

RESEARCH NOTE

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Fair Farm Work: A review of label and certification initiatives in the Agrifood sector

Over the last 30 years, several initiatives have been introduced to engage governments, farmers, retailers, nongovernmental organizations, and even consumers in providing new avenues for improving migrant labour conditions in the agricultural sector. Label or certification programs have become an effective strategy to tackle issues related to food security, food process quality standards, and labour exploitation. In some cases, certification programs have also led to the creation of communities and workers' coalitions, thus facilitating spaces for conversations surrounding policy changes and temporary programs' restructuring to make conditions fairer to migrant, racialized and indigenous workers.

CHARACTERISTICS

These certification initiatives and coalitions are voluntary schemes that allow farms and businesses to opt-in to follow a set of standards wherein an external (third-party) auditor then checks for compliance. They are beyond the scope of state regulation and employ a voluntary mechanism in place of public regulation and collective bargaining. Some of them promote reflexive consumerism including domestic fair trade instead of government oversight and intervention.

They follow a quadruple-win logic where:

1. Farmworkers benefit from increased compliance to labour standards
2. Farmers and growers benefit from whitelisting and prioritized purchasing of their product to businesses

3. Businesses and brands adopting products with certification may achieve greater recognition in the marketplace through the use of a label or ethical seal, while potentially enjoying the benefit of increased profit margins
4. Consumers are provided with information about the conditions under which the products they purchase, have been produced

SUCCESSFUL EXPERIENCES (EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA)

The Fair Food Program (FFP) – United States

[Partnership/Certification]

The program is promoted by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, which is a Florida worker-based human rights organization focused on fighting human trafficking and gender-based violence at work. Its standards focus on the Worker-Driven Social Responsibility Model which addresses the weaknesses in traditional models of supply chain monitoring, including lack of worker voice, superficial auditing, and lack of measurable accountability.

The Equitable Food Initiative (EFI) – United States

[Certification]

The program started as a coalition integrated in 2008 by Oxfam America, Costco Wholesale, and United Farm Workers. The Equitable Food Initiative was

officially launched as an independent non-profit social enterprise in 2015. The certification is a comprehensive audit that applies broadly to all fruit and vegetable crops and address labour conditions, food safety and pest management. EFI Standards are presented in three documents that should be read and agreed by growers in conjunction with the certifying bodies.

AHIFORES – Mexico

[Coalition/Certification]

This coalition brings together 80% of all agricultural exporters in Mexico in an effort to promote good practices and social responsibility. The coalition operates using the Responsible Agricultural Company Distinction (DEAR) standards which were originally designed as a self-assessment guide for agricultural companies and producers to assess their level of compliance with the rights described in Chapter 23 of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA).

Buoni e Giusti – Italy

[Campaign/Certification]

Launched by Coop Italy, the campaign advocates for an ethical production and supply chain. Coop was the first company in Europe to adhere to the SA8000 ethical standard which is an auditable, internationally recognized certification that encourages organizations to treat workers fairly. Social Accountability International (SAI), a multi-stakeholder initiative with representatives from the private sector, NGOs, labour unions, governments and academia, developed and maintains SA8000.

#FiliaraSpora – Italy

[Campaign]

Created to trace the entire agri-food chain, from the field to the shelf, this campaign addresses the need for an integrated approach between environment, agriculture and anti-mafia rights in Italy's agrifood system. The three associations responsible for launching the initiative are Terra! Onlus, an environmental association; da Sud, an anti-mafia association; and Terrelibere, a migration and anti-mafia organization.

NoCap – Italy

[Association / Label project]

The initiative aims to counter exploitation by promoting an ethical food-supply chain. The NoCap association includes professionals with different backgrounds and skills, such as international cooperation experts, agronomists, journalists, lawyers, and engineers, with the goal of disseminating high-quality standards that protect both workers' rights and strive for environmental sustainability. It was founded by a group of activists and currently finances itself through donations and relies on crowd funding for specific projects, including the initiation of an ethical seal.

SOS Rosarno – Italy

[Association]

SOS Rosarno was launched as a solidarity economy project with the goal of reversing the structural conditions of the supply chain which impoverish small farmers and result in the exploitation of migrant farmworkers. It was created by local farmers, activists, and African workers to promote a transparent and fair citrus-fruit supply chain. The association promotes alternative agriculture practices, based on fair relations and short supply chains.

C'est Qui le Patron – France

[Brand/ Certification (consumer-driven initiative)]

The brand was created to provide consumers power to decide which products would be placed on the shelves. It was created through the cooperative CQLP that offers fair prices to producers, encouraging consumers to fix the price. Their goal was a bottom-up approach, involving consumers in all phases of the food supply. Consumers have direct participation by 'voting' and sharing their views on product attributes via online questionnaires. Fair farm practices and compensation, traceability of the product, ingredients, and ecofriendly practices are essential criteria in the voting process.

LESSONS LEARNED

Drawing from this review of best practices, the following features are essential to the success of certification programming:

- Migrant workers' inclusion and participation in partnership/certification schemes have been instrumental in addressing the most pressing issues in the agriculture sector, such as forced labour or modern slavery, discrimination, harassment, and sexual violence.
- Permanent, on-site and third-party quality monitoring and enforcement of standards and codes of conducts are pivotal for the success of partnerships and certification initiatives.
- Binding agreements with buyers should be a strict condition for participation, and should include a robust system for monitoring, compliance and sanctions when necessary.
- Extensive standards and third-party audits for the entire food-supply chain is a key structural mechanism for ensuring fair treatment to migrant workers, safety and quality assurance.
- Appropriate complaint resolution mechanisms are needed to ensure migrants do not face retaliation under a guest worker program. This includes practices that check worker understanding using different communication methods and languages and even creating literacy programs to address educational differences.
- Strong awareness-raising campaigns allow consumers to become literate in the social sustainability of the products they purchase which may contribute to the success of these initiatives.

WHAT SHOULD A CERTIFICATION INCLUDE?

In summary, the following are key elements needed to create a strong certification program:

- Trustworthy third-party systems, audits and/or coalitions that involve workers participation and assess all tiers of supply chains in order to ensure that risks and value are equally shared among all the stakeholders.
- Legally binding agreements with buyers, that include transparent codes of conduct, rigid supply chain protocols, and strong monitoring and sanction schemes.
- Training and capacity building strategies aimed at providing farmers and migrant workers with the tools to participate in the application and evaluation of labour standards and quality-related processes in the agrifood sector.
- Consumer and community engagement initiatives aimed at connecting with civil society organizations, including community leaders, community-based organizations, and worker and migrant organizations.
- Direct action campaigns promoted by coalitions in the agriculture sector with the potential to educate the community about migrant workers' exploitation and discrimination.

This review is part of CERC Migration's Fair Farm Work project, and was produced as a collaboration between: