

Increasing the impact of ethical market mechanisms on working conditions in farming

Policymakers and stakeholders meet today to debate policy pointers for supermarkets and the EU on how working conditions in farming can be improved for all farmers and farm workers.

A SafeHabitus [online policy workshop](#) today (27 January 2026), looks at the use of ethical trade market mechanisms to promote health and safety in agriculture.

The event brings together EU and international organisations, social partners and agricultural organisations, as well as those who evaluate and certify ethical market mechanisms.

Such mechanisms are creating additional momentum for improved conditions as supermarkets ask suppliers to certify the social conditions of farm workers picking fruit and other produce. But evidence from new research shows more needs to be to improve conditions.

Agriculture and occupational health and safety stakeholders will discuss the findings of research commissioned by SafeHabitus and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA).



New research reveals a fundamental contradiction

The SafeHabitus report, [Enabling conditions for market developments supporting ethical working conditions](#) analyses how corporate social responsibility (CSR) measures and human rights due diligence led by large retailers affect labour conditions across two strawberry supply chains: Morocco to the United Kingdom and Huelva (Spain) to Germany.

Responding to the report, Dr David Meredith, the leader of SafeHabitus highlighted that. “This new research highlights a number of critical issues regarding CSR, due diligence frameworks and supermarkets’ purchasing practices.

“While corporate social responsibility and human rights due diligence frameworks have become increasingly sophisticated, the purchasing practices driving these chains do not always support farmers to deliver on the social commitments set by retailers and expected by consumers.”

The report’s author, Carlos Ruiz Ramírez of Oxfam Intermon highlights recommendations for both supermarkets and the EU:

“Supermarkets should respect labour and human rights, pay fair prices, integrate human rights into corporate management and incentives, publish supplier information and risk data, and support regional, organic and small-scale farming.

“For the EU, the key recommendation is to ensure an ambitious and effective implementation of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), with timely transposition, strong oversight and enforcement, and real access to justice and remedies for affected people, avoiding any weakening of its scope across supply chains,” he says.

According to Alun Jones of CIHEAM Zaragoza, SafeHabitus policy lead, “By increasing the culture of compliance of OSH and decent work standards by agricultural producers, ethical market trade systems can play a key role in raising the prevention culture in both the EU and in non-EU countries.”.

LIFT-OSH

EU-OSHA’s LIFT-OSH project looked at the role of supply chains in promoting safety and health in agriculture.

Dietmar Elsler of LIFT-OSH says:

“Market leverage in the supply chain can play a significant role for the improvement of working conditions and OSH in the agri-food sector. However, market leverage cannot replace government regulation and long-term buyer-supplier relationships. Rather, market leverage builds on a platform of regulations requiring the actors in the sector to take care of health and safety.”

Notes to editors:

Recommendations of the SafeHabitus report on Enabling conditions for market developments supporting better working conditions

Supermarkets should:

- ensure strict **respect for labour and human rights** throughout their supply chains
- pay **fair prices** that reflect the real costs of sustainable production and decent work
- **integrate human rights** into corporate management and internal incentive systems
- increase transparency and accountability by publishing **supplier information and risk data**

- orient purchasing policies toward supporting **regional, organic and small-scale farming**.

The **EU** should:

- develop and improve **binding rules for responsible business conduct** to
 - o build a **legal framework** that has a **broad** scope and **strong enforcement**,
 - o guarantee **access to legal protection and remedies** for affected persons,
 - o **require companies** to adapt **sourcing and purchasing policies** to support **decent work**, and
 - o mandate the payment of **living wages** from the base of agricultural supply chains.

Policy pointers of the LIFT-OSH project

Market leverage practices in agri-food having mainly have an indirect effect on occupational safety and health. It would therefore be important to strengthen the buyer-supplier relations and the occupational safety and health (OSH) content more explicitly. Both policymakers and practitioners can help strengthen buyer-supplier relations and OSH content.

