



BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL LABOR AFFAIRS

INTERIM EVALUATION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OF IMPROVING RESPECT FOR WORKERS' RIGHTS IN
AGRICULTURAL SUPPLY CHAINS IN HONDURAS AND
GUATEMALA, AND THE MAQUILA SECTOR IN EL SALVADOR

November 2024

Grantee: Solidarity Center

Project: Improving Respect for Workers' Rights in Agricultural Supply Chains in Honduras and Guatemala and the Maquila Sector in El Salvador

Project Duration: December 2021–August 2026

Fiscal Year and Funding Level: FY 2021: \$6,250,000.00

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Evaluation Fieldwork Dates: April 17–May 17, 2024

LIST OF ACRONYMS

DevTech	DevTech Systems, Inc.
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FOACB	Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining
GBVH	Gender-Based Violence and Harassment
ILAB	Bureau of International Labor Affairs
ILO	International Labor Organization
IP	Implementing Partner
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and More
SC	Solidarity Center
USDOL	United States Department of Labor
USG	United States Government

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The right of workers and employers to form and join effective organizations of their own choosing is an integral part of a free and open society and a foundation for decent work. Closely linked to freedom of association is the practice of collective bargaining, a key means through which employers and their organizations and trade unions can establish fair wages and safe and healthy working conditions and ensure equal opportunity and non-discrimination. Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining (FOACB), as described in International Labor Organization (ILO) Conventions 87 and 98, were declared fundamental principles and rights at work in 1998.

While trade agreement commitments and labor laws exist in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, economies based on wage repression, weak state enforcement of citizen and labor rights, impunity for major economic actors, complex political environments, and historic violent repressions affect independent worker organizations' ability to organize. Workers continue to endure restrictions on freedom of association, insufficient wages to meet basic needs, long working hours, gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH), exposure to health and safety hazards, violence against organizers, and inadequate or non-existent employment benefits. Workers are fearful of wrongful dismissal, and an anti-union sentiment is pervasive. Often workers from underserved communities—including poor, rural, Indigenous, Afro-descendant, women, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and other sexual and gender-diverse (LGBTQI+) workers—are the most affected.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

The Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) leads the U.S. Department of Labor's (USDOL) efforts to ensure fair treatment for workers globally. ILAB's mission encompasses strengthening global labor standards, enforcing labor commitments among trading partners, promoting equity, and combating child labor, forced labor, and human trafficking.

As part of this mission, ILAB awarded a cooperative agreement to Solidarity Center (SC), specifically, the *Improving Respect for Workers' Rights in Agricultural Supply Chains in Honduras and Guatemala and the Maquila Sector in El Salvador* project. This project aims to improve workers' rights by supporting worker organizations in the banana, melon, palm oil, and pineapple sectors in Honduras; the banana and palm oil sectors in Guatemala; and in the garment sector in El Salvador. With a total budget of \$6,250,000, the project is set to conclude in August 2026. SC and four implementing partners (IPs) implement the project.

EVALUATION BACKGROUND

ILAB contracted DevTech Systems, Inc. (DevTech) to conduct a joint, high-quality, and cost-effective interim performance evaluation of the *Improving Respect for Workers' Rights in Agricultural Supply Chains in Honduras and Guatemala, and the Maquila Sector in El Salvador* project.

The core objectives of the evaluation were to (1) take stock of the extent to which the projects are making progress toward achieving their intended outputs and outcomes, (2) identify challenges and emerging opportunities, (3) analyze the factors driving project performance, (4) identify

leverage points that hold transformative potential, and (5) recommend time-bound, practical actions to be taken by different project stakeholders to improve project performance and effectiveness moving forward.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

The interim performance evaluation used a utilization-focused, qualitative, and participatory approach. The evaluation questions and key findings are guided by the core evaluation criteria of ILAB's technical assistance programming: relevance, effectiveness, coherence/alignment, equity/inclusion, and sustainability. A desk study review provided the evaluation team with background information to inform data collection and the stakeholder mapping exercise. Key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted remotely and in person from April to May 2024 in three locations in Guatemala, four in Honduras, and one in El Salvador. To protect the safety of project participants and IP staff, the evaluation does not disclose specific locations.

