Human rights impacts and risks in transitions to sustainable agriculture

SOAS workshop June 2025

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Plans for today

Workshop aims:

- To share knowledge and insights on the potential human and labour rights implications of green transitions in food, farming and fisheries.
- To catalyse engagement on just transitions in food systems by bridging the gap between environmental sustainability, human rights and labour rights.
- To contribute to shaping an international research and action agenda on just transitions in food, farming and fisheries.

What we're looking for:

- Active participation… Diverse perspectives… Chatham House rules

Agenda

10:00 - 10:35	Introduction	Registration, refreshments Keynote Introduction
10:35 - 11:15	Session 1	Impacts of shifting to sustainable agriculture on workers
11:25 - 11:55	Session 2	Expert interventions
11:55 - 12:15	Tea and coffee break	
12:15 - 13:00	Session 3	Shaping a research and action agenda

Research project: A critical assessment of human rights impacts and risks in transitions to sustainable agri-food production

Purpose: To apply a 'just transitions' lens to the shifts towards environmentally sustainable agriculture in order to better understand implications for human rights, incl workers' rights.

Objectives:

a) To identify and better understand the **human rights impacts** associated with alternative agri-food production models.

b) To **build awareness of the human rights impacts** associated with alternative agri-food production models and inform action to mitigate risks through improved policy, practice and investment.

c) To **support key decision-makers in policy and industry** to integrate human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD) in decision-making related to sustainability transitions in agri-food supply chains.

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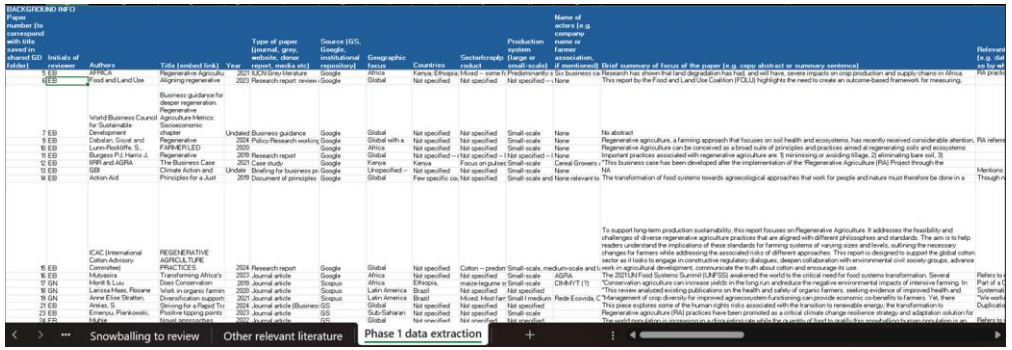
Ethical Trading Initiative

BananaLink

Methodology for rapid evidence review

- GS; Google; Scopus; major repositories (WB, FAO, CGIAR, ILO, IIED)
- “labour” or “worker” AND “impacts” AND “regenerative agriculture” or “sustainable agriculture” or “organic agriculture” – wide net
- **Expanded the original scope to:**
  - Small-scale and large
  - Any crop
  - Labour rights and human rights
  - Impacts that could interact with rights (e.g. income)
  - Global South
  - Logged papers relating to Global North (larger farms) for later



- 57 papers analysed: journal articles, systematic reviews, agronomic guides.
- Bananas deep dive

Limitations of our approach

- **Not a systematic review**
- **Wide net**:
  - Not only meta-analyses or primary research, also grey lit/handbooks
  - Multiple terms: regen. ag, sustainable ag, organic ag, agroecology – often means different interventions
- Studies may focus **on one measure** (e.g. yield, or income), or one case study
- Means not holistic, won't capture trade-offs, or may cherry-pick
- We focussed on studies that **report actual** impacts
- But **replicability, extent** or **durability** of impact unknown

