Request for Proposals Decent work baseline research in cotton cultivation in India

RFP n#:   2025-7-MEL-DWBLI

Location: India

Start date: 29 August 2025

End date: 27 February 2026

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All applications must be submitted via this form.
You may submit questions to tender@bettercotton.org - RFP n# 2025-7-MEL-DWBLI" until 4 August 2025

Applications sent after the deadline (10 August 2025 midnight Geneva timezone) will only be considered in exceptional circumstances.

Introduction

Better Cotton is the world's largest cotton sustainability programme. Our mission: to help cotton communities survive and thrive, while protecting and restoring the environment. In difficult times, we are meeting the challenge head on. Through our network of field-level partners we have provided training on more sustainable farming practices to more than 2.9 million cotton farmers in 26 countries. More than a fifth of the world's cotton is now grown under the Better Cotton Standard and our membership network includes more than 2,400 members.

More information about Better Cotton can be found on our website: www.bettercotton.org

Since the first Better Cotton harvest in India in 2011, the country has been a pioneering force within the global Better Cotton Programme. The work responded to pressing challenges in India's cotton sector, including inefficient water use, over-reliance on harmful pesticides, soil degradation, low yields, poor labour conditions, and limited market access for smallholder farmers. Cotton is a critical

crop for the country's economy and rural livelihoods, but production practices were often unsustainable and risky for both people and the environment.

To address these issues, Better Cotton focused on building farmer capacity through training on sustainable farming practices. This included integrated pest management, improved irrigation techniques, soil health improvement, and promotion of decent work—especially tackling child labour and gender inequality.

The programme also partnered with local organisations, research institutions, and later with government bodies, to expand its reach. Over time, Better Cotton's work in India has evolved to include traceability systems and regenerative agriculture approaches, aiming to embed sustainability across the entire cotton value chain.

Introduction and focus of study

Decent work is a key focus area for Better Cotton and we want to know:

1. The current status of key indicators of our desired outcomes.
2. Suggestions for future measurement of these key indicators.

The findings will help create a baseline for the new Decent Work strategy and its future measurement.

Context

Cotton production plays a vital role in rural livelihoods across India, particularly where alternative income sources are limited. The sector largely comprises smallholder farmers, with labour often shared among household members. Women's contributions may be undervalued or unrecognised, limiting their access to income and decision-making. At the same time, children may become involved in hazardous or age-inappropriate tasks, especially when labour demand peaks.

Hired labour is common but typically informal, associated with low pay, long hours, hazardous working conditions, and limited access to worker protections or social security—factors that reduce resilience and deepen vulnerability.

Sharecropping practices in some regions further entrench inequality. Sharecroppers are expected to repay advances through harvest shares. These informal arrangements, when coupled with poor yields or volatile prices, can trap households in debt cycles and increase the risk of debt bondage.

The sector also depends heavily on seasonal migrant workers, many of them women, recruited informally and lacking bargaining power or access to grievance mechanisms—exposing them to risks of a range of labour rights violations, including forced labour.

Climate change is compounding these challenges. Irregular rainfall, droughts, and other climate shocks are reducing agricultural stability, driving stress migration, and leaving workers more exposed to exploitative conditions.

Scale and Reach of Decent Work-Focused Activities in India

Better Cotton's work in India is delivered through approximately 15 in-country Programme Partners operating across seven states. These partners are responsible for providing training and guidance on the Better Cotton's Principles and Criteria[1]. Field Facilitators employed by the partners work directly with farmers to support implementation at the field level.

Better Cotton engages primarily with smallholder farmers cultivating plots of land not exceeding 20 hectares. Farmers are organised into Producer Units (PUs)—each comprising roughly 4,000 farmers—brought together under a shared management system to participate in the Better Cotton Programme. Each PU is overseen by a dedicated PU Manager, responsible for coordinating training, implementing an internal management system, and monitoring activities across the PU. To facilitate peer learning and more localised support, each PU is further subdivided into Learning Groups. Field Facilitators are responsible for delivering the trainings to the farmers in LGs as well as collecting data as part of regular programme monitoring.

