Morocco: Better Work for Women Strawberry Pickers

This Oxfam case study for the Workforce Disclosure Initiative (WDI) highlights a collaborative initiative to improve working conditions for women in the Morocco strawberry sector.
Introduction

The Workforce Disclosure Initiative (WDI) aims to maximise the role of investors to improve the quality of jobs in multinational companies’ operations and supply chains. Through the WDI, more than 115 investment institutions are requesting comparable workforce data from listed companies on an annual basis. Improved transparency helps investors gain crucial insights into how companies are managing their workforce, and how they compare with peers. The data collected will also inform investor engagement with companies to encourage better employment policies and practices. The aim is for this to contribute to the delivery of Sustainable Development Goal 8: Decent Work for all.

As part of the WDI, a series of case studies highlights the experience of workers in global supply chains, drawing attention to some of the systemic challenges to achieving decent working conditions, and pointing to examples of good practice. This case study brings to life issues faced by workers on Moroccan strawberry farms, which came to light following research by Oxfam in 2009, and the improvements that followed when Oxfam collaborated with stakeholders throughout the supply chain to improve working conditions. In addition, Oxfam improved workers’ awareness of their rights, so they felt empowered to ask employers to improve working conditions. The key issues included low pay, long working hours, access to social protection, health and safety, dangerous transport to work, and harassment. The WDI survey requests data from companies on these and other issues.

The case study profiles Oxfam’s programme to improve working conditions for women in the strawberry sector in Northern Morocco. This included the creation of the Better Strawberry Group, a multi-stakeholder coalition where the Moroccan industry and civil society organisations work with international retailers, fruit importers and producers, and NGOs, facilitated by Oxfam and the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) to improve work conditions for strawberry pickers and processors. The initiative has created a number of positive changes for women workers in this sector. However, significant challenges remain and further improvements are needed. A key finding of the case study is that international companies can create significant positive impact in their supply chains through collaborating to: a) better understand challenges faced by workers; and b) agree a plan of action to tackle these challenges.

This case study was written to contribute to public debate and to invite feedback on how these systemic issues across sectors and geographies can be resolved. It has been produced as part of the Workforce Disclosure Initiative, which is coordinated by ShareAction in partnership with Oxfam, SHARE and the Responsible Investment Association Australasia (RIAA). The WDI is funded by UK aid from the UK government; however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government’s official policies.
Context
Morocco is the world’s fifth largest exporter of strawberries, producing almost 148,000 tonnes of strawberries a year. This is due to an ambitious growth programme, with investment from both private and public sources, which increased berry production 16 fold in under 20 years. About 600 farms, covering approximately 5,000 hectares, are involved in strawberry growing, ranging from small family-run farms to large, highly integrated, commercial farms. 80 percent of the fresh strawberries are exported to the European Union, with some of the main buyers being large European supermarkets and strawberry importers.

Morocco Facts
Morocco is a constitutional monarchy with a diverse, market-oriented economy, which capitalises on its proximity to Europe, and relatively low labour costs to create a relatively strong export-based economy. Key sectors include agriculture, tourism, aerospace, automotive, textiles, and apparel.

Until recently Morocco has benefited from a stable economy marked by steady growth, low inflation, and gradually falling unemployment, however recent poor harvests and economic difficulties in Europe are contributing to a slowdown. Despite Morocco’s economic progress the country suffers from high unemployment, poverty and illiteracy, particularly in rural areas.

Over 30 percent of the population work in the agriculture sector, and there has been a conscious effort by the government to ensure that the sector remains at the core of the country’s economic growth. A key part of this strategy is the production and exportation of berry fruits including strawberries.

Fast facts
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Table 1: Map of programme stakeholders

Graphic showing the stakeholders involved in the programme, including the produce supply chain in Morocco and the buyers based in Europe, with Oxfam as a facilitator.
The huge growth in strawberry growing created opportunities for large numbers of women to enter productive, paid work. Women now make up 75 to 90 percent of workers in Morocco’s berry sector, mostly working in the fields picking strawberries and tending to the crop, or in the factories processing and packing the fruit for export. In the North of Morocco alone, an estimated 20,000 women work in berry farms. Women workers are considered better placed to perform fruit picking and packaging tasks that require greater care and attention when handling delicate fruit, and are also valued as labour because of their supposed “docility”.

