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Better Labour Practices Programme update

Advancing human rights in the sugar cane sector

1. About the programme

Fairtrade International's Better Labour Practices Programme (BLP) is a global improvement programme that works with Fairtrade sugar producer organisations in countries with high risks of human rights violations and significant risks to vulnerable individuals, or producer organisations with individual risks. The increasing labour shortage in many Fairtrade sugar producing countries adds to those risks.

The programme targets producers, workers, and traders, and aims to mitigate unacceptable labour practices, such as child or forced labour, gender-based violence, and other forms of workplace violence or exploitation. It combines training on compliance with Fairtrade Standards with Producer Network support and projects on better labour practices. It is aligned with government regulations as well as relevant industry and business codes of conduct.

The BLP Programme is funded through income generated by Fairtrade sales. The first project contracts were signed in late 2019, but the pandemic meant that many projects could only be rolled out later than first envisaged. As Fairtrade cane sugar is produced in the three producer regions, target countries and projects were prioritised based on risks, and in collaboration with the relevant Producer Networks (PNs) and National Fairtrade Organisations (NFOs).

Since 2019, funding from a percentage of sales has enabled Fairtrade to implement the Better Labour Practices Programme as well as the Climate Resilient Cane Production Programme, on which a fact sheet will follow in due course.

We'd like to thank all buyers of Fairtrade sugar and Fairtrade members who promote Fairtrade sugar sales, as these enable us to develop and implement highly impactful and successful projects.

2. Supporting HREDD compliance

Our Better Labour Practices Programme equips producers with skills and tools to meet HREDD requirements through targeted training, robust monitoring systems, and alignment with national frameworks. By fostering transparency and sustainability, Fairtrade strengthens sugar cane supply chains for future challenges, while upholding ethical practices.

Fairtrade's sugar programmes also provide options for business partners and NFOs to work with their licensees on their path towards compliance with EU legislation. They present an opportunity to strengthen partnerships with Fairtrade supply chains and the Fairtrade system. Our programmes can function as offer to business to co-finance projects that mitigate risks in supply chains. In case of interest, please contact your local Fairtrade representative or [Monika Berresheim](#) at Fairtrade International for more information.

Key HREDD contributions include:

- Centralised monitoring systems can simplify compliance with labour requirements and environmental standards.
- Investments in human rights protection foster readiness for regulatory demands.
- Focus on social and environmental sustainability supports long-term resilience.
- The [Fairtrade Trader Standard](#) includes detailed HREDD requirements.

3. Global sugar sector

Sugar cane is a cornerstone of agriculture globally, driving economic growth and sustaining millions of livelihoods. Sugar farming and processing contribute significantly to the gross domestic product of many countries, creating thousands of jobs and fostering economic resilience in rural communities. Sugar cane is an annual crop with usually one harvest per year. It represents approximately 80 percent of the world's sugar production and is an essential resource for food and non-food, biofuels, and industrial products.

Globally, Fairtrade sugar cane was grown on more than 91,259 hectares in 2023-24, involving 38,264 producers in 84 small-scale producer organisations (SPOs). In sugar, Fairtrade certification is only open to SPOs, who employ seasonal workers during the harvest. A Fairtrade Minimum Price is hard to set, and the Fairtrade Premium is on the lower side compared to other Fairtrade products, with \$60 per metric tonne of conventional sugar and \$80 per metric tonne of organic sugar.

Nonetheless, Fairtrade sugar producers earned over €8.1 million in Fairtrade Premium in 2023 alone, with 140,536 metric tonnes of sugar sold on Fairtrade terms. These numbers underline Fairtrade's important contribution to fostering more equitable farming and trading conditions in the sugar sector.

Significant sustainability efforts are underway in sugar cane cultivation and processing. Smallholder sugar farming systems exemplify agroecological agriculture, and achieve near-zero net emissions. Our Better Labour Practices Programme serves as a critical enabler of both environmental and social sustainability in this context. It works with producers to address challenges such as hazardous working conditions, increasing labour shortages, sugar price

volatility, low wages, gender inequality, and child or forced labour. Human rights violations and climate change are the main risks identified in the sugar cane sector.

Fairtrade's work spans key sugar-producing regions and countries, including small island development states such as Belize, Mauritius, Fiji, and Costa Rica. Each of these has its own unique needs and tailored interventions. Together, these efforts foster ethical supply chains, promote more sustainable practices, and prepare producers for future challenges.