The table below provides approximate values for season 2024-25, these values will differ slightly in the current season. The values are provided to you to prepare an estimate for the sampling decision.

State	Number of Programme Partners	Number of Producer Units (PU)	Number of Field Facilitators	Number Farmers	Approximate number of workers on those farms
Andhra Pradesh	1	4	46	15465	N/A [2]
Karnataka	1	2	15	5477	8000
Gujarat	10	83	906	344066	631000
Maharashtra	7	95	1098	379590	585000
Punjab	1	10	125	41340	43000
Rajasthan	2	12	133	47874	70000
Telangana	3	24	255	88631	71000

The main districts where Better Cotton projects are implemented in each State are:

Andhra Pradesh: Kurnool, Guntur and Palnadu

Karnataka: Belgavi

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[1] https://bettercotton.org/what-we-do/defining-better-our-standard/
[2] Worker numbers for season 2024-25 not reported. The approximate numbers will be available during the season 2025-26.

Gujarat: Surendranagar, Rajkot, Amreli, Botad, Morbi, Junagardh, Jamnagar, Vijapur, Vadnagar, Visnagar, Ahmedabad

Maharashtra: Yavatmal, Aurangabad, Wardha, Akola, Jalna, Jalgaon, Chandrapur, Nagpur, Sakri, Dhule, Shinkheda, Amravati, Buldhana, Washim, Parbhani, Taloda, Shirpur

Punjab: Bathinda, Mansa, Ludhiana

Rajasthan : Hanumangarh, Nagaur

Telangana: Ragareddy, Warangal Rural, Siddipet, Warangal, Nalgonda, Jangaon, Adilabad, Peddapalli, Mulugu, Narsampet, Jayashankar Bhupalpally

Key indicators for study:

To establish a robust baseline, Better Cotton seeks data on the current status of a set of key indicators across three groups of stakeholder groups: farmers, workers (including sharecroppers), and field facilitators (including members of Gender and/or Decent Work Committees set up by the PU).

While many of the indicators are quantitative, we recognise that some issues – particularly those related to working conditions, discrimination and lived experience – may be better explored through qualitative and/or participatory methods. These approaches can provide richer insights into challenges that may not surface through close-ended survey questions.

We therefore request that all applicants:
- Propose a mixed-methods approach, clearly outlining which methods (quantitative and/or qualitative) they will use for each indicator.
- Justify your chosen methods, explaining how these will help ensure accuracy, relevance, and inclusivity—especially in capturing the voices of seasonal, migrant, and women workers, and those from scheduled caste backgrounds.
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1. Field Facilitators

Domain	Indicator
Training on Decent Work	• Number who have attended Decent Work training overall • % who have attended Decent Work training during this year. • % who can cite 3 or more learnings from Decent Work training
Understanding labour rights	• % who understand the difference between child labour and age-appropriate child work; can give examples and understand why some work is unsafe • % who understand how to identify unfair treatment and can give examples of discrimination and who is at risk • % who can identify health & safety hazards and can give examples of basic mitigation measures

	• % who can list at least 3 poor work practices that may be indications of forced labour
Labour Monitoring and Remediation System /Incident handling	• % who have been trained on how to identify labour rights risks • % who have been trained on how to report incidents • % who conduct worker interviews • % who have identified an incident in the past year • % who agree that most incidents can be reported and escalated through the PU Manager • Number of incidents recorded by the PU • Types of incidents – e.g. child labour; other • % remediated/addressed • Type of remediation delivered in response to the identified incidents

2. Workers

Worker profile	• % directly employed by farm owner/manager • % employed via labour broker/intermediary • % hired as a sharecropper
Training on Decent Work	• Number who have attended Decent Work training overall • % who have attended Decent Work training during this year, • % who can cite 3 or more learnings from DW training
Understanding labour rights	• % who understand the difference between child labour and age-appropriate child work; can give examples and understand why some work is unsafe • % who understand how to identify unfair treatment and can give examples of discrimination • % who can identify health & safety hazards and can give examples of protections they are entitled to • % who are aware of what a worker organisation / trade union is • % who can share 1 benefit of worker organisation membership • % who can list at least 3 practices that farmers aren't allowed to subject them to • % who report having been subjected to at least 3 poor work practices in the last year
Perception of working conditions	• Perception of safety when conducting cotton farm work (%) • Perception of fairness in work task allocation (%) • Perception of fairness in wage payments (%) • Perception of fairness in treatment e.g. supervision; communication of tasks etc. (%)
Power & voice	• % who discussed work terms with farmers/employers before they start job -Types of terms discussed/agreed. • % who are engaged in a union or other workers group/organisation