Defining regenerative agriculture

- Lots of interest, **no consensus**, some definitions compete.
- **Outcome-based** (e.g. improved soil health)
- Regen Ag is an **umbrella term**: encompasses different agricultural practices. Few **include human/farmer element**

Practices *can* include:

- No-till / reduced till
- Composting / manure
- Agroforestry
- Use of cover crops
- Intercropping
- Reduction in use of agro-chemicals (for others none)

ICAC (2024) reviewed 12 existing regen. ag frameworks

	REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE PRACTICES	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	COUNT
1	Cover Crops	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	12
2	No-Till Or Zero-Till	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X		10
3	Reduced Tillage With Retained Residue	X	X	X		X		X		X	X	X	X	X	10
4	Crop Rotation	X	X	X			X	X			X	X	X	X	9
5	Livestock Grazing	X	X	X	X	X			X		X	X			8
6	Synthetic Fertilizer Reduced	X	X		X	X	X		X		X			X	8
7	Herbicides Reduced	X	X		X	X	X		X		X			X	8
8	Insecticides And Acaricides Reduced	X	X		X	X	X		X		X			X	8
9	Fungicides Reduced	X	X		X	X	X		X		X			X	8
10	Nematicides Reduced	X	X		X	X	X		X		X			X	8
11	Bactericides Reduced	X	X		X	X	X		X		X			X	8
12	Water Pollutants Contained		X	X	X	X	X				X	X		X	8
13	Integrated Silviculture		X		X	X	X				X	X			6
14	Plant Growth Regulators And Harvest Aids Reduce	X	X		X		X		X						5
15	Manure		X	X			X		X		X				5
16	Composting And Biochar	X	X		X		X				X				5
17	Conservation Buffers				X	X	X				X	X			5
18	Water Use Efficiency Improved		X			X	X				X	X		X	6
19	Intercropping	X	X				X				X				4
20	Human Rights					X	X	X			X				4
21	Continuous Improvement						X	X			X	X			4
22	Safe Work						X	X			X				3
23	Gmos With Herbicide Tolerance Reduced		X			X	X								3
24	Gmos With Insect Tolerance Reduced		X			X	X								3
25	Farm Profitability						X					X			2

Rights entry point (human and labour)

ILO labour rights:

- **Freedom of Association**
- **Right to Collective Bargaining**
- **Protection against Child Labour**
- **Elimination of Forced Labour**
- **Non-Discrimination**
- **Safe Working Conditions**

*Achieving "**decent work**" is the primary objective of upholding ILO labour rights*

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights:

- Right to **work in just and favourable conditions**;
- Right to social protection, to an **adequate standard of living** and to the highest attainable standards of physical and mental well-being;
- **Right to education and the enjoyment of benefits of cultural freedom** and **scientific progress**.

General insights from rapid review

- Almost entirely **small-scale farmer** focussed
- **End markets unclear**
- Very **few use framing of rights or refer to rights/decent work/working conditions**. Only ***potential* rights impacts** or how a just transition should take place:
  - **hazardous working conditions**
  - **child labour**
  - **loss of livelihood for smallholder farmers** who are replaced by large-scale farms to meet company climate targets
  - **reduced crop yields**, crop failure and low profit margins
  - **environmental risks** due to continued use of pesticides
  - **threats against environmental human rights defenders**
  - Because regen. ag does not typically require specialised technology or access to capital to achieve favourable results, it *could* have the potential to improve **gender equity**

Challenges of drawing insights

- Impacts are framed in **socio-economic terms** not rights
- Very hard to draw **generalised conclusions, results should be treated with caution:**
  - **Impacts vary** by context
  - **Time period of analysis is important but often differ or are unclear**
  - **Different** or **limited measurement(s) of impacts** on people
  - **Blind spots** e.g. unintended consequences for women
  - Studies lack **counterfactual** or **baseline data** against which to draw meaningful comparisons
  - Individual case studies or crop trials – **replicability?**
  - Papers frame **similar issues in different ways**

