

Additional resources - knowledge

Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement: Practical Guidance for Companies in the Agriculture and Food Manufacturing Sector

Avocado Field in Spain. Photo: Noelia Blanca / Oxfam



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Content

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Q&A

This Q&A contains answers to frequently asked questions on meaningful stakeholder engagement (MSE) in the agriculture and food manufacturing sector.

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List of engagement tools – benefits and limitations

This resource provides a non-exhaustive list of engagement tools, along with their benefits and limitations, which you can use as guidance for choosing the suitable tool(s) for engagement.

③

The role of trade unions and worker representation

This resource gives a short overview of trade unions and worker representation and what they mean for MSE.



1. Q&A

How do purchasing and sourcing practices influence the conditions for meaningful engagement?

When commercial priorities conflict with human rights commitments, stakeholder engagement risks becoming superficial or performative rather than a genuine, sustained process that drives meaningful change. Purchasing and sourcing practices play a central role in shaping how companies engage with stakeholders. For example, when buyers prioritise short lead times, low costs, or last-minute order changes, suppliers can face intense pressure – often resulting in poor working conditions and limited space for meaningful engagement.

By contrast, responsible sourcing – characterised by fair pricing, stable relationships, and transparency – enables suppliers to invest in better labour practices and supports more open dialogue with stakeholders. Long-term commitments and collaborative partnerships build trust and accountability across the supply chain, making it easier to involve stakeholders in decision-making and to ensure their voices are genuinely heard and respected. **It is important that companies:**

- Ensure all departments (e.g. compliance, human rights, commercial, legal) understand and address the links between purchasing practices and MSE in a coordinated way, and work towards supply chain traceability.
- Strengthen internal governance processes to integrate and act on findings from MSE, improving the company's ability to respond when risks to human rights and the environment arise.
- Adopt and disclose efforts to further responsible procurement decisions in supply chains, including transparency on planning, forecasting, and ensuring payment terms incorporate the full cost of production for suppliers.

Who should companies engage with when there is limited traceability and they are uncertain where exactly the product is sourced from?

When traceability is limited, companies should:

- Shift focus from tracing every supplier to understanding risk at a regional or sector level.
- Engage stakeholders or actors with proximity to rightsholders, even if they are not directly in their supply chain.
- Invest in collaborative, long-term efforts to improve transparency and traceability.



1. Q&A

In a company's supply chain, workers are mainly seasonal or transient. How can the company set up a rightsholder engagement process in this situation?

When workers are present only during certain periods of the year, engagement can be challenging, as they may be working intensively for a short time before leaving for the rest of the year. **Companies should therefore:**

- Schedule engagement activities during periods when seasonal workers are present.
- Plan well in advance for short harvest windows (e.g. fruit picking that lasts only a few days and varies each season). This identifies when workers will be on site and ensures engagement can take place within that limited timeframe.
- Consider working with legitimate representatives such as trade unions or trusted intermediaries. Civil society organisations (CSOs) that support migrant workers, for example, may have long-term relationships with them and can facilitate engagement during the season – or sometimes even in their home countries.
- Take workers' workloads into account, including compensation if participation during working hours affects productivity or income, or if engagement takes place after work.
- Recognise that many workers return year after year, creating opportunities for engagement over time. Even when this is not the case, engagement remains valuable: insights gathered from one group can be triangulated with sector reports, future consultations, and input from credible proxies to assess whether impacts are common across the sector.



1. Q&A

How can companies address the problem of “consultation fatigue” which leads to low engagement?

Sometimes stakeholders may experience consultation fatigue from too many or poorly timed requests. **To address this, companies can consider:**

- Engage legitimate representatives, such as trade unions, where appropriate, to avoid overburdening individual rightsholders.
- Check whether stakeholders have already provided input to other actors on the same issues. Where possible, use publicly available information and only contact stakeholders for updates or when circumstances have changed.
- Adapt the timing of the engagement to the stakeholder’s availability. If this means engagement occurs later, it is preferable to rushed or inconsistent consultations.
- Ask stakeholders about their preferred engagement format. While the originally planned method may not work for them, alternative formats might. Making such adjustments ensures the process is respectful, efficient, and meaningful.
- Collaborate with other actors when possible, to avoid duplicating engagement efforts and reduce the workload on stakeholders. For example, check [Open Supply Hub](#) to find out which companies source from the same production location and contact these companies with a request to collaborate.



