



# Decent Work Strategy

2020-27



Credit: Better Cotton/Seun Adatsi. Better Cotton  
Farmer Aminata working in her cotton field.  
Kolondieba Mali. 2019.

# Table of Contents

1. Background	3
2. Decent Work challenges in agriculture	4
3. Outcomes	6
4. Decent Work Strategy 2020-27	7
Annex 1. Risk-based approach	11
Annex 2. Implementation plan	12



# 1. Background

Respect for both the environment and human rights is a core element of Better Cotton's approach: both are integrated into our organisational-level processes as well as our relationships with partners and our standards for farmers.

Through our field-level standard, the Principles & Criteria, and capacity building programmes, Better Cotton supports more than 2 million cotton farmers around the world to adopt practices that are better for the environment; using less water, fewer pesticides, and with improved biodiversity and soil health. Decent work is covered extensively under the Principles & Criteria, which applies to all farmers and workers participating in Better Cotton programmes worldwide.

Decent work is work that provides opportunities for women and men to work productively in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity. This approach is rooted in the ILO's declaration on fundamental principles and rights at work, the eight fundamental conventions of the ILO and the international bill of human rights.

As with most global agricultural commodities, the decent work challenges in cotton production are formidable; it will require strengthened expertise and new partnerships to achieve meaningful sustained change on the ground. With a network of more than 70 Programme Partners supporting millions of farmers and farm workers across more than 20 countries, Better Cotton is uniquely positioned to drive positive impact in working conditions on cotton farms globally.



## 2. Decent Work Challenges in Agriculture

There are fundamental decent work challenges in the cotton sector, due to the largely informal, often unregulated nature of farm work, and low profit margins for farmers, which contribute to low wages and poor working conditions.

### Low wages and incomes

Working relations in agriculture are often informal and seasonal, and government employment policy is frequently insufficient or absent. Often, minimum wage regulations do not apply to agricultural workers or are poorly enforced. When minimum wages are paid, they may still not be sufficient for workers to provide a decent life for themselves and their families. Even so, a lack of alternative income opportunities can leave workers with no choice but to accept undesirable terms of work. Farmers themselves, especially smallholders or landless farmers, are vulnerable to high levels of poverty and income insecurity due to crop failure and/or imbalanced product pricing on the market.

### Gender inequality and intersectionality

As a rule, women represent a majority of the manual labour force in cotton production doing labour-intensive jobs such as weeding, picking, etc, yet they tend to be under-represented in training groups and have access to fewer development and economic opportunities than their male counterparts.

In many cases, female workers earn less than men for the same work or are employed in different, lower-paying tasks. Lack of sanitary facilities in the field also poses a particular challenge for women, affecting work attendance and productivity, both of which can further drive down their incomes. Overlapping factors such as migrant status, age, and/or belonging to a minority religious, social, or ethnic group, further increase women's vulnerabilities to exploitation and abuse.

### Forced and bonded labour

Forced labour is when people are employed against their will or under threat of punishment (violent or non-violent). Bonded labour, also called debt bondage or debt slavery, is the most widespread form of 'modern slavery', particularly in agriculture. It occurs when a person is forced to work to pay off a debt. Typically, a person is pressured into working for little or no pay, and they may be tricked into further debt and face violence or intimidation if they try to leave. They can also be trapped in non-violent coercive ways, e.g., through the holding of identity documents or withholding of wages. Sometimes smallholder cotton farmers, particularly sharecroppers, are stuck working for years to pay off a debt to a landlord.





Credit: Better Cotton/ Morgan Ferrar. Better Cotton Farmer Shilpaben Rao. Gujarat India. 2019.

## Child labour

Child labour is common in agricultural communities as families often rely on children for help with production. According to the ILO<sup>1</sup>, nearly 70% of all child labourers work in agriculture – totalling 98 million. This number is expected to have grown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In some cases of bonded labour, children are born into bondage and must work to pay off their parents' debt. In both cases, child labour impedes the child's schooling and development, can affect their health and wellbeing impacting their future productivity, which, in turn, perpetuates cycles of poverty. The international labour standards around the eradication of child labour are universally applicable even if the legislative framework in a given country is weak.

## Health and safety concerns

Many farms do not meet basic health and safety requirements, including providing proper sanitation facilities or medical care in case of injuries on the job. For cotton farmers and workers, some of the biggest risks to health and safety are exposure to hazardous pesticides and chemicals, heat stress, and long working hours. Oftentimes this disproportionately affects the groups with

overlapping vulnerabilities, including women, child workers, migrants, and ethnic minorities, who tend to do most manual work in cotton farming.