Initial insights on farmer impacts

- **Yield**: increases, mixed + lower for organic
- **Labour intensity of production:** practice dependent + farm size/mechanisation
- **Inputs/production costs** e.g. agrochemicals reduced versus increased (no-till)
- **Farmer income:**
  - Increase
  - Opportunity costs
  - Diversification of income sources where regen ag = diversified cropping
- **Nutrition and food security:** improved where regen ag = diversified cropping
- **Farmer health**: exposure to chemicals and less stress/enhanced community ties
- **Gender:**
  - Often **more work for women + children** but can depend on tools
  - Diversification of ag = more income generating opportunities for women
  - Different implications for women in different contexts (small-scale versus large)

Possible relevance to rights:
IBHR: an adequate standard of living; right to work in just and favourable conditions;
ILO labour rights: safe working conditions; Protection against child labour (to fill labour gaps)

Key informant interview insights

- +ve human/worker outcomes a**re often assumed to accompany +ve environmental outcomes**. Evidence is weak.
- Different framings have been used, **rarely labour or human right**s.
- Agriculture is **context specific** => sustainable agric will be different in diff. places
- **Workers and producers' social capital and knowledge** are critical to all forms of agriculture.
- **But very few strong examples of workers and producers participating in decision making** related to sustainable transition – with some exceptions

Key informant interview insights

- **Most** sustainable agric approaches incl **reductions in agro-chemical use**.
  - Leads to **increased labour requirements**, especially in initial years.
  - **+ve impacts for workers** from reduced chemical exposure should not be underestimated.
  - But **trade-offs are not well understood**
- **Smallholder farmers**: critical. But **labour requirements tend to be hidden** and a strict 'labour rights' framing can be difficult to apply.
- **Land rights** should not be ignored
- Importance of **equity lens**
- **Certification** schemes play a **limited role**
- A **major gap in available labour in some contexts** can lead to severe human rights abuses
- **Responsible purchasing practices required** for any transition

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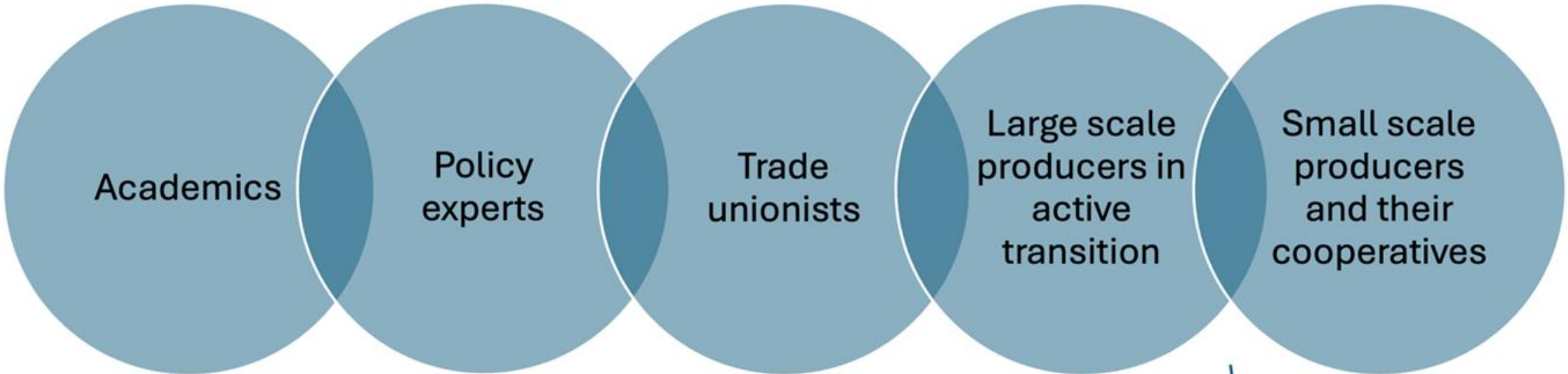
Labour impacts of transitions to sustainable agriculture

