



International  
Labour  
Organization

# ► 2024 Observance of recruitment and working conditions in the cotton harvest in Turkmenistan



▶ **2024 Observance of  
recruitment and working  
conditions in the cotton  
harvest in Turkmenistan**

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## ► Preface

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The International Labour Organization (ILO) is committed to promoting decent work for all. In response to a request from the Government of Turkmenistan, the ILO initiated direct cooperation in 2023, including an observation of working conditions in the country's cotton fields. This report presents the findings from the ILO's observation of the 2024 cotton harvest, with a particular focus on assessing progress in preventing child and forced labour. We acknowledge and appreciate the ongoing commitment and collaboration of the Government of Turkmenistan in this critical initiative. While challenges persist, the engagement of national authorities has been instrumental in improving working conditions and advancing key labour reforms.

The findings in this report highlight both the progress made in recent years and the areas requiring further improvement. The ILO remains committed to supporting the Government of Turkmenistan in implementing effective policies, strengthening labour inspection mechanisms, and enhancing awareness initiatives to prevent all forms of labour exploitation. These efforts are closely linked to fostering an environment conducive to social dialogue within the country.

We extend our gratitude to all stakeholders who participated in the Roundtable in Ashgabat in February. Their valuable insights and active engagement have enriched this report, reinforcing the importance of dialogue, transparency, and collective action in upholding fundamental principles and rights at work. We also appreciate the vital role of the UN Resident Coordinator Office in facilitating this cooperation, as well as the continued support from donor countries that have been instrumental in advancing this process.

We hope this report serves as a useful resource in guiding ongoing efforts to uphold fundamental labour rights in the cotton sector and beyond. The ILO looks forward to continued collaboration with all partners in driving sustainable progress and lasting positive change.

**Philippe Vanhuynegem**

Branch Chief

Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work  
(FUNDAMENTALS)

International Labour Organization (ILO)



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## ► 1. Introduction

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### 1.1 Cooperation between the ILO and the Government of Turkmenistan

An intensive and structured program of direct cooperation between Turkmenistan and the ILO has taken place over a relatively short period of time. In 2023, the ILO and the Government of Turkmenistan entered into their first joint framework to reinforce the implementation of the ILO Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105), ratified by Turkmenistan in 1997. This cooperation was initiated in direct response to recommendations from the ILO supervisory bodies, following the 2021 Conclusions of the ILO Conference Committee on the Application of Standards. The Committee had urged the Turkmen government to take effective and time-bound measures to ensure that no individuals—including farmers, public and private sector workers, or students—were forcibly mobilized for the state-sponsored cotton harvest.<sup>1</sup>

As a first step, following a high-level ILO mission in 2022, the ILO and the Government of Turkmenistan jointly developed the 2023 Roadmap for Cooperation. This framework encompassed key activities such as situational analysis, legal and regulatory reforms, capacity building for labour inspection, and technical assistance to align legislation with ratified ILO conventions. A novel element of the 2023 Roadmap was the introduction of ILO's independent observance of recruitment and working conditions in the cotton harvest, which allowed the ILO to directly observe conditions in cotton fields and public institutions, assessing instances of forced labour, child labour, and overall working conditions. All activities envisaged under the 2023 Roadmap were undertaken with strong leadership and commitment by the Government and helped to build a knowledge base on the dynamics and challenges surrounding recruitment and working conditions in the cotton harvest.

Building on this progress, the ILO-Government of Turkmenistan Roadmap for 2024-2025 was developed as an ambitious next step within the context of a long-term partnership to promote decent work. This framework aims to address concerns of ILO supervisory bodies while contributing to the strengthening of labour market governance for decent work and supporting Turkmenistan's broader socio-economic development.

The 2024-2025 Roadmap is structured around four main components: (1) priority actions to prevent forced and child labour; (2) legislative reforms; (3) strengthening enforcement of labour laws and international labour standards; and (4) broader policy reforms, including research initiatives, enhanced social dialogue between workers' and employers' organizations, and improvements in employment services. This strategic, multi-faceted approach reflects Turkmenistan's commitment to meaningful labour reforms.<sup>2</sup>

The ILO observance of recruitment and working conditions during the 2024 cotton harvest in Turkmenistan took place as envisaged under Output 1.6 of the 2024-2025 Roadmap. The 2023 Memorandum of Understanding between the ILO and Government of Turkmenistan governing the objectives, process, and

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<sup>1</sup> The ILO Conference Committee on the Application of Standards (CAS) has discussed the application of C105 by Turkmenistan on four occasions – 2016; 2021; 2023; and 2024 based on concerns of the use of forced labour and child labour in the state-sponsored cotton harvest.