4. Scope of the Better Labour Practices Programme

Country	Reach	Project status
Belize	Four Fairtrade producer organisations 5,200 members	Started in 2020 Ongoing
Mauritius	23 Fairtrade producer organisations 2,295 members	Started in 2021 Ongoing
Fiji	Two Fairtrade producer organisations 10,726 members	Started in 2020 Completed
Fiji	Lautoka Cane Producers Association (LtCPA) 5,498 members	Started in 2024 Completed

5. Belize: Pioneering youth engagement and labour rights advocacy

People reached by at least one SPO: 2,266 members and 2,000 seasonal field workers (primarily cane cutters) trained in child labour prevention and other labour rights. 1,397 field workers representing 95 percent of the workforce covered by updated agreements.

Change: Recognition from the US Dept. of Labour.

Impact: Strengthened labour rights awareness, YICBMR system, improved safety, hydration awareness.

Belize has emerged as a leader in advancing labour rights and youth engagement in the sugar sector. 91 percent of the country's total sugar production of around 100,000 metric tonnes per

year is managed by the four Fairtrade certified SPOs representing 5,500 members, 3,320 of which are part of the Belize Sugar Cane Farmers Association (BSCFA). The remaining nine percent of Belizean sugar are produced by the Belize Sugar Industries Ltd.

Belize is a key Fairtrade sugar origin and supplier. Fairtrade offers support and training since Belize is listed as a country with labour risks and faces challenges through an increasing shortage of labour.

The Belize Sugar Cane Farmers' Association, the largest of the SPOs in the country, initially lead the initiatives to tackle child labour and to promote better labour conditions and workers' rights. The other three Fairtrade SPOs and the sugar mill fully supported the activities.

BSCFA implemented innovative approaches, such as the Youth Inclusive Community-Based Monitoring and Remediation system (YICBMR), which engages young people as monitors and trains them to identify and address labour risks proactively. In addition, updated worker agreements have improved safety conditions for 95 percent of the BSCFA workforce.

BSCFA have strengthened partnerships with national agencies and global organisations. A Brazil-Belize Technical Exchange on Child Labour Prevention has enhanced the skills of SPO leaders to adopt effective remediation strategies. These collaborations support the implementation of Belize's National Child Labour Policy and alignment with international labour standards.

The launch of the Belize National Child Labour Policy and Strategy was a significant success for Fairtrade and the Belize sugar industry. The US Department of Labour recently noted "moderate advancement" in tackling child labour and made special mention of BSCFA and its role in the National Child Labour Policy. Supply chain partners (e.g. Tate & Lyle Sugars) and their buyers, have also supported and co-invested in related projects.

Belize's focus on youth-driven compliance systems and collaborative partnerships positions it as a model for sustainable and ethical sugar cane production. With pilots planned for broader YICBMR implementation, the sugar sector is poised to continue its progress in protecting human rights.

5.1 Key programme activities in Belize

Training on child labour, forced labour, gender-based violence

Action: BSCFA launched an awareness campaign reaching 2,266 members, harvesting group leaders and 2000 workers (cane cutters) through workshops, field visits, home distribution of information, and digital communication.

Outcome: Increased awareness among farmers and workers, contributing to improved labour conditions and compliance with Fairtrade Standards.

Strengthening agreements for field workers

Action: All SPOs implemented the third year of the Cane Cutters' Agreement and the first year of the Machine Operators' and Truck Drivers' Agreement, covering 1,397 seasonal field workers across 154 harvesting groups who were provided with safety gear, tools, and first-aid kits. COVID restrictions meant that fewer workers were reached than initially envisioned.

Outcome: Improved labour conditions, clearer employment terms, and better safety provisions for field workers.

Partnering with government and international organisations

Action: Belize-Brazil Technical Exchange on strategic labour inspections and child labour prevention, engaging with the Belize government and international organisations.

Outcome: Strengthened regional cooperation, identified key challenges in child labour prevention, and initiated steps toward implementing Belize's National Child Labour Policy and Strategic Plan.

Continuous labour monitoring and youth engagement

Action: Integrated child labour and forced labour monitoring into the internal management system and engaged young people in monitoring efforts through the apprenticeship and internship programme.

Outcome: More effective identification and response to labour risks with trained youth contributing to industry oversight and potential employment opportunities.

Promotion of health and safety in the workplace

Action: Awareness campaigns on adequate hydration to prevent kidney disease among field workers. Distributed safety equipment, first aid kits, and hydration tools such as water thermoses.

Outcome: Improved worker health and safety awareness, reduced risks related to dehydration (Chronic Kidney Disease) and workplace injuries.

Addressing forced labour and strengthening prevention measures

Action: While forced labour was not identified as a challenge, the SPOs planned proactive measures including meetings with relevant government agencies and reallocated funds to reinforce youth involvement in monitoring programmes.

Outcome: Strengthened prevention strategies and industry-wide commitment to eliminating forced labour.

6. Mauritius: Strengthening labour policies and monitoring systems

People reached: 2,295 smallholder farmers; around 144 seasonal workers and contractors

Impact: Development of labour policies, training for Labour Committees, ICS piloting for risk management.

