⁶⁴ [Corrado, Alessandra, and Letizia Palumbo. "Essential farmworkers and the pandemic crisis: Migrant labour conditions, and legal and political responses in Italy and Spain." In *Migration and pandemics: Spaces of solidarity and spaces of exception*, pp. 145-166. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021.](#)

⁶⁵ [Garcia, Horaci, and Nacho Doce. "In Spain's Greenhouses, Migrant Amnesty Brings Hope of Better Conditions." *Reuters*, 22 May 2026.](#)

[Corrado, Alessandra, and Letizia Palumbo. "Essential Farmworkers and the Pandemic Crisis: Migrant Labour Conditions, and Legal and Political Responses in Italy and Spain." *Migration and Pandemics*. IMISCOE Research Series, 2022, pp. 145-166.](#)

["Let's Not Forget the Migrant Workers Who End Up Being Exploited in Spain." *The Guardian*, 26 Feb. 2025.](#)

⁶⁶ [Loezar-Hernandez, Mariana, Agustin Gonzalez-Rodriguez, Heidy Natalia Urrego-Parra, María del Mar Jiménez-Lasserrotte, María del Mar Pastor-Bravo, and Erica Briones-Vozmediano. "The vulnerability of migrant women working in agriculture in Spain: A qualitative study from the perspective of social and health professionals." In *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 109, p. 103065. Pergamon, 2025.](#)

⁶⁷ [Loezar-Hernandez, Mariana, Agustin Gonzalez-Rodriguez, Heidy Natalia Urrego-Parra, María del Mar Jiménez-Lasserrotte, María del Mar Pastor-Bravo, and Erica Briones-Vozmediano. "The vulnerability of migrant women working in agriculture in Spain: A qualitative study from the perspective of social and health professionals." In *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 109, p. 103065. Pergamon, 2025.](#)

⁶⁸ [Loezar-Hernandez, Mariana, Agustin Gonzalez-Rodriguez, Heidy Natalia Urrego-Parra, María del Mar Jiménez-Lasserrotte, María del Mar Pastor-Bravo, and Erica Briones-Vozmediano. "The vulnerability of migrant women working in agriculture in Spain: A qualitative study from the perspective of social and health professionals." In *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 109, p. 103065. Pergamon, 2025.](#)

will ensure they return to Morocco at the end of the harvest instead of overstaying their visa.⁶⁹ Once they arrive in Spain, these women are tied to one employer who controls their legal status, wages, and housing. Because they do not speak Spanish and live in isolated farm labor camps, they are highly vulnerable to abuse. Employers frequently underpay them, force them to work long hours without overtime, and require them to spray toxic pesticides without protective gear.⁷⁰ These workers live in substandard temporary housing and are subject to serious health and safety risks.⁷¹ Further, they face multiple barriers to broader inclusion in society, including language barriers and legal exclusion.⁷² If the women complain about these conditions or report sexual harassment, employers can instantly cancel their contracts and have them deported, leaving them with no way to pay off recruitment debts or support their children.⁷³ There is also evidence that the precarious nature of these situations leads to increased incidence of and vulnerability to sex trafficking among these migrant women.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Zeneidi, Djemila. "Circular Migration and Misrecognition: The Experience of Spatial Injustice of Moroccan Women Doing Seasonal Agricultural Work in Huelva (Spain)." *Justice Spatiale = Spatial Justice*, no. 3, 2011.

Plaza del Pino, Fernando Jesús, et al. "Migrant Women in Shantytowns in Southern Spain: A Qualitative Study." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 20, no. 8, 2023, article 5524.

Martínez-Solanas, Èlia, et al. "Lived Experiences of Heat Stress among Migrant Agricultural Workers in Spain: A Qualitative Study." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2025.

⁷⁰ Zeneidi, Djemila. "Circular Migration and Misrecognition: The Experience of Spatial Injustice of Moroccan Women Doing Seasonal Agricultural Work in Huelva (Spain)." *Justice Spatiale = Spatial Justice*, no. 3, 2011.

Plaza del Pino, Fernando Jesús, et al. "Migrant Women in Shantytowns in Southern Spain: A Qualitative Study." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 20, no. 8, 2023, article 5524.

Martínez-Solanas, Èlia, et al. "Lived Experiences of Heat Stress among Migrant Agricultural Workers in Spain: A Qualitative Study." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2025.