Banana ”splash”

Why bananas?	Leading food product in volume and value for most northern European retailers
	Labour intensive crop – low mechanisation, labour accounts for 40-45% cost of production
	Threat of TR4 – disease that could wipe out cavendish bananas
	Transition is a live issue
	Living wage initiatives - focus on labour issues among European retailers

Scope of rapid research phase into banana industry transitions

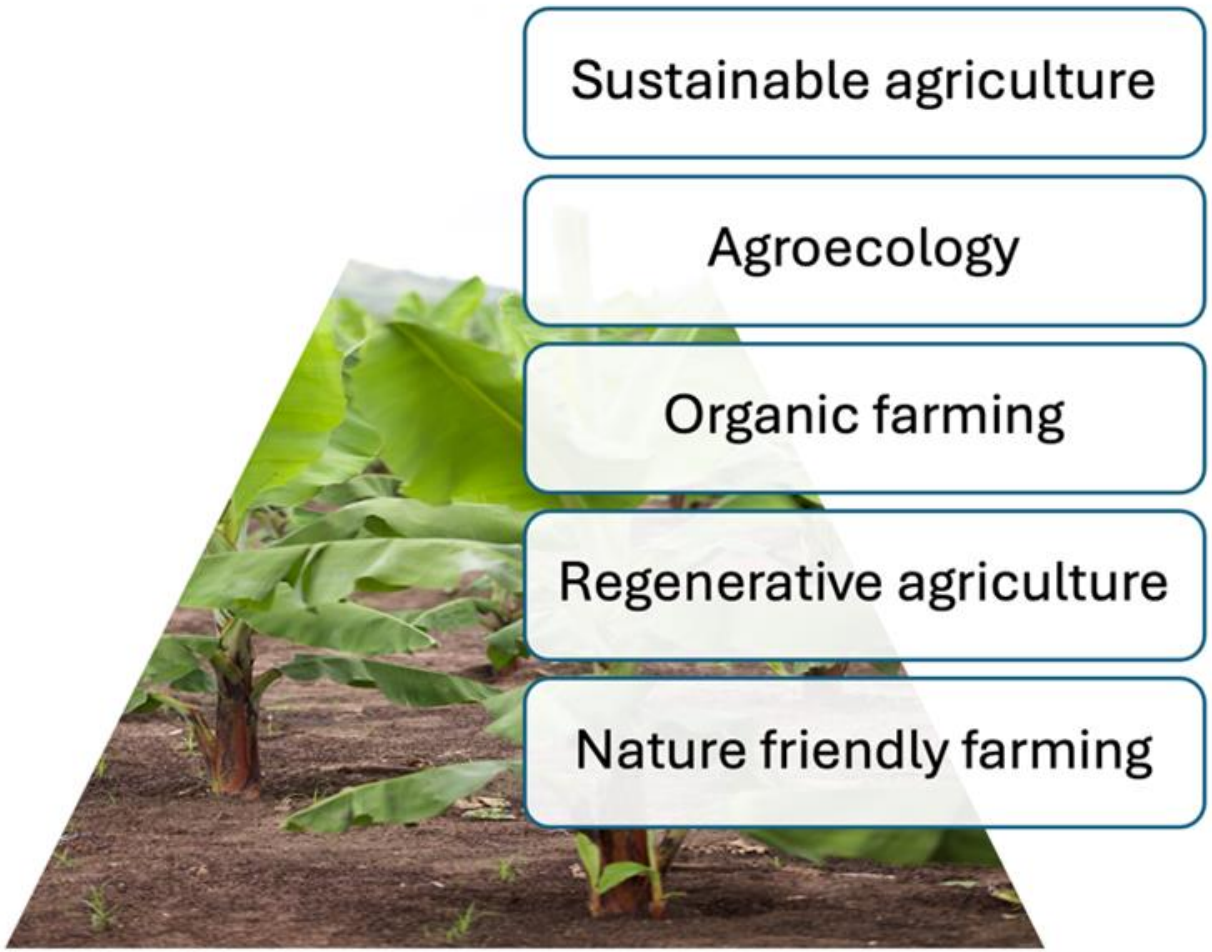


Lack of written information = a focus on key informant interviews

Most producers who were willing to talk were small in scale

Africa
South-East Asia
Latin America
Caribbean
Europe

Are we all talking about the same thing?



