

► ILO Brief

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Sowing the seeds of change through private sector partnerships: Lessons from two seasons of pilots and system-building

Highlights

- Two pilot seasons tested a simple idea: that supporting cherry exporters to work more closely with farmers could raise farmers' incomes and improve conditions for workers at the same time, and the evidence shows that it can. The model drew in four commercial exporters across both seasons, three of which continue operating it today: one from the original 2024 cooperative pilot, and two more who joined through an open call in 2025.
- In practice, this meant stronger farmer–exporter linkages that improved farmers' production and quality practices, while helping exporters meet international certification standards and reach higher-value export markets. The results followed: in 2025, farmers working with partner exporters earned between USD 0.72 and USD 1.97 more per kilogram than comparable farmers selling elsewhere, worth USD 688,564 in additional income across the season. Alongside this, 265 workers were trained on decent work, health and safety, and workplace rights, and two partner exporters obtained SMETA ethical trade certification.
- These pilot-level gains were reinforced by wider shifts in the sector: Lebanon's first national cherry export certification and phytosanitary framework was established, anchored within the Ministry of Agriculture and four chambers of commerce, alongside an international buyer engagement across Gulf and European markets and sector-wide sessions on phytosanitary standards and market access that reached exporters and farmers beyond the direct pilot partnerships.

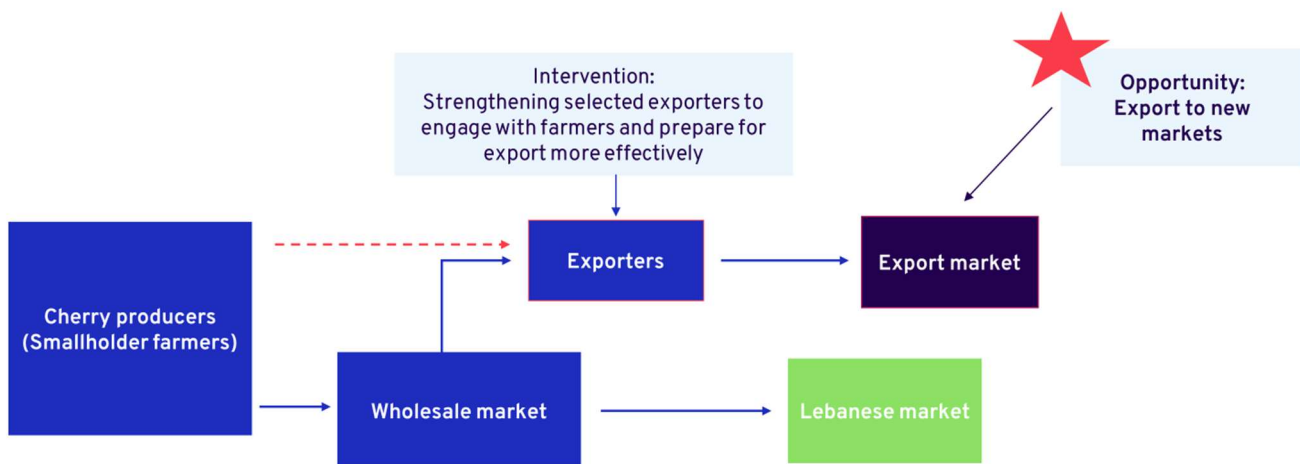
► Lebanon's cherry sector: the opportunity and the challenge

Lebanon produces high-quality cherries, particularly in the Bekaa Valley, Akkar and Mount Lebanon, with growing international demand from Gulf and European buyers seeking reliable, quality-assured Mediterranean produce. Yet for most smallholder cherry farmers, this potential remains out of reach. Fragmented farmer–exporter relationships, limited post-harvest handling capacity, absence of export certification and phytosanitary compliance, and a seasonal labour market characterised by informality have kept the sector in low-value, informal domestic trade channels.

