



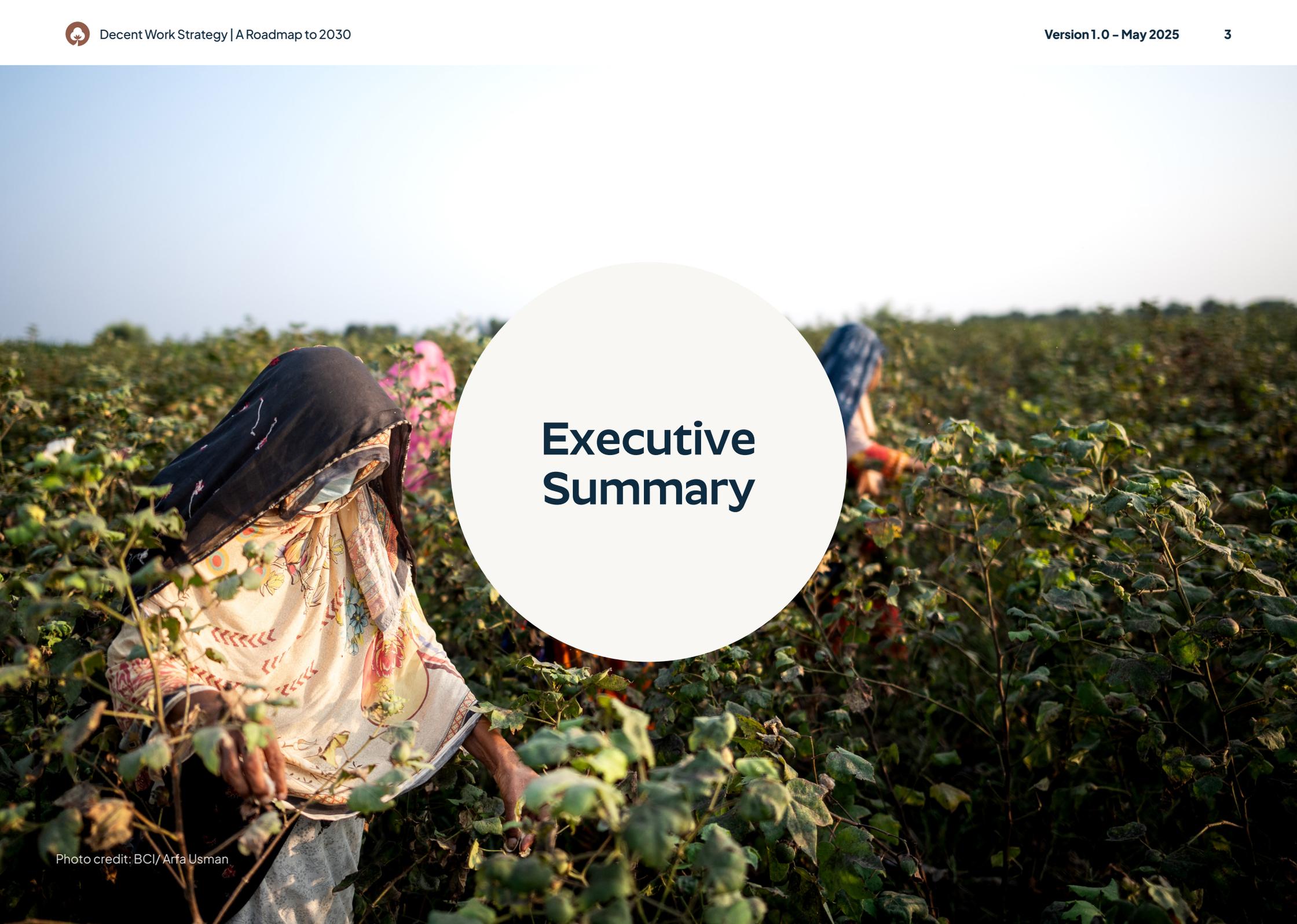
# Decent Work Strategy

## A Roadmap to 2030

Version 1.0 - May 2025

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# Executive Summary

# A Long-Term Commitment

This document outlines the Better Cotton Initiative's (BCI's) long-term commitment to decent work and the roadmap to achieving its medium-term objectives by 2030. Aligned with BCI's revised organisational theory of change, it reinforces the impact area on enhanced well-being and economic development of farming communities by advancing improved working conditions and the protection of children's rights. Central to delivering [BCI's 2030 Impact Targets](#)—particularly those on sustainable smallholder livelihoods and women's empowerment—this strategy provides a comprehensive framework that unifies BCI's broader social impact goals while guiding the development of tailored operational strategies at the country level.

Building on and replacing [BCI's 2020–27 Decent Work Strategy](#), this new approach reflects the organisation's evolution and growing maturity in addressing social sustainability issues over the past five years. Moving beyond the initial “set-up” phase structured under “learn, strengthen and monitor” pillars, the strategy is now organised around three interconnected pillars: farm level, programmes and partnerships, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. These pillars align closely with BCI's internal structure, signalling that decent work is fully integrated within the organisation, while promoting internal clarity,

accountability, and effective implementation across different functions.

BCI's Decent Work Strategy harnesses these three pillars to strengthen decent work outcomes across cotton-growing regions. Each pillar plays a critical role in reducing vulnerabilities, enhancing workers' voices, and fostering sustainable change, with interventions designed to address root causes and empower farming communities to thrive.

At the farm level, decent work requirements are embedded into BCI's standards and assurance processes, promoting producer-led due diligence, improved rights awareness, access to grievance mechanisms, and better working conditions and wages. Moving forward, BCI will:

- **Support Programme Partners (PPs)** with clear guidance materials and capacity strengthening on the Principles and Criteria (P&C) to help them implement decent work requirements.
- **Enhance assurance approaches**, with a focus on risk-based methodologies and strengthening social auditing capabilities. Certification Bodies will receive extensive training on worker interviews to ensure more accurate identification of risks.



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- **Operationalise farm-level labour monitoring and remediation systems** at scale, aligning with [OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct](#).
- **Increase wage transparency** by improving data collection and verification processes, recognising the importance of fair wages in addressing the root causes of labour rights violations.
- **Ensure that country risk assessments continue to inform programming and assurance**, with regular updates to reflect evolving local conditions.