⁷¹ Vozmediano E. The Labour Conditions and Health of Migrant Agricultural Workers in Spain: A Qualitative Study. *Healthcare* (Basel). 2025 Jul 31;13(15):1877.

⁷² Plaza del Pino, Fernando Jesús, et al. "The Labour Conditions and Health of Migrant Agricultural Workers in Spain: A Qualitative Study." *Healthcare*, vol. 13, no. 15, 2025, article 1877.

⁷³ Zeneidi, Djemila. "Circular Migration and Misrecognition: The Experience of Spatial Injustice of Moroccan Women Doing Seasonal Agricultural Work in Huelva (Spain)." *Justice Spatiale = Spatial Justice*, no. 3, 2011.

Plaza del Pino, Fernando Jesús, et al. "Migrant Women in Shantytowns in Southern Spain: A Qualitative Study." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 20, no. 8, 2023, article 5524.

Martínez-Solanas, Èlia, et al. "Lived Experiences of Heat Stress among Migrant Agricultural Workers in Spain: A Qualitative Study." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 2025.

⁷⁴ Jiménez-Lasserrotte, María del Mar, et al. "From Precariousness to Prostitution: Experiences of Moroccan Migrant Women with Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation in Agricultural Settings." *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 112, 2025, article 103162.

Côte d'Ivoire

Migrant workers play an important role in Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa sector, particularly as hired labor during harvest periods and in longer-term farm work. Short-term workers tend to be local, while longer-term workers are more likely to be migrants, including Ivoirians from northern regions where cocoa is not grown and foreign migrants from Burkina Faso and Mali.⁷⁵ Migrant workers find work through family networks, word-of-mouth recruitment, or third-party intermediaries. Côte d'Ivoire is widely viewed as a place of economic opportunity within West Africa, and migration is important not only for workers seeking income but also for the sustainability of the cocoa sector, which faces shortages of affordable adult labor. Some workers take loans or advances to pay fees and costs associated with their travel and recruitment, leaving them indebted before the cocoa season starts. Workers who stay for the duration of the cocoa season are often paid at the end of the harvest. Some workers also receive food, housing, medicine, or cash advances as part of the employment arrangement. Their debt can accumulate throughout the year as they are not paid until after the harvest. If they leave early, they face not being paid at all and the inability to pay back debts. Although many migrant workers report that they can resign or refuse work, many also fear not being rehired if they complain, and some fear blacklisting.⁷⁶

3.3 Precarious Employment and Hazardous and Undesirable Work

3.3.1 Hazardous and Undesirable Work

Agriculture is classified as one of the most hazardous sectors globally, accounting for roughly half of all occupational fatalities worldwide according to data from the International Labour Organization (ILO).⁷⁷ Because agricultural employment is often seasonal, informal, temporary, or managed through labor

⁷⁵ [Free the Slaves. *Forced Labor and Child Labor in the Cocoa Sector in Côte d'Ivoire*. 2024.](#)

[Verité. *Assessment of Forced Labor Risk in the Cocoa Sector of Côte d'Ivoire*. 2019.](#)

[Verité. *Recruitment & Labor Dynamics of Migrant Workers in the Cocoa Sector of Ghana*. 2025.](#)

⁷⁶ [Verité. *Recruitment & Labor Dynamics of Migrant Workers in the Cocoa Sector of Ghana*. 2025.](#)

⁷⁷ ["Agriculture: A Hazardous Work." *International Labour Organization*.](#)

["Rural Agricultural Health and Safety Overview." *Rural Health Information Hub*.](#)

["Health & Safety." *National Farm Worker Ministry*.](#)

contractors, workers often lack stable contracts, predictable income, benefits, and job security, making them less able to refuse hazardous, excessive, or otherwise undesirable work.