Lebanon hosts one of the largest refugee populations per capita in the world, and Syrian refugees make up a large share of the agricultural workforce alongside Lebanese host communities. Workers in the cherry sector, the majority of whom are Syrian refugees, with significant participation of women, face informal and often exploitative employment conditions: wages negotiated informally, no contracts, no social protection and limited safety standards enforcement. Buyers in premium international markets are also increasingly requiring evidence of ethical sourcing, traceability and labour standard compliance as a condition of trade. This gives decent work a commercial dimension in the cherry sector as well as a social one, and it is this overlap that the project's strategy set out to use.

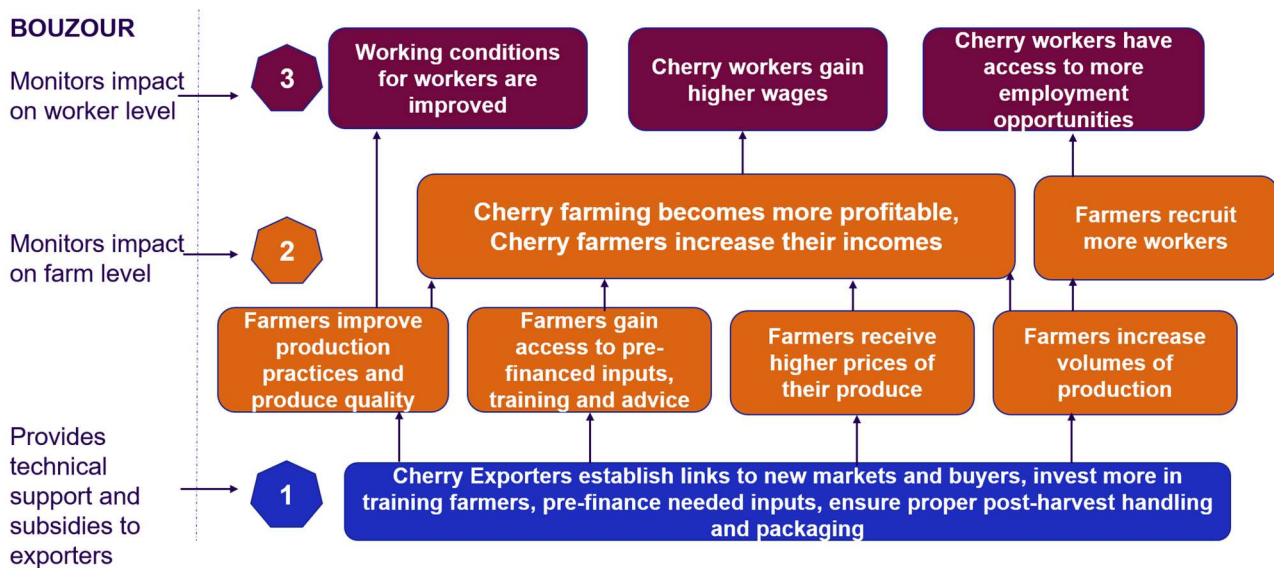
ILO's [BOUZOUR project](#), funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), developed interventions using a market systems approach to these challenges. This is a facilitation approach: rather than delivering services directly to farmers or workers, the ILO worked with companies to develop structured sourcing and export models that raised farmers' incomes and improved conditions for workers. Embedding these gains in exporters' own commercial relationships was a deliberate choice about durability. Buyers who require evidence of labour standards as a condition of doing business give exporters an ongoing reason to maintain decent work practices, not a one-time reason to adopt them, which gives these gains a better chance of lasting once the project ends.

Before the intervention, cherries grown by smallholder farmers moved almost entirely through a single channel, the wholesale market, with no structured route to export. Figure 1 shows how ILO's entry point, strengthening selected exporters to link directly with farmers, opened a pathway into export markets.



► **Figure 1: The cherry value chain in Lebanon before the ILO's intervention.**

Building on this pathway, the intervention follows a simple results chain (Figure 2): ILO support to selected exporters is expected to flow through to farm-level gains and, from there, to workers. Evidence is strongest closest to the intervention, at exporter and farm level, where a comparison group of non-supported farmers exists. It is more indicative further up the chain, at worker level, where wages and employment are shaped by many forces beyond this project.