<sup>2</sup> ILO and Government of Turkmenistan, [Roadmap of cooperation activities between the International Labour Organization and the Government of Turkmenistan for 2024-2025](#), Geneva, Ashgabat, 2024.

roles and responsibilities of each party during the ILO observance was extended in July 2024 to cover the 2024 harvest and its scope was expanded to include all public institutions and state-owned enterprises.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Recent developments

In February 2024, the Government announced a substantial increase in the purchasing price for cotton, raising the rate from 1,500 to 5,000 manat per ton for cotton collected at the start of the harvest until October 15, with adjusted rates of 4,770 manats per ton for cotton collected between October 15 and November 15, and 4,550 manats per ton for cotton harvested thereafter. Similarly, prices for fine fibre cotton were increased from 2,000 manat to 6,700 manat per ton for early-season cotton, 6,400 manat per ton for mid-season, between October 15 and November 15, and 6,100 manat per ton for late-season harvest. These price adjustments were designed to increase farmer incentives and income. At the same time Government subsidies for harvest inputs were lifted, necessitating further assessment of the net impact of these changes. Additionally, wages for cotton pickers were increased to between 80 tenge and 1.2 manat per kilogram picked, depending on the time of picking and quality. The importance of these measures is underscored by empirical evidence from Uzbekistan (2015–2020), which demonstrates a clear link between wage levels and the risks of forced labour, as highlighted in the ILO report on "Third-Party Monitoring of Measures Against Child Labour and Forced Labour During the Cotton Harvest in Uzbekistan".<sup>4</sup>

In July 2024, following ILO technical assistance, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MLSP) issued an Order to revise the Hazardous Work List, classifying cotton picking as hazardous work for children under 18. This prohibits all children under 18 from engaging in cotton picking, marking a major policy advancement in the fight against child labour.

During July and August 2024, the Government, in partnership with the Office of the Ombudsperson, the National Trade Union Centre, the Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, and the ILO, conducted a series of awareness-raising workshops across 19 etraps in the Ahal, Dashoguz, and Lebap regions. These workshops sensitized local stakeholders—including local authorities, farmers' associations, public institution staff, workers and the general public—on national labour legislation and international labour standards related to the prevention of forced mobilization and child labour.

In late November 2024, the Parliament approved several key reforms to the Labour Code, removing, as an exception to compulsory labour, work undertaken as a 'civil duty' as well as some other reforms, which effectively prohibit children under the age of 18 from most forms of work. These mark a step forward in strengthening national legislation against forced labour and child labour. Nonetheless additional steps are necessary in the coming years to fully close existing legislative gaps and ensure compliance with ratified ILO conventions on forced labour and child labour.

## 1.3 Objectives and scope of the observance

The 2024 cotton harvest observance in Turkmenistan aimed to assess the recruitment and working conditions of cotton pickers, with a particular focus on identifying risks of child labour and forced mobilization. Additionally, the initiative sought to assess the effectiveness of measures implemented by the Turkmen government to mitigate these risks and improve the overall working environment during the harvest.

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<sup>3</sup> Public social buildings and cotton fields were covered in the 2023 MOU.

<sup>4</sup> ILO, [Third-party monitoring of child labour and forced labour during the 2020 cotton harvest in Uzbekistan](#), Geneva, 2021.



### Box 1. Key objectives of the 2024 observance

Collecting independent and reliable data on recruitment practices, working conditions, and the risks of forced labour and child labour in the cotton harvest. Documenting government measures to address forced mobilisation and child labour, as well as challenges related to working conditions.

Analysing recruitment methods, channels, and mechanisms used to engage workers for cotton picking.

Identifying decent work deficits in recruitment practices, working conditions, and proposing necessary remediation measures.

Enhancing awareness among employers, workers, and other stakeholders regarding these issues.

In order to achieve the established objectives, the observance followed a structured protocol which included visits to cotton fields, public institutions and state-owned enterprises throughout the harvest period. Visits to cotton fields were designed to monitor and document recruitment practices, working conditions, and the presence of child labour and forced mobilisation in real-time. Public institutions and state-owned enterprises which include schools, healthcare facilities, and essential utility services like water and electricity providers, were included in the observance. By including these institutions in the scope of the study, the observance was able to capture the broader context of recruitment practices and mobilisation surrounding the cotton harvest.