"Difference between conventional and agroecological – in conventional you fertilize the plant, in agroecological you fertilize the soil – the stomach of the plant"

"From the point of view of unions, sustainable includes sustainable for the worker and means decent work and living wages."

"Is 'transition' a realistic term for very large monocultures, or can we only talk of 'transformation'? In transition, you can move back and forth – like in politics from left to right wing parties …but in transformation you change something fundamentally."

Difficulty isolating cause and effect in complex moment of change

Labour is impacted both by the transitions towards sustainable production itself AND the drivers of those transitions

Initial findings: occupational health and safety

Reduced exposure to agrochemical poisoning

- Links to gender equity

Extreme Heat

- Diversification with tree cover creates a reduction in temperature on the plantation, micro-climates that are less prone to extreme heat and more comfortable for workers.
- More labour required to maintain increased number of plants, and to compost them.

Personal Protective Equipment

Where exposure to agrochemicals is eliminated as a risk, PPE burden reduced, lowering exposure to heat

Sustainability policies can be counterproductive – e.g. banning use of aerial spraying in Guadeloupe and Martinique led to workers being more exposed to chemicals.

Initial findings: changes to worker knowledge and tasks

Mitigation methods - managed task rotation.

Risks

Risk of very repetitive tasks, e.g. manually cutting leaves infected by fungal infections - impacting worker wellbeing and bringing exoskeletal risks.

There can be a **temporary increased workload** during the phase of transition where there is a level of duplication in methods used and a high amount of new information, changes to structures and processes.

May be increase in non-chemical related plantation-based risks due to broader range of activities when moving from monoculture to diversified food systems, organic composting and manual disease control

Risk of outsourcing to shift risks further down the supply chain

Opportunities

New and more diverse tasks. When plantation level tasks are more diverse, and workers skillsets become more diversified, there is improved **mental health and self-esteem**.

Large **investment in the educational and training of workers** is needed

Increased need for technical knowledge and skills – there may be a need to attract more technical people to the countryside to work

Youth inclusion: sustainable transformations in agriculture can, and already appears to be, part of the solution to preventing the abandonment of the countryside by young people and the loss of the rural workforce.

In theory, leading to **increased motivation and efficiency and less staff turnover.**

"Young people today have seen the struggle of farming or working on plantations for their parents. Young people have a deeply held desire to be part of something constructive and not just repeat the mistakes of the past or be blamed for all of society's problems."

Further research

Many gaps exist:

- **Larger farms and export crops** in Global South
- Blind spot around **people, labour, rights specifically and gender**
- Challenges in **comparing across contexts** (sectors, crops, production systems, practices implemented under sustainable agric) and time periods

A need for:

- **Primary research** on production sites with **rights holders**
- Focus on **export crops selling into GVCs** (bananas, fresh e.g. tomatoes and possibly coffee or a fisheries product)
- Research across **different contexts** where these crops are produced (farm size, countries/governance contexts)
- Consider inclusion of **upstream and downstream chains** (e.g. processing, input supply etc) to understand impacts of transitions there

Feedback very welcome throughout the day!