► **Figure 2: Simplified results chain for the cherry value chain, from exporter-level support to farm-level income gains to worker-level outcomes.**

► 2024: Testing the win-win

The first season tested whether the hypothesis held in practice: could structure, certification-backed sourcing relationships generate measurable benefits for farmers, workers and exporters simultaneously? Two pilot approaches ran in parallel, each testing a different sourcing model.

The cooperative model: Nasr Rahme / FaV Lebanon

The first pilot worked through Nasr Rahme and its trading arm FaV Lebanon, partnering with three cooperatives in Ainata, Aarsal and Kaa El Reem. The cooperative model provided a structured collective point of coordination: quality standards, pre-harvest support, decent work requirements and price agreements were managed at cooperative level, giving farmers access to the exporter's market relationships and the exporter a reliable, certified supply. GlobalG.A.P. certification, an international standard for safe, traceable farm production, was obtained for Ainata cooperative farmers.



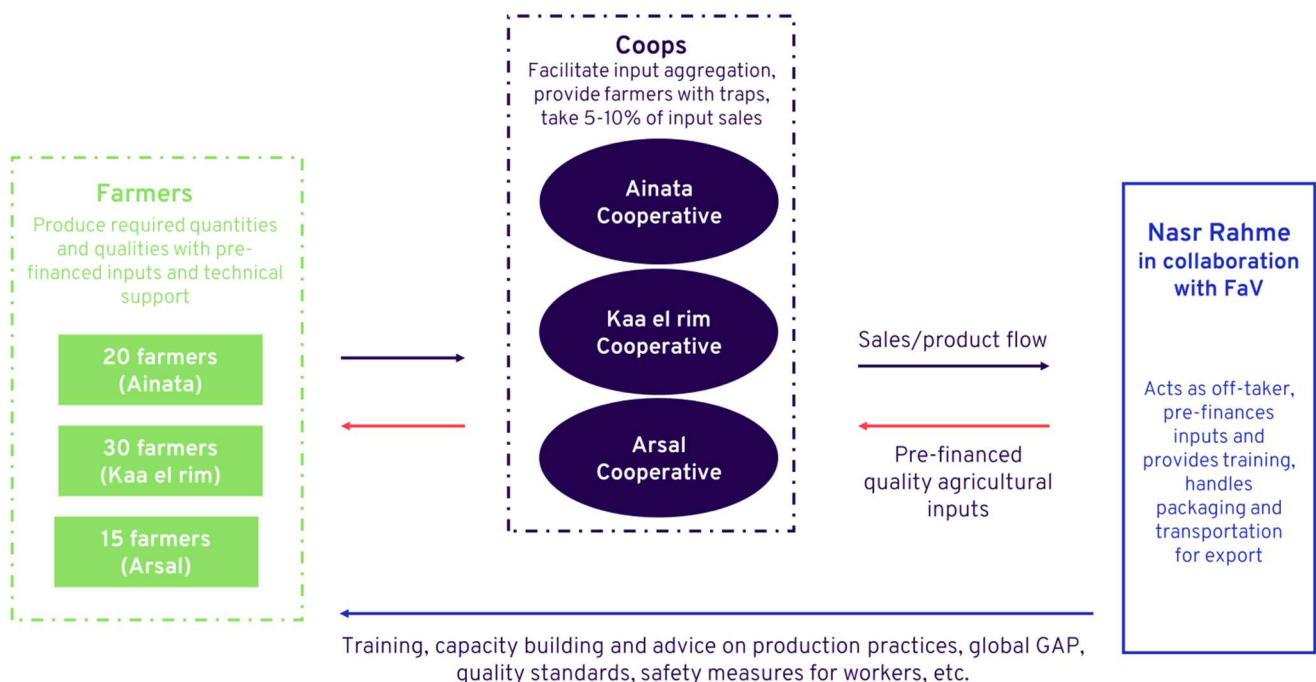
Sixty-five farmers took part across three cooperatives in Ainata, Aarsal and Kaa El Reem. Nasr Rahme, operating under the FaV Lebanon brand, acted as guaranteed off-taker, pre-financing inputs and providing training on harvesting, grading and cold storage. The pilot delivered three shipments to Dubai and Kuwait worth USD 19,319, plus a first order of certified organic cherries from Aarsal Cooperative worth USD 1,254.