	• Results/benefits of engagement in a union or other workers group/organisation, or collective bargaining
Grievance mechanisms	• % who are aware of a grievance mechanism • % who are aware – and can access in case of need, e.g. if agreed terms of work are broken • % who feel safe raising a work-related issue to a grievance mechanism • % who feel that a work-related issue could be resolved through a grievance mechanism
Child Labour	• % reporting an understanding/knowledge of rights • % whose children support them at work in cotton farming • % who report other workers bringing children to support them at work • % of school-going children in household enrolled in schools
Forced Labour	• % who report experiencing at least two high-risk indicators of forced labour (coercion, involuntariness, etc.) • % who report working for free to repay debt to the farmer (probing for debt bondage) • % who report that agreed terms of work were not representative of the actual work they do (probing for coercion) • % who report awareness regarding forced labour as an illegal practice
Health & Safety	• % with access to safe drinking water during work on cotton farms • % access to shaded rest areas during work on cotton farms • % taking at least 1 break every XX hours • % access to private area for personal sanitation within XX minutes walking distance • % given time to attend to personal sanitation needs during working hours • % reporting effects from exposure to harmful chemicals
Wage payment modalities	• % who report wage payment delays in at least 2 of the last 4 wage payments • % who report wage payment delays that exceed duration of the next agreed payment timing • % who report wages are not paid directly to them • % who report wage deductions • % who report that the above are violative labour practices.
Social Security	• Numbers enrolled in social security scheme • Type of support received

3. **Farmers**

Training on Decent Work	• Number who have attended Decent Work training overall • % who have attended Decent Work training during this year.

	• % who can cite 3 or more learnings from Decent Work training
Understanding labour rights	• % who understand the difference between child labour and age-appropriate child work; can give examples and understand why some work is unsafe` • % who understand what unfair treatment would look like and can give examples • % who can identify health & safety hazards and can give examples of mitigation measures • % who are aware of what a cooperative and/or Trade Union is • % who can share 1 benefit of cooperative and/or Trade Union membership
Practice adoption – Decent Work	• % who provide clean and safe drinking water to workers during their work hours • % who can cite at least 3 measures they adopt to avoid worker heat stress • % who discuss work terms with workers before they start job - Types of terms discussed/agreed • Number of breaks provided to workers within a working day at the farm
Perception of working conditions	• Perception of safety when conducting cotton farm work
Child labour	• % whose children support them at work in cotton farming • % who report their workers bringing children to support them at work • % reporting children working on other cotton farms in their area • % of school-going children in household enrolled in schools
Power & voice	• % who are engaged in a cooperative, union or other farmers group • Results/benefits of engagement in a union or other workers group/organisation
Health & Safety	• % with access to safe drinking water while working on cotton farm • % taking at least 1 break every XX hours during cotton farm work
Social Security	• Numbers enrolled in social security scheme • Type of support received

Sample

We recognise the need to balance sample size and selection with several constraints and priorities, including the available budget, the need for representation of key stakeholder groups, the practicality of identifying respondents, and the choice of data collection tools. While we aim for as much accuracy as possible, we do not prescribe a specific sample size or accuracy requirement for the quantitative data. However, we expect no lower than a 90% confidence level with a 10% margin of error per State and stakeholder group—with a preference for higher precision where feasible.

In addition, we are open to considering focusing the research only on 3 States if this is felt to offer a better overall use of resources to produce credible findings.

We ask applicants to propose a sampling strategy for both quantitative and qualitative components. This should include:

- Suggested sample sizes by stakeholder group and location (including justification for reasons why data might not be collected from all States).