1. Q&A

A company has collected information through an engagement process with rightsholders, but it has doubts about the authenticity of the information. What can the company do?

When engaging with different stakeholders, companies may question whether the information being shared is real or authentic. It is important to listen to all information and recognise that in many cases rightsholders might have a different perception than the company itself – and that their perception is key to identifying impacts. Some information may nonetheless be misleading. Companies should therefore triangulate findings with external reports, news, internal reports and input from other credible stakeholders.

Can social audits be considered meaningful rightsholder engagement?

By themselves, social audits do not amount to meaningful rightsholder engagement. Their primary function is to evaluate compliance and identify areas for improvement, rather than to replace meaningful engagement with workers, communities, and other rightsholders. Social audits are typically structured, compliance-oriented snapshots that limit worker participation and often miss issues shaped by fear, coercion, or entrenched hierarchies. Sensitive concerns – such as gender-based violence, discrimination, or supervisor retaliation – often go undetected in worker interviews.

Audits can also overlook abuses in contexts assumed to be “low risk.” Documented labour exploitation in agricultural and food production settings demonstrates that risk profiles and audit coverage do not always align with actual conditions on the ground. For instance, Italy is often not considered high risk, yet labour exploitation is well documented in the agriculture and food sector.¹

A holistic approach to human rights and environmental due diligence goes beyond audits, integrating multiple tools and methods to ensure risks are properly understood and addressed. This includes combining audits with stakeholder engagement, risk mapping, participatory assessments, and continuous monitoring.



1. Q&A

How can companies engage rightsholders through multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs)?

Collective engagement – through MSIs, for example – can play a key role when companies wish to increase their sectoral impact, make best use of resources, or use their leverage collectively. Engagement with rightsholders in these platforms takes different forms, ranging from one-off information sharing and project-specific engagement, to full integration into the MSI's governance structure. Meaningful engagement should respect the principles set out in this guidance.

In particular, this means that:

- Rightsholders are engaged early in the process, before any decisions which may impact them are made. They are given the opportunity to provide feedback on the methodology and process used. They are also informed about how their feedback is taken into account.
- Rightsholders understand the governance, working mechanisms and scope of the MSI.
- Rightsholders are properly supported, so that they can engage on a level playing field (both financially, and in terms of information and training).
- Engagement with proxies – such as NGOs from the Global North – does not substitute for direct engagement with impacted rightsholders.



1. Q&A

How can the legitimacy of trade unions and community representatives be assessed?

To assess the legitimacy of a representative, the following questions can be considered:²

Trade unions

- Is the trade union democratically elected and independent from management and government control?
- Is the trade union recognised at site level and actively involved in labour-related discussions and negotiations?
- Has the trade union been included in past assessments or grievance procedures?
- Is the trade union genuinely representative of all relevant groups of workers, including women, migrant workers, or temporary workers?

Community representatives

- Is there an established and recognised system in place for selecting community representatives (e.g. elections, traditional leadership, council structures)?
- Do these representatives reflect a broad cross-section of the community, including women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and other groups facing vulnerability?
- Has the company validated whether these representatives are perceived as legitimate by the wider community? If not, has the company undertaken broader consultations to test this perception?
- Is there any indication of bias, elite capture, or conflict of interest in how representatives were selected or how they operate?
- Has the company identified and taken steps to include underrepresented or marginalised groups in engagement efforts?