Jobs in the strawberry sector offer the potential for economic development. However, in 2009 concerns were raised about the lack of respect for workers’ rights – rights which are afforded under Moroccan labour law and supported by the country’s ratification of ILO conventions. For thousands of women across the Larache province in northern Morocco, the working day started with travelling long distances, in cramped and crowded vans, along rough roads to strawberry fields. Once there, they picked strawberries for over eight hours, often for less than the minimum wage and without the social security protections offered at the national level.

A 2009 survey of workers by Oxfam identified these workforce issues in more detail.

Low wages and long working hours

Farms were under considerable pressure to meet orders from their buyers, whilst keeping costs low and quality high. This translated into workers being continuously pushed to work harder and for longer hours; one worker was told by her supervisor: “Do not ruin the strawberries; they are worth more than you are.”

Workers reported this pressure was kept up relentlessly even if they were sick or pregnant.

Other problems uncovered by the research included non-compliance with minimum wage and working hours legislation, poor health and safety standards, degrading and dangerous transport conditions, and harassment and verbal abuse. Women worked long hours, weekly rest was rarely respected, and overtime did not result in more pay.
Lack of awareness of labour rights and entitlements

Workers and their employers were not aware of relevant labour rights. Many workers were employed on an informal and very precarious basis, with no contracts. They had no identity documents, so their age could not be verified, which meant employers could avoid child labour legislation.

One strawberry picker explained: “When I started working in the strawberry sector four years ago, I accepted the money they gave me without questioning the supervisor and without counting the hours I worked. Sometimes we could work from very early in the morning until sunset.”

Morocco has a social security system designed to protect workers when paid work is not available, but to benefit from this, workers need to register, and not many were aware of this.

Audits commissioned by international retailers did not accurately assess whether workers were paid the minimum wage, let alone uncover sensitive issues such as sexual harassment. The corrective actions recommended by auditors did not take into account the systemic nature of the issues; nor did they secure the buy-in of growers or labour providers to own and solve problems.

"We worked from dawn till dusk; we did not know that we should not work more than 8 hours and that the extra hours are remunerable. They would pay us 35 dirhams ($3.75) for a whole day of work."

— FATIMA
STRAWBERRY PICKER®

Fatima, Strawberry picker and member of Women’s Alliance
Credit: Bekki Frost/Oxfam
Morocco’s female strawberry pickers, in many cases, could possibly be regarded as a real and classic example of women’s low-paid labour facilitating greater profits for others ... While the sector has been growing significantly and contributing to positive economic results, unfortunately working conditions within the supply chain have evolved in a ‘predominantly informal and precarious environment’.

“Harassment was the norm before, but now, with the intervention of these associations and this project, the bosses have begun to be afraid of such behaviour.” - Fatima

Low literacy levels, lack of awareness of their rights, lack of voice in decision-making (at work, home or in the community) and lack of employment alternatives make these women particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Power imbalances

All the labour providers were men, with significant power over the largely female workforce, controlling access to employment, payment, transport, and supervision. These untrained supervisors were often the ‘de-facto employer’, frequently subjecting women workers to harassment.

Women workers reported being physically and verbally bullied, discriminated against, especially when pregnant and when spurning sexual advances. Sexual harassment was just one of many factors that made them feel insecure in their employment; they could easily be fired, or forced to leave when these problems became too much to cope with.

“We worked without Social Security. We ignored it, we did not know what Social Security was.”

- KHADIJA

STRAWBERRY PICKER

Khadija, Strawberry picker
Credit: Bekki Frost/Oxfam
Creating change

Following this research, Oxfam and its partners created a programme to make women workers aware of their rights through large open workshops in rural communities. Over the next few years these reached over 16,000 women workers, and more than 75 women were trained as leaders in their communities. Local civil society partners create the “Observatory” and the “Identity Cell” to help women register for identity cards and Social Security as well as to provide them with legal assistance for rights violations cases. Following this process, the Al Karama Women’s Association was set up to help these women and others to claim their rights.

“When I joined the Oxfam project, they started an awareness campaign...When I started training with them, I changed a lot of things in my life; Fatima is no longer the same. I did not speak out before... I began to understand the administrative processes, my rights, unlike before. These are our right as citizens, and if we are not equal citizens in terms of rights, we cannot work.” - Fatima

Despite the success of this initiative in raising workers’ awareness of their labour rights, it had very little impact on improving working conditions. This could only be done by engaging with actors further up the supply chain, for example the international retailers and importers buying the Moroccan berries, as they have significant bargaining power and influence with the small producers in their supply chains. Because a high proportion of the exported strawberries land on the shelves of UK supermarkets, many of whom are members of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), the project team decided to engage UK retailers and importers first, but has increasingly engaged with retailers and brands in France, Spain, and Sweden as well.