While fatal accident rates have generally declined in other industrial sectors over the last decade, agricultural mortality rates have remained consistently high. Because a large portion of agricultural work is casual, seasonal, or based in family subsistence farming, official fatality statistics are likely lower than actual numbers due to widespread under-reporting and a lack of routine labor inspections.⁷⁸ General operational risks in the sector include physically demanding tasks, heavy lifting, exposure to extreme weather conditions, repetitive motions, operation of heavy machinery, exposure to toxic agrochemicals, and animal handling.⁷⁹

Heatstroke is a documented cause of farmworker mortality. Workers face elevated risks for heatstroke and other heat-related illnesses because of prolonged exposure to direct sunlight, particularly during peak harvest seasons.⁸⁰ The use of heavy protective clothing, which is often required to shield against contact with crops or chemicals, can compound this risk. Risk factors are further increased when workers are not provided with regular rest breaks, shade, or access to clean drinking water.⁸¹ The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) monitors these factors and implements workplace guidelines through its federal heat illness prevention standards.⁸²

⁷⁸ ["Agriculture: A Hazardous Work." International Labour Organization.](#)

["Rural Agricultural Health and Safety Overview." Rural Health Information Hub.](#)

["Health & Safety." National Farm Worker Ministry.](#)

⁷⁹ ["Agriculture: A Hazardous Work." International Labour Organization.](#)

["Rural Agricultural Health and Safety Overview." Rural Health Information Hub.](#)

["Health & Safety." National Farm Worker Ministry.](#)

⁸⁰ ["Preventing Heat Stress in Agriculture." U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.](#)

["Rural Agricultural Health and Safety Overview." Rural Health Information Hub.](#)

["Health & Safety." National Farm Worker Ministry.](#)

⁸¹ ["Preventing Heat Stress in Agriculture." U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.](#)

["Rural Agricultural Health and Safety Overview." Rural Health Information Hub.](#)

["Health & Safety." National Farm Worker Ministry.](#)

⁸² ["Preventing Heat Stress in Agriculture." U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.](#)

["Rural Agricultural Health and Safety Overview." Rural Health Information Hub.](#)

Processing and manufacturing facilities can also present hazards. OSHA data indicates that the meat slaughtering, processing, and packaging industry experiences high rates of occupational accidents, injuries, and illnesses compared to other sectors.⁸³ High production line speeds are associated with elevated rates of musculoskeletal disorders, strains, and repetitive motion injuries.⁸⁴ Workers experiencing vulnerabilities such as debt and precarious employment are less likely to be able to express concerns about safety conditions in hazardous settings like meat processing.

3.3.2 Illustrative Cases

United States

Data from 2021 research among farmworkers in the United States seeking assistance in community health centers illustrates the health burdens commonly reported among agricultural workers and their families, reflecting both chronic disease risk and the effects of physically demanding work.⁸⁵ Among more than one million agricultural worker patients, common illnesses included hypertension, diabetes mellitus, anxiety disorders, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and contact dermatitis or eczema.⁸⁶ Among children in agricultural worker families in the study, over 20,000 were diagnosed with a lack of expected normal physiological development or nutritional deficiencies, including delayed milestones, failure to gain weight, or failure to thrive.⁸⁷

In 2019, a migrant farm worker from Mexico was sent to harvest corn at a farm where he was not authorized to work.⁸⁸ While working in extreme heat, his body temperature rose above 105 degrees; he left the field to drink water and rest, but collapsed before he could cool down and later died of

[*"Health & Safety." National Farm Worker Ministry.*](#)

⁸³ [*"Meatpacking: Hazards and Solutions." Occupational Safety and Health Administration.*](#)

⁸⁴ [*"Meatpacking: Hazards and Solutions." Occupational Safety and Health Administration.*](#)

⁸⁵ [*National Center for Farmworker Health. Facts About Farmworkers. National Center for Farmworker Health, Jan. 2023.*](#)

⁸⁶ [*National Center for Farmworker Health. Facts About Farmworkers. National Center for Farmworker Health, Jan. 2023.*](#)

⁸⁷ [*National Center for Farmworker Health. Facts About Farmworkers. National Center for Farmworker Health, Jan. 2023.*](#)

⁸⁸ [*Blau, Max. "The Dramatic Rise of Farm Labor Contractors Has Led to Rampant Abuses. Here's Why Regulators Have Failed to Stop Them." ProPublica, 5 Feb. 2026.*](#)

heatstroke symptoms at age 34.⁸⁹ The U.S. Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) found that the contractor overseeing the field work had failed to provide a worksite free from serious hazards and charged a fine of \$16,433, though the contractor was able to continue supervising workers.⁹⁰

Zimbabwe

Some risks are tied to specific commodities, such as Green Tobacco Sickness (GTS) among individuals harvesting tobacco. GTS is an acute form of nicotine poisoning that occurs when the skin absorbs moisture containing nicotine from wet tobacco leaves. Symptoms of this condition include nausea, vomiting, headaches, muscle weakness, and dizziness.⁹¹ Due to the poverty experienced by some families, children and other family members often help with agricultural tasks like harvesting, carrying leaves, and sorting, which exposes them to nicotine. A 2019 Zimbabwe government survey found 26.3 percent of children ages 5–15 in surveyed tobacco-growing areas were involved in tobacco activities, putting them at risk of G^{92, 93}.

