

# Recruitment practices and seasonal employment in agriculture in Uzbekistan 2014-15

## Executive summary of ILO survey

### Purpose and background

- This report presents the results of primary research carried out by the International Labour Organization (ILO) regarding the recruitment and seasonal work of adults aged 18-50 years old in Uzbek cotton cultivation in 2014 and 2015. It aims to provide a deeper understanding of practices regarding the recruitment of seasonal labour in Uzbek cotton cultivation, including a framework for measuring the risk of forced labour in this specific context.
- Since it became a member of the ILO in 1992, Uzbekistan has ratified 14 ILO conventions, including all eight fundamental conventions - an important milestone achieved in 2016 with ratification of the Convention on Freedom of Association and the Right to Organise.<sup>1</sup> In response to comments from the ILO's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations, Uzbekistan has recently been taking concrete steps to implement these ILO Conventions – including the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No 29), ratified in 1992; the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention (No 105) ratified in 1997; the Minimum Age Convention (No 138), ratified in 2009; the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No 182), ratified in 2008 – with the technical assistance of the ILO.
- In 2014, the Government and social partners of Uzbekistan and the ILO signed the first Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP) for Uzbekistan, extended in 2017. One of the DWCP's priorities is to ensure that conditions of work and employment in agriculture, including in the cotton sector, conform to international labour standards. An important starting point for the ILO's work programme with its Uzbek partners was to establish an in-depth research programme on recruitment and seasonal employment in cotton cultivation.
- The ILO has also been conducting third party monitoring of the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan in cooperation with the World Bank, targeting World Bank project areas. The World Bank and the ILO signed a Memorandum of Understanding on issues of child and forced labour in 2014, following a complaint to the World Bank's inspection panel in 2013. The World Bank asked the ILO to assess the use of child and forced labour by the beneficiaries of World Bank projects in specific project areas, in 2015 and 2016.
- The methodology for this study involved both qualitative and quantitative elements, including probabilistic sampling surveys that permitted the extrapolation of results at a national level. The target population for the study was adults aged 18 to 50 years old.

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<sup>1</sup> Information on Uzbekistan's ratifications was current as of January 2017. At this time, the most recent ratification was the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1949 (No 87) in December 2016.

- Children were not covered by the survey. ILO monitoring confirms that Uzbekistan has made significant progress in eliminating the use of child labour in the cotton harvest, though continued vigilance is required to maintain this progress, especially amongst vulnerable 16 – 17 year-olds.

#### Planning, production and seasonal labour requirements in Uzbek cotton

- The major requirement for seasonal labour in cotton cultivation arises during the harvest. Altogether, there are around 3.2 million cotton pickers, or nearly 25% of the total population aged 18 to 50 years, who are engaged as seasonal labourers over three “passes” from September to November. Each pass takes place over about ten days, and with each pass, the quality and volume of cotton available for picking decreases.
- Cotton farmers are contractually obliged to meet annual production quotas, which are set by the national Ministry for Agriculture and Water Resources (MAWR) and its local departments, and provide the basis for projected seasonal labour requirements. Once fixed, quotas are distributed to province and district *hokimiyats* (local government) in August for implementation and management, and *hokimiyat* officials are personally responsible for ensuring that the assigned quotas are met. Each *hokimiyat* establishes a cotton harvest committee (*pakhta shtab*) that organizes, coordinates and monitors the harvest, including mobilisation of the necessary amount of seasonal labour required by farmers.
- Historically, seasonal labour activities in cotton cultivation have involved the participation of non-agricultural workers, including students, and public sector and private sector employees. Although mechanisation has been introduced in some districts, most farmers continue to rely heavily on manual labour, as the topography of their land does not permit the use of machines or they do not have sufficient access to machinery to meet their needs at the peak of the cotton weeding or harvesting season.