## Labour rights are poorly understood and not enforced

Farmers and workers tend to have a limited understanding of the fundamental principles and rights at work, including the right to organise and bargain collectively. Agricultural workers typically fall outside worker support mechanisms (unions, social security schemes, etc.) compared to workers in other industries. This perpetuates the risk of labour rights' violations as those who may be in an exploitative position may not know that they are, and therefore not raise complaints or push back against illegal practices; or they may not have access to safe channels to raise their complaints. The lack of regulation, social security and labour inspection in the agricultural sector in many countries results in weak accountability for perpetrators and little protection for workers. The dispersed farm labour makes any interventions targeted to support workers, including monitoring or awareness raising, a real challenge to roll out and scale.

<sup>1</sup> 2020 Child Labour Global Estimates, ILO, Unicef, 2021

### 3. Outcomes

Further strengthening decent work at farm level is a core element in the Better Cotton 2030 strategy. The vision for 2030 is to achieve the following:

**Overall Outcome: Workers enjoy decent working conditions at farm level free from child labour, forced labour, workplace harassment, discrimination and violence**

**Intermediate outcomes for the initial phase of the Decent Work Strategy, to be achieved by 2027:**

1. Better Cotton Programme Partners are equipped and empowered to effectively monitor, prevent, or mitigate the risks of severe labour rights violations like child labour, forced labour and workplace harassment and violence
2. All farmers and workers enjoy safe and secure access to grievance channels to voice complaints, and have them meaningfully resolved
3. Responsible farm-level practices are scaled, including operational health and safety, fair recruitment, and worker remuneration
4. Workers earn a decent wage
5. Workers are better supported to understand and exercise their labour rights, including the right to organise and bargain collectively
6. Better Cotton operates a globally credible assurance system adapted to contextual risks of labour rights violations



Credit: Better Cotton/Seun Adatsi. Tata Djire (left) with Better Cotton Farmers, sorting through seed cotton. Kolondieba, Mali. 2019.

## 4. Decent Work Strategy 2020-27

Providing effective support to farmers and farm workers requires both a deep understanding of the local challenges and trust with communities. Better Cotton engages with farming communities through our global network of trusted Programme Partners, who are embedded in the communities where they operate. We will continue to invest in strengthening our own competencies and expertise in decent work, as well as building expertise amongst our Programme Partners. At the same time, tackling complex labour issues will require new impactful partnerships with relevant organisations and experts leading on decent work at international, national, and regional levels.

The Decent Work Strategy has three main pillars: Learn, Strengthen, and Monitor.

### Learn:

The Learn pillar is about making sure our solutions are risk-based and are adapted to local, validated decent work challenges. A high-level assessment of forced and child labour risks at country level will indicate which regions are highest priority for intervention. High-risk countries that also have significant numbers of Better Cotton farmers will be prioritised for an in-depth assessment of local decent work risk factors. This will include desk research, stakeholder consultations, and extensive field visits and farmer/ worker interviews to understand specific risks around recruitment, working conditions, labour migration, etc. Improved understanding of the context will enable Better Cotton to devise solutions that are locally relevant and targeted. The assessment findings will directly inform the country-level capacity building strategy, stakeholder engagement efforts, and activities aimed at addressing the most salient of the identified risks.

Focusing first on high-priority / high-risk contexts and later scaling it to all our operations, we will collaborate with our Programme Partners to build tools and systems to better address the relevant decent work challenges, e.g., around health and safety, recruitment, or monitoring. In addition, we will work together with our Programme Partners and relevant stakeholders to introduce accessible and reliable feedback channels for farmers and workers to help address risks before they escalate into serious or systemic labour rights violations.



## Strengthen:

Taking a compliance-based approach<sup>2</sup> to labour risks has the potential to push them further underground. Therefore, we will put the emphasis with our Programme Partners on better identification and mitigation of labour risks instead of proving the absence of incidences of labour rights violations. We will build up the competencies of all our country-level staff, our Programme Partners, and verifiers to strengthen our collective ability to detect and mitigate risks, identify cases, and deliver remedy to the victims.

In parallel, we will enhance the decent work understanding and competencies at Better Cotton organisational level and throughout our network of Programme Partners. We will do this through a combination of localised training, setting specific expectations on decent work competencies for Programme Partners, and bringing in more expertise (through 'knowledge partners'<sup>3</sup>) to support them. We will collaborate to improve knowledge around labour rights and empower farmers and workers to exercise them effectively.