Farmworkers harvest wine and table grapes from a vineyard in Rawsonville. Credit: Alexa Sedgwick/Oxfam





2. List of engagement tools – benefits and limitations

Tool	Why it's useful	Potential limitations
<u>Surveys and questionnaires</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quick to implement. • Can reach many people. • Useful for gathering input from large groups (e.g. workers, and community members). • Useful for spotting trends over time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May lack depth. • Literacy barriers. • Language barriers. • Low trust may prevent honest answers. • Less flexibility to add or discuss further topics.
<u>Focus groups</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rich qualitative data. • Encourages group discussion. • Can surface sensitive topics. • Useful for exploring concerns or testing ideas with specific groups (e.g. women, youth, or Indigenous leaders). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group dynamics may silence some voices. • Needs skilled facilitator. • May need to address logistical challenges or barriers.
<u>One-to-one interviews</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rich qualitative data. • Builds trust. • Allows for deep listening. • Flexible format allows rightsholders to bring up issues they consider important. • Useful when engaging with individuals experiencing vulnerabilities or when discussing sensitive issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively time-consuming. • Harder to scale from companies' perspective. • Needs skilled interviewer.
<u>Community meetings and forums</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Useful for initial consultations, updates, or collective decisions that impact communities. • Promotes transparency. • Visible commitment. • Can build community buy-in. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not reflect all views in the community. • May exclude certain groups (e.g. women, young people, and those experiencing marginalisation). • Needs careful planning.
<u>Worker committees and worker voice tools</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides a regular channel for ongoing engagement with workers in factories or worksites. • Useful for monitoring workers' experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May not reflect all workers' views. • Can take time for workers to trust these channels.



2. List of engagement tools – benefits and limitations

Tool	Why it's useful	Potential limitations
Dialogue and collaboration with local NGOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful where trust is low or access is limited. Helps build credibility. Can facilitate access to hard-to-reach groups. Brings cultural and contextual knowledge. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assessing whether an NGO genuinely represents rightsholders' views and can be considered a legitimate proxy can be time-consuming.
Multi-stakeholder roundtables including workers, civil society organisations (CSOs), government representatives, business associations and other actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brings different stakeholders together to share views and ideas. Encourages open discussion and debate. Saves time by avoiding multiple separate meetings. Helps uncover and explore root causes of issues. Builds trust and connections between local and international actors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group dynamics may silence some voices. Requires a skilled facilitator.
Various grievance mechanism channels, including survivor-centred, gender-responsive grievance mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides accessible channels for raising concerns and complaints. Can support remedy. Helps detect early warning signs. Demonstrates accountability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often underused by companies. Digital-only grievance mechanisms can exclude rightsholder individuals or groups. Requires follow-up and trust in the grievance mechanism. Effectiveness depends on alignment with the UNGPs criteria.
Participatory mapping and visual tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowers local knowledge. Makes abstract impacts visible. Useful where low literacy is a barrier, or in the context of Indigenous Peoples' rights. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires time. Requires facilitation skills.
Digital tools such as apps and SMS feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enables fast data collection. Good for reaching dispersed or mobile populations, e.g. supply chain workers. Allows rightsholders to engage at a time that suits them. Scalable for companies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Excludes those without internet or devices. May be inaccessible due to language or literacy barriers. Raises privacy concerns. Rightsholders may hesitate to share personal data. Can reinforce power imbalances, as companies control the tools. Risks deepening gender gaps if men have more access than women. Less effective for building trust and relationships. Can lack depth and nuance compared to in-person methods.

Digital engagement tools

[MillionMakers.org](#) offers a digital platform that empowers workers to anonymously share insights about their working conditions, enabling companies to gather real-time, worker-driven data to enhance transparency and improve supply chain accountability.

[Ulula](#) provides companies with digital tools to collect real-time, anonymous feedback from workers and communities, enabling proactive identification of risks and fostering transparent, inclusive communication across supply chains.

[The SenseMaker®](#) - [The Cynefin Co](#) helps companies make sense of complex rightsholder dynamics, using digital approaches to design more effective, inclusive engagement strategies.

Photo: Unsplash





3. Different forms of trade unions and worker representation and what they mean for MSE

The role of trade unions³

Trade unions are the democratically elected and **legitimate** representatives of workers on labour rights issues (i.e. issues covered by ILO conventions).⁴ Trade unions bring critical expertise on labour standards, company practices, local agreements, and community dynamics. When trade unions are present, companies should engage with them directly.

Companies may engage with trade unions at **local, national, regional**, or global levels, including Global Union Federations (GUFs). For example, engaging with international trade unions may be most appropriate when drafting global policies, and with national federations when developing country-level strategies.

