



► ILO Brief

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Building better labour markets: A service-based approach to agricultural recruitment in Lebanon¹

Key points

- Lebanon's agricultural sector is dominated by informal labour intermediaries, limiting worker protection and farmers' access to reliable, skilled labour.
- The ILO's [BOUZOUR](#) project piloted a service-based recruitment model through PlantLab, one of Lebanon's only formal agricultural service companies, across 25 farms and 348 workers in four governorates.
- 348 workers benefited from improved working conditions, and 47 new employment opportunities were created through stable contracts and farm placements.
- 96% of farmers expressed interest in continuing with the model and 88% indicated willingness to pay, confirming economic viability beyond project support.

Decent work deficits and labour market constraints in agriculture

Lebanon's agriculture sector is a key source of livelihood for a significant share of Lebanese host community and Syrian workers. Despite its economic and social importance, the sector is characterized by widespread decent work deficits and weak labour market functioning.

Agricultural workers, particularly seasonal workers who are predominantly Syrian refugees, often face low wages, long working hours, hazardous working conditions and limited access to labour protection. Recruitment practices remain largely informal and weakly regulated². Workers are often exposed to exploitative conditions, including recruitment fees, lack of formal contracts and limited access to grievance mechanisms.

Securing reliable and skilled labour for time-sensitive operations such as pruning, harvesting and orchard management is a persistent challenge for farmers. Many rely on the Shawish system - informal labour intermediaries who dominate recruitment across many agricultural regions and act as the primary gateway between workers and employers. Shawish typically deduct significant commissions directly from workers' wages, often without prior disclosure, leaving workers with little visibility over their earnings and no formal mechanism to raise grievances. The absence of contracts, combined with workers' limited bargaining power, creates conditions in which wage manipulation and dependency are difficult to challenge. The result is a system that generates poor outcomes on both sides: workers remain exposed to exploitation with limited recourse, while farmers face persistent difficulties securing workers with the skills

¹ This intervention and brief were carried out by Hala Obeid with support from Luana Ayala.

² For a more comprehensive analysis of recruitment mechanisms in Lebanon, please refer to the [study](#) published under BOUZOUR project examining recruitment mechanisms and working conditions for workers in the agriculture sector in Lebanon.

needed for specialised agricultural tasks, contributing to workforce instability and reduced productivity.

Informal labour intermediation is deeply embedded in agricultural labour markets and reflects real needs on both sides: farmers need reliable labour quickly, and workers need income. The BOUZOUR project explored one entry point where conditions were favourable: strengthening an existing commercial service provider to offer a more structured and transparent recruitment model, better aligned with decent work principles, with the longer-term aim to prove that improved formal alternatives may gradually reduce reliance on harmful informal arrangements over time.

Testing a service-based model for agricultural labour recruitment

To implement this approach, the intervention worked through a collaboration with PlantLab, a Lebanese agricultural service provider with an established commercial presence in farm management and technical agricultural services. PlantLab is one of the few actors in the market already operating an integrated, service-based recruitment model. This partnership therefore provided an opportunity to test and refine the model, assess its alignment with decent work standards, and evaluate whether it can deliver mutual benefits for farmers, workers and the service provider.

PlantLab offered an integrated service to farmers focused on high-value crops such as cherries, grapes and avocados. This includes a pool of trained workers alongside technical farm management services such as integrated pest management, organic production guidance and harvest coordination. The model responds to the specific needs of quality-focused farmers who require both reliable skilled labour and technical expertise to meet market and certification requirements. A core objective of the intervention was to demonstrate the operational and financial sustainability of embedding labour intermediation and workforce development functions within this type of existing agricultural service model.

The intervention focused on strengthening PlantLab's capacity and incentives to integrate labour recruitment, workforce training and worker deployment within its core service offering. Structured outreach mechanisms were developed to improve alignment between labour supply and farm-level demand. Initial implementation focused on North and South Lebanon, where service-based labour

models show strong potential. The intervention also generated evidence on adoption pathways in the Bekaa and Mount Lebanon, where informal labour arrangements remain dominant.

A further objective was to generate market evidence on the viability of service-based recruitment and create incentives for other market actors to consider similar approaches. The intervention also integrated targeted actions to address priority decent work deficits observed at farm level, contributing to gradual improvements in working conditions alongside service quality and workforce productivity.



The service centre functions as a platform for linking skilled and trained workers with farmers in need of labour for specialized tasks © ILO

From pilot to practice: what the model delivered

The intervention directly engaged 25 farmers across South Lebanon, Bekaa, North Lebanon and Mount Lebanon, combining technical farm support with structured workforce services. A total of 348 workers benefited from the intervention, including 292 farm-based workers (110 permanent and 182 seasonal) who received technical skills training and Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) awareness. Syrian refugees made up the large majority of both groups (89% Syrian, 26% women). To expand the pool of skilled labour available through the model, PlantLab carried out dedicated outreach to identify and train 47 additional workers. Of these, 12 were subsequently contracted into PlantLab's own workforce and 35 were matched to participating farms.

► 96%

Of farmers want to continue with the model

Better farms, better practices

Farmers reported significant improvements in farm performance and labour management practices. A notable shift was observed from informal hiring toward structured service agreements, with 96% of farmers expressing interest in continuing with the model.

With the support we received, workers now use protective equipment properly. Safety has become part of how we manage the farm.

► *Ahmad Dia, Farm supervisor*

Farmer satisfaction with training was high at 75%, and this translated into tangible changes in farm management practices. Access to skilled workers enabled more efficient operations and stronger adoption of improved agricultural practices, including more structured approaches to irrigation, fertilisation and harvest coordination.

Farms also made notable progress in working conditions. 88% implemented OSH improvements, including provision of protective equipment, safety training and improved workplace practices, and early progress was reported on gender equality, non-discrimination, and working and living conditions.

Better jobs, better conditions

Workers benefited from improved skills, working conditions and more stable employment. Training satisfaction was high: 83% of workers demonstrated strong improvements in technical competencies and OSH practices, which directly influenced their performance and hiring outcomes.

Workers already integrated into the PlantLab model consistently outperformed newly trained workers across all assessment criteria, indicating that the model strengthens workers' skills over time. Among newly trained workers, those who secured employment showed stronger competencies in key areas such as machinery operation and, most notably, OSH practices, closely aligned with farmers' hiring priorities.

These improvements address the labour constraints identified at the outset: limited access to skilled workers, inconsistent work quality and safety risks, with workers

better able to perform tasks efficiently and meet production standards. Beyond skills, however, the PlantLab model represents a meaningful shift in the nature of employment itself. Workers engaged through the model moved away from informal, intermediary-dependent arrangements characterised by wage deductions, lack of contracts and limited recourse, toward more transparent, direct and stable employment relationships. This shift matters: workers gained greater visibility over their earnings, clearer terms of engagement and a more dignified and predictable working experience. For a population with limited labour market power and few alternatives, access to fairer and more stable employment is as significant an outcome as the skills gained.

Beyond recruitment: skills as a sustainable value

The economic case for the service-based model rests not only on recruitment efficiency but on the value generated by the full package of services it delivers. Workers trained and integrated through PlantLab earned USD 17 per day compared to USD 11.50 for those in informal arrangements, a 48% wage premium reflecting higher skill levels among trained workers. They also worked fewer hours and received more consistent overtime compensation.

This premium reflects the skills development embedded in the model: all engaged workers received both technical agricultural training and OSH coaching, and those who secured employment consistently outperformed their peers across all competency criteria, particularly in machinery operation and safety practices, which are closely aligned with farmers' hiring priorities. For farmers, this translated into measurable operational gains: 96% improved irrigation and fertilisation management, 75% introduced structured farm workflows, and 63% adopted pest and disease control strategies. These are outcomes that informal brokerage arrangements, which do not incorporate technical support, are not in a position to deliver.

The value of the model to farmers lies in this combination of labour supply and technical support. The willingness of 88% of farmers to pay for these services confirms that commercial viability rests on service quality rather than project support.

Evidence of commercial sustainability

Through the pilot, PlantLab developed the foundations of an operational service delivery model, a pool of trained workers, formal agreements with farms across four governorates, and a clearer understanding of both market demand and its own operational capacity. The intervention enabled the company to test and refine its model in new areas, laying the groundwork for geographic expansion to Akkar, Beqaa and Mount Lebanon.

The pilot demonstrates that a commercially viable model aligned with decent work principles can function in practice and deliver value to both farmers and workers.

The ILO's role was to de-risk and generate evidence for the model. The commercial relationships and workforce developed during the pilot now continue independently of project support. The broader aim is to generate evidence and incentives that encourage other service providers to develop similar models, gradually increasing the availability of structured, transparent recruitment.

Early results show improved farm productivity, crop quality and more stable labour arrangements, with potential for wider impact as the model scales and attracts interest from other service providers. Together, these results indicate clear demand for reliable labour matching and workforce services, and early evidence that service-based models can support a gradual shift in how agricultural labour is recruited and managed. The recruitment of workers into more permanent roles by PlantLab marks a concrete early step in that direction.



Agricultural worker using protective equipment during daily agricultural work. © ILO

Looking ahead: building on early evidence

The PlantLab model is one entry point in a complex labour market. Different contexts, including farm size, crop type and geographic area, may call for different models. The project began exploring complementary approaches involving municipality coordinators and private sector actors as third-party service providers. Both models were assessed and designed, with stakeholder consultations and local data collected, before the March 2026 escalation required suspension of piloting activities. These remain ready entry points for future testing when conditions allow.

Lebanon's agricultural labour market continues to shift, with growing labour shortages and changing population movements making the case for more structured recruitment mechanisms increasingly pressing. The evidence generated through the pilot on commercial viability, worker outcomes and farmer demand provides a practical foundation for continued investment in more structured, transparent and fair recruitment across the sector.

Supported by



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