The revision of the Principles & Criteria taking place over 2022-2023 will focus on strengthening our decent work indicators, including areas around forced labour risks, health and safety, and grievance mechanisms. We will ensure that capacity building approaches and partnerships with the relevant stakeholders are properly utilised to raise awareness, design and implement effective solutions at farm level.

## Monitor:

We will refine our monitoring and evaluation framework to better track the progress against our decent work targets. We will also support Programme Partners to better use existing field-level data (for example on recruitment practices and labour profiles) to identify risks and feed into capacity building.

We will further enhance our decent work monitoring approach in high-risk contexts, while concurrently building up the capacity of our Partners to remediate the cases of labour rights violations once detected and prevent them from reoccurring.

In addition, we will test and scale the use of direct-from-worker feedback technology (such as simple mobile phone surveys) to complement our assurance and monitoring systems. The use of these tools at scale has the potential to improve our understanding of field realities in real time, so that emerging risks can be addressed.

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<sup>2</sup> Compliance-based approach refers to a disproportionate focus on meeting the requirements set out in the standard in order to receive a licence, instead of preventative and risk mitigation measures. The risk is that such focus can lead to concealment of cases of e.g. child labour for the fear of losing a licence rather than identification and remediation.

<sup>3</sup> To distinguish from Programme Partners and Better Cotton teams.



To support Better Cotton to progress against the three pillars of its strategy, the cross-cutting priority will be collective action through greater collaboration, partnerships, and fundraising efforts.



## MONITOR

- Enhanced M&E systems
- Enhanced use of straight-from-worker feedback tools, e.g., worker voice technology
- Enhanced decent work risk monitoring, incident detection and remediation



## LEARN

- Better understand & address local risks and drivers of forced labour and child labour in high priority regions
- Global forced labour and child labour risk scoring
- Country-level decent work risk assessments



## STRENGTHEN

- Revision of the Decent Work Principles & Criteria
- Strengthen awareness and competencies of staff, Programme Partners and verifiers
- Build and operationalise producer-level labour management systems, with a strong grievance and remediation function
- Capacity building to improve knowledge and empower farmers and workers



## Partner and Collaborate:

The root causes of labour rights violations often sit outside of the immediate sphere of influence of Better Cotton. It is therefore imperative for Better Cotton to operate in a conducive enabling environment with basic legislative framework, stakeholder commitment to social issues, and presence of independent civil society.

The decent work challenges in cotton farming are considerable and will require collaboration across the value chain to drive systemic, positive change together. Better Cotton will actively engage with key stakeholders and establish partnerships in order to advance on the mission to reduce the risks of labour rights violations and improve decent work outcomes for cotton farming communities. We will build partnerships with relevant organisations, including government and international agencies, civil society, and non-governmental organisations to support our Programme Partners to achieve decent work improvements on the ground. Where appropriate, we will also support existing advocacy efforts to drive policy change and improve the enabling environment. Some examples of focus areas for stakeholder engagement are access to services, including social security, education, and finance, referral mechanisms, psychosocial support, and child protection, as well as freedom of association and collective bargaining.

# Annex 1. Risk-Based Approach

Decent work challenges are manifested in cotton production in many different ways. In order to ensure that Better Cotton achieves the intended impact, the approach to addressing the decent work challenges must be focused and risk-based. Better Cotton developed a Forced Labour Risk Scoring Tool which establishes the country level risk of forced labour in cotton production for countries where Better Cotton operates. Knowing the prevalence of forced labour is difficult due to its sensitive and often hidden nature, but by focusing on contextual and labour specific risk factors for cotton production, a relative understanding of risk levels can be developed. This risk-based approach is used by Better Cotton to prioritize further investigation and investment into the mitigation of forced labour where the risk is elevated. Please see the [Global Forced Labour Risk Assessment Methodology](#) for details of the approach. In 2022, Better Cotton intends to develop a Child Labour Risk Assessment Methodology to complement and strengthen the risk-based approach.