Farmers selling through the cooperative received a 51% price premium over wholesale, and average annual income rose by 37.6% without being offset by higher costs. Daily wages rose by 63.4%, from USD 8.20 to USD 13.39.

New packaging solution developed for the export market by one of the partners: Nasr Rahme ©ILO

All farmers surveyed said that working with the cooperative had increased their income from cherry production and reduced

their production costs, cutting the share of annual income spent on inputs from 41% to 14%. All farmers also expressed their intention to keep selling to Nasr Rahme, while recognising that such intentions captured in a single survey may shift with changing market conditions.



- **Figure 3: How the cooperative sourcing model divides roles.** Cooperatives aggregate farmers and provide services such as fruit fly traps; the exporter acts as guaranteed off-taker, pre-financing inputs and handling training, packaging and export.

The cluster farmer model: NatAgri

The second pilot worked through NatAgri, sourcing directly from a cluster of individual farmers rather than through cooperatives. This tested whether the structured sourcing approach could function outside the cooperative structure, reaching farmers that are not organised collectively. The cluster model offered more flexibility but required stronger direct management of quality and decent work compliance at the company level.

NatAgri sourced directly from ten smallholder farmers in Kaa El Rim, Bekaa, without a cooperative intermediary, testing whether the model could work through direct contracts alone. The pilot demonstrated the feasibility of this approach, with NatAgri meeting most of its export target for the season, including through a partnership with another Lebanese exporter's existing buyers. Of 19 international buyers contacted across Asia, the Gulf and Europe, only one responded positively, as engagement with international buyers was initiated relatively late in the 2024 sourcing cycle, limiting opportunities to secure new buyers for that season. Thus, the pilot highlighted the importance of early buyer engagement and meeting market-specific certification and quality requirements. NatAgri did not continue as a partner into 2025.

What 2024 confirmed

The 2024 season confirmed the core hypothesis where it was tested through a cooperative structure. Nasr Rahme's model showed that structured, certification-backed sourcing relationships can improve market access for farmers, wages and working conditions, and commercial positioning for exporters, at the same time. The parallel trial with NatAgri tested the same hypothesis without a cooperative structure and showed the barriers an individual exporter still faces working on its own: low buyer conversion, certification gaps, and price competition from established suppliers. Together, the two pilots point to the same conclusion: aggregation through cooperatives, certification readiness and institutional backing are what make the export model viable, not simply connecting an exporter to farmers. 2024 also identified areas needing further work before the model could reach scale, including phytosanitary compliance, post-harvest handling, buyer engagement and the formalization of decent work practices at company level. The 2025 season built on the cooperative model, which had shown the clearest results, and worked to strengthen each of these areas.

► 2025: Building the enabling conditions for scale

The 2025 season was also particularly challenging: severe frost reduced cherry production across Lebanon by over 90% compared to normal years, drastically limiting export volumes for all partners. This context matters for reading the results, but it also provided an important test of which elements of the model were durable under adverse conditions. Nasr Rahme continued sourcing through its three partner cooperatives, while Fadel Trading and Biomass joined as new exporters testing their own sourcing models. All three stayed engaged despite near-total harvest failure, and wages for workers rose even as labour demand fell, a sign that the model held up under conditions that would normally have discouraged continued investment.

New market actors: Fadel Trading and Biomass

In 2025, ILO opened the model to additional exporters willing to work directly with farmers on their own sourcing arrangements, and Fadel Trading and Biomass joined alongside Nasr Rahme through this open call. Unlike Nasr Rahme, which continued sourcing through the same three cooperatives, both new entrants tested their own models: Fadel worked through individual farmer contracts in the Bekaa Valley, and Biomass, exporting cherries for the first time, built farmer clusters in Bekaa-Koussaya and Akoura.



Packaging solution for cherry developed by partners to achieve better export quality for the produce ©ILO

Both companies co-invested substantially in export upgrading, certification and post-harvest infrastructure alongside ILO support. This is a sign that the commercial case for the model was credible enough to draw in new market actors.