Through programmes and partnerships, BCI strengthens its work with local partners to deliver social sustainability outcomes. The focus will be on:

- **Sensitising Programme Partners** to social sustainability challenges and providing implementation guidance adapted to local contexts.

- **Fostering new partnerships** with labour rights and social sustainability experts to complement the strong environmental sustainability focus of long-standing partners.
- **Testing and scaling impactful initiatives**, accelerating fundraising efforts through mechanisms like the [Growth and Innovation Fund](#), while exploring new funding avenues.
- **Expanding Programme Partner due diligence** to ensure alignment with BCI's values.
- **Addressing labour rights-related grievances** raised through BCI's organisational mechanisms in line with established policies.

Finally, through multi-stakeholder collaboration, BCI works to amplify farming communities' voices and drive collective action. Future efforts will focus on:

- **Establishing multistakeholder committees** at the country level to



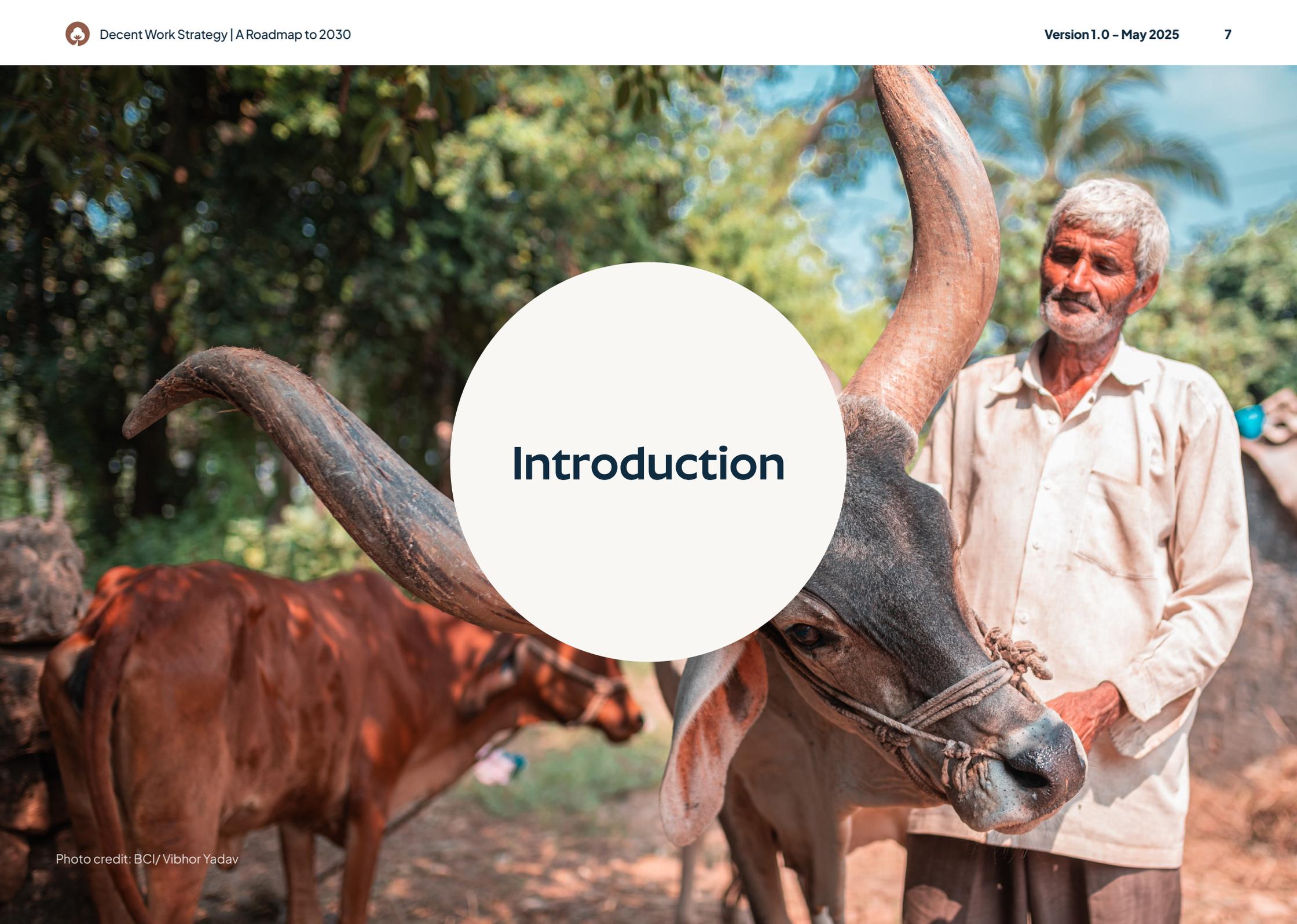
align diverse actors around shared goals and strengthen field-level impact.

- **Advocating for stronger labour protections** at the national and international levels, pushing for greater investments in remediation.
- **Upholding freedom of association and collective bargaining** while promoting platforms for workers and farmers to engage in dialogue.
- **Enhancing field-level reporting and transparency** for more effective advocacy and to support members' corporate due diligence efforts.
- **Coordinating collective remediation efforts** to ensure that responses to identified risks are effective, comprehensive and sustainable.

As BCI moves towards 2030, the Decent Work Strategy will remain at the heart of ensuring that social and environmental goals go hand in hand. It reflects BCI's continued focus on creating a fairer, more resilient cotton sector where farming communities can thrive, and labour rights are respected.



Photo credit: BCI/Seun Adatsi



# Introduction

# Driving Lasting Change

BCI aligns with [Sustainable Development Goal 8](#), which promotes inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all. Social sustainability is integrated alongside environmental objectives within BCI's standards and impact targets, defining its unique role in the cotton sector.

From the outset, BCI's mission, vision, and Principles and Criteria have placed the wellbeing of women and men working in cotton farming at the core of its mandate. By upholding the [ILO's Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work](#), BCI strives to ensure farming communities can pursue dignified work, access economic opportunities, and build sustainable livelihoods.