3.4 Poverty, Marginalization, and Lack of Social Capital

Poverty, social marginalization, and a lack of social capital among agricultural workers compound the risk factors described in all the sections above. People living in poverty often lack social networks and relationships that would otherwise support their access to economic, employment, and educational opportunities. Jobs that are undesirable, dangerous, or otherwise difficult—and low-paying—are generally avoided by workers who have access to other options. The work is thus routinely done by local workers who are in extreme poverty, socially marginalized groups, migrant workers, and immigrants

⁸⁹ [Blau, Max. “The Dramatic Rise of Farm Labor Contractors Has Led to Rampant Abuses. Here's Why Regulators Have Failed to Stop Them.” *ProPublica*, 5 Feb. 2026.](#)

⁹⁰ [Blau, Max. “The Dramatic Rise of Farm Labor Contractors Has Led to Rampant Abuses. Here's Why Regulators Have Failed to Stop Them.” *ProPublica*, 5 Feb. 2026.](#)

⁹¹ [“Green Tobacco Sickness: Overview.” *Occupational Safety and Health Administration*.](#)

⁹³ [“A Bitter Harvest: Child Labour Prevalence on Tobacco Farms.” *International Labour Organization*, 17 Apr. 2024.](#)

who may not have local language fluency or transferable skills.⁹⁴ Because they have few alternatives, these workers are more likely to accept terms that ultimately compel them to continue working, despite exploitive, abusive or unsafe practices.

Limited ability to read or to converse in a local language (or the language of the workplace), being trapped in debt, holding work visas that are tied to a single employer, intimidation and threats by an employer, being fearful of authorities, being homeless, experiencing substance addiction, and needing to send money to support relatives at home are other indicators that workers could be at higher risk of exploitation.⁹⁵

3.4.1 Illustrative Cases

India

Sugarcane harvesting in Maharashtra, India, relies on an informal workforce, many of whom are families of migrants from drought-stricken areas of the country.⁹⁶ The work is associated with workers from marginalized caste groups⁹⁷ The work involves prolonged manual cutting, lifting, and loading of cane under hot conditions, often with limited access to rest, sanitation, clean drinking water, and medical care at worksites or temporary settlements.⁹⁸ Workers commonly use sharp tools, carry heavy loads, and work long hours during the harvest season, increasing the risk of cuts, musculoskeletal injuries, exhaustion, dehydration, and heat-related illness. Workers live in informally constructed settlements with inadequate safety and sanitation. Almost 70 percent of migrant cane cutters in some regions are

⁹⁴ Lenko, Mariya, et al. "Migrant Work Conditions and Health Status: A Longitudinal Study on 'Dirty Work' Among Undocumented and Newly Regularized Workers." *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 2024, pp. 1-21.

"The Unsafe 3-D Jobs of Migrant Workers." *Maison Law*, 28 Dec. 2018.

"Immigrants in the Low-Wage Workforce." *Work Rise Network*, 25 Aug 2025.

Farhana, M. H., Z. Li, and A. H. Hafizal. "Dirty, Dangerous, and Difficult Sectors: Challenges, Opportunities and Way Forward." *Malaysian Journal of Industrial Technology*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2024, pp. 39-50.

⁹⁵ Giloth, Emma. "Managing Migrant Labor Human Rights Risks in U.S. Food Value Chains." *BSR Insights+*, 5 Mar. 2025.

⁹⁶ Adhikari, Pooja, and Vani Shree. *Human Cost of Sugar: Living and Working Conditions of Migrant Cane-cutters in Maharashtra*. Oxfam India, Feb. 2020.

⁹⁷ Adhikari, Pooja, and Vani Shree. *Human Cost of Sugar: Living and Working Conditions of Migrant Cane-cutters in Maharashtra*. Oxfam India, Feb. 2020.

