International COCOA Initiative



Learning into action:

Employment contracts to prevent forced labour risks

This brief presents how to promote the use of written contracts in cocoa farming to prevent the risk of forced labour, drawing on our experience in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. The good practices presented in this brief could apply to other contexts.

What does the risk of forced labour look like in cocoa?

Forced labour is all work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily.

In cocoa farming, limited use of formal contracts and low awareness of labour rights increase the risk of forced labour and allow potentially abusive working relationships to go unchecked. Common forced labour indicators in cocoa farming include withholding of wages and/or documents, or workers performing tasks that were not specified at the time of recruitment.

Focusing on risks allows action to be taken to address common concerns before a situation degenerates further.

Employment contracts in cocoa farming

In cocoa farming, labour arrangements are often informal and undocumented. Many workers are hired based on verbal agreements rather than written contracts. Promoting the use of formal employment contracts can help clarify roles, responsibilities, and working conditions, protecting workers' rights and reducing their vulnerability to abuse. Having witnesses to labour contracts provides an additional safeguard for labour rights.

To encourage the use of written contracts, ICI has developed contract templates and witness checklists that can be used in the context of cocoa farming. These resources have been created in both written and illustrated formats to ensure they are accessible and understandable for everyone.

Why promote the use of employment contracts in cocoa farming?

- **Promote and protect labour rights.** Employment contracts are a key safeguard for workers. By clearly outlining wages, working hours, tasks, and conditions, they help ensure decent work and reduce the risk of abuse or exploitation. Contracts also make labour rights enforceable, providing workers with a legal basis to seek redress in case of violations.
- **Strengthen labour relations.** Written contracts benefit both employers and workers by formalising the employment relationship and clarifying mutual expectations. They reduce misunderstandings by clearly outlining roles and responsibilities, and in cases of conflict, they provide a reference point to resolve the dispute fairly.
- **Support community-based grievance resolution.** The use of formal employment contracts has become an important tool for addressing labour-related grievances at the community level. Local committees and grievance mechanisms can use these written agreements to mediate disputes, clarify obligations, and protect workers in cases of conflict. Learn more about community-based grievance mechanisms here.
- **Address forced labour risks.** By formalising employment arrangements and ensuring mutual consent, written contracts reduce ambiguity and help prevent exploitative practices, including deception, coercion, and other indicators of forced labour.
- **Increase awareness and contribute to broader social change.** Beyond individual arrangements, contracts help increase awareness of labour rights and responsibilities across the community. As more workers and employers adopt formal agreements, this helps normalise fair labour practices, empowering others to demand similar treatment and contributing to a culture of accountability and professionalism in the cocoa sector and beyond.



> "Having a contract helps us avoid misunderstandings; it's easier to resolve issues when both parties know what was agreed upon."
>
> COCOA FARMER WITH SEASONAL WORKERS

How to promote the use of employment contracts in cocoa farming?

There are several ways to promote the use of employment contracts in cocoa-growing communities. Below, we outline piloted approaches and share good practices to help address common challenges.

Hand out contract templates

Distribute clear, easy-to-use contract templates that outline essential terms, such as wages, tasks, working hours, and duration.

Good practices

- **Adapt templates to local languages and literacy levels.** Complex written contracts may be intimidating for people with limited literacy. Providing illustrated contract templates can help make contract terms easier to understand. However, consider the local context: ICI's experience has shown that in Ghana, while illustrated contracts were useful to explain contract terms, some people were reluctant to sign them because they perceived them as less "official". However, in Côte d'Ivoire, they were generally well accepted and sometimes preferred. Access ICI's written and illustrated contract templates.

Raise awareness

Inform farmers, workers and community members about labour rights and responsibilities, the benefits of formalising employment agreements, and key contract terms.

Good practices

- **Clarify who is a worker.** Some farmers may not recognise certain labour arrangements as employment relationships. Use awareness-raising sessions to explain who is considered a worker and therefore should have a contract.
- **Explain contract content.** Workers and employers need to understand the terms of the contract before signing. Use awareness-raising sessions to explain key contract terms and encourage participants to ask questions and clarify anything they don't understand.
- **Highlight benefits for all parties.** Some farm owners may view cocoa farming as an informal activity and see no need for written contracts, while others may be concerned about potential legal consequences. During awareness-raising sessions, explain how contracts help protect both parties by clarifying responsibilities, supporting fair and stable employment relationships, and reducing disputes. Where possible, share real-life examples of workers and employers who have benefited from signing contracts. Use ICI's awareness-raising brochure or ICI's videos featuring real-life stories.
- **Address misconceptions.** Community members and employers may be sceptical about the purpose of promoting written contracts or distrust those promoting them. Others may believe that contracts involve a cost or are only relevant to highly educated people or those working in sectors perceived as more formal. Use awareness-raising sessions to address these concerns and misconceptions.
- **Clarify roles and limitations.** Witnesses and recruitment intermediaries may misunderstand their roles in relation to employment contracts. For example, some witnesses may believe they are responsible for mediating disputes and some recruitment intermediaries may consider themselves parties to the contract. Awareness-raising sessions should clarify that contracts are between employers and workers and explain the roles and limitations of other actors. Witnesses should understand that they can provide information about what was agreed if a dispute arises, but should not act as mediators, as they may lack the necessary training and their involvement could compromise impartiality. Use ICI's awareness-raising brochure and witness checklists to explain these distinctions.



Set up community-based committees

These committees can raise awareness about labour rights, encourage the use of contracts, facilitate contract signing, and help mediate disputes when they arise.

Good practices

- **Train committee members.** Training topics include human rights, labour rights, detecting forced labour risks, and conflict resolution techniques.
- **Provide ongoing coaching.** Support committee members as they carry out their role, helping them address questions and challenges that arise in practice.
- **Equip committees.** Equip committees with the resources needed to promote contracts safely and effectively, including reaching farmers and workers in remote communities. This may include appropriate transport, awareness-raising materials, and contract templates.
- **Raise awareness about the role of committees.** Make sure workers and employers understand that committees can support them with contract signing and that they can seek their assistance in case of disputes for free. Use ICI's awareness-raising video.

Access more good practices and guidance on setting up community-based grievance mechanisms.

Engage community leaders

A lack of trust in those promoting contracts can discourage their uptake. This is why community leaders may be well-positioned to distribute contracts and encourage adoption, especially in areas where formal committees are not yet active.

Good practices

- **Train community leaders.** Provide training so community leaders understand the purpose of employment contracts and the key messages they are expected to communicate. ICI's brochure can serve as a tool to ensure community leaders share consistent and appropriate information.

Involve cooperatives and supply chain actors

Supply chain actors and cooperatives can also play a key role in promoting the use of contracts among their members and partners, especially by making contract usage a membership requirement. They can also help distribute templates, raise awareness about labour rights and responsibilities, require producers to share copies of contracts signed with workers with the cooperative, and keep a register of these signed contracts.

Good practices

- **Train cooperative staff.** Train cooperative staff on labour rights to ensure they can better support their members and raise awareness about these issues.



Additional resources

Contract templates and witness checklists

Awareness-raising brochure on contract benefits

Awareness-raising kit on forced labour

Awareness-raising film on labour rights

Learning into Action: Setting up community-based grievance mechanisms