#### Profile of pickers

- There is an important gender dimension revealed by the survey. Rural women seeking cash incomes, who are otherwise economically inactive, form the bulk of cotton pickers. Pickers normally employed in the health and education sectors are also overwhelmingly women. Mechanisation plans for the sector need to take into account the fact that there are limited alternatives for income generation for women in rural areas.
- Over the period in question, the surveys suggest that there was a drop in the overall participation rate in seasonal cotton picking: in 2014, 24% of all 18 to 50 year olds (3.2 million) participated, compared to 21% (2.9 million) in 2015. Women represented nearly three quarters of the seasonal workforce over both harvests (71% in 2015, 72% in 2014). Most pickers were from rural areas; however, there was a slight rise in the proportion of pickers from urban areas in 2015 (34% of pickers in 2014, rising to 37% in 2015).
- Cotton picking is a temporary economic activity for all the individuals interviewed for this survey, who were otherwise not economically active or engaged in other forms of economic activity. The largest category of seasonal workers, rising from 42.9% in 2014 to 46.1% in 2015, were the economically inactive (excluding students): this category comprises individuals – mainly women - who are otherwise responsible for unpaid work in the home or on family plots, or retired. This group was followed by those who were employed outside the health and education sectors (20% in 2014; 22.6% in 2015). From 2014 to 2015, there was a drop in participation in the harvest by those employed in the health and education sectors (16.6% in 2014; 14.8% in 2015), students

(11.2% in 2014; 8.6% in 2015) and the unemployed (8.8% in 2014; 7.1% in 2015). The occupational composition of weeders in 2014 was broadly similar, except there were higher levels of participation of the unemployed (35%) and lower levels of students (4%).

- The number of individuals who declined to participate in the harvest (“rejectors”) increased from 644,000 (14.8% of those who were called) in 2014 to 1.1 million (23.34% of those who were called) in 2015. The groups most likely to turn down the call to participate were the unemployed and otherwise not economically active (broadly in line with their proportionate representation as the largest category of pickers). The majority of rejectors experienced no negative consequences (74% in 2014; 80% in 2015) and for those who did, the most common negative consequence was that they assumed the cost of a replacement worker. Some 25% of rejectors paid to be replaced in 2014, dropping to 18.2% in 2015.

#### Key recruitment channels

- Securing labour for the cotton harvest is a major organized activity. Almost all seasonal pickers were “called” or asked by someone with some level of authority to participate (96.8% in 2014 and 95.5% in 2015). Of these, more than 95% of all pickers in 2014 and 2015 were called through three main recruitment channels. These were:
  1. Heads of enterprises or organizations (including medical and educational facilities);
  2. Representatives of *mahallas* (neighbourhood or community councils); and
  3. Farmers or their representatives.
- Heads of enterprises or organizations were the largest recruiters of workers over both harvests. However, the role of *mahallas* grew over the period (from recruiting 25% of all pickers in 2014 to 39.5% in 2015) and the role of farmers dropped (from 28.4% in 2014 to 14.6% in 2015).
- In 2014, farmers who were located furthest from rural settlements were reported to be the least likely to have machinery to help with harvesting, and they found it most difficult to attract workers. Consequently they were particularly reliant on the assistance of the *pakhta shtab* and others in order to recruit non-local workers.

#### Volunteers and workers at risk of coercion

- Based on the findings of the qualitative research, seasonal workers were classified into three categories:
  1. **Voluntary:** those who participated willingly without being subject to pressure or coercion;
  2. **Reluctant:** those who participated because they did not want to damage positive relationships with others (“social pressure”); and
  3. **Involuntary:** those who participated primarily in response to a perceived risk of dismissal, wage reduction, expulsion from educational institution, loss of scholarship, or harassment by authorities; or inability to pay for a worker to replace them.
- Although the term “reluctant” is not found in the ILO forced labour Convention 29 of 2014 (and its Protocol, which has not yet been ratified by Uzbekistan) or Convention 105, it does provide a necessary category for those survey respondents who replied that they were unwilling to pick cotton yet who also replied that they did not experience or fear an actual or perceived penalty if they were to refuse to pick cotton. This means that the “involuntary” category of cotton pickers accords with the precise definition of forced labour contained in the ILO Convention. It also

enables a comparison of the productivity of each category of picker, with reluctant pickers less productive than volunteers but more productive than involuntary pickers.