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Q&A of research

Summary of Q&A

- Given context specific nature of the realities, stakeholder engagement is really important to understand impacts and opportunities in specific supply chains - how to do that in **a systematic way that doesn't overwhelm suppliers/workers with multiple requests** from multiple buyers/retailers?
- Is willingness to **adapt new agricultural methods different depending on age** of farmers/workers?
  - This was not a finding in the research.
  - Amongst UK and European organic farmers there is a desire to adapt, even with age. What they are looking for is clearer direction to support innovation.
  - When women are given opportunities, they are more likely to adapt and innovate. This has been the experience with cotton farmers in south Asia.
- **Who owns the data?** e.g. in geomapping, farmers are being required to supply data but not being paid for it.
- Could we reverse the framing of the central research questions: i.e. what are **the impacts of improving labour rights on green transitions** in agriculture?
  - Human rights and environmental crisis overlapping.
  - Are resolutions to human rights issues (e.g. improvements in wage, freedom of association etc.) associated with improvements in environmental outcomes?
- Important to look at **models of worker organising**
  - How can they be scaled? What are the barriers they face?
  - What is the profile of grassroots organisations and how to support their involvement, strengthen.
- Focus of the research seems to be on privately owned land. But what about **land under collective use and/or public land** – how does this feature in the green transition to regen or agroecology?

Summary of Q&A

- **Need for a lot of training**, e.g. on deforestation legislation. Where is the advice to farmers coming from? Who is funding and creating the extension services?
- A lot of information to large scale production and the impact of transition may **not be in public domain, but exists in private domain** such as supermarket research / certification / projects etc
  - Next phase should try to access some of the information that is in the private domain to garner insights and accelerate action.
  - Soil Association doing a lot of work on organic vis-a-vie regen, likely to have data/info. - there is a lot of research/data out there, need to ask the right questions to the right people.
  - Quicker move away from research phase into action would be welcome.
- Need to articulate the impacts and insights more holistically and more consistently. **Need for aligned KPIs** used consistently across different programmes. Would help us better understand the outcomes.
  - Recommendation - KPI framework for green transition framework to assess impacts on labour rights and vice versa (i.e. environmental impacts of labour rights improvements)
- Interesting and surprised that found **more research on small-scale farmers than larger**.
  - Security/quality of supply is a critical issue for supply chain players. E.g. in cocoa – who is joining and who is leaving the workforce are critical questions.
  - Direct link to living wage to ensure quality/security of supply.
- Need **clear criteria for selection of supply chains** for any comparative study.
- **Public authorities are buyers too** – there is a key role for public buyers given their scale, volume, purchasing power, leverage. (Don't just view public authorities as standard setters and regulators.

Expert interventions

Summary of intervention – International fresh produce company

The agroecology equation in industrial plantations?

- Supplying all throughout the year the consumer
- Absorbing input costs increase while maintaing low production costs
- Adapting to the socio demographic shift in the production countries
- Financing the green transition

- Use the agroecology shift as a business efficiency lever
- Pair technology and agroecology
- Support the new generation aspirations without creating a gap with less tech savvy workers

Summary of intervention – International fresh produce company

The agroecology equation in industrial plantations?

- Let's state the obvious :
  - Agroecology is about reducing the use of chemicals

- But agroecology is also about :
  - Regenerating soils
  - Promoting biodiversity
  - Relying on natural balance
  - Managing water consumption

To do so, we had to reassess :

- our daily routines
- the nature of the tasks
- who and how we perform them

Summary of intervention – International fresh produce company

Agroecology and technology: an emerging pair ?

- **By using less chemicals we had to rethink our ways of protecting the plantation** :
  - Less herbicides means using cover crops
    - Cover crops means manual weeding
      - Manual weeding means physical strain on workers

→ Is exploring mechanical weeding a solution ?

- **To improve efficiency of water management :**
  - Precision or automated irrigation ?

→ • New skills to develop ? How to bring water management to the new standards

- **To guide decison making to balance yields and agroecology:**
  - Digital tools to know where and how to intervene with the minimal impact ?
  - Cartography ? Drones to lower the impact of treatments ?

→ New skills to develop ?

