Impact & Justice Quarterly Review

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CBIS® Catholic Responsible Investments



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Investigations into the sugar industry in India, the world's second-largest sugar producer, have exposed patterns of forced labor activity, debt bondage, wage withholding, and other concerns. Julie Tanner shares her thoughts on this important issue and how CBIS has responded.

Why is this issue important?

Our research into the Indian state Maharashtra, which is responsible for about a third of India's sugar, found that about 1.5 million sugar cane workers are laboring under arduous, under-regulated conditions, often lacking basic entitlements like rest days, sick leave, housing, and, at times, withheld wages.

While India's exports generate some $4 billion per year and cultivation supports 50 million farmers and workers nationwide, the entire sector is associated with human rights abuses and forced labor.

What does Catholic social teaching have to say about the issue?

Mensuram Bonam demands workers enjoy the right to an environment in which the human personality can grow and thrive.

The Church also points out specifically that exploitative child labor, forced labor, and human trafficking be decisively countered. The USCCB also has a specific section in their Guidelines specifically on human trafficking and forced labor.



"The CBIS engagement pillars define the key areas of focus for our active ownership efforts, addressing issues at both the individual company and broader sector levels."

How, specifically, do you hope to affect change?

Every engagement CBIS starts with Catholic social teaching. Our goal is to influence corporate behavior in order to promote one or more of our three engagement pillars…Human Life and Dignity, Economic Justice and the Common Good, and Care For Creation.

To achieve systemic change in the sugar industry, we are engaging with six of the world's leading global food and beverage companies, Nestlé, Unilever, General Mills, Mondelez, Coca-Cola, and Pepsi. These companies source sugar from India and we believe they are taking inadequate action to address the associated human rights issues.

Given the size and influence of the companies we engage with, we believe any positive steps they take could help improve conditions on the ground for workers, and those actions may encourage similar efforts across the industry



"Our main objective is to improve the human rights due diligence process for all companies involved in India's sugar supply chain."

What can you tell us about your progress?

Coca-Cola has reported initiatives providing protective gear, shade, clean water, and access to government benefits through initiatives that will reach approximately 100,000 workers. Nestlé, meanwhile, has supported access to health care for women sugar cane workers, including maternal health services and mobile outreach.

CBIS collaborates with investors through the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility, where we participate in the Ethical Global Supply Chain Leadership Group and serve on the sugar steering committee to help advance collective engagement.

Any suggestions on how CBIS investors might get involved in your great work?

CBIS represents the voice of our investors through our active ownership and corporate engagement efforts. However, there are ways investors can help these efforts.

For those interested in becoming more involved, writing directly to companies we engage with can be particularly effective.

While we've highlighted several companies today, our engagement efforts extend well beyond the sugar industry. I encourage investors to contact their CBIS representative to discuss more about our ongoing initiatives. I also recommend exploring this year's Impact Report for a broader look at our work and how investors are helping drive meaningful impact around the world.



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