

*Whether you are
traveling near or far, I
wish you and your
family a fun, safe and
fulfilling summer
holiday.*

*Best regards,
Liz*

SPOTLIGHT ISSUE: SOCIAL CONDITIONS IN AGRICULTURE

Farm workers and small-scale farmers are the backbone of agricultural production in much of the world. Yet, these people often work under demanding conditions and have limited opportunity to better their lives. Seventy-five percent of the world's poorest people live in rural communities, many of whom depend on agriculture for their livelihood (Ayres W., et al. n.d.).

Social issues in agricultural settings relate to both working conditions and socio-economic factors. Common issues throughout agriculture include child labor, migrant labor, forced/bonded labor, dangerous working conditions, discrimination, and lack of freedom of association. Some of these issues are core labor standards established by the International Labor Organization* (ILO) that form the foundation for their Decent Work program.

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** The ILO is the tripartite United Nations agency that brings together governments, employers and workers from its member states in common action to promote decent working conditions throughout the world. ILO establishes international labor standards and seeks to ensure those standards are respected in practice as well as principle.*

MEASURING ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRESS

Whether they are used to meet regulatory or voluntary program requirements, or to verify progress over time, metrics are an important part of every sustainability program. At a minimum, metrics should measure the key impacts of the primary products and/or services of the business and, when possible, highlight cost saving and resource efficiencies. Metrics should be collected and normalized in accordance with international or industry standards, when applicable. This is particularly important when measuring greenhouse gas emissions since the findings may be used in current or future 'cap-and-trade' programs.

When designing metric systems it is important to be clear on what you want to achieve in capturing metrics. This will dictate the extent and type of the metrics collected, as well as the level of verification required. For example, if metrics are captured to motivate and show progress to employees, third-party verification may not be necessary. Conversely, if the metrics are linked to marketing claims and/or used in future carbon-trading schemes, third-party audits are appropriate. In every case, the accuracy of metrics will always be of the utmost importance.

Metrics also are a good way to keep business partners focused on strategic priorities and to motivate operational efficiencies. (We all know the adage "you can't manage what you don't measure.") With this in mind, a company should consider the value received versus the resources required when setting parameters for a metric system. Data from owned and operated facilities tend to be more readily available and can be more closely linked to cost savings and operational efficiencies. The measured impacts of products, on the other hand, may require data from additional resources but could provide a holistic and compelling story about the company's sustainability efforts and values.

Key business partners should be involved in the design phase since their support during implementation will be critical. Linking metrics to their strategic priorities should prove to be invaluable. The system also should allow for expansion and continuous improvement over time.



COMMUNICATING PROGRESS

Companies place a lot of significance on their communication and marketing programs – it is how they connect with their consumers, employees and stakeholders. Their brand image is built through various communication vehicles aimed towards many audiences. Sustainability can positively impact these messages and, furthermore, may be communicated through various channels.

Progress can be communicated by either providing straightforward metrics, or by telling a broader story, connecting consumers with communities in need. For example, a company may detail the philanthropic contributions they have made through their corporate social responsibility reports and websites, or identify the sustainable materials used in a product on a product label. For those sectors that are associated with social ills or negative environmental impacts, the communication of industry-wide efforts may also be sensible. Regardless of the level of detail, all statements should be made in accordance with ‘truth in marketing’ requirements.

Those companies that present an engaging story that is aligned with their core values will differentiate themselves from other companies, who simply market “being green.” To foster this image, companies ought to embrace their employees and key stakeholders within their strategies, since they can be either powerful advocates or critics. Ultimately, the important thing is to tell your story truthfully and sincerely.

SOCIAL CONDITIONS IN AGRICULTURE (CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1)

Despite the fact the ILO’s standards have been recognized in a number of countries, many of these countries do not have provisions to monitor or enforce compliance. Limited protection is not the only challenge facing farm workers. Economic factors that keep people in poverty include: high input prices, low yields and crop failure, delayed payment, unaffordable interest rates, product spoilage, and lack of access to a global market.

By looking at the root causes that create poor working conditions in both formal employment and small-scale settings, it’s easy to recognize the correlation between economic standing and social well-being. For example, if a farmer’s income increases he might be able to end a cycle of indebtedness. This may lessen his dependence on unfair employers or buyers, or allow him to send his children to school because he doesn’t need them to work to earn additional income.

I believe that improved working conditions, along with more efficient, transparent and fair supply chains, could lead to improved productivity that would benefit farmers and their communities and global brands alike. Improving relationships and communication between key supply chain participants can unearth opportunities to improve working conditions and build a more efficient and fair supply chain. While this will require major brands to take the lead to affect global supply chains, small- and medium-sized companies can also make a significant contribution.

Please let me know if you would like to discuss these or other sustainability issues.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE:

- INSTALLING PHOTOVOLTAIC ARRAYS (A.K.A. SOLAR SYSTEMS)
- MORE ON AGRICULTURE SUPPLY CHAINS