“In 2012, this engagement led to the creation of the Better Strawberries Group, made up of international retailers, fruit importers, and members of Moroccan Civil Society. Facilitated by the ETI and Oxfam, the group created a plan of action to improve working conditions for women strawberry pickers, which involved positively influencing the strawberry producers in Morocco. The plan had six key elements:

- **Identity**: Companies only hire employees who have an identity card
- **Social Security**: Workers are registered for Social Security and companies pay their premiums
- **Labour providers**: Establish a code of good practice in relation to the work of intermediaries that promotes the adoption of standards by all strawberry producers
- **Transport**: Improve the workers’ transportation to and from the worksite
- **Health and Security**: Adhere to the Global G.A.P. (Good Agricultural Practice) standards for health and safety as a minimum for all Moroccan farms
- **Minimum wage**: All Moroccan women working in strawberry production are paid at least the national minimum wage

It took time to build trust between the different actors, which included making necessary adjustments in the traditional relationship between strawberry producer, the importers, and retailers. The companies needed to see each other as stakeholders in a common agenda, driving the plan forward together. As the project developed, communication between the different actors improved, which strengthened the relationship between them bringing its own commercial benefits.

“Most of the major retailers in the UK are ETI members and already working with key suppliers, so it made sense to build on these established relationships to try and address the issues faced by these women workers in Morocco. It’s important to look at all of the actors involved in these global supply chains, facilitating collaboration and momentum at the international level while engaging the government as well as producers, civil society and workers directly in Morocco.” - Sloane Hamilton, Oxfam.
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- SLOANE HAMILTON
OXFAM

Impact of the project

The Moroccan growers created a platform in 2015 to provide the space for them to meet to discuss challenges and successes. They developed a code of conduct, drawing from the ETI base code, with the Better Strawberries Group giving support and recommendations on ways of working, based on their experiences in other sectors, leading to concrete improvements on the identified issues.

Together the collaboration achieved a number of impressive improvements for the workers including:

- 1,385 women were registered legally and obtained their civil status and over 70 percent of packing stations and processing plants in the Larache region now require workers to have identity cards

  “… when you enter the factory where I work, the first thing they ask you is for your Social Security and identity card. There are those who do not have Social Security, and ask, what is Social Security? They explain it to you if you do not have it.” - Loubna

  “I remember the day I received my identity card. I was over the moon, because it allowed me to start working.” - Khadija

- All producers directly supplying the UK market have the right systems in place for their workers to access social security, and the number of strawberry farms supplying these companies continues to grow.

- 7,140 women were helped to register for social security and understand how to access benefits. The number of people registered for social security in the provinces of Larache and Kenitra increased by 40 percent in 2012 and 70 percent in 2013; in 2014, nearly 65 percent of people working in the red fruit sector in the two provinces registered

  “Now, fortunately, when a worker joins a company that doesn’t grant her all her rights, she simply moves to a different company. She looks for a company where she will feel at ease and benefit from all her rights. Fortunately, times have changed and people are now more aware than before.” - Khadija
All Moroccan packing stations exporting to the UK have obtained Global G.A.P. certification and some producers are trying to adopt other standards such as BSCI. There have been noticeable improvements in infrastructure and health and safety practices in some factories and packing stations.

Over 70 percent of the pack houses and processing factories now pay the agricultural sector minimum wage.

“Before they paid us for a day of work, now they pay us by the hour. So, we earn more. Before, the maximum we earned was 50 dirhams for a whole day of work. Now they pay us 13 dirhams per hour... the equivalent of ninety or one hundred dirhams per day.” - Loubna

Women workers report improvements, including greater awareness of rights, safer transport, and improved social security.

“Harassment was the norm before, but now, with the intervention of these associations and this project, the bosses have begun to be afraid of such behaviour. And this has yielded results; many times, we have been the cause of the expulsion of bosses. We have protested against these cases of harassment.” - Fatima

“We end up getting what we want; we have become women capable of grabbing our rights.” - Khadija

Before they paid us for a day of work, now they pay us by the hour. So, we earn more.

- LOUBNA
- STRAWBERRY PICKER
But challenges remain

There is still some way to go. Women are still worried about verbal and physical violence, excessive working hours, and wage deductions. And they also raised concerns about the lack of worker representation and their inability to raise issues with supervisors.

Tackling the problem of how workers are transported to the farms has been more challenging than hoped, as this requires the co-operation of government departments responsible for roads and transport infrastructure as well as of employers. Some producers and farmers have taken positive steps to improve transport for their workers, but they are limited in what they can achieve without support from the government to improve infrastructure and public transport.