⁹⁸ "5 Takeaways From an Investigation Into Hysterectomies in India's Sugar Industry." *The New York Times*, 24 Mar. 2024.

indebted.⁹⁹ Many workers migrate seasonally after drought, crop losses, or other livelihood shocks, and wage advances, which are common, make it difficult to leave unsafe work before the harvest ends.¹⁰⁰ Women cane cutters have also reported reproductive-health harms, including pressure to undergo hysterectomies so they can continue working without interruption from menstruation-related pain or gynecological conditions.¹⁰¹

3.5 State-Imposed Forced Labor

According to the ILO, “state-imposed forced labor refers to forms of forced labor imposed by state authorities, agents acting on behalf of state authorities, and organizations with authority similar to the state.”⁸⁷ It can include the abuse of compulsory prison labor, the abuse of military conscription, the exaction of work that is beyond normal civic responsibilities, and forced labor for the purpose of economic development.⁸⁸ Different types of state-imposed forced labor have been documented in the agricultural sector.

3.5.1. Illustrative Cases

China

China’s cotton sector, producing about one fifth of the world’s cotton, is linked to state-sponsored forced labor risks, particularly in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, where most of the country’s cotton is produced.¹⁰² International organizations, governments, and researchers have reported that Uyghurs and other Muslim minority groups are subjected to coercive labor transfer and employment programs carried out under conditions of surveillance, political pressure, restricted movement, and threats of detention or other penalties.¹⁰³ These programs are not limited to cotton picking, but cotton

⁹⁹ [Adhikari, Pooja, and Vani Shree. *Human Cost of Sugar: Living and Working Conditions of Migrant Cane-cutters in Maharashtra*. Oxfam India, Feb. 2020.](#)

¹⁰⁰ [“5 Takeaways From an Investigation Into Hysterectomies in India’s Sugar Industry.” *The New York Times*, 24 Mar. 2024.](#)

¹⁰¹ [“5 Takeaways From an Investigation Into Hysterectomies in India’s Sugar Industry.” *The New York Times*, 24 Mar. 2024.](#)

¹⁰² [“Brands Face Boycott in China over Decision Not to Source Xinjiang Cotton Due to Allegations of Forced Labour.” *Business & Human Rights Resource Centre*, 26 Mar. 2021.](#)

[Hawkins, Amy. “‘Substantial Volume’ of Clothing Tied to Uyghur Forced Labour Entering EU, Says Study.” *The Guardian*, 6 Dec. 2023.](#)

¹⁰³ [Murphy, Daniel. “The World Sanctioned Xinjiang Cotton. China Turned It Into Chicken Feed.” *Pulitzer Center*, 30 May 2025.](#)

farming, ginning, spinning, textiles, and apparel are widely identified as high-risk because of Xinjiang's central role in China's cotton supply chain.¹⁰⁴ Cotton has also been documented to be utilized in animal feed that enters international supply chains.¹⁰⁵

4. Recommendations: Due Diligence Steps to Address Risks

4.1 Conclusions

This report examined the forced labor risks in the operations and supply chains of companies across the agriculture sector, focusing specifically on the supply of labor.

The risks of exploitation of workers trace, in most cases, back to the inadequate due diligence processes of third-party service providers, labor agencies, and suppliers; deceptive and exploitive recruitment processes that result in worker debt and compound other risk factors for migrant workers; the use of workers in state-imposed forced labor, and the unique hazards of agricultural work.

Companies should view the contents of this report as a starting point and seek to further develop their understanding of the specific weaknesses and risks in their supply chains at all tiers, in order to implement dynamic and ongoing risk assessments and mitigation strategies.