- Proposed sampling selection methods and rationale

- Plans to ensure representation of priority groups, including seasonal, migrant and women workers

Available Data and Constraints

Better Cotton Partners maintain detailed records for:

- Field Facilitators, Farmers, and Sharecroppers, including geographic location, age, and gender

However, data on workers is significantly more limited:

- We have only approximate numbers of workers per Partner.

- records for workers (e.g. name, age, contact details)

- Many workers are seasonal and may be difficult to reach during the data collection period

These limitations must be factored into the sampling and outreach strategy, particularly for the worker sample. We expect applicants to demonstrate a strong understanding of the local context and propose practical, context-sensitive solutions—including strategies to:

- Maximise participation of seasonal workers

- Ensure adequate representation of women workers

- Reach vulnerable groups, such as sharecroppers, scheduled castes/tribes, non-Hindu minority group and migrant workers

Key Considerations for Sample Design:

Applicants should consider the following in shaping their sampling approach:

- Ensure geographic representation, reflecting the spread and scale of Decent Work activities across India

- Collect data from all three stakeholder groups: field facilitators, farmers, and workers

- Consider how to be representative of different types of worker (permanent, seasonal, temporary)

- Ensure the following minimum representation targets:

    o 50% women among workers

    o 25% women among field facilitators

- o   10% women among farmers
- Consider inclusion of vulnerable groups, such as sharecroppers, scheduled castes/tribes, minority communities (non-Hindu), and migrant workers

Sampling should be informed by:

- Country-level reach figures (e.g. number of Programme Partners/Producer Units, field facilitators, farmers, and workers per location)
- Availability of existing lists for field facilitators and farmers
- The absence of worker lists, requiring alternative selection methods
- The desired gender balance in the dataset
- The indicators we aim to assess through the baseline

Data quality and ethics

Collecting data from workers on cotton farms can pose ethical and logistical challenges. Engaging workers during their working hours may result in lost income or productivity, while collecting data outside of working hours can inadvertently exclude those with household responsibilities—particularly women—thus introducing gender bias into the data.

Better Cotton is open to respondent remuneration where appropriate, though we recognize this raises further considerations, such as managing expectations about future benefits and ensuring that participation remains truly voluntary.

We ask applicants to clearly describe in their proposals how they will:
- Minimize the burden on workers, including strategies for scheduling and time management.
- Ensure informed and voluntary participation, including how consent will be obtained.
- Address potential gender and social exclusion, particularly of women and marginalized groups.
- Consider if, when, and how remuneration might be used ethically and transparently.
- Manage expectations among participants, especially regarding the purpose of the research and any benefits.
- Ensure the safety and well-being of participants throughout the process.

Proposals should reflect a worker-centred and ethically sound approach to data collection that respects participants' time, dignity, and rights. Experience with rights-based or participatory research approaches will be viewed favourably.

Scope of Work

The selected consultant or firm will be responsible for the following deliverables:

1. Inception Report (English)
- An updated version of the proposal, informed by a review of key documentation and initial discussions with Better Cotton staff.
- Should incorporate insights from:
  - At least three inception meetings with relevant Better Cotton staff
  - A review of the Decent Work Strategy, Principle 5 Decent Work of the Better Cotton Principles & Criteria, relevant project design documents, and activity plans

2. Sampling Strategy
   (This may be included as part of the inception report)
- A clear and feasible sampling approach that reflects the considerations outlined in the sampling section above, including:
  - Stakeholder group representation
  - Geographic spread
  - Gender and vulnerability considerations
  - Practical limitations related to worker outreach

3. Data Collection Tools (English)
- Development of both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools
- Refining the tools based on at least two rounds of review and feedback from Better Cotton
- Final tools must be translated into relevant local languages prior to use in the field

4. Data Collection
- Training workshop(s) for data collectors, attended by Better Cotton and relevant Partner staff to ensure shared understanding and prompt clarification
- Pilot testing of tools to ensure appropriate length and clarity of questions, ideally on a sample of target stakeholders (Field Facilitators, farmers and workers).
- Fieldwork, carried out by trained enumerators using appropriate local languages
  - Better Cotton and its Partners will support access to locations and provide lists (including contact information) for Field Facilitators and Farmers