In total, 72 KIIs and 9 FGDs were conducted with a total of 171 people, including IPs or workers from worker organizations (120), civil society organization (CSO) representatives or leaders in the community (24), SC staff (16), ILAB or U.S. Government (USG) staff (6), government officials (3), academia (1), and the private sector (1). While there is a potential for positive bias in the sampling strategy, there is a high level of consistency in the answers provided across actors. The evaluation team, in coordination with ILAB and SC, determined that it would not be feasible or safe to speak to the private sector in Guatemala and Honduras. Further, the evaluation engaged with government officials in Guatemala but not in Honduras or El Salvador.

KEY EVALUATION RESULTS

Key findings are presented below and organized by evaluation criteria.

Relevance. The project and its objectives were relevant at the time of design and remain valid to date, especially given the historical and contextual labor conditions described by workers in the agricultural and maquila sectors. The project addresses the needs and priorities of workers who otherwise lack a viable mechanism for resolving conflicts with their employers.

Effectiveness. The project made significant progress across its three long-term outcomes, all of which were rated as **moderate** or **above-moderate** on a scale of low, moderate, above-moderate, and high. The project team reached a total of 2,560 contacts and provided learning sessions to at least 3,483 workers. This newly acquired knowledge led to the formation of worker organizations and achieved historic wins. Some organizations have already registered legally and started advocating for improved working conditions, though others have not yet entered negotiations.

To combat fears of retaliation for organizing, the project introduced various strategies, such as mainstreaming human rights, promoting community-driven responsibility, and establishing legal unions for representation. However, despite these efforts, the fear of retaliation for organizing remains prevalent in all three countries. The human rights and labor rights training provided to workers contributed to increased knowledge, self-esteem, and motivation to demand their rights across all three countries. Moreover, workers have been sharing the information they learned with other colleagues and community members, extending the reach and transfer of knowledge. While

institutional or union-building skills—such as union administration (status or committees), financial management (dues), and overall accountability—were introduced, additional training is needed in these areas, given the emerging context and history of dismantling prior organizing efforts.

While major improvements in working conditions remain limited, worker organizations report small but meaningful changes from employers, such as a reduction in threats and reprimands. In El Salvador, *mesas de diálogo* (dialogue tables) provide a space for dialogue between maquila unions and employers to resolve conflict, increase salaries, and improve working conditions.

Coherence. There is strong alignment with the key pillars of SC’s Central America Strategy and the project’s strategies, sectors, and activities. SC has a process for reflecting on its regional and project-level strategies. SC adapted project-level strategies to incorporate learning garnered to date and to reflect the local context. It has integrated community-based approaches, collaborated with a CSO as an IP, and gained insights into the challenges of organizing through a remote strategy.

Equity and Inclusion. The project demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity by targeting low-income, underserved workers with low literacy levels and by working with women in all three countries. However, the demographics of the targeted sector and company constrain the outreach efforts. In the agricultural sector, the project primarily organized permanent workers and engaged with seasonal workers where possible. Although the project initially planned to work with Afro-descendant workers, it could not do so because Afro-descendant populations are not present in the areas or sectors where the project operates. Youth engagement in the project varied across regions.

Sustainability. The project has integrated sustainability efforts by collaborating with IPs and establishing worker organizations. However, evaluation findings revealed a need for accelerated institutional efforts to further enhance and sustain workers’ capacity. A critical gap identified in the project’s sustainability framework is the absence of a comprehensive plan to ensure long-term financial support for organizers who work within IPs. While the project has enhanced the capacity of several organizers in each country, sustaining these efforts requires identifying alternative external financial resources. Without this, and unless this issue is prioritized now, it is unlikely that newly formed organizations or IPs will have the financial means to support organizers and technical staff once the project ends.

At the time of data collection, recently formed worker organizations were awaiting approval to become legal entities. Since then, many have received their legal paperwork. Given the common challenges faced by new organizations, there is a significant risk that many of these organizations may not survive.

Impact. The project has made significant contributions by supporting applied research on labor rights abuses aiming to deter, document, and redress injustices. These initiatives are important undertakings that are otherwise unlikely to take place. The reports and research generated have the potential to create long-term benefits for workers, especially when integrated with broader advocacy efforts and the strategic dissemination of information.