Change: 52 percent reduction in non-compliance cases, stronger grievance mechanisms and worker inclusion.

The Mauritius sugar cane sector is integral to its economy. Annually, it produces around 250,000 metric tonnes of sugar. Smallholder farmers account for about 20 percent of the total production, of which 16,000 metric tonnes (30 percent) are produced by 22 Fairtrade cooperatives. Individual SPOs in Mauritius have fewer members and smaller plots compared to those in other countries, meaning that the total number of Fairtrade cooperatives here is relatively high.

Volatile prices, high production costs, and inconsistent labour practices, especially in very small producer organisations, pose significant challenges. As a small island developing state and a tourist destination, Mauritius experiences increased labour shortages.

Mauritius is emerging as a model for Fairtrade sugar cane production, demonstrating how robust systems can increase producers' alignment with HREDD requirements while also improving livelihoods. Fairtrade's Better Labour Practices Programme has taken significant steps to strengthen labour standards and worker protection within cooperatives and has mitigated supply chain risks related to certification volatility.

Fairtrade Africa is currently implementing an anti-harassment policy, for which it is gathering information from workers on the status of labour practices. The feedback of this is meant to shape the design and implementation of the policy at producer organisation level.

6.1 Key programme activities in Mauritius

Policy development workshops and labour standards adoption

Action: Targeted training for 20 cooperatives, equipping Labour Committees with the knowledge and tools to draft and implement policies against child labour, forced labour, and workplace harassment. In addition to co-op members, 144 seasonal workers, including contractors, were trained.

Outcome: 15 cooperatives fully adopted new labour policies, putting comprehensive, standardised measures in place to protect workers' rights. They have contributed to safer, fairer, and more inclusive workplaces, with policies now guiding operations and worker interactions.

Piloting internal control systems

Action: Pilots in three cooperatives to improve the identification and management of labour-related risks and enhance their monitoring and compliance capabilities.

Outcome: Strengthened ability to detect potential labour risks early, enabling proactive remediation measures. The cooperatives are now better equipped to manage internal workers' rights processes, resulting in greater accountability and reduced instances of non-compliance.

Monitoring system for policy compliance

Action: Implemented system to track adherence to new labour policies and ensure ongoing compliance with Fairtrade Standards across the cooperatives.

Outcome: Significant improvement of implementation of labour policies and ethical practices within the cooperatives and considerably improved compliance with Fairtrade Standards. Increased transparency and regular monitoring contribute to the policies being actively followed.

Improved grievance mechanisms and worker inclusion

Action: Fairtrade training emphasised the importance of grievance mechanisms and worker inclusion in decision-making.

Outcome: Workers now have better grievance mechanisms in place, so they can raise concerns more easily. Workers participate in shaping policies and practices that affect their lives through greater inclusion in decision-making, fostering a fairer and more democratic working environment.

Recognition ceremony for successful cooperatives

Action: Plans for a recognition ceremony to celebrate cooperatives that have successfully adopted and implemented better labour practices.

Outcome: The upcoming recognition ceremony is set to celebrate the achievements of the participating cooperatives and also to encourage other cooperatives to adopt similar ethical practices. By publicly honouring the progress made, Fairtrade aims to inspire broader participation and expand the positive impact on labour practices across the sector.

7. Fiji: Advancing gender equity and worker inclusion

People reached: Over 10,726 sugar cane farmers supported by two SPOs in the first project phase, 5,498 sugar cane farmers covered in the second phase. More than 1,200 workers trained on labour rights and gender equity, sustainable farming practices, and herbicide use reduction.

Impact: Increased workers' rights and gender equity awareness, stronger supply chains, strengthened environmental practices, robust monitoring systems

Change: 37 percent female participation, improved compliance with labour requirements of Fairtrade Standards. Strengthened labour rights compliance.

With an annual sugar production of around 135,000 metric tonnes, Fiji's sugar cane industry is vital for the country's economic stability. Around 95 percent of the total production is managed by Fijian sugar cane SPOs, all of whom are Fairtrade certified with the exception of periods when single producer organisations might temporarily be suspended. The Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) produces the remaining approximate five percent of the country's total annual sugar production.

Being a small island development state and a tourist destination means there are severe labour shortages in Fiji, and the sector faces issues of gender disparity. The practice of centrally importing herbicides for the entire Fijian sugar industry from Australia can pose an additional challenge for Fairtrade SPOs, especially when only products whose use is banned by Fairtrade are available.

Fairtrade's interventions address these challenges by fostering inclusive practices, enhancing labour rights, building community resilience, and promoting more sustainable agricultural practices. A previous Fairtrade programme and the current Better Labour Practices Programme

have stabilised the SPOs' certification status. By integrating social inclusion and fostering collaboration, Fiji's sugar cane producers are making significant strides toward sustainable and ethical production.