→ **These adaptations mean that today only industrial farming can answer the initial equation due to the burden of the initial investments**

Summary of intervention – International fresh produce company

Impacts of Agroecology on workforce

- By moving toward agroecology, we see a drop in use of pesticides/herbicides and the apparition of new tasks :
  - This creates a variety in activities and a better working environment

- But we also face new challenges :

  - We need people with a different understanding of soils and biodiversity (composting is a good example)
  - We need people with totally new skills such as drone operators or data interpreters

- The main risk is to create a divided workforce between the digital activities and the labor intensive ones
- From a company standpoint, it means an increase in labor costs while prices are stagnating

Summary of intervention – International fresh produce company

Conditions for a socially sustainable agroecology

- To manage a green shift a company has to :
  - Share its vision where yields and prices are not the only target and how workers can benefit from it
  - Massively invest in training, learning and development
  - Provide the tools to manage this shift
  - Bring along buyers and authorities to have fair prices to sustain the shift and fair standards to prioritise the companies moving in the right way.

Summary of Q&A

- How are we defining agroecology? e.g. in the Via Campesina definition (origins of agroecology) there is an emphasis on small scale, peasant production and opposition to export focused large-scale production – so how are we defining agroecology in these large-scale contexts?
  - Reducing impact on environment by doing things the way they used to be done, e.g. bringing 'old ways' into industrial scale. For example, through composting at large scale.

- Are these long term or short-term impacts on labour and yields?
  - Many are long term, such as changing status of workers to higher paid positions.

Summary of intervention - University of Manchester

- Trade offs at economic, social and environmental levels.
- Trade offs between who does the work and who bears the costs and reaps the benefits?
  - Own research shows that farmers often love their crops, and the work involved itself is okay, but at the same time they may be struggling to access clean water and food themselves.
- Questions of who gets listened to and who bears the cost. Need for bottom-up voices at the table.
- Certification, agroecology, digital technologies… what are the mechanisms to achieve a just transition? And who is creating the mechanisms?
- Importance of bottom-up voices and how to incorporate those.
- Kenya green beans
  - Women selling at roadside – rejects are entering local markets.
  - Farmers had 'work around' agency to decide where to sell what quality of beans.
  - Some started to market those beans to supermarkets in Kenya. But risk being penalised by buyers or certifiers.
- Importance of concept of psychological safety: how to stand up for rights without feeling threatened.
  - So that individuals can reach a situation they feel is just 'enough' whilst minimising trade-offs.

Summary of intervention - University of Manchester

- Labour frameworks don't quite fit smallholder contexts – smallholders exist in a liminal space.
  - Yet smallholder farmers depend on global value chains for their livelihoods
  - Smallholder farmers don't have that much autonomy and their livelihoods are precarious
  - They are neither entrepreneurs nor labour in the 'traditional' sense.
- Standardisation – why do we need it?
  - Given how deeply contextual everything is, how do we ‘descale’ standards to reflect that.
  - Larger standards can crowd out indigenous contexts
  - De-scale and re-scale
- Digital tools
  - Evidence some have provided women producers with visibility (name on app), opportunities for improvements
  - Adverse incorporation? Where is data going?
  - Data tells a story - what data is needed to ensure the transition is just and equitable
    - e.g. data cooperative - farmers/coops own the data and selling it to companies
- How to use that to inform standards and support definitions

Summary of intervention - ITF

- Fishing sector is not very union dense: each individual vessel is a company; cultural history; share basis for employment; industrialised fishing sector heavily reliant on migrant workers; vast majority of fishers around the world are artisanal and not fishing for commercial purpose.
- Sector specific approaches built into global approach to just transition: 10.5% of transport emissions are from shipping, that is relatively low compared to road (45%), aviation (30%). And 90% of products arrive by sea.
- Workers are impacted by climate (e.g. flooding, air turbulence affecting air crews), and by the climate mitigation and adaptation actions (e.g. OSH, lay-offs)
- Just Transition is central to the Trade Union movement – it was developed by trade unions.
- Workers often don't have a loud enough voice. Need to broaden democracy at the workplace and co-create solutions
- Worker protection and voice are central to Just Transition.
- Women and young people need to be included in decision making – they experience disproportionate impact from decision making (which often excludes them).
- Just Transition exists in international law - Paris agreement committed all parties to this; there are the ILO guidelines.
- Safety concerns should be reflected in collective bargaining agreements also training needs. E.g. shift in fuel requires different procedures on board and different OSH (e.g. ammonia cells more dangerous than diesel on board vessel – but produce less GHGs)
- Shipping - replacing fossil fuels with zero carbon will require international coordination to do that. Need to put climate emergency and seafarer needs at heart of the solutions