- The majority of workers participated in the harvest on a voluntary basis, increasing from 60% of all pickers in 2014 to 66% in 2015. The proportion of reluctant pickers decreased over the period (29% in 2014, 20% in 2015), but the number of involuntary pickers increased (11% in 2014; 14% in 2015). This breakdown was broadly similar for weeding.
- The main reason that people volunteered was to increase their incomes (72% in 2014, 77% in 2015). Cotton picking is a particularly important opportunity for rural women to earn extra income, as reflected in the gender composition of cotton pickers. Voluntary workers were more likely to come from the ranks of the unemployed or otherwise not economically active (including many women who are otherwise occupied with domestic duties or family plots): in 2014, this group represented 51.9% of all pickers and 69% of volunteers; rising to 68.7% of all pickers in 2015 and 71% of all volunteers. Volunteers were more likely to be recruited by *mahallas*, who provided 25% of all pickers and 35% of all volunteers in 2014, and 39.5% of all pickers and 52% of volunteers, in 2015.
- Involuntary pickers were most likely to be those employed outside the health and education sectors (30.4% of all involuntary pickers in 2015), those employed in the health and education sectors (27.2%), and students (26.7%). The main reasons given by involuntary pickers for working related to perceived risks of loss of income, jobs or student places. Although there was a decrease in the overall number of students who participated from 2014 to 2015, there was a substantial increase in the proportion who did so on an involuntary basis: 6.3% of all students in 2014, rising to 43% in 2015 (representing an increase in absolute terms from 22,000 to 106,000). There was a similar increase for those employed in the health and education sectors (13% in 2014, rising to 25% in 2015). Heads of colleges and enterprises were the most significant recruitment mechanism for involuntary workers, responsible for recruiting 82% of all involuntary pickers in 2014 and 75% in 2015. One possible explanation to the increased number of involuntary students and medical staff may be found in the significant increase of rejectors, and the simultaneous decrease of reluctant people. This led to a situation where the total number of pure volunteers was not enough to ensure the full harvest, hence the call to students and medical staff.
- The proportion of reluctant workers – i.e. those who felt social pressure to participate, but did not report any actual or perceived threat of penalty – decreased over the period (29% of all cotton pickers in 2014, 20% in 2015).
- Involuntary pickers were more likely to come from urban areas and were more likely to be recruited later in the season. Urban residents were also over-represented amongst reluctant pickers, representing 44% of reluctant pickers in 2014 and 51% in 2015.
- Levels of living standards do not seem to have a strong bearing on reluctance or involuntariness. The representation of very poor, poor, middle-income, well-off and rich households remains relatively proportionate to their overall participation rate across all categories of voluntariness (voluntary, reluctant and involuntary). However, the number of very poor who were classified as reluctant workers trebled from 2% in 2014 to 6% in 2015.
- In advance of the 2015 harvest, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MOL) and the Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan (FTUU) launched an awareness raising campaign

regarding the rights of seasonal workers. Only a minority of survey respondents had been exposed to these messages: 18% of pickers and 15% of rejectors.