Recognising the unique challenges of decent work in seasonal agriculture, BCI has adopted a risk-based approach. Efforts are concentrated in higher-risk geographies where labour rights vulnerabilities are most acute, ensuring meaningful engagement with partners and key stakeholders. In areas where BCI's presence is less prominent, risks are mitigated through strategic collaborations.

Economic security and gender equity are essential preconditions for decent work — farmers and workers must be fairly paid, protected, and empowered to make sustainable choices. Strengthening worker and farmer voices is equally critical, enabling communities to raise concerns, advocate for their rights, and co-create solutions to decent work challenges.

As a voluntary standard system in cotton farming, BCI brings a unique combination of deep contextual knowledge, collaborative partnerships, and the capacity to mobilise stakeholders across the supply chain. This positions BCI to drive meaningful, lasting change — both within its direct sphere of influence and beyond.



# Decent Work Across Key Sustainability Areas

BCI's commitment to decent work intersects with several high-priority sustainability areas. Embedding decent work principles strengthens outcomes in sustainable livelihoods, gender equality, regenerative agriculture, climate adaptation, and corporate social due diligence. These interlinkages ensure that improving labour conditions also advances economic resilience, environmental stewardship, and social equity.



## Sustainable Livelihoods

Economic security is a cornerstone of decent work. Smallholder farmers and workers can only build resilience if their rights are protected, wages are fair, and workplaces are safe. A livelihoods-first approach is essential to reducing people's vulnerability to labour exploitation and reducing the reliance on child labour in farming households. Beyond compliance with fundamental labour rights, BCI's Decent Work Strategy aims to improve access to social protection mechanisms, support economic alternatives for vulnerable families, and work closely with Programme Partners to improve access to education and vocational training opportunities. This ensures that the root causes of common labour rights violations are addressed and the gains are sustained.



## Gender Equality

Women's empowerment is central to achieving decent work. Women play critical roles in cotton production yet often face exclusion from decision-making, lower pay, and limited access to training and resources. BCI's strategy tackles these inequalities by improving wage transparency, strengthening gender-responsive interventions, and increasing women's participation in training and leadership. These efforts contribute directly to BCI's Women's Empowerment 2030 target.



Photo credit: BCI/Emma Upton



## Regenerative Agriculture

Sustainable farming practices depend on secure livelihoods. Smallholders need economic stability to adopt long-term, climate-resilient techniques like regenerative agriculture. The Decent Work Strategy ensures farmers and workers are equipped with the resources, knowledge, and support needed to enable this transition. Addressing labour rights risks improves both social sustainability and environmental outcomes.



## Climate adaptation and Health & Safety

Climate change presents direct risks to farmers and workers, from heat stress to unpredictable income due to extreme weather. Without strong protections, workers bear the brunt of these impacts. BCI drives enhanced health and safety measures through climate adaptation strategies — such as heat stress mitigation, shaded rest areas, and adaptive work schedules — ensuring farm-level resilience while protecting workers' well-being.

# Our Approach

BCI's long-term goal is for all cotton farming communities to enjoy decent working conditions, with their human and labour rights respected. By 2030, we aim for all workers and farmers involved in BCI production to benefit from measurably improved working conditions. Achieving this requires reducing vulnerabilities to labour rights violations by addressing root causes, such as poverty, limited rights awareness, lack of oversight, and restricted access to resources and support services.

We recognise that farming communities are best placed to define what they need to improve their working conditions. Our role is to listen, amplify their voices, and support solutions shaped by their input – whether they are workers or farmers, men or women, migrants or community members. We will also strengthen their representation and participation in multistakeholder dialogue alongside Programme Partners, ensuring their perspectives inform broader decision-making processes.

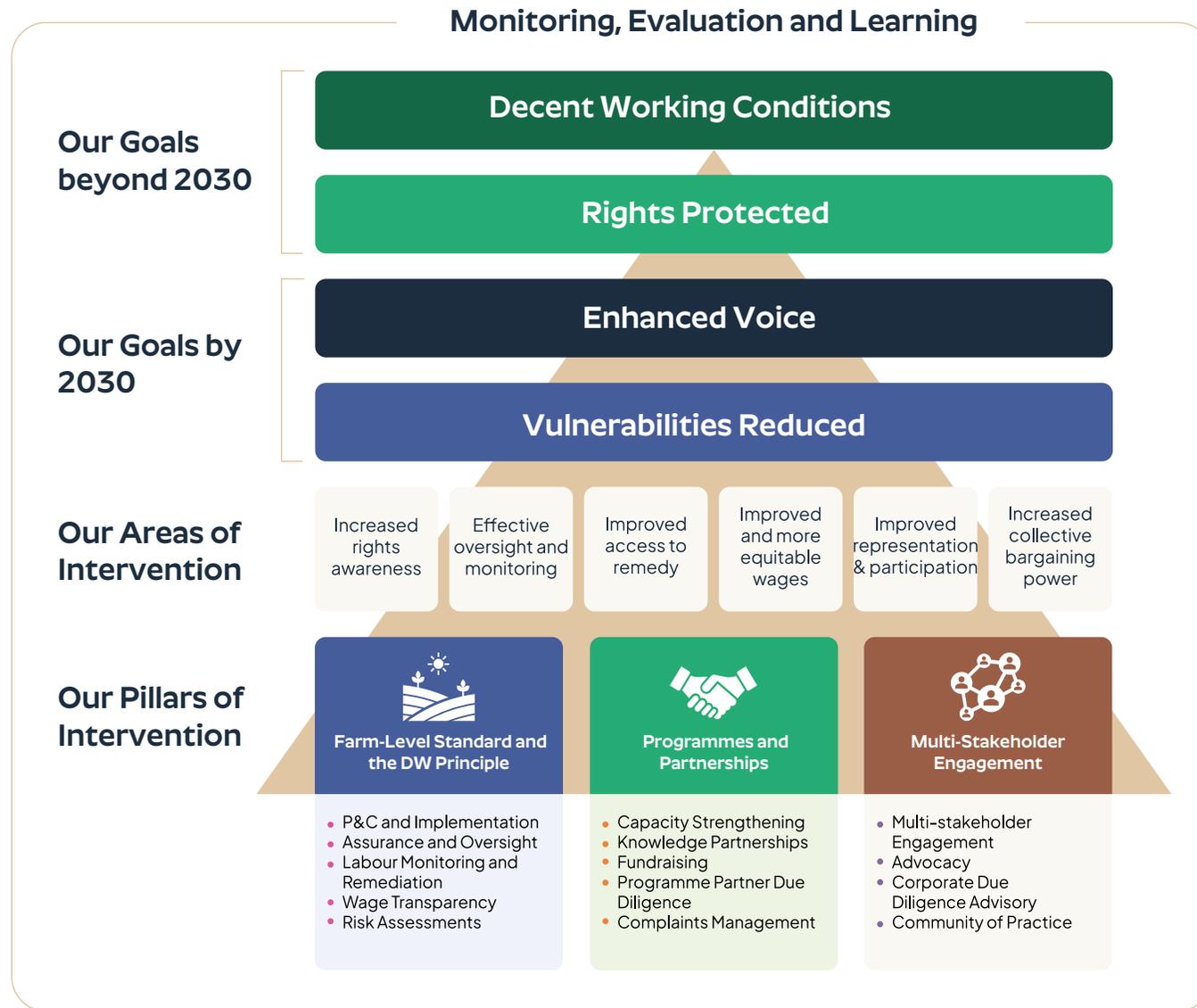
A core principle of our work is that producers should not be penalised for structural risks in agriculture or for identifying cases of exploitation, as long as they take proactive steps to mitigate risks and remediate where necessary. BCI works closely with producers, farming communities, and stakeholders to

