

What trade unions can do

Trade unions have a major role to play in improving working conditions among smallholders, workers and others, although particular features of smallholdings can create significant challenges in doing so. This chapter of the guidelines suggests some ideas for action and gives case studies of successful activities and campaigns.

7.1 Background

The agriculture sector accounts for half the world's workforce. The composition of the workforce is changing however. The percentage of waged workers is increasing, particularly among women workers, as small farmers are forced off their land for political reasons or cannot survive on returns from their crops and so seek employment as agricultural workers. Plantations are restructuring and using smallholders as outgrowers/contractors.

7.2 Organising smallholders

In recognition of these changes many unions do now recognise the right of non-salaried workers and producers to join trade unions.

For example, in 2002, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) changed its rules, deleting references to waged workers and replacing it with the broader classification of 'workers'. These include self-employed, small and family producers, tenant farmers, sub-contractors and landless sharecroppers. The IUF has affiliated agricultural trade unions that represent 'unwaged' workers plus numerous organisations with strategic alliances that have also become affiliates. It does recognise that there is no one organising model or structure that will fit all affiliates although there are common principles behind national models.

7.3 Building alliances

The challenge for trade unions is trying to organise workers involved in agriculture, including those who have no history of democratic organisation. However, trade unions are well placed to mobilise and involve the community. Alliances can be built between food chain workers, rural workers and small producers into permanent autonomous organisations. Trade unions can adapt their structures so that they can take on the problems of the self-employed and small producers. Trade unions can provide sustainable and organised democratic structures at national level together with the collection of funds, which helps them to maintain their independence.

Alliances also need to be built with organisations that provide social services and technical production support such as the ILO's STEP (Strategies and Tools against Social Exclusion and Poverty) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) which provide farmers and agricultural workers with support services. STEP pro-



motes the extension of social protection in health to all workers, especially in the informal sector. It works with rural communities and unions providing support services and micro-lending for small farmers' associations. It also has working links with the UN (World Health Organisation, UNICEF and United Nations Development Programme), NGOs, co-operatives and research institutes. Examples of its work include viable health schemes to improve working conditions in agriculture; promoting gender equality and reducing rural poverty; AIDS prevention programmes; establishing links between their network of organisations and sharing information.

FAO's mandate, as a UN agency, is to work for food security and the alleviation of poverty. Most of its activities focus on technical assistance and support services to small farmers and agricultural workers. In Uganda, farmers are given access to information on services, technology, the market, training for quality control and support programmes. In Mozambique, FAO has developed savings clubs in order to improve productivity and food safety through technology and irrigation systems. FAO has recently established direct links with the IUF regional offices and its affiliates. It collaborates with Oxfam UK Land Net and Land Net East Africa.

7.4 How to organise smallholders in a sustainable way

Trade unions need to recognise the specific needs of smallholders, for example, security of tenure, and offer appropriate services and assistance. The smallholders' needs, as outlined in chapter 2, are to have access to networks, which in turn can access water, tools, production techniques, credit, legal assistance and markets. Land reform is also an issue if trade unions are to alleviate poverty, unemployment and violence. This could lead to control over production and marketing and ensure the production of safe food, preservation of the environment and biodiversity as well as preserving the seeds of native produce. Access to land should be a worker's right, allowing them both a home and food.

When looking at trade union recruitment in some countries (for example, Kenya, which the Smallholder Project used as a case-study), we have to realise that trade unions may not have the time or money let alone the effective means of communication to conduct recruitment campaigns on a national basis. If smallholders and their workers are not organised, they should be given the facilities to allow them to do so. Empowerment through collective action could begin that process, with the key players being the lay activists that live in local communities (for example, workers in the processing factories). They should be encouraged to conduct a campaign to unionise smallholders and their workers in their community. This would also be the easiest way of collecting union dues from both smallholders and workers.

The International Co-operative Alliance, which is an international, non-governmental organisation uniting and representing co-ops around the world, could provide the answer for some smallholders, whether they employ labour or not. It has a strong international voice with over 230 member organisations representing 760 million people worldwide. Its main objective is to promote and strengthen viable co-operatives working to facilitate the development of economic and other mutually beneficial relations between member organisations. It also develops new co-operatives. It can provide members and partners with a network of contacts through which experience and best practice are shared.

7.5 Case studies

Unions around the world have organised smallholders in a sustainable way. Some examples are listed below.