#### Duration of work, productivity and earnings

- The average number of days spent picking cotton decreased from 2014 to 2015. Over the period, the average number of days worked by students was higher than other workers (37 in 2014 and 35 in 2015). The average number of days for those employed in the health and education sectors (29 in 2014, 26 in 2015) and reluctant and involuntary workers (30 in 2014, 28 in 2015) was broadly in line with the average across all seasonal cotton pickers (31 in 2014, 29 in 2015).
- There was a decrease in the proportion of seasonal workers who worked more than eight hours per day on average (36% to 26%); however, there was an increase in the proportion of reluctant and involuntary workers who worked more than eight hours a day on the third pass (15% in 2014; 18% in 2015). The main reason that pickers worked more than eight hours a day was to increase their income (66% in 2014; 68% in 2015), but there was a clear increase in the proportion of some categories who said that they also did so in response to instructions (for instance, 16% of involuntary workers in 2014, rising to 83% in 2015).
- The productivity of cotton pickers was significantly higher during the first pass, and voluntary workers were more productive than involuntary and reluctant workers across all passes. All farmers considered that workers recruited directly by farmers (or their proxies) were more productive than workers brought in by the *pakhta shtab*, as they picked cotton at a faster rate and of a higher quality.
- Workers struggled to maintain productivity levels in October and November, when average picking amounts fell under this level, and average earnings – based on piece rates – dropped by half between the first and third passes.

#### Findings and conclusions

- Overall, the results suggest that recent interventions by the government and social partners of Uzbekistan and the ILO are having a positive impact: important advances have been made in reducing the risk of coercion in the use of seasonal labour in the cotton harvest. Significantly, over the period in question, there was a clear increase in the proportion of workers who participated in the harvest on a voluntary basis. There was a decrease in the number of students and staff from medical and educational facilities who participated in the harvest. This was accompanied by a significant increase in the number of individuals who felt empowered to refuse to participate (“rejectors”), together with an increase in the proportion of rejectors who experienced no negative consequences as a result of their decision.
- Nevertheless, despite these promising signs, there is clearly scope for further progress, and the survey results indicate that the risk of forced labour in Uzbekistan remains a concern. Alongside the increase in voluntary participation, there was an upswing in involuntary work in the 2015 harvest, particularly among students and staff of educational and medical facilities. In addition, the average number of working days for students and staff of educational and medical facilities increased from 2014 to 2015.
- Encouragingly, the figures of the survey findings indicate that involuntary participation could be eliminated altogether without resorting to full-scale mechanisation. This research suggests that the voluntary workforce could be increased significantly with improvements in wages and working

conditions. Responses to the household survey suggest that 1.7 million people would willingly participate in future harvests under any conditions, 1.15 million would participate voluntarily if remuneration was higher, and another 476,000 would participate voluntarily if working and living conditions were improved.

- Improving labour relations and working conditions in the sector should be considered an important pathway to both the modernization of the agricultural sector and sustainable development in rural areas in Uzbekistan. Better wages and working conditions would lead to higher levels of voluntary participation, which would, in turn, have important knock-on effects for farm level productivity, as well as household incomes in rural areas. However, there may be a role for increased mechanisation for more remote farms, given that these farmers find it more difficult to attract voluntary workers, and are more likely to rely on workers who need to be brought in from other areas.

### Recommendations

1. Streamline, clarify and formalise frameworks and rules for recruitment and employment of seasonal labour in agriculture, particularly in cotton cultivation.
2. Foster greater ownership of recruitment and employment functions by the farmers and their representatives.
3. Support Small and Medium Enterprises as key actors in rural labour provision, with particular attention to the role of rural women.
4. Strengthen market and institutional mechanisms to link labour demand with supply.
5. Boost incentives to work in the cotton sector, including review of worker compensation strategies.
6. Introduce safeguards and remedies for categories of vulnerable workers so that participation in the harvest is truly voluntary.
7. Focus on the labour productivity gains associated with higher levels of voluntariness, which could be stimulated by better wages and working conditions set through forms of tripartite consultation or collective bargaining.
8. Support rural communities to sustain dynamism of rural labour markets.
9. Build capacity and understanding of actors at all levels, including policy-makers, recruiters and vulnerable categories, with respect to *inter alia* the implementation of international labour standards, decent recruitment practices, workers' rights during the harvest and workers' right to refuse to participate in the harvest.
10. Continue to monitor developments and trends over time.