"In 2016, a van had an accident in which an 18-year-old girl was killed... The driver of the 207 did not have a driver’s license. The man was driving at a high speed. He wanted to transport the girls quickly from our village, and then go to another village to transport other people. As a result of this speeding, the tyre exploded and the van flipped. The girl who died was sitting near the door, which was open," Fatima

But at least dialogue has been initiated between the relevant stakeholders to work on practical and realistic solutions to transport problems. Despite these ongoing problems, women know that change is possible and are beginning to speak up about their rights as workers. Tellingly, they now expect international brands to put pressure on growers to improve conditions of employment.

As one woman said: "You buyers put pressure on quality with the products. You can also put pressure on the quality of the conditions for workers. Strawberry farm owners listen to you."
“[Bosses], when you treat your employees well, they achieve much more than you expect of them. If the boss is harsh, the employee won’t take any notice of his instructions, and may even do the opposite, there are some bosses who treat their employees like insects. They don’t realise that the employees are at the heart of the entire production chain. And without them, there wouldn’t be any production.” - Khadija

Building trust and a good working relationship between stakeholders through the supply chain is key. The support of local civil society ensures the project meets the needs of vulnerable workers in that area. It is important that collaboration includes engaged employers who are directly affected by the issues raised.

These are essential elements to the success of any collaboration aimed at improving working conditions for women, but there may also be external elements that need to be considered such as social inequalities and cultural vulnerability.

Improving supply chain working conditions: the importance of involving workers

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Change can only happen if the affected communities and workers are involved in bringing about that change. It was therefore essential for the working women to be involved in discussions and input regarding what they needed, which was to understand more about their rights, and how to apply for identification and social security protection. The women workers became the main actors of change, and essential to ensuring the success of the program.
The role for investors

Institutional investors can play a key role in helping to improve jobs in listed companies’ supply chains. They can ask companies in their portfolio to demonstrate that they have identified the greatest risks to their supply chain workforce as well as to the business, and how these are incorporated into their sourcing strategy. Investors can also encourage companies to carry out robust due diligence on their supply chain to ensure workers’ rights are respected. This can include asking companies to report the actions they are taking to improve jobs in their supply chains, and the consequences of these actions.

Institutional investors typically hold shares in many companies within a given sector. They are therefore well placed to encourage the kind of pre-competitive collaboration that can lead to improvements for workers in a sector. The Better Strawberries Group is an example of this collaboration.

Supply chains are not all about managing workforce risks. There are big opportunities too. These include improving skills and attracting workers, upgrading the security of supply and product quality, allowing an industry to invest in its future, and ultimately contributing to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.22

This case study demonstrates that through collaboration across stakeholders positive change can happen. Investors can play a key role in promoting this kind of progress in a wide range of geographies and sectors.

“Supply chains are not all about managing workforce risks. There are big opportunities too. These include improving skills and attracting workers, upgrading the security of supply and product quality, allowing an industry to invest in its future, and ultimately contributing to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.”
Strawberry picker
Credit: Bekki Frost/Oxfam
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This case study is based on reports and research as outlined in the text above. Additional opinions expressed in this publication are based on the documents specified. We encourage readers to read those documents. Online links accessed 30 November 2018. Fairshare Educational Foundation is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales number 05013662 (registered address 16 Crucifix Lane, London, SE1 3JW) and a registered charity number 1117244, VAT registration number GB 211 1469 53.

About ShareAction and the Workforce Disclosure Initiative (WDI)

ShareAction (Fairshare Educational Foundation) is a registered charity that promotes responsible investment practices by pension providers and fund managers. ShareAction believes that responsible investment helps to safeguard investments as well as securing environmental and social benefits. ShareAction is coordinating the Workforce Disclosure Initiative (WDI) in partnership with Oxfam and other aligned organisations, including SHARE and the Responsible Investment Association Australasia (RIAA). As of August 2018 the WDI survey is backed by 110 institutional investors representing assets under management of more than $13 trillion.

https://shareaction.org/wdi

About Oxfam

Oxfam is an international confederation of 20 organisations networked together in more than 90 countries, as part of a global movement for change, to build a future free from the injustice of poverty. Oxfam is a global voice on poverty & inequality, women’s rights, humanitarian issues and climate change and has substantial experience of engaging with multinational companies to improve their employment policies and practices, as well as their supply chain transparency.

https://oxfam.org.uk