Closing these gaps meant working across four parts of the market system at the same time: the institutional and regulatory foundation, buyer-facing market access, post-harvest infrastructure, and decent work compliance. A gap in any one of these would have limited what farmers and workers could gain from progress in the others.

Much of this work reached beyond the three partner exporters. The phytosanitary framework, the sector-wide training on export requirements, and the fruit fly monitoring network were built as

shared infrastructure for the whole cherry sector, available to any Lebanese farmer or exporter, not only those directly engaged through the pilot partnerships.

1. Phytosanitary certification and institutional anchoring

Phytosanitary compliance, specifically demonstrating that orchards are free of the Mediterranean fruit fly and related pests, is a precondition for exporting cherries to the EU, Lebanon's most attractive long-term market given its late-season advantage and stronger prices. Before this intervention, no exporter or farmer had successfully navigated this requirement. Awareness of the pre-harvest monitoring period needed to support a fruit fly-free declaration was low, and the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) had not yet issued the specific procedures needed to certify compliance with EU standards. This regulatory gap was a key challenge for Lebanese cherries to reach the EU market, as the only alternative route, a 16-day cold storage quarantine, is impractical for a fruit as perishable as cherries.

Working with the Zahle Chamber of Commerce, three other chambers and the MoA, ILO supported the development of Lebanon's first national cherry export certification and phytosanitary framework, including a step-by-step guideline and inspection checklist for farmers, exporters and MoA inspectors. Twenty MoA extension agents were trained to deliver this guidance directly to farmers and exporters, and pheromone traps for fruit fly monitoring were installed and monitored weekly on 60 farms across the Bekaa, Baalbek-Hermel and Metn from June to August 2025, the first season of the sustained monitoring record that EU certification requires. This framework is now formally anchored within the Ministry of Agriculture and four chambers of commerce, an institutional asset available to the whole sector, not just project partners. GlobalG.A.P. certification was renewed for 14 Ainata cooperative farmers; Fadel Trading obtained GlobalG.A.P. for one anchor farmer as a proof of concept for wider rollout.

To extend the benefits of this work beyond direct pilot partnerships, ILO organised sector-wide sessions open to all Lebanese cherry farmers and exporters: one set on phytosanitary requirements from both farmer and exporter perspectives, and a second set for cherry exporters on EU and Gulf market access requirements. This established a shared knowledge base for the sector rather than an asset held by any single company.

Meeting EU residue standards also has a direct bearing on worker safety: it requires farmers to reduce pesticide use and observe pre-harvest intervals, which means the largely Syrian seasonal workforce is exposed to fewer and less hazardous chemicals during field operations.

2. Market access support

Reaching international buyers requires more than product quality: it requires understanding buyer requirements, timing, pricing dynamics and communication approaches specific to each market. Market access experts worked with all three partner exporters on their EU and Gulf buyer engagement strategies, and all three took part in Fruit Attraction Madrid, the sector's main international trade fair, generating new buyer contacts. Press coverage, including a feature on FreshPlaza, also helped bring in new buyer interest.

3. Post-harvest technical improvements

Post-harvest handling is a critical bottleneck for cherry export quality: the fruit is highly perishable, and temperature management, packaging and logistics from harvest to market directly determine whether the product reaches buyers in

exportable condition. Post-harvest experts worked with each partner exporter to develop a tailored improvement plan covering the full chain from harvest to delivery, including immediate operational measures, targeted equipment investment and staff training. Fadel Trading installed a pre-cooling system at its Tyre facility as one concrete result. Nasr Rahme upgraded its sorting line at Kaa El Reem, expected to improve efficiency, product uniformity and hygiene, and reduce contamination risk.

4. Decent work improvements and certifications

Fadel Trading and Biomass both worked towards SMETA (Sedex Members Ethical Trade Audit)-aligned practices during 2025, covering labour contracts, wage monitoring, health and safety and worker feedback systems, and Fadel completed full certification. Workshops on occupational safety and health practices, fair compensation and grievance reporting reached 265 workers, who were also provided with personal protective equipment kits and direct channels for reporting labour concerns.