implement an “assess and address” approach, as outlined in [BCI's Principles & Criteria](#).

By embedding this approach across three pillars – farm-level standard, programmes and partnership and multistakeholder engagement – BCI aims to reduce workers' vulnerability to exploitation, foster shared accountability, and drive sustainable change at scale. Ultimately, our goal is to empower local actors to take ownership of labour rights improvements, ensuring that decent work becomes a reality across global cotton farming.



# BCI's Decent Work Approach





## BCI's Decent Work Approach

# Farm-Level Standard and the Decent Work Principle

## Setting the Scene

The first pillar focuses on developing, interpreting, and implementing the Decent Work Principle within the BCI Principles and Criteria (P&C). Our aim is to drive greater sustainability with every standard revision in the spirit of continuous improvement, as well as ensuring alignment with benchmark partners, standards we recognise as equivalent to ours. This includes providing guidance, investing in training, and defining minimum compliance criteria relevant to our diverse operational contexts. Producers' proactive engagement with the farming communities to assess and address labour rights risks is a new important requirement of our standard. The insights gained from implementing the P&C v.3.0 will inform the next iteration of the standard, enhancing its relevance, clarity and effectiveness, while ensuring global feasibility and alignment with our environmental and social impact targets.

To complement an incrementally stronger farm-level standard, we strengthen our assurance work. We introduce more stringent social auditing requirements for our auditors and provide extensive training on worker interviewing. We ensure that producer assessments are informed by a thorough understanding of contextual risks. As we move towards certification, we will transfer our knowledge to certification bodies, providing extensive training and oversight to uphold the credibility of our farm-level standard assurance system.

## Actions

- **P&C & Implementation:** Develop and share comprehensive, practical guidance on decent work criteria and indicators for Programme Partners and Producers to support the effective implementation of the Decent Work Principle in the BCI Farm-level Standard. Ensure that thorough expert consultations and industry best practices directly inform the next scheduled BCI P&C revision, reinforcing the advancement of decent work and social sustainability objectives.
- **Labour Monitoring & Remediation:** Support the global roll-out and maintenance of the Producer-level assess-and-address approach, the labour monitoring and remediation system framework, and improved access to grievance mechanisms. Guidance is informed by pilots, tailored to contexts, and supported through close oversight, advisory, and capacity strengthening.
- **Assurance & Oversight:** Continuously strengthen the assurance system through rigorous training on the Decent Work Principle, social auditing best practices, and worker interviewing. A risk-based approach ensures that assurance framework is tailored to context. Certification Body requirements include demonstrated social auditing credentials and competencies.
- **Wage Transparency & Verification:** Increase wage transparency for farm workers by enhancing wage data collection and monitoring and improving wage verification and auditing approaches. Innovative approaches are tested, adapted to different contexts, and scaled.

**P&C and Implementation**

- Guidance development
- Implementation support
- Inform standard revision through expert consultation

**Assurance and Oversight**

- Social auditing best practice
- Worker interview trainings
- Risk-based assurance

**Labour Monitoring and Remediation**

- Support global roll-out through pilots and oversight
- Producer-level grievance mechanisms are strengthened

**Wage Transparency**

- Wage data collection and monitoring
- Wage verification approach tested and implemented at scale

**Risk Assessments and Reporting**

- Assurance data and country risk assessments continuously inform each other

- **Risk Assessment and Reporting:** Aggregated assurance and producer-level data continuously inform risk assessments, capacity strengthening, and reporting, enhancing industry learning and supporting BCI members' due diligence and reporting obligations. Risk assessments in high-risk contexts inform assurance and programmatic focus.

**Objectives**

- Strengthen producers' capacity to identify, prevent, and remediate labour rights risks through enhanced monitoring and worker engagement.
- Improve workers' access to grievance mechanisms and ensure timely remediation of identified issues.
- Increase wage transparency and improve data collection to support fairer wages and better working conditions.

**Indicators of Success**

- Percentage (%) increase of producers meeting Decent Work Principle indicators.
- Increase in workers' awareness of rights, measured through surveys.
- Percentage (%) increase of producers with verified operational grievance mechanisms and remediation protocols in place.
- Increased number of workers paid at least the minimum wage.