The findings of this report largely point to potential gaps in companies' due diligence systems or approaches to managing risk. The following recommendations for addressing these potential process gaps offer agriculture entities practical guidance for implementing comprehensive measures to control forced labor risks and protect their operations and individuals who may be vulnerable to exploitation within their supply chains. Effective due diligence requires a systematic approach that integrates risk assessment, prevention and mitigation, capacity building, and monitoring. This involves developing

Hawkins, Amy. ["'Substantial Volume' of Clothing Tied to Uyghur Forced Labour Entering EU, Says Study." *The Guardian*, 6 Dec. 2023.](#)

Heng, Kevin. ["China's Re-Education Camp 'Graduates' Trapped in Forced Labor in Xinjiang." *Newsweek*, 15 Oct. 2023.](#)

¹⁰⁴ Murphy, Daniel. ["The World Sanctioned Xinjiang Cotton. China Turned It Into Chicken Feed." *Pulitzer Center*, 30 May 2025.](#)

Hawkins, Amy. ["'Substantial Volume' of Clothing Tied to Uyghur Forced Labour Entering EU, Says Study." *The Guardian*, 6 Dec. 2023.](#)

¹⁰⁵ Murphy, Daniel. ["The World Sanctioned Xinjiang Cotton. China Turned It Into Chicken Feed." *Pulitzer Center*, 30 May 2025.](#)

comprehensive frameworks that can identify and address potential forced labor indicators across diverse operational contexts. The goal is not merely to achieve compliance but to create sustainable systems that protect vulnerable populations and prevent forced labor while maintaining operational efficiency and competitive advantage.

The ResonsibleSourcingTool.org site overall and the [Food and Beverage Sector Due Diligence Toolset](#) specifically provide technical tools to support the implementation of the following recommendations.

The toolset and the recommendations that follow are aligned with the [UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and the [OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct](#).

Tool 1 of the Food and Beverage Toolset provides a model due diligence program for identifying potential risks of human trafficking within a supply chain, evaluating and prioritizing identified risks, implementing solutions, and monitoring and improving supplier performance over time.

4.2 Recommendations

4.2.1 Policy and Embedding Forced Labor Prevention Standards and Practices in Business Functions

- 4.2.1.1 Companies should include a clear prohibition against forced labor in their Codes of Conduct and supplier performance standards. (See Food and Beverage Tool 2.) This should include the “employer pays” principle, which requires that all fees and expenses relating to the recruitment and placement of a worker are paid to by the employer.
- 4.2.1.2 The policy should be clearly communicated to all business entities, including third-party service providers and labor agents, and included in business contracts. (See Food and Beverage Tool 5.) The contracts should also require that the policy be cascaded to the suppliers’ suppliers.
- 4.2.1.3 Procurement staff should be formally assigned, trained, and supported to screen prospective suppliers, including third-party service providers and labor agents, for their commitment and capacity to meet the policy standards on avoiding forced labor. (See Food and Beverage Tools 3, 7, and 8.) There should be clear consequences established for supplier performance on achieving the standards.

- 4.2.1.4 Review of a supplier's management of forced labor risks should be incorporated in regular supplier engagements, such as quarterly business reviews, quality audits, and other existing supplier management processes.

4.2.2 Risk Assessment and Prioritization

- 4.2.2.1 Conduct a combined supply chain mapping and forced labor risk assessment as a key first step in creating a targeted strategy for segmenting and prioritizing risks to address. (See Food and Beverage Tool 6.) High-level risk factors to consider include characteristics of the country of operation, product or production processes involved, and workforce demographics (e.g., prevalence of migrant workers). Other factors to consider include a company's ability to influence suppliers based on volume/spend and the degree of harm to people that practices may cause.

4.2.3 Needs Assessment and Capacity Building

- 4.2.3.1 Based on the results of a risk assessment, companies should conduct deep dives (e.g., targeted research, risk assessments, rapid appraisals, supplier assessments) to develop and implement action plans to address the underlying causes of identified risk or issues. The activities, which should be informed by clear objectives and measurable success indicators, may range widely from supplier training to engagement in multistakeholder initiatives where companies individually lack the leverage to drive positive changes in an operating environment (e.g., where economic or political factors are immovable in the immediate term). (See Food and Beverage Tools 8, 10, and 11.)

4.2.4 Monitoring

- 4.2.4.1 Companies need to routinely evaluate whether they are implementing their due diligence processes as planned (e.g., new suppliers screened for forced labor risks, review of corrective action plans during regular supplier business reviews). (See Food and Beverage Tool 9 and the Supply Chain Due Diligence Process.)
- 4.2.4.2 The effectiveness of due diligence activities should be tracked to ensure the desired impacts are on target and sustainable (e.g., worker-paid recruitment fees are avoided,

foreign migrant workers are in full control of their identification documents, workers have access to remedy).