## 1.4 Structure of the report

Chapter 2 presents the observance methodology, defining the scope of the exercise. Chapter 3 examines the socio-demographic characteristics of cotton pickers, and chapters 4 to 6 outline the key findings: Chapter 4 details findings on working conditions, while Chapters 5 and 6 explore the presence of child labour and instances of forced mobilisation, respectively. Finally, Chapter 7 provides conclusions and discusses priorities for future action.

## ► 2. Observance methodology

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### 2.1 Key ethical principles in the ILO observance methodology

The overarching concern in the methodological design of the 2024 observance of the cotton harvest was the protection of participants, guided by the highest ethical standards. Central to this approach was adherence to international research ethics guidelines, including the UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation (2020), UNICEF's Procedure on Ethical Standards (2021), and the European Commission's Ethics for Researchers (2011). These principles ensured that participants' rights, dignity, and well-being were prioritized throughout the process.

During the design of the observance methodology the research team considered possible harm to and benefits for each group of participants and developed a protection protocol to safeguard participants from potential harm throughout the observance. Central to this principle, participation in the observance was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Informed consent was ensured by providing each participant with a form that detailed the objectives and scope of the study, as well as how the data collected would be used. Observers were trained to assist participants if they required any help, including in cases where they were unable to read. No payments or incentives were offered to participants, in alignment with international standards to avoid undue influence or coercion. Additionally, the consent form included contact details for an independent ILO grievance mechanism, enabling participants to seek further information or file complaints of any kind, including those related to the observance exercise. To ensure ethical engagement, all staff involved in data collection received comprehensive training, ensuring the consistent application of these principles throughout the process.

Respecting participants' privacy and confidentiality was also paramount during the data collection and analysis process. Strong safeguards were put in place to protect personal data, including secure storage, anonymization, and the proper disposal of collected information.

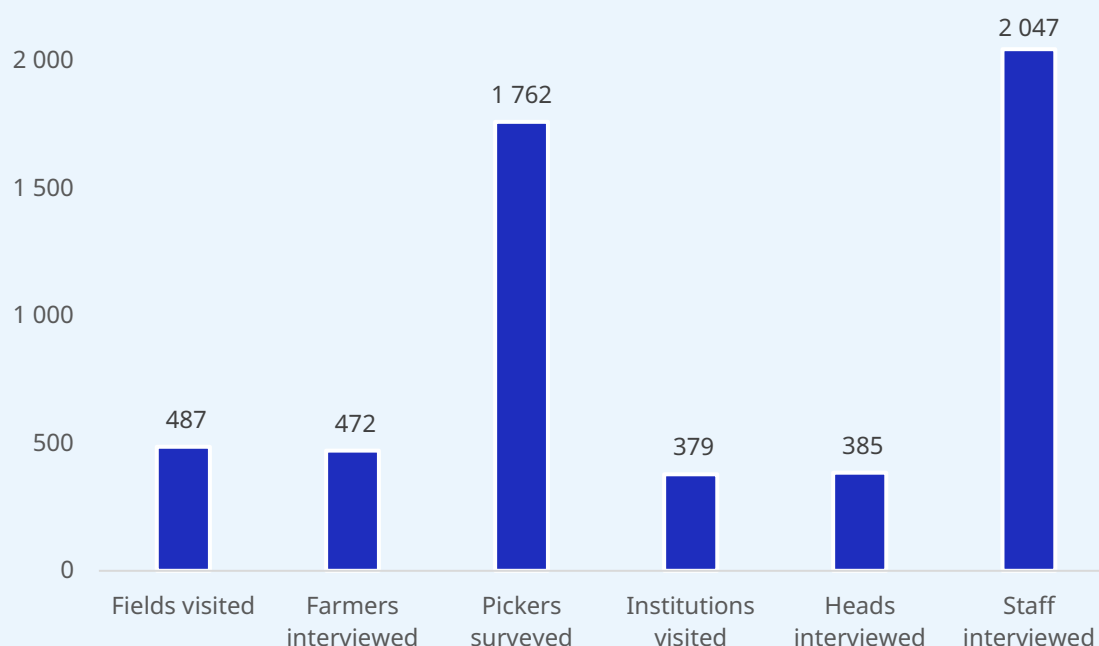
Finally, the methodology and protocols underwent review by an independent Institutional Review Board (IRB) to guarantee full compliance with ethical standards. This comprehensive approach underscores the ILO's commitment to conducting research that upholds the highest standards of ethics and the protection of all involved.