For policymakers:

- Upcoming regulation under the European Green Deal on mandatory due diligence practices and reporting on value chain sustainability (Corporate Sustainability Reporting Due Diligence Directive (CSRD)) has the potential to be a key instrument for OSH and agri-food. However, as with the practice with certificates and audits, there is a risk of developing a paper tiger with little influence on practice. Tailoring the due diligence regulation to agri-food with the many small suppliers with limited managerial capacity is crucial.
- One possibility could be to integrate due diligence with the existing certificates, as the application of many parallel certificates constitutes a burden for the small suppliers. Integration of the different certificates is therefore a priority. A model could be the Norwegian integrated certificate for food safety and OSH.

For practitioners:

- Buyers give advice and make their own audits of food safety and environment but leave OSH to third-party certifying agencies. Stronger integration between the procurement units and CSR/social sustainability units in the buyer organisation would signal a stronger priority on OSH, as well as create advantages and synergies for the buyer organisation in their supplier management.
- Formal contracts of a longer duration – preferably several years – are important for suppliers. They can create stable conditions and open possibilities for longer-term investments.
- Personal trusting relationships help suppliers to plan their production and may facilitate more stable employment. Physical buyer visits to suppliers can help in building personal relations.

- During visits it would be an advantage to open up dialogue on all topics of interest for both buyer and supplier – including OSH.
- Delivery terms are normally determined in the contract – sometimes with fines for violating the terms. Yet, it is important to develop a trusting relationship where both parties are flexible and try to help each other in case of problems such as the supplier having difficulties delivering due to, for instance, adverse weather conditions.

Useful links:

- [SafeHabitus Report | Enabling conditions for market developments supporting ethical working conditions](#)
- [Supply chains' role in promoting safety and health in agriculture: the LIFT-OSH Project](#)
- [SafeHabitus Video | Behind Europe's harvest - Understanding migrant labour to shape better policy](#)
- [SafeHabitus Policy Brief | Seasonal and migrant workers in agri-food value chains](#)
- [SafeHabitus Infographic | Migrant and seasonal workers in EU agriculture](#)
- [SafeHabitus Infographic | Social conditionality in the Common Agricultural Policy \(CAP\) | SafeHabitus](#)

About SafeHabitus:

SafeHabitus (2023-2026), funded under Horizon Europe, is a multi-actor project that aims to strengthen Farm Health and Safety Knowledge Innovation Systems and support the EU transition to social sustainability in farming. The project brings together farmers, farming organisations, farm advisers, researchers, trade unions, health authorities, policy stakeholders and other relevant actors from across Europe to address occupational health and safety challenges faced by farmers and farm workers.

About the Partner Organisations:

Oxfam Intermón is a Spain-based charitable foundation and part of Oxfam's international confederation of NGOs aiming to find solutions to world poverty and injustice. Established in 1956, it joined Oxfam in 1997.

CIHEAM Zaragoza (Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Zaragoza) is one of four institutes of the International Centre for Advanced Agronomic Mediterranean Studies, promoting international training and cooperation in agriculture and food in the Mediterranean region.

Teagasc is Ireland's agriculture and food development authority, providing integrated research, advisory and education services to the agriculture and food industry and rural communities.

Geopa (European Employers' Group of Professional Agricultural Organisations) represents 22 national employer associations in European agriculture. As the European social partner for agriculture officially recognised by the European Commission, GEOPA engages in permanent social dialogue at European level.



EFFAT (European Federation of Trade Unions in the Food, Agriculture and Tourism sectors) is the umbrella organisation of 121 national trade unions from 40 European countries, defending the interests of more than 2.6 million members and 25 million workers.

About EU-OSHA:

EU-OSHA is the European Union information agency for occupational safety and health. Its work contributes to the [European Commission's Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at Work 2021-2027](#) and other relevant EU strategies and programmes.

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