5. Reporting and Presentation
- Draft report (max. 60 pages, English) summarising key findings against baseline indicators, with preliminary narrative analysis and recommendations on future data collection
- Presentation of key findings in English (maximum 40 slides) during a session of up to 1 hour 15 minutes, with:
  - ~30 minutes for presentation
  - ~45 minutes for Q&A and discussion

- Final report (max. 50 pages, English) integrating feedback and containing refined findings, narrative analysis, and recommendations

6. Data Submission
- Submission of:
    - Raw and cleaned quantitative datasets
    - Codebook, if numeric codes were used for survey responses

High-level Timeline

10 August 2025	Applications deadline All applications must be submitted via this [form]().
11 August to 25 August 2025	Applications review & shortlisting / Interviews
25 August 2025	The successful applicant will be notified Unsuccessful shortlisted applicants will also be notified
29 August 2025	Start of the consultancy
12 September 2025	Inception Report and Data Collection tool drafts
26 September 2025	Data Collection tools finalized
Starting early-October 2025 – mid-December 2025	Data Collection (the worker availability will vary across the different States based on the harvest timeline)
12 January 2026	Draft Report
By 27 February 2026	Final Report, presentation and raw and cleaned data with codebook There should be time for 2 rounds of comments from BCI team

Required Skills & Knowledge

Skills, Knowledge and Experience
Essential
10+ years of experience of work on rural development in India (lead consultant)

7+ years' experience of work on rural development in India (at least one other team member)
7+ years of experience of working on decent work-related issues (lead consultant)
5+ years' experience working on decent work-related issue (at least one other team member)
Master's degree on relevant topic (lead consultant) – labour rights, agriculture, development, evaluation, research methods
7+ years Research / evaluation process – data collection / analysis / reporting
4+ years Research / evaluation process – data collection / analysis / reporting
Proven ability to organise data collection on labour or related issues in India
Data collectors with necessary data collection skills and languages for collecting data labour issues in India within the States that are the focus for this research.
Proven ability to produce clear reports on topics relevant to this study.
Business proficiency in English: Better Cotton's language of operation is English
Optional
Knowledge and experience of certification and standards
Knowledge and experience of cotton cultivation

Application Requirements

Please note that we have changed our RFP submission protocol, and this is now in two phases;

- Phase 1: Initial details will be submitted on the form found in this link.
- Phase 2: You will receive an email with live links to upload relevant documents (please check your Spam and Junk folders)

Proposals responding to this Request for Proposals should be a *maximum* of __12 pages__ (excluding CVs), have a __budget within the range of 25,000-35,000 Euros__, and __include the following__:

- Overview of relevant experience, summarising key experience of applicants and description of least 3 pieces of decent work-related pieces of research/evaluation or MEL roles within the team.
- Proposed methodology, including: approach/methodology, planned types of data collection tools for the indicators and your justification for their suitability [including if you've successfully used them before], sample size and selection approach for field facilitators, farmers and workers, how you will manage the key data quality and ethical considerations,
- Timeline of key steps in the research
- Detailed and transparent budget, in EUROS, including staff days/time allocation and day rates
- CVs as separate attachments.
- If possible – a relevant report or presentation on a similar topic in order to demonstrate ability to produce relevant and clear reports.

We thank all applicants for their interest; however only shortlisted applicants will be contacted.

Better Cotton is committed to good practice and transparency in the management of natural, human

and financial resources. All applications will be reviewed under the principles and subject to Better Cotton's policies on equal opportunity, non-discrimination, anti-bribery & corruption and conflict of interest.

Evaluation Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated based on the following criteria:

Technical Evaluation Criteria
- Relevant professional experience of the proposed consultant(s)
- Demonstrated understanding of this RFP – responding to its requirements
- Quality / suitability of the proposed approach and methodology
- Feasibility of the proposed activity plan and timeline, and appropriateness of time allocated to delivering each task
- Clarity of the proposal and budget

Financial Evaluation Criteria
- Alignment of the budget to the activity timeline detailed in the technical proposal
- Adherence to the available budget
- Value for money (quality of consultancy team, methods, sample and proposed outputs for the cost)