### 2.2 Scope and logistics of the 2024 observance exercise

The 2024 observance consisted of 4 rounds of missions that each included 10 consecutive observance days. In each of the 4 rounds, five observance teams were deployed across the five regions in Turkmenistan. This structure yielded 200 individual days of observation in the 2024 observance (4 rounds X 10 days per round X 5 teams per round) for a total of 40 ILO officials. Additionally, the geographical coverage included all five regions of Turkmenistan.

The number of cotton fields observed was 472 in 2024. This led to 1,762 cotton pickers surveyed in 2024. Moreover, 472 farmers were interviewed during the 2024. As well, 379 public institutions and state-owned enterprises were visited. In total, 2,047 staff members from these public institutions and state-owned enterprises were surveyed, alongside interviews with 385 heads interviewed.

**Figure 1. Number of visits and surveys by visit and survey type**



## 2.3 Field team composition

The observance exercise involved multiple field teams, each led by two ILO staff members who were assisted by two local translators and one driver.

ILO observers participated in mandatory training covering the objectives, procedures, ethical considerations, and technical aspects of the observance. Local interpreters and drivers also received procedural and ethical training in-country before the exercise began.

## 2.4 Observance sites and data collection

During the observation period, field teams conducted visits to two main types of sites: cotton fields and public institutions or state-owned enterprises.

### 2.4.1 Cotton field visits

To document recruitment practices and working conditions in the cotton harvest, field teams visited multiple cotton fields per day, conducting structured interviews and surveys with key stakeholders.

- Teams visited at least two cotton fields per day of observance, selecting sites using GPS coordinates communicated to the driver only on the day of the visit.
- At each field, observers sought consent from the farmer or their representative before conducting structured interviews with the farmer and surveys with cotton pickers.
- Farmers and pickers were each provided with informed consent forms and data collection only proceeded upon receiving verbal consent from each potential participant.
- Interviews and surveys were conducted privately, ensuring third-party presence did not compromise the process or create risks for the participants.

## 2.4.2 Public institutions and state-owned enterprises

In addition to cotton field visits, teams also observed recruitment and labour conditions within public institutions and state-owned enterprises, where recruitment for cotton harvesting may take place.

- Teams visited at least two institutions per day.
- At each public institution and state-owned enterprise, observers sought verbal consent from the head of the institution or enterprise to conduct self-administered surveys with staff and structured interviews with the head or representative themselves.
- Heads and staff were each provided with informed consent forms and data collection only proceeded upon receiving verbal consent from each potential participant.
- Interviews and surveys were conducted privately, ensuring third-party presence did not compromise the process or create risks for the participants.

Data collection employed the following methods:

- Self-administered surveys for cotton pickers and staff in public institutions and state-owned enterprises.
- In-person structured interviews with farmers and institutional heads.
- Observation of sites by trained ILO observers

All self-administered questionnaires for cotton pickers and staff of public institutions and state-owned enterprises were made available to respondents on programmed tablets or, if preferred, in paper format. The questionnaires were offered in Turkmen, Russian, and Uzbek for cotton pickers, and in Turkmen and Russian for staff of public institutions.

Only individuals aged 18 and older participated in the survey and interviews. Minors were strictly excluded to ensure ethical compliance.

## 2.5 Temporal scope of the observations

The four observance rounds were strategically timed to capture different phases of the cotton harvest. The first round took place early in the harvest season, from August 20 to August 30. This was followed by the second and third rounds, conducted from September 3 to September 13 and September 17 to September 27, respectively. The final round occurred later in the season, from November 1 to November 11, providing a comprehensive view of conditions across the harvest period.

## 2.6 Limitations and challenges in data collection

While the observance exercise is not a probability-based study and is not designed to yield statistically representative estimates at the national level, it involved a substantial sample size and wide coverage. The data collected from cotton pickers, farmers, and staff and heads from public institutions and state-owned enterprises— provides valuable insights into observed practices and conditions.

While the results cannot be generalized to the entire population, the scale and diversity of the observations offer a strong basis for identifying patterns and informing policy discussions.

