

Tate & Lyle Sugars – Contracts for seasonal sugar cane harvesters

TATE & LYLE SUGARS

Who are Tate & Lyle Sugars?

Tate & Lyle Sugars is a cane sugar refiner based in London and is part of the ASR Group. They buy raw sugar for refining from all over the world, mostly produced in developing countries, with the mills, estates and small farmers often being the backbone of the local community.

Summary

Cane farming in Northern Belize employs large numbers of seasonal workers, particularly during the harvest. These workers are employed by smallholder farmers, and prior to the implementation of the project, they would typically work without written contracts, training or systematic provision for their safety at work.

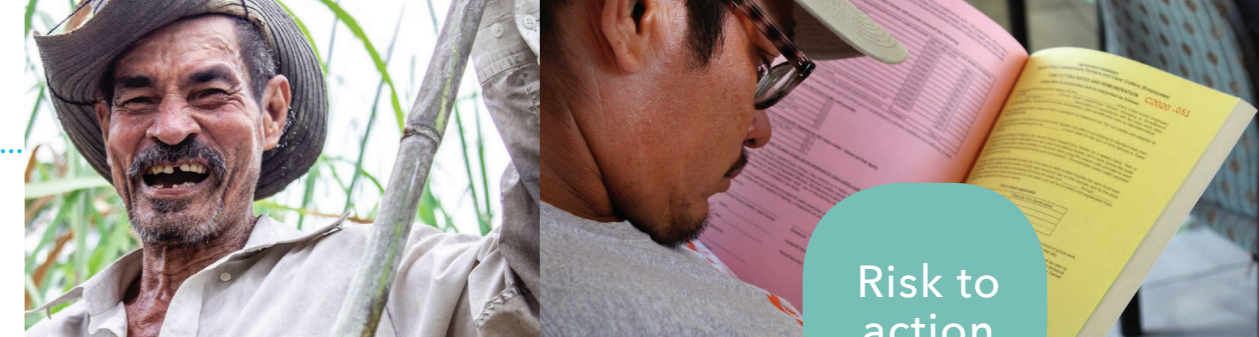
This project has successfully started the process of formalising hiring and working practices, through the development and piloting of written contracts, to enable employers and employees in cane farms to replace word of mouth agreements so that workers have increased employment and income stability and safety.

What prompted the action?

In Northern Belize, cane farming and harvesting is mostly carried out by seasonal hired workers, employed by smallholder farmers, historically without written contracts or consistent provision for safety at work. This was concerning since most cane in Belize is cut by hand with machetes. All smallholder cane farmers in the north of Belize are members of Fairtrade certified producer associations, however some risk factors for forced labour were identified in hiring and working practices.



This case study has been developed with the support of Co-op as part of Co-op's 2021 'Treating People Fairly Awards' at which Tate & Lyle Sugars was Highly Commended. Tate & Lyle Sugars has supplied to Co-op for 14 years. The awards celebrate excellence in human rights practice, encourage suppliers to learn from each other and inspire new ways of mitigating future threats to worker welfare. Supplier entries were assessed by an independent, expert panel and awards were presented at a Co-op supplier event. Click [here](#) and [here](#) to learn more about human rights at Co-op.



Context

Since 2008, ASR Group has supported small-scale farmers through Fairtrade, generating over US\$65 million in Fairtrade Premiums, more than any other sugar company. Under the Fairtrade system, certified small producer organisations decide democratically how to spend the premiums generated from the sale of their produce. ASR Group's Fairtrade commitment has generated premium funds which have contributed to enhanced productivity and improved livelihoods, improved living and working conditions, protection of communities from child and forced labour, promotion of education, better healthcare and gender equality in cane farming communities.

This project case study relates to production in Belize, where Belize Sugar Industries Limited (BSI) is a mill which supplies Fairtrade certified sugar to Tate & Lyle Sugars (BSI is also part of the ASR Group). BSI in turn sources sugarcane from approximately 5,000 smallholder farmers in the North of Belize. All smallholder cane farmers supplying BSI are members of Fairtrade certified producer associations.

Taking action

Aims and key success factors

The project, which was part funded by Co-op, aimed to formalise hiring and working practices in the smallholder cane farming sector during harvesting, through the development and piloting of written contracts, which would enable employers and employees in cane farms to replace word of mouth agreements. Approximately 2,640 cane cutters and 264 reaping group leaders across the industry are benefitting from the project.

The success of the work depended on the acceptability of the contracts booklet to the target group. The target group for this project is cane cutters (farmers who cut cane, hired cutters and captains) and reaping group leaders (their managers/employers) in the North of Belize. The project therefore has been highly dependent on successful collaboration both at the inception phase and in development of the contract.

Taking action

Initial step - engagement and prioritisation

As part of their due diligence under the UK Modern Slavery Act, Tate & Lyle Sugars arranged for 80 stakeholders from the Belize sugar industry (farmers, reaping group leaders, farmers' associations, employees of the mill and members of the government) to participate in training run by the ILO on forced labour risk indicators.

Small focus groups of cane cutters and reaping group leaders met to discuss their perspectives on forced labour risks and then at further workshops, representatives identified the hiring process and health and safety as key priorities, proposing employment contracts and provision of health and safety training and personal protection equipment as potential solutions.