Table 1. Global Forced Labour Risk Scoring, Season 2021-22<sup>4</sup>

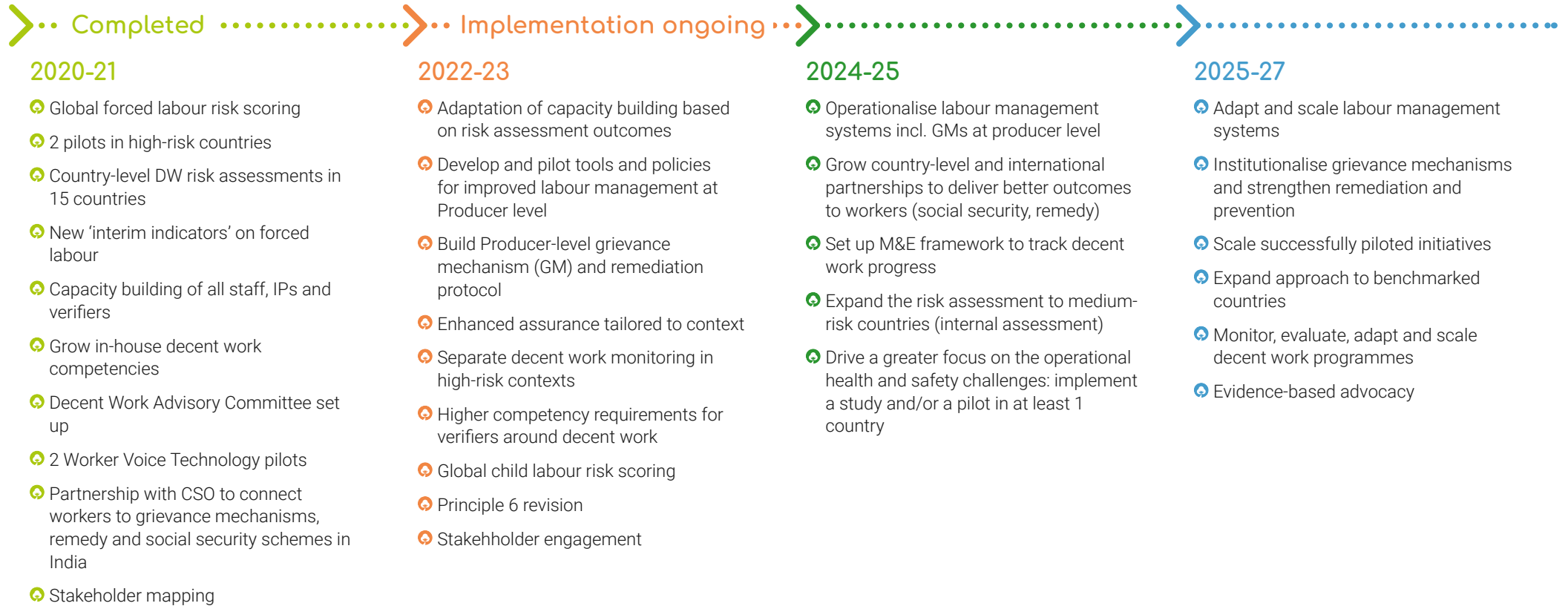
Country	Risk Level	Estimated Better Cotton farmer numbers ('000)	Estimated Better Cotton worker numbers ('000)
India	HIGH	998	1,020
Pakistan	HIGH	556	187
Mali	MEDIUM	147	877
China	HIGH	130	88
Mozambique	MEDIUM	81	132
Egypt	HIGH	7	8
Turkey	MEDIUM	4	13
South Africa	MEDIUM	3	0.6
Tajikistan	HIGH	1	54
Madagascar	MEDIUM	0.7	1
Kazakhstan	HIGH	0.5	5
USA	LOW		

Based on the risk scoring and the scale of Better Cotton operations in the country, a more in-depth decent work risk assessment is commissioned to further unpick and contextualise the challenges that need to be prioritised for addressing.

In 2021, such assessments were conducted in 15 countries/regions (India, Pakistan, Western China, as well as 12 sub-Saharan Africa countries where better cotton was produced (directly by Better Cotton or through a benchmarked standard, Cotton Made in Africa). The outcomes of the assessment will help us and our Programme Partners jointly design systems which address the specific contextual risks and improve working conditions overall.

<sup>4</sup> Our Global Forced Labour Risk Methodology was developed in 2021 and is reviewed on an annual basis, subject to revision as necessary. Country risk ratings are likely to change year-on-year, to reflect evolving circumstances, and/or changes in methodology.

# Annex 2. Implementation Plan







Please direct your questions  
about this document to:  
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Please visit our **[Decent Work webpage](#)**  
to learn more.

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Credit: Better Cotton/Emma Upton.  
Cotton blossom, Tajikistan. 2019