The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) is the GUF representing workers in the food and agricultural processing sector.

Companies should assess whether different groups of workers are adequately represented through trade unions. For example, female workers are often underrepresented in trade union positions. Where gaps are identified, companies should, while respecting the autonomy of trade unions, consider what can be done to ensure all groups of workers have adequate representation.

Where trade unions are not present or are effectively prohibited by law, **elected worker representatives** can be a starting point for dialogue – to the extent provided for under national law.

In accordance with [ILO Convention 135](#), “elected representatives” are “representatives who are freely elected by the workers of the undertaking in accordance with provisions of national laws or regulations or of collective agreements and whose functions do not include activities which are recognised as the exclusive prerogative of trade unions in the country concerned.”

Elected representatives do not have a legal mandate to represent workers in collective bargaining and cannot be used as a means to undermine or avoid the organisation and registration of trade unions. Such mechanisms are not effective substitutes for industrial relations or collective bargaining conducted by union representatives.

Where elected representatives are present, workers should be actively supported in exercising their Freedom of Association – the right to form or join a union of their own choosing.

MSE and existing industrial relations and social dialogue

Freedom of Association (FOA) and collective bargaining are enabling rights that underpin improved working conditions in global supply chains. They allow workers to organise, negotiate, and advocate for their rights. Promoting these rights through Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD) is essential to meaningful worker engagement. **Any MSE activity must ensure that existing industrial relations and social dialogue are respected and not undermined.**

Paper unions⁵ and limited trade union rights⁶

In some countries and workplaces, trade unions may be established by the government or the employer. These are sometimes referred to as “paper unions” – employer-controlled or overly aligned with management, and not genuinely representative of workers' interests⁷.

In these cases, companies can consult global and national trade union federations – ensuring these are independent and democratic – on the most appropriate way to engage with workers and identify actual and potential adverse human rights impacts.

Similarly, in certain countries the legal framework limits trade union rights; in others, workers are prohibited from joining or forming trade unions altogether.⁸ In these cases, companies should seek to source their products where workers can access their fundamental rights.



3. Different forms of trade unions and worker representation and what they mean for MSE

Tips:

- Contact the IUF, the global union federation representing workers in the food and agricultural processing sector. Engaging with the IUF can help companies identify existing or emerging issues in the supply chain and draw on established experience to explore practical solutions. This approach is particularly effective in countries or workplaces where workers are organised through IUF-affiliated unions.
- For more information on how trade unions work and how they are structured globally, refer to this Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) infographic on [trade unions](#).
- For guidance on how companies can support progress on worker representation, see this [ETI infographic on progressing worker representation](#).

Getting started: Key actions for companies

1. Identify whether the country, site, or supplier is covered by a Global Framework Agreement with the IUF.
2. Map risks, focusing on contexts where Freedom of Association and collective bargaining are denied or actively opposed.
3. At site level:
 - Assess union presence, recognition, agreements, and industrial relations practices.
 - Review existing Collective Bargaining Agreements, where applicable.
 - Identify and assess the legitimacy of statutory committees or elected worker representatives, to the extent provided for under national law.
4. Develop an action plan with elected representatives to address gaps.



Tilapias are harvested on the shore of Badagry creek (Lagos, Nigeria)

Endnotes

1. Oxfam (2021) The Workers Behind Sweden's Italian Wine: An illustrative Human Rights Impact Assessment of Systembolaget's Italian wine supply chains. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/the-workers-behind-swedens-italian-wine-an-illustrative-human-rights-impact-ass-621266/>
2. Adapted from STITCH (2025) Technical Guidance on Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement in Garment, Apparel and Textile Sectors
3. Adapted from STITCH (2025) Technical Guidance on Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement in Garment, Apparel and Textile Sectors
4. ILO, C098 - Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98) and C087 - Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87)
5. Also referred to as yellow unions
6. STITCH (2025). Technical Guidance on Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement in Garment, Apparel and Textile Sectors
7. CNV International (2021). The Power of Trade Union Freedom.
8. See the ITUC's Global Rights Index for a list of high-risk countries for trade union and labour rights.

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