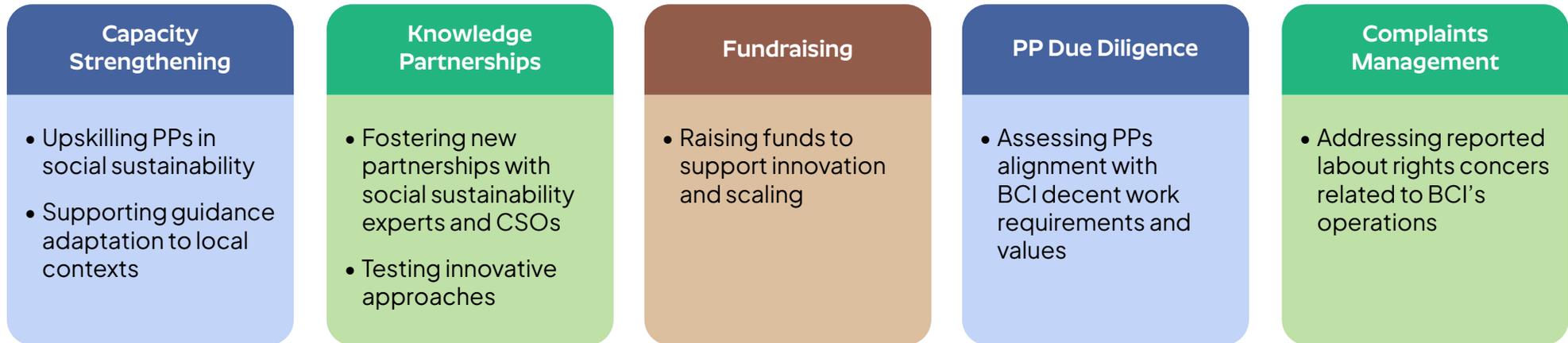
# Programmes and Partnerships

## Setting the Scene

The second pillar centres on our ongoing engagement with Programme Partners and other key stakeholders at the country and international level to support the advancement of the Decent Work roadmap and reinforce local efforts on the improvement of labour conditions. We aim to work together to promote decent work both at farm level and within partner organisations, improve working conditions for field staff, including by establishing robust internal grievance mechanisms. In line with this, we continue to refine our Programme Partner due diligence processes, holding all partners, including benchmark organisations, accountable for their role in protecting labour rights. By creating platforms for sharing knowledge and aligning efforts across countries, we aim to build a global community of practitioners whose work is rooted in BCI's core values. Additionally, we will actively seek and establish new partnerships with stakeholders from a wide range of sectors, including knowledge partners, public institutions, civil society organisations, worker and farmer groups, and other autonomous entities that can support in the advancement of our mission on Decent Work.

## Actions

- **Capacity Strengthening:** Programme Partners receive extensive capacity strengthening and continuous support to increase awareness of social sustainability and internalise the Farm-level Standard requirements, adapting them to local contexts, and advancing their implementation.
- **Knowledge Partnerships:** Fostering new partnerships with social sustainability expert organisations and civil society organisations (CSOs); Testing innovative approaches.
- **Fundraising:** Raising funds to support innovation and scaling.
- **Partner Due Diligence:** Programme Partners (PPs) undergo a rigorous due diligence process and are supported to address the corrective actions, ensuring that their policies and practices align with BCI Partner requirements and values. Advisory is provided in strengthening the Programme Partner-level grievance mechanisms.
- **Complaints Management:** BCI's organisational complaints mechanism is strengthened and sufficiently resourced to adequately respond and address labour rights-related complaints related to its Programme Partners and operations.



## Objectives

- Strengthen Programme Partners' capacity to implement social sustainability measures, aligning practices with BCI's Decent Work Principle.
- Foster new partnerships to scale innovative approaches for addressing labour rights challenges.
- Enhance partner accountability through improved due diligence processes and grievance mechanism oversight.

## Indicators of Success

- Percentage (%) increase of producers meeting Decent Work Principle indicators.
- At least five knowledge-partner initiatives scoped and/or formalised.
- At least three funding opportunities advancing decent work causes pursued.
- All labour rights-related complaints received through BCI's organisational complaints mechanisms are addressed in line with the policy.

# Multistakeholder Engagement

## Setting the Scene

This pillar focuses on fostering collaboration across diverse stakeholders to address systemic decent work challenges. A core element is the establishment and revitalisation of multistakeholder platforms at the country and regional levels, providing spaces to align on priorities, tackle urgent issues, and define concrete action plans. BCI channels this work through existing frameworks like the Growth and Innovation Fund while exploring new avenues and initiatives.

The evolving policy landscape, particularly the European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), highlights the growing importance of these efforts. BCI aims to enhance transparency, strengthen traceability, and amplify workers' voices at the farm level, which can support advocacy efforts and enable members to more effectively meet their corporate due diligence obligations. Through regular reporting and evidence-based advocacy, BCI strives to move beyond compliance, driving meaningful improvements in working conditions in farming communities.

By enhancing multi-stakeholder collaboration, BCI aims to build scalable, locally relevant solutions that address the root causes of labour rights deficits, ensuring collective action leads to lasting impact.

## Actions

### Multi-Stakeholder Engagement

- **Global Stakeholder Mapping:** Conduct global stakeholder mapping to identify key partners, actors, and organisations working on priority challenges such as child labour, forced labour, sustainable livelihoods, gender inequality and worker voice in agriculture, including trade unions, labour rights-focused civil society organisations, state agencies and others.

- **Manage Multi-Stakeholder Committees:** Facilitate and manage committees at the country level that bring together diverse stakeholders to work on integrated, multi-dimensional solutions to labour issues for holistic action and enhanced impact.

### Advocacy

- **Evidence-Based Advocacy:** Lead and support evidence-based advocacy efforts aimed at greater collective investment at the farm level to address labour rights violations, with a focus on holistic remediation strategies and strengthening policies and protections for vulnerable agricultural workers.
- **Support Farmer and Worker FOA/CB:** Support farmer and worker freedom of association and collective bargaining (FOA/CB) efforts and social dialogue to ensure fairer working conditions.

### Corporate Due Diligence Advisory

- **Improved Transparency and Reporting:** Develop clear reporting frameworks for enhanced transparency to support effective advocacy and human rights due diligence (HRDD) reporting.
- **Risk Assessment and Remediation:** Providing advisory to relevant stakeholders on prevalent risks and effective mitigation strategies to inform collective remediation efforts.

