

Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement: Practical Guidance for Companies in the Agriculture and Food Manufacturing Sector

A short summary of a guidance aimed at centering workers and communities in due diligence



This is a summary of a practical guidance designed to support companies in the agriculture and food manufacturing sector in carrying out Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement, with a particular focus on workers and communities.

Who is this guidance for?

The practical guidance was primarily written by Oxfam; co-developed and co-financed by AIM-Progress, amfori, the Ethical Trading Initiative; Ethical Trade Sweden, Fair Labor Association, and the Food Network for Ethical Trade. The guidance has been developed to support companies and their staff members in the agriculture and food manufacturing sectors who have a role in engaging stakeholders, including sustainability, procurement, human resource managers, and local country teams. It is applicable for companies at different tiers of agri-food supply chains and maturity levels. It is meant to serve as a practical resource for companies, whether just beginning to develop stakeholder engagement processes or looking to strengthen and deepen existing approaches.

What is Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement?

Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement (MSE) is the process of engaging stakeholders in a genuine, safe, respectful, and ongoing dialogue to ensure their perspectives meaningfully shape company decisions and improve human rights and environmental outcomes. MSE strengthens companies' human rights and environmental due diligence and can prepare them for upcoming legislation, such as CSDDD.

The primary focus of MSE should be on rightsholders (also called 'affected stakeholders'), such as workers, communities, and others who may be affected. Their perspectives, concerns, and knowledge are essential for identifying risks, shaping effective responses, and ensuring that companies genuinely respect human rights and the environment.

When done well, meaningful engagement delivers clear benefits.

- It helps companies identify risks early, prevent conflict, build more resilient supply chains, and strengthen trust with stakeholders and investors. It also supports alignment with international standards and soft-law frameworks, which are increasingly being embedded in binding legal requirements.
- At the same time, it enables stakeholders and rightsholders to be heard, participate in decisions that affect them, and strengthen the protection of their rights.

What good looks like

For engagement to be meaningful and truly make a difference, companies need to get a few fundamentals right:

- it should start early and be continuous,
- be rights-based and ensure stakeholders are well informed;
- be safe and accessible;
- and be inclusive and legitimate.

Underpinning all of these principles is trust, which cannot be rushed, must be earned through consistent, respectful, and good-faith practice, and is often the critical precondition for meaningful dialogue to begin.

The guidance unpacks each of these principles – with practical examples from the sector. In the annex, companies will find various practical tools, including a checklist to help them assess and strengthen their own approach.



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Why it matters in agrifood supply chains

The agriculture and food manufacturing sector is uniquely complex and uniquely high-risk:

Scale and complexity

The sector employs nearly 1.3 billion people. There are often long, fragmented, and often opaque supply chains spanning multiple tiers and geographies.

Large groups of rightsholders facing risks

There are large groups of rightsholders who face risks that remain hidden or underestimated – e.g. women, migrant workers, and workers in precarious forms of employment. Many intersecting forms of inequalities compound their risk of exploitation.

Power imbalances

Concentrated buying power and poor purchasing practices push costs and risks onto suppliers, smallholders, workers, and communities.

Interconnected risks

Persistent social and environmental harms that often compound each other – e.g. heat stress, piece-rate pay, and climate change intersect to increase rightsholder risk.

How the guidance helps businesses conduct Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement

The guidance is practical and action-oriented, structured around three core questions while supporting companies to facilitate the connections between these questions:

WHO to engage	Step-by-step stakeholder mapping to identify and prioritise affected groups, with a downloadable mapping dashboard.
HOW to engage	Practical methods and tools for reaching different groups, including guidance on working with trade unions, credible proxies, impact indicators to help you measure whether engagement is leading to real change and a downloadable data collection and management system tool to systematically collect and use data to improve engagement, track impact, and strengthen accountability.
WHEN to engage	A table of engagement opportunities mapped to each stage of the HREDD cycle, with real-world examples from the sector.

It also includes:

- Sector-specific case studies showing what meaningful engagement looks like in practice
- Practical strategies for building trust with rightsholders, including in contexts where past harm or power imbalances make engagement difficult.

Ready to go deeper?

[Download the full guidance](#) – including all annexes and tools – to start building more meaningful, effective engagement with the workers and communities in your supply chain.