Cherry workers sorting the produce at Kaa El Rim cooperative, in Beqaa, Lebanon ©ILO

Average daily wages for cherry workers under Nasr Rahme's cooperative model rose from USD 8.20 at baseline in 2023 to USD 13.39 in 2024 and USD 14.30 in 2025, a cumulative increase of 74.4%. Wages continued to rise even as frost-reduced production cut overall labour demand significantly, which is consistent with the model's logic that higher farm profitability feeds through to better pay for workers. Unlike the price data above, there is no comparison group for wages, and Lebanon's agricultural labour market has moved a great deal over this period for reasons unrelated to the project, so this trend should be read as supportive rather than as isolated project impact.

A declining trend in child labour among Nasr Rahme's farmers was also observed across the three tracked seasons, from 34% of farmers at baseline to 20% in 2024 and 10.5% in 2025. In 2025, Nasr Rahme introduced a child labour monitoring system within its cooperatives to identify, prevent and respond to risks directly, which, together with the behaviour change that certification and structured sourcing requirements tend to drive, helps explain the continued decline.

Evidence from the comparison group

A sample of non-supported cherry farmers in the same geographic areas was tracked across both seasons. In 2025, the contrast between supported and non-supported farmers was sharpest on prices: non-supported farmers sold almost entirely through wholesale channels at USD 1–5/kg, while partner farmers with active exporter relationships obtained USD 6–7.5/kg even at very low volumes, as exporters chose to pay above-market prices to maintain their sourcing networks through the frost season. The same pattern held across all three partner exporters: farmers earned more per kilogram than the control group. Since the frost affected all farmers equally, this price difference reflects the commercial relationships, quality positioning and collective purchasing access built through the intervention, not better growing conditions.

► Way forward

Two seasons of pilots have established the commercial and decent work case for structured, certification-backed export models in Lebanon's cherry sector. The institutional foundation is in place through a national certification and phytosanitary framework anchored in the Ministry of Agriculture, and the sector-wide training that reached farmers and exporters beyond the three pilot partnerships. Other gains are still firm-level, such as buyer relationships, post-harvest investment and decent work improvements within three exporters' operations and depend on those companies staying engaged.

The model generated USD 688,564 in additional farmer income in 2025 alone (measured against a comparison group of non-supported farmers). Across both seasons combined, exporters co-invested USD 376,331 of their own resources in inputs, technology, training and logistics. Exporters expanded from 4 international buyers in 2024 to 11 by 2025 across Kuwait, Dubai and Malaysia, growing export revenue from USD 44,325 to USD 84,345 despite a second season marked by

severe frost and regional airline disruptions. Across the two seasons combined, 112 farmers and 1,046 workers (421 full-time equivalent) have been engaged through the model, with Syrian workers making up 66.7% of the workforce and women 45.7%. Assuming exporters sustain current volumes and engagement, cumulative farmer income across the value chain is projected to reach USD 1.72 million and worker engagement to reach around 1,569 workers (632 full-time equivalent) by the end of 2026.

Moving forward, a seasonal value chain such as the cherry one, requires multiple harvest cycles for sourcing relationships, quality consistency and buyer trust to consolidate. The 2025 season was exceptional in its severity; additional seasons under more normal conditions are needed to validate the full commercial potential. The phytosanitary framework anchored with the Ministry of Agriculture is particularly important as an entry point for European markets, which offer significantly better prices and more durable commercial relationships than Gulf markets for certified, sustainably produced Lebanese cherries.

The approach is also directly transferable to Lebanon's stone fruit sector more broadly. Apricot, plum and other high-value permanent crops grown in many of the same regions face structurally similar constraints: seasonal labour intensity, post-harvest vulnerability, limited export readiness and gaps in quality assurance. The certification systems, post-harvest improvement approaches, market access tools and decent work monitoring mechanisms developed in cherry could be applied to other stone fruits through the same exporter, cooperative and Ministry of Agriculture partnerships already in place. Two seasons of evidence and an established set of relationships leave the sector well positioned to extend this approach to other stone fruits.



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