### Community of Practice

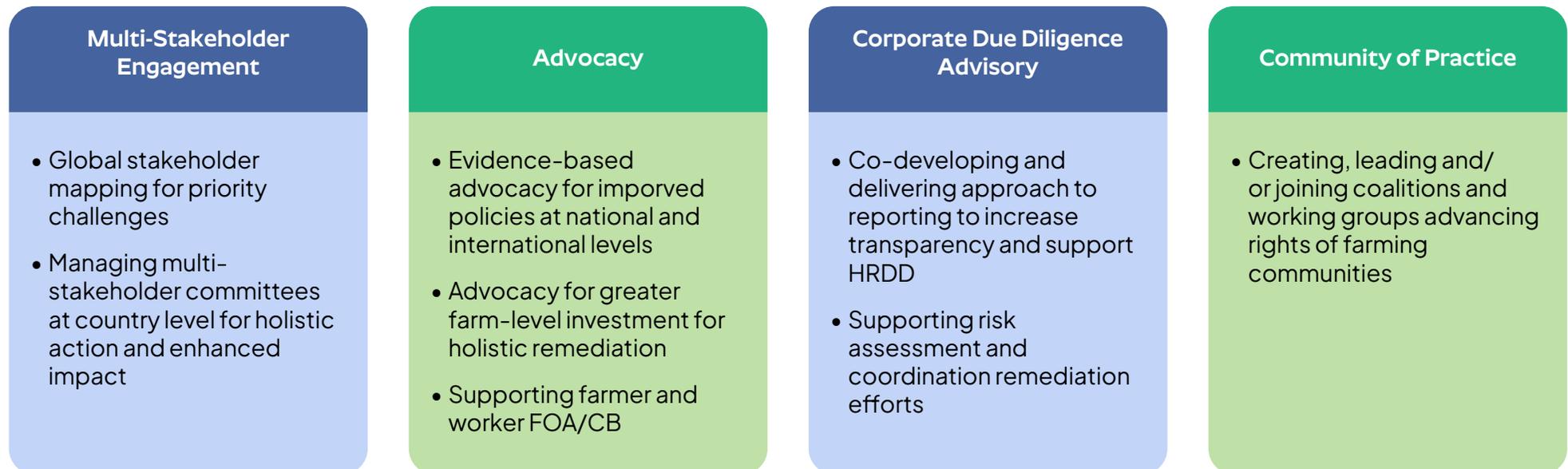
- **Knowledge Sharing and Peer Learning:** Establish, lead, and join coalitions and working groups dedicated to advancing the rights of farmers and workers in global supply chains, with particular emphasis on addressing salient labour and human rights challenges in agriculture.

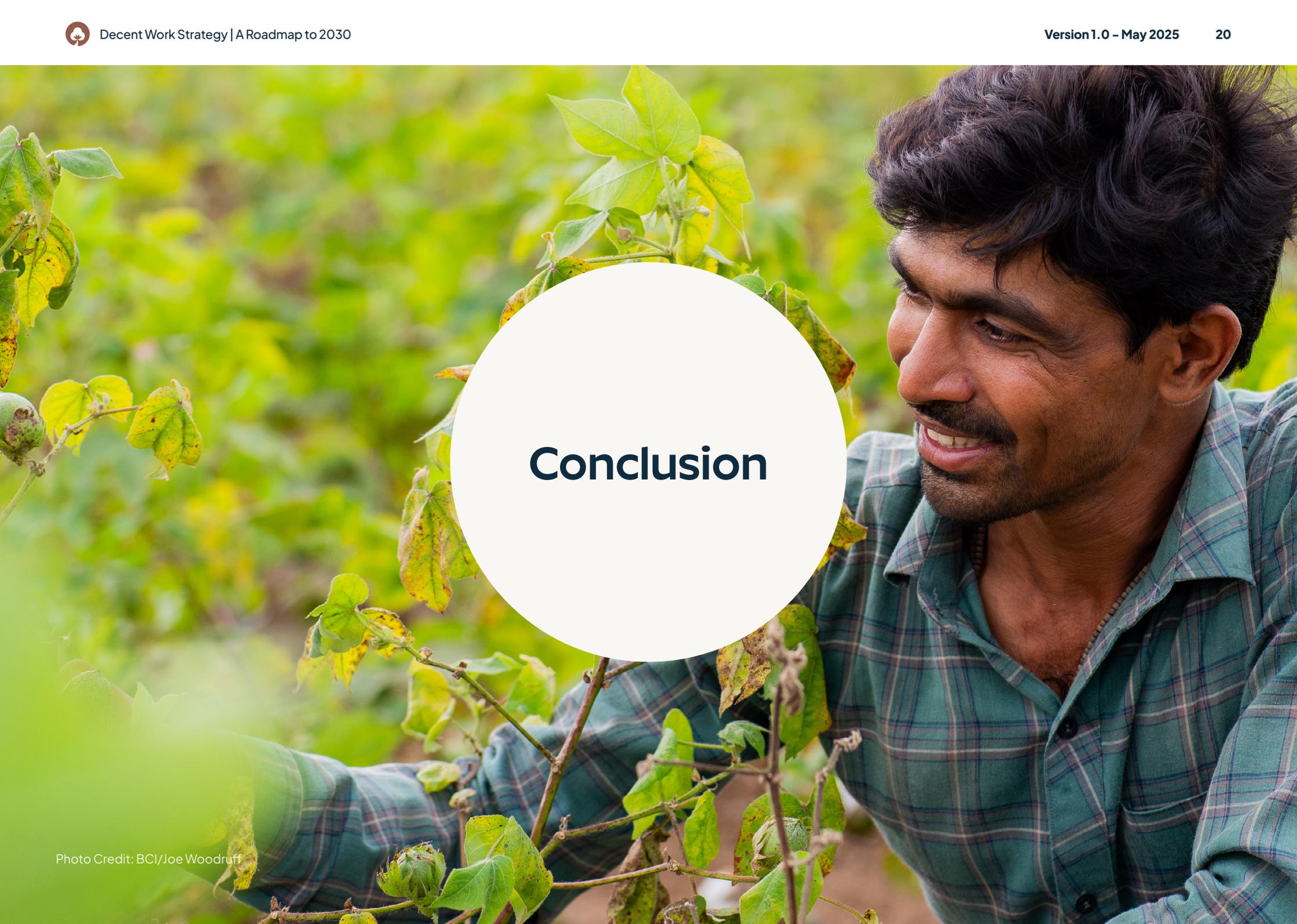
## Objectives

- Establish multi-stakeholder platforms to align diverse actors around shared goals and strengthen field-level impact.
- Advocate for stronger labour rights protections and investments in farm-level improvements through evidence-based policy engagement and collective action.
- Enhance transparency in reporting on risk assessments and collective remediation strategies, advancing advocacy efforts and delivering greater value to BCI members.