UNAC, Colombia

The Colombian union UNAC (National Agro-Food Union) represents various sectors in the food and agriculture chain, associations of small producers and organisations involved in environmental protection training and agro-ecological production. It was set up in 2000 with the help of the IUF. Within two years it had established 756 organisations and had 74,000 members. Its role is not only to negotiate and defend collective agreements but to intervene nationally with the state in meeting the needs of the rural population. It organises study circles, involving the whole family, where they discuss ecological, sustainable agricultural production, the management and community control of reserved land (that is the protection of forests, water and woods) and training in environmental matters. It also organises independent workers and their families co-operatively to produce and export plantains and bananas. UNAC is seeking support from the government and the international community to consolidate the organisation and work of these networks.

CONTAG, Brazil

In Brazil, CONTAG (National Confederation of Agricultural Workers) has 2,700 trade unions and 10 million members who have campaigned for 40 years for land reform, funding policies, marketing, employment rights including gender and youth policies, different agricultural policies for family farmers and social benefits (including pensions) for rural workers. To ensure trade unions are involved in the process they have found it necessary to involve the community in a decentralised decision-making process. CONTAG has 400 elected Prefects (councillors) and 10,014 members of rural councils.

Uruguay

In Northern Uruguay, bordering Brazil, small farmers produce vegetables in greenhouses. Five years ago they were heavily indebted and dependent on a technological package based on expensive and highly-polluting inputs. For every 10 boxes of tomatoes produced, four were used to pay for the pesticides. With the help of the Regional IUF they have turned this around, building an organisation where they work collectively and in a more eco-friendly environment.

PKSK, Philippines

The PKSK (National Union of Independent Rural Organisations) is a new organisation that was set up as a result of globalisation and deregulation of the economy. Alliances were built with Akbayan (an opposition party that won a seat in the last election defending land reform and rural development policies), PAKISAMA (the national farm workers federation) and KASAMA-LO (the national federation of democratic farm workers). Through these alliances PKSK represents small farmers, farm workers, fisher folk, women, indigenous people and co-operatives and is established in 20 out of 76 provinces in the Philippines. Its aim is to improve access to production, services and markets, improving communications between the leaders and giving them more training.



7.6 Child labour

Bitter harvest, the ILO's document on child labour in agriculture produced in 2002, states that, "The work children perform in agriculture is often invisible, because they assist their parents in task work or other forms of work organisation. Because the work is not recognised, nor easily recorded in statistics, it goes largely unnoticed. This creates a cycle of poverty and affects the future of children since their access to education and training is greatly reduced". Half of all workplace fatalities are in agriculture with children figuring largely in the statistics. The highest proportion of working children between the ages of five and 14 (around 40 per cent) is in Africa, with the highest percentage among rural children, particularly girls. For example, children are believed to comprise a quarter of all agricultural workers in Kenya. A recent ILO report states that nearly one-third of the agricultural workforce is made up of children in some developing countries. The increase in the numbers of AIDS orphans will result in a further increase if steps are not taken to halt AIDS.

Trade unions have always taken this issue very seriously. CONTAG (Brazil) and GAWU (General Agricultural Workers Union, Ghana) have been at the forefront of the fight to stop child labour, as the examples below demonstrate.

CONTAG, BRAZIL

- Produced 10,000 copies of the *Child workers' programme* in 1993 to disseminate information about the rights of rural children and to train trade unionists to improve provisions in collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) on prohibition of child labour.
- Provided five training courses for 150 union leaders as well as producing seven highly successful radio programmes to raise awareness. They were aired on CONTAG's network of 160 local radio programmes.
- Brought parents and working children together to discuss living and working conditions of children in rural areas. All this helped in lobbying the Government in ratifying ILO C182, which it did in 2000.
- Established a commission to determine the worst forms of child labour. It is now challenging the government to formulate public policies to implement ILO C138 and C182. Its suggested measures are: awareness-raising among members of parliament, judges, employers, parents and children; land reform; universal social security; school scholarship programmes where poor families receive a minimum salary if they send their children to school.

GAWU, GHANA

- Negotiated a CBA with the Ghana Oil Palm Development Committee, committing it to the eradication of child labour in and around the plantations and the country as a whole.
- Undertook joint research/studies on child labour.
- Conducted training and education, instituted rewards and sanction schemes with particular reference to casual workers, smallholders and outgrowers.
- Deepened awareness about child labour and its linkages with women's, children's, workers' and human rights as well as sustainable development.

Trade unions have to use the argument that agriculture that relies on child labour is not sustainable. Ron Oswald, General Secretary of the IUF says, "Children work because their parents are poor; they have to supplement the family income or provide unpaid labour. Child labour in agriculture cannot be tackled in isolation from one



of its main causes – rural poverty. Trade unions can work to eliminate child labour but the main priority has to be improving the living and working conditions of adult workers and through this eliminating the need for children to work. Cheap child labour undermines or weakens the possibility of negotiating a fair and decent wage for adult workers. We must work to eliminate child labour in order to break the cycle of rural poverty.”