CONCLUSION

The project has successfully supported a total of 14 organizations across Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador, a significant and historic achievement given the ongoing repression of labor organizing in the region.

Human rights education has been an effective entry point, helping reduce fear and building workers' self-esteem. Still, it is essential that this approach does not overshadow future rights-based labor training, which is critical for effective organizing.

While some organizations have already achieved positive outcomes, such as salary negotiations and improved treatment from employers, many are still awaiting legal recognition and need ongoing capacity-building to manage unions effectively. As the project enters a critical phase, further emphasis on securing financial sustainability and strengthening institutional support will be essential to ensure long-term impact.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ILAB

Future Programming

1. Consider support for public officials, mainly for those in Ministries of Labor in the host countries, to receive training related to the protection of labor rights, specifically on the legal frameworks for the protection of labor rights, discrimination, equity, and workplace harassment. Moreover, funding can be allocated to implement existing labor code protections and support bilingual labor inspectors who can travel to hard-to-reach areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ILAB AND SC

Project Approach

2. In future project designs, consider the number of countries and geographical locations involved in potential organizing. The project experienced delays due to the areas of intervention and budget allocation, which involved travel to rural areas and the inefficiencies of hybrid coordination. Each country and site presented unique challenges that required specific management.
3. In future regional project designs, consider having an overarching regional objective that articulates what the project needs to change and achieve at the regional level. While there were some cross-country initiatives (i.e., documenting labor rights abuses and meetings between partners), the project lacked an overarching regional objective, which ultimately led SC and IPs to focus primarily on country-level and site-specific programming as opposed to regional initiatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SC

Project Approach

4. Continue to build a trusting relationship with IPs by implementing an accompaniment and worker-led approach, allowing IPs to take the lead in activities. Complement this project-strategy approach with a rigorous union-strengthening and union-building strategy that

includes concrete and measurable administrative, financial, technical, and organizational targets for IPs and new unions.

Effectiveness

5. Prioritize union institution-building activities (Activity 1.3) to consolidate gains, even if this means reaching fewer workers in other geographical locations or companies. Ensure that concrete progress on the institutional strengthening of IPs and the newly formed unions is adequately reported (outcome 2). Continue to proactively anticipate and prioritize preparing newly formed unions to respond to common challenges that they may face once they are legally recognized, including intra- and inter-conflict dynamics, negotiation, strategic planning, and external tactics to dismantle organizations.
6. Assess the efficacy of pamphlets in recruiting new union members in the maquila sector. Consider piloting and studying alternative recruitment strategies (WhatsApp campaigns, workshops, digital recruitment, etc.). Give priority to creating strategic communication plans in the maquila sectors, involving union leaders in their design, with the aim of gaining new members and improving knowledge about a union's role. Train union leaders on multi-channel communication strategies.

Equity and Inclusion

7. Continue to seek opportunities to work with all vulnerable and marginalized workers, including Indigenous people, women, men, and youth. Document and share existing good practices in the maquila sector with all IPs, focusing on the integration of intersectionality and inclusion of LGBTQI+ individuals, as well as advocacy for workers with chronic illnesses.
8. Continue to mainstream human rights into capacity-strengthening curriculum in a distinct and separate phase. Key concepts related to power analysis, community, and collective power can also be integrated.
9. Create dynamic communication and training strategies to engage tech-savvy youth workers who may expect or engage better with different pedagogical training methodologies. Consider engaging with a youth engagement specialist or advocate to review existing capacity-strengthening efforts or solicit more feedback from Honduran youth who participated in existing trainings.

Sustainability

10. Work with IPs to create an action-oriented and measurable sustainability plan with concrete scenario planning to ensure they can maintain sufficient financial and human resources to continue organizing and providing capacity-strengthening efforts beyond the life of the project. Create bi-annual touchpoints with each of the IPs to assess plan implementation.
11. In newly formed unions, develop multiple leaders in the event of potential challenges, such as layoffs, democratic turnover, and disengagement. While capacity-strengthening activities already take place, more support is needed to increase the leaders' capacities to make decisions to promote transparency, increase internal participation, create alliances, and be resilient in the face of crisis and constant labor changes (Activity 1.3).

12. Use research efforts strategically and explore other entry points for future alliances, such as the role of labor in addressing climate change and the impact of forced labor in working conditions.