## Indicators of Success

- Number of multi-stakeholder committees established and active.
- Number of public engagements advocating for stronger labour rights protections and/or collective action.
- Value of additional investment in farm-level activities (beyond volume-based fees).
- Number of reports and media outputs on prevalent risks and systems and activities to mitigate them and remediate incidents.





# Conclusion

# Empowering Workers and Farmers

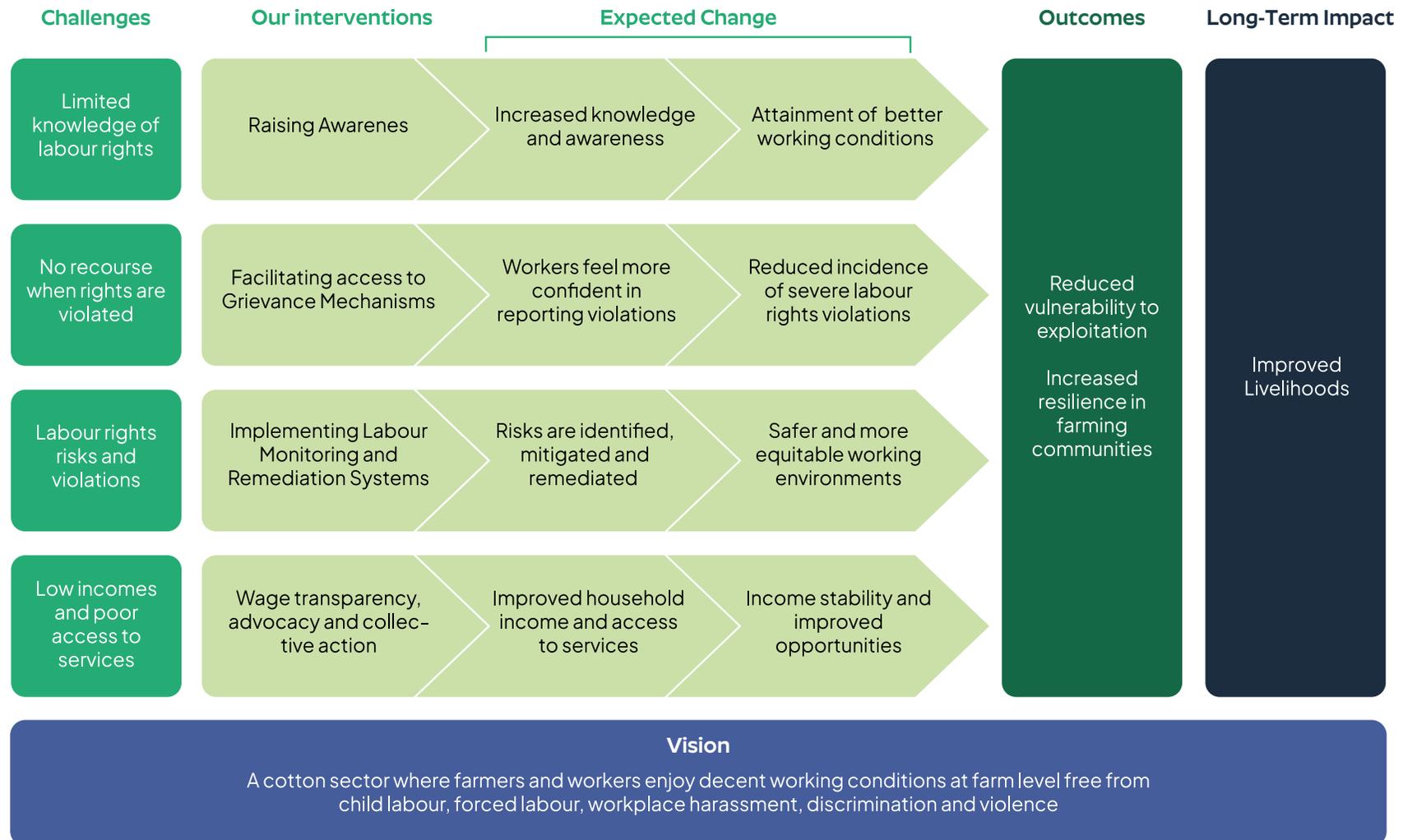
BCI's Decent Work Strategy charts a transformative path towards ensuring dignified livelihoods in cotton farming communities. By embedding decent work principles into standards, strengthening partnerships, and driving collective action, BCI aims to address root causes of labour rights violations while fostering long-term resilience.

The three pillars of intervention — Farm-Level Standard, Programmes and Partnerships, and Multistakeholder Engagement — form a comprehensive framework to reduce vulnerabilities, enhance workers' voices, and secure better working conditions by 2030. Continuous learning, collaboration, and adaptation will be crucial as BCI scales these initiatives, supporting farming communities to thrive.

As BCI moves forward, the success of this strategy will be measured not only in improved standard compliance and reduced vulnerability to labour exploitation but in the empowerment of workers and farmers to shape their futures and attain better livelihoods. Through collective effort, we can build a fairer, more resilient cotton sector where farmers and workers enjoy decent working conditions at farm level free from child labour, forced labour, workplace harassment, discrimination and violence.