Lautoka Cane Producer Association (LtCPA) was not part of the first programme phase, but successfully implemented the Better Labour Practices Programme in 2024-25.

Collaboration with local NGOs such as Empower Pacific, as well as with the Fiji Police and government agencies, has further strengthened the social compliance framework.

7.1 Key programme activities in Fiji

Training on gender equity and labour rights

Action: Comprehensive training on gender equity and labour rights delivered to over 1,200 workers, focusing on awareness and implementation of child labour, forced labour, and workplace harassment policies.

Outcome: Increased awareness and understanding of labour rights has led to improved conditions. Workers are better equipped to recognise and address labour violations, contributing to more compliant and equitable working environments.

Partnering with local NGOs for worker support

Action: Providing targeted support to at-risk workers.

Outcome: Workers in vulnerable situations now have access to timely support services, helping them navigate workplace challenges and receive assistance in cases of labour violations or exploitation. Collaboration with NGOs has enhanced the industry's capacity to protect its most at-risk workers.

Strengthening internal management systems for labour monitoring

Action: Strengthened internal management systems in Fairtrade SPOs to better monitor and improve labour conditions.

Outcome: Improved monitoring mechanisms enable early identification and remediation of labour-related risks. Enhanced management capacity has led to more effective implementation of labour policies, increasing compliance and worker satisfaction.

Second programme phase: Training for Lautoka Cane Producer Association

Action: Training covering key labour rights issues, including child labour, forced labour, and gender-based violence.

Outcome: Higher levels of compliance with Fairtrade Standards and Fiji's labour laws, and also improved health and safety measures.

Strengthening Environmental practices and reducing chemical use

Action: Training focused on safe chemical handling, reduction of chemical use, waste disposal, and conservation techniques to mitigate environmental risks. Introduction of trash conservation

and ratoon management through collaboration with the Fiji Sugar Corporation and the Sugar Research Institute of Fiji.

Outcome: Awareness raising and significant reduction of the use of banned herbicides. Soil health has improved, and farmers adopt more sustainable practices.

8. Case study: Casa de la Alegría – a model for worker and family support in Costa Rica

CoopeVictoria is a Costa Rican sugar and coffee cooperative. The organisation has invested Fairtrade Premium funds in the Casa de la Alegría initiative, a pioneering childcare programme for sugar cane and coffee workers. It is primarily available to seasonal and migrant workers and allows parents, and particularly mothers, to work during harvest seasons without worrying about their children's safety. Professional caregivers provide a nurturing environment where children receive education, recreation, and culturally appropriate meals.

This approach promotes family well-being and supports gender equity by enabling women to participate in the workforce to a greater extent. The project also has the positive side-effect that the same worker families return to CoopeVictoria every year to carry out the harvest.

The project is funded by Fairtrade Premium earned through coffee and sugar sales. Recent investments have expanded the programme's capacity and improved its facilities.

Casa de la Alegría sets a benchmark for integrating the family welfare of seasonal farm workers into sugar and coffee supply chains, and showcases how community-focused interventions can drive transformative change. Other cooperatives in Costa Rica and neighbouring countries have followed suit.

9. The path forward for Fairtrade sugar programmes

Fairtrade remains committed to shaping a sugar cane industry where human rights are protected, farmers and workers can fulfil their potential, and communities thrive.

Fairtrade sugar cane producer organisations around the world are as diverse as their crop. Some are small cooperatives with only 100 members and small plots, and some have several thousands of members and rely on seasonal workers during the long harvest period. Fairtrade's work in the sugar sector can only be meaningful if it addresses key challenges that are relevant in the specific local context.

The increasing shortage of seasonal workers and cane cutters poses the risk that the numbers of child and migrant workers could increase in future. In addition, the volatility of sugar prices and increasingly extreme weather patterns affect yields and lead to lower incomes for producers, limiting their ability to invest further in their crop.

Nevertheless, we encourage sugar producers to invest in [human rights and environmental due diligence \(HREDD\)](#) to improve market access and incentivise longer-term business relationships and investments. Our regularly updated [Impact Platform](#) and the recently updated sugar section of the [Fairtrade Risk Map](#) support supply chain partners in understanding these risks, taking

action to mitigate them, and working towards compliance with legislation such as the EU [Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive](#) (CSDDD) and [EU Deforestation Regulation](#) (EUDR).

In addition, Fairtrade invites business partners to co-fund projects to mitigate supply chain risks and enhance their supply chains' preparedness for CSDDD and EUDR requirements. These programmes can potentially reduce the risk of supply chain disruptions, foster an interest in seasonal workers to return to working with Fairtrade producers, and improve compliance with labour and HREDD requirements. They also provide an opportunity to increase sales and strengthen relationships between Fairtrade supply chain partners.

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