Designing contracts

In designing the contract booklets, great care was taken to ensure the content was acceptable to the target groups, whilst ensuring compliance with the law, Fairtrade Standards and the ASR Group standards.

There were three phases to the project.

- The project started with several workshops with associations, reaping group leaders and cutters; consultation with Government departments of Labour and Social Security and also consultation with CLAC (Latin American and Caribbean Network of Fairtrade Small Producers and Workers) (on behalf of Fairtrade).
- An in-field pilot took place during the 2020 crop and feedback was sought and captured from stakeholders.
- The feedback was incorporated in reprinted booklets which were distributed to all reaping groups at the beginning of the 2021 crop.

The contracts formalised the previously informal agreements and practices. This is mutually beneficial to both the employees and employers.

Impact

A quantitative monitoring and evaluation survey was conducted after year 1 (following the pilot) and qualitative research (workshops and interviews) after year 2 (conclusion of the project).

The initial study demonstrated that reaping group leaders and cutters understood the potential benefits of the contracts in general (eg providing clarity on work activities) but both groups were unsure if using the contracts would benefit themselves personally. At the end of the project, responses were more positive, citing improved working conditions for employees, clarity of work activities, reduction in accidents and injury and child labour prevention.

The research at the start of the project showed a general lack of awareness among the community of legal and Fairtrade expectations of employers. This project was an important step in changing this.

The improvements that have been made so far include:

- The contracts are a primary tool in improving the understanding of reaping group leaders of all of their obligations. Contracts with workers are now mandatory under Fairtrade standards, which will underpin their ongoing use and will benefit workers across the wider sugar cane industry in Belize.
- Training by Social Security and Labour departments on Belize employment law was arranged during the project. More training is required and will be arranged by those departments.
- The contract covers the responsibility of employers (the reaping group leaders) to ensure that their workers can carry out their tasks safely, including the importance of personal protective equipment (PPE). Historically, reaping group leaders haven't provided this equipment, partly because of the cost of doing so. As part of the project, gloves, protective eyewear and shin guards were distributed free to reaping group leaders using the contract, which incentivised the roll-out of the contract and facilitated compliance. The PPE was popular with cutters and anecdotal accounts suggest it has already reduced injuries.
- The project has already been perceived as addressing multiple issues; safer working conditions due to the provision of PPE, prevention of child and forced labour.

"In the past, they didn't give us PPE. I had two cuts that sent me to the hospital for a month. This year I had one cut but because I was using the gloves I was given, it protected me so the cut didn't go through to my skin. This helps a lot."

– Jorge Luis Novelo, cane cutter



For more details you can watch this short film, explaining the impacts after the first year of using the contracts: <https://youtu.be/IPpLNvseaMw>

"The role of The Belize Sugar Industries Limited in the project was to facilitate the process and offer technical advice, but in essence, the cane farming associations, their harvesting group leaders and their cane cutters have worked together themselves to produce the standard contract. It has been a year-long process and we're very happy with the conclusion."

– Olivia Avilez, Cane Farmers Relations & Communication Manager, BSI

Lessons learnt

Engagement

With a project like this, it's essential to be sure who the various 'target groups' are, and to ensure every group is effectively engaged and their views are appropriately incorporated, to make sure everyone is 'on-board', heard and sees the benefit of the project progressing. If one group feels that the project will harm their interests, it won't succeed. This takes patience, careful planning and effective management on the ground by local teams who know the important stakeholders to engage.

Feedback and review

It's important part way through a project like this, to test the output, gain feedback and integrate it, so that the final product really does meet the needs of the different target groups.

"Before these changes, we had problems when we got hurt. If we went to the Labour Department, they couldn't do anything because we weren't registered and we ended up losing. But now, with the contract, it's different. Also, now, it's rare for someone to get hurt because of the PPE that's provided." – Agapito Mai, cane cutter

What makes this a leadership approach?*

Proactivity

Tate & Lyle Sugar's proactivity in their approach was demonstrated by their first step of running training on forced labour risk indicators for local stakeholders, with the advice and support of Fairtrade International, and then facilitating workshops for focus groups to discuss perspectives and prioritise risks and potential solutions. They did not assume that they knew what the solutions were or what was most important but listened carefully. This enabled actions to be taken that were genuinely meeting the needs of the community, which were then more likely to be applied and maintained, because of the 'buy-in' that resulted.

Ownership

The issue of informal and potentially dangerous work for seasonal/hired workers, employed by smallholder farmers, is endemic in many agricultural supply chains. It might have been easy for Tate & Lyle Sugars to just say this is a fundamental risk of the supply chain and not their responsibility, but they chose to take ownership and work to make a small but impactful change.

Partnership

"The success of this project is based on collaboration; in its inception, design and implementation. This enabled us to design the contract to be as user friendly as possible while at the same time respecting the requirements of Belizean law, Fairtrade standards and ASR Group's own standards".

Julia Clark, Director Sugar Ethics, Tate & Lyle Sugars

* Key behaviours that Co-op champion are proactivity, ownership and partnership. Click [here](#) to learn more about Co-op's supplier engagement programme. Co-op's 'Supplier's Guide to Ethical Trade' sets out the standards suppliers are expected to meet.