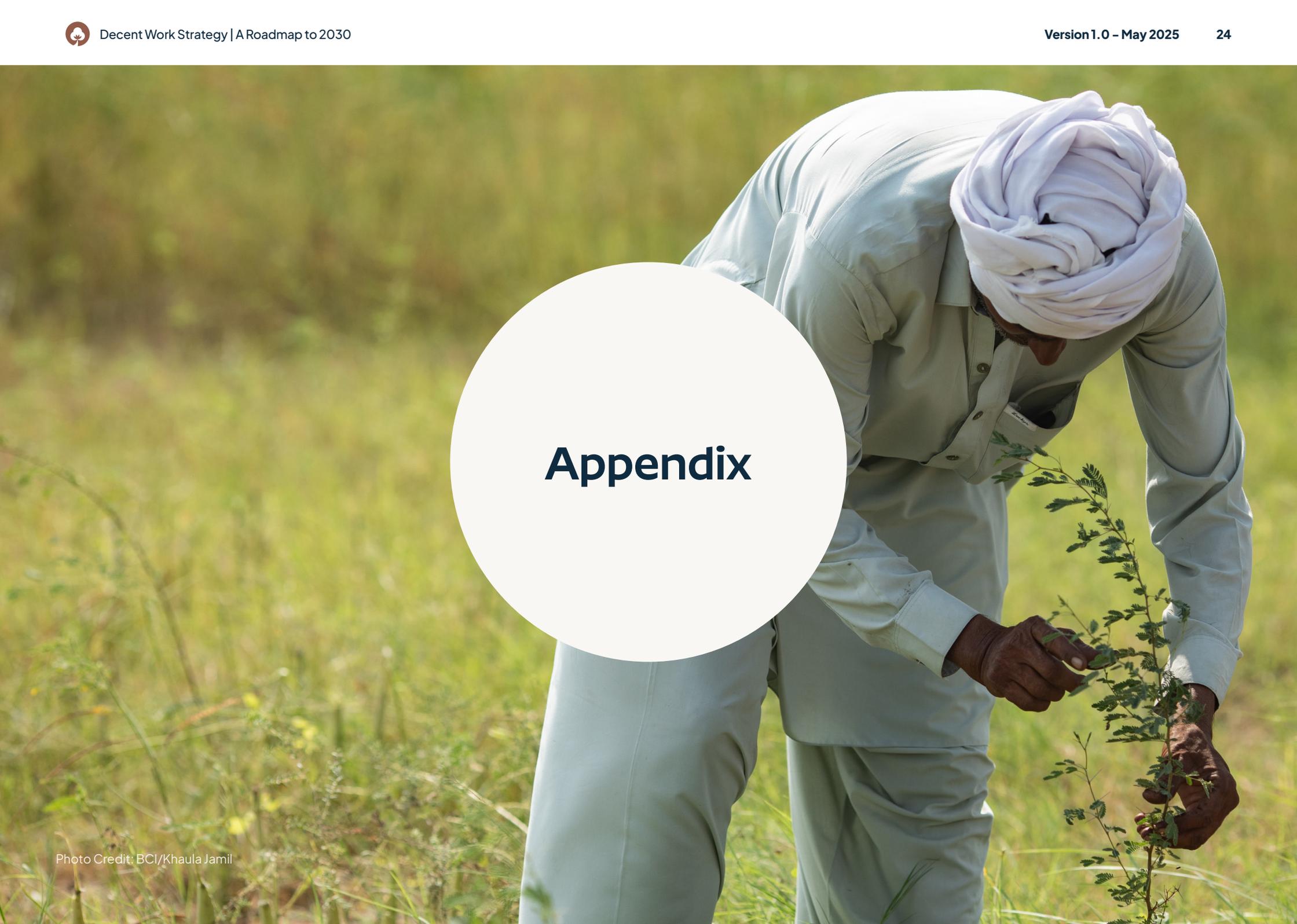


# Decent Work Impact Pathway



# Milestones for 2025-2030

	2025-26	2027-28	2029-30
 <p><b>Farm-Level Standard and the DW Principle</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● P&amp;C communicated to PPs through a set of clear guidance and training materials.</li> <li>● Evidence framework baseline completed. Data informs programming and P&amp;C revision.</li> <li>● India and Pakistan country decent work risk assessments refreshed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Labour Monitoring and Remediation system and producer-level grievance mechanisms fully operationalised.</li> <li>● Wage sampling approach adapted and scaled.</li> <li>● Africa DW risk assessments refreshed.</li> <li>● P&amp;C revised to further enhance DW criteria and indicators.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tajikistan DW risk assessment refreshed.</li> <li>● P&amp;C communicated to PPs through a set of clear guidance and training materials.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Programmes and Partnerships</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● PPs trained on labour risks, LMR, wage sampling and grievance mechanisms.</li> <li>● 2 knowledge partnership initiatives scoped or formalised.</li> <li>● At least 1 funding opportunity pursued.</li> <li>● 50 Partner due diligence assessments completed (PP and Benchmark).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Roll out targeted interventions for key risks like child labour, wage gaps, OSH</li> <li>● At least 2 new knowledge partnership initiatives scoped or formalised.</li> <li>● At least 1 funding opportunity pursued.</li> <li>● Programme Partner Due Diligence framework expanded.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● At least 1 new knowledge partnership initiative scoped or formalised.</li> <li>● At least 1 funding opportunity pursued to scale impactful initiatives.</li> </ul>
 <p><b>Multi-Stakeholder Engagement</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Advocacy strategy agreed.</li> <li>● High-level public engagements secured.</li> <li>● A multi-stakeholder forum for corporate due diligence established.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Country-level multi-stakeholder committees established or revived.</li> <li>● Reporting and traceability for effective member corporate due diligence enhanced.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Multi-stakeholder remediation initiative(s) launched.</li> <li>● Farmer and worker representation on the Council strengthened.</li> </ul>



# Appendix

# List of Abbreviations

- CSDDD** – Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive
- CSO** – Civil Society Organisation
- DW** – Decent Work
- FOA/CB** – Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining
- HRDD** – Human Rights Due Diligence
- LMR** – Labour Monitoring and Remediation
- OECD** – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
- OSH** – Occupational Safety and Health
- P&C** – Principles and Criteria
- PP** – Programme Partner (BCI)



Photo credit: Eventra/BCI



-  [bettercotton.org](https://bettercotton.org)
-  [better-cotton-initiative](https://www.linkedin.com/company/better-cotton-initiative)
-  [bettercottonorg](https://www.instagram.com/bettercottonorg)