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UN FORUM SERIES – The importance of local partnerships and robust research: Agricultural workers in the Morocco tomato food chain

Damiano de Felice

This post was contributed by Ines del Real Tovar and Maddalena Neglia, respectively Senior manager partnerships and learning and Business and human rights specialist at Fairfood International.

The implementation of human rights standards in the global supply chain and, particularly, in the food supply chain is one of the emerging challenges of present years. The lack of decent working conditions, the existence of unfair trading practices and the absence of a living wage for workers in the food sector are facts that need to be addressed and solved.

Relating to this last point, important steps have already been taken and living wages are no longer a taboo subject among the stakeholders involved (governments, NGOs and industry). However, the international and national regulatory and policy framework is still complex and fragmented. It has become crucial for all the actors involved (government, industry and civil society) to understand the best ways to ensure a sustainable food supply chain, respecting human rights standards, and to work towards implementation. This multi-stakeholder dialogue was encouraged on several occasions during the last 4th Forum on Business and Human Rights in Geneva.

For this reason, here we present the example of our work in the tomato food chain in Morocco, which now we aim to develop into a multi-stakeholder dialogue. The tomato food chain project was instigated by Fairfood International in 2013 and we believe that it can be a model for other similar initiatives.

The agricultural sector in Morocco is an important part of their economy, representing 14% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The sector, with its 4 million jobs, has the potential to bring about significant social value, not only for the workers, but also for their families and for the communities in which companies operate. However, agricultural workers still don't get a fair share of the value to which they contribute.

The tomato is an important commodity exported to European markets. Tomatoes account for almost half of Morocco's vegetable exports and around 90% of their exported tomatoes are sent to the EU. About 80% of Moroccan tomatoes are produced in the Souss-Massa-Drâa region, which has the third highest percentage of people living in poverty and the highest percentage of poverty severity in Morocco.

Fairfood's field research in this region (2013) confirmed that there are some human rights issues. First of all, the right of freedom of association (Art. 20 UDHR) is not always respected. Despite the fact that national legislation acknowledges the right to form unions, workers are often prevented from exercising this right by means of dismissal and harassment. The [Moroccan Penal Code](#) even allows for imprisonment and fining of workers who go on strike.

The study also showed that the minimum agricultural wage (now 167 EUR) was not enough to cover their basic needs and it was only just above the 2004 rural poverty threshold (160 EUR). This wage does not allow for the decent standard of living implied by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, Article 23(3) and the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization. It is estimated that a living wage would be 1.5 to 3 times the current minimum wage for agricultural workers.

Poverty wages at the production end of the tomato global food chain deprive agricultural workers of their basic socio-economic rights, such as the right to education, the right to housing, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to health and the right of access to science and culture. This particularly affects women, who form a large part of the agricultural workforce.

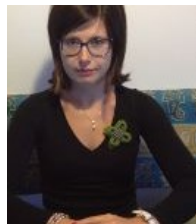
A partnership was built to address these human rights issues. Since 2013, Fairfood International, an Amsterdam-based NGO, and the FNSA (Fédération Nationale du Secteur Agricole), the largest agricultural labour union in Morocco, have been collaborating with the specific aim of improving working conditions and wages in the Moroccan tomato sector. To achieve this goal, the project strategy is based on the following building blocks:

- **Gathering robust research** to unveil the state of the human rights violations related to working conditions. The research provided evidence for advocacy purposes, which proved to be valuable in engagement with companies and governments. The research had two main benefits: firstly it provided abundant evidence of the poor working conditions workers in the region are experiencing. This initiated the engagement process with companies and governments. Secondly, the research had a compelling and mobilising effect. Not only data, but also stories were collected throughout the research process, in which the workers themselves described the reality of being a tomato picker under the current working conditions.

- **Connecting local issues to global concerns.** The situation of Moroccan tomato workers has been documented in reports and factsheets and promoted through global media (for example, see the post on the business and human rights resource centre [here](#)). The case of tomatoes in Morocco has been used in policy discussions as an example in order to create momentum for the need to implement living wages in all global food chains. For example, together with other organisations in the Netherlands, Fairfood is pursuing the inclusion of living wages as one of the priority items to be included in the current negotiations of the International CSR covenant for the Food Industry.
- **Applying leverage at both ends of a value chain.** Fairfood is active in the EU and the FNSA conducts activities in Morocco. Fairfood has engaged with retailers and has raised awareness among consumers in European countries, while the FNSA has engaged with producing companies at the beginning of the chain. This means that both organisations are working within their fields of expertise and have ownership over their part of the project.
- **Skills sharing on negotiation and conflict resolution.** Fairfood and the FNSA have shared skills and knowledge on how to become more influential through advocacy and campaigning, with emphasis on negotiation and conflict resolution. This has been done by means of training, workshops and knowledge exchange seminars. As a result, workers expressed feeling more confident in their negotiation processes with companies.

The project has been a success and will now be further expanded into a multistakeholder dialogue by also involving industry and government, because we are firmly convinced that it will only be possible to reach an effective implementation of the UNGPs and a sustainable food supply chain through a cooperative and inclusive approach between the different actors involved.

Ines del Real Tovar and Maddalena Neglia ([@MaddalenaNeglia](#))



Ines del Real is Senior manager partnerships and learning at Fairfood International. Ines is a creative thinker, with master degrees in Regional Planning (KIT, Germany) and Sustainable Development (Utrecht University, Netherlands), dedicated to create and implement international cooperation programs. Within her current position at Fairfood International she has trained workers and civil society organisations to identify human and labour rights issues and to advocate for more transparent and sustainable global food chains. Maddalena Neglia is Business and human rights specialist at Fairfood International. In this position, she works to apply the business and human rights framework to the food supply

chain. Maddalena is also postdoctoral research associate in business and human rights at UCL London – Centre for Ethics and Law, where she studies the implementation of the business and human rights principles in different policy fields. Maddalena holds a Ph.D. in Public Comparative Law.

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