Summary of intervention - ITF

- Fishing: direct biological impact from climate change which changes fishing practices e.g. stocks move or deplete
  - Fishing contributes to climate change but is also a sector that will feel extreme changes. Oceans are the earth's primary heat sink.
  - IPCC suggest coastal ecosystem climate impact will be huge - large impact on artisanal fishers who don't have the option to go further if stocks move
  - Link to migration – impact of overfishing, and of illegal unreported unregulated fishing, and climate change – forcing people to migrate, e.g. Senegalese fishers migrating to the Canaries, high mortality rates on route.
  - Fuel subsides - 22bn USD spent on capacity enhancing subsides which promote overfishing - keep costs low and enable overfishing and unfair competition (e.g. China provides massive subsidies to its fleets, and others can't compete with that).
  - Fisheries strategy policy - outlines a chapter on environment and sustainability
    - Fishing accounts for 4% of global GHG emissions but is way behind other sectors in ability to make the shift to net zero - current tech can't match power needs of vessels.
    - Change is happening on small-scale vessels that can shift to electric fuel but will not be feeding into global value chains.
- Need for strong worker perspective :
  - Working hours for fishing workers are already the worst of any sector (basically unlimited hours).
  - Risk of further marginalising an already out of sight and out of mind workforce.

Summary of intervention - Westfalia

- The purpose of the ‘green’ agricultural revolution was to make nature predictable – current challenges can be traced back often to those decisions
  - Aimed to make yields and production known in advance and reduce volatility
  - That process took workers for granted – the focus was economic and environmental predictability.
- At Westfalia we’re now trying to put people back into the picture.
- But rural communities are in crisis globally – they have not been valued: skills have not been recognised and rewarded; young people have been left out.
- Hears two responses from business to just transitions: 1. “It’s obvious that we need to take care of people in the supply chain, especially as it gets hotter.” 2. “It’s not my job, I’m here to make money and if you make that too hard then I’ll just break the rules.”
- We need to delve into supply chains and get a level of detail we haven't had before – figuring out who we can and who we want to work with (and who we don’t want to work with!).
  - Unpacking that is going to take time.
  - Requires long-term partnerships.
  - Current model of price/yield won't work.
    - Need engagement from public, from retailers etc. a long chain that needs to be joined up.
- Key challenge: the labour will be different - it will take a new revolution to respond.

Group Discussions

Group Discussion Qs

1. What are the **knowledge gaps** related to human impacts of green transitions in your sector(s) or supply chain(s)?
2. What kind of **data** and/or **research outputs** would you find **most useful** and why?
3. How can we put **rights-holders at the centre** of a research and action agenda on green transitions?
4. How can **researchers and business work together** to address the human rights impacts of green transitions?
5. How can the **current funding landscape** enable research and action agendas on green transitions in food, farming and fisheries?

Key points from each group

Group 1: Empower the workers themselves on farms. Make these processes of change at the farm level legible to public consumers, and they can create pressure on supermarkets.

Group 2: Trade-offs, there is a need for general principles to guide decision-making on just transitions, and on how to operationalise it.

Group 3: Develop a business case on why this should be prioritised.

Group 4: Differences between agri- and aqua-culture. Find out where there is already work being done. Ensure formalisation of discussions at the company level.

Human rights impacts and risks in transitions to sustainable agriculture

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