It is important to highlight that the reported figures do not fully reflect the extent of the data collection efforts, as a considerable number of attempted visits were unsuccessful due to various challenges. For instance, 27 farms and 17 public institutions and state-owned enterprises could not be surveyed because the head of the farm or farmer declined to provide consent. Additionally, 3 farms and 1 public institution

were excluded due to interference encountered during the data collection process. Additionally, 77 farms could not be surveyed because the harvest had not yet started at the time of the visit. These challenges highlight the complexities involved in fieldwork and emphasize the need to address these hurdles in future data collection efforts.

The observance exercise faced certain challenges and limitations that should be clearly acknowledged. First, it was not designed to produce representative estimates of the number of cotton pickers or their characteristics. Achieving such representativeness would require the design and implementation of a probability-based sampling approach. Second, the exercise addressed sensitive topics, such as child labour and forced mobilization. Despite the implementation of protocols to ensure confidentiality, privacy, and protection from negative consequences for respondents, some individuals may still feel hesitant sharing information. Additionally, large-scale data collection exercises conducted by non-governmental organizations are relatively uncommon in the country, further compounding the challenges of the data collection process. However, as the observance exercise is repeated over time, continuous improvements are expected in terms of design, implementation, and overall effectiveness. Lastly, interference during data collection remained a significant concern, with observers reporting signs of interference in 23 per cent of their visits.



### ► 3. Socio-demographic characteristics of cotton pickers

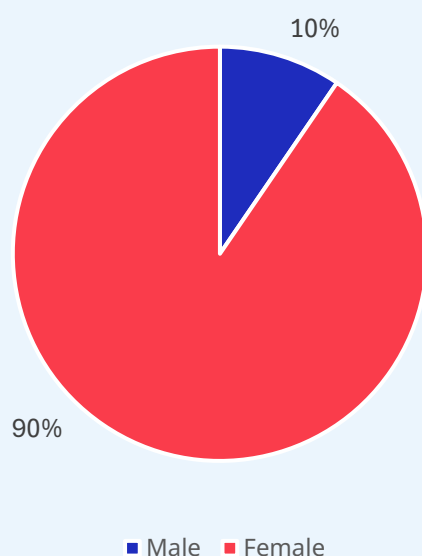
To fully understand the working conditions of cotton pickers, it is essential to first examine their socio-demographic characteristics. According to the collected data, the average age of cotton pickers is 39 years, with an age range spanning from 18 to 75.

Notably, the results indicate that over 90 per cent of cotton pickers surveyed are women. This gender distribution needs to be considered when addressing OSH risks, such as chemical exposure, repetitive strain injuries, and inadequate protective equipment, which impact men and women differently.

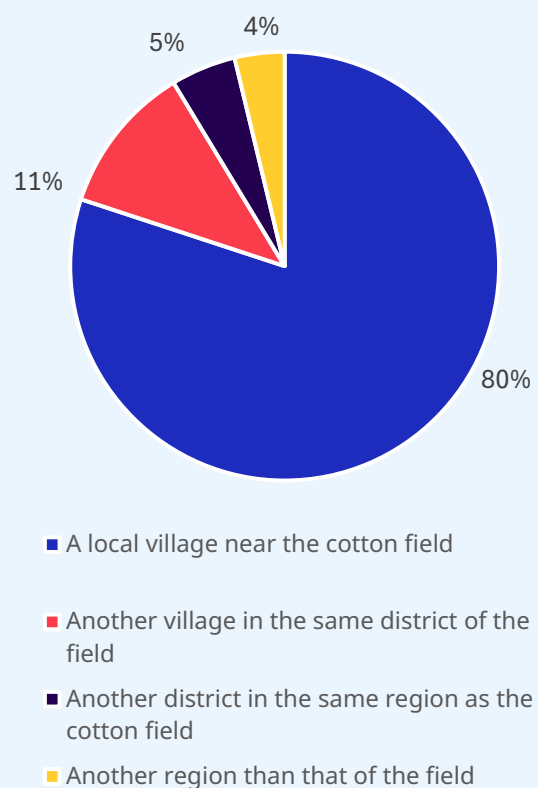
An additional sociodemographic characteristic of cotton pickers that is important to analyse is their place of residence. It is noteworthy that while the majority of cotton pickers (8 out of 10) surveyed live in a village near the cotton field, a significant portion reside further away. Specifically, 11 per cent of cotton pickers live in another village within the same district (Etrap), 5 per cent reside in a different district within the same region (Velayat), and 4 per cent come from another region entirely. This geographic distribution highlights the mobility of some workers and underscores the importance of considering distance and travel-related challenges in understanding their working conditions, access to resources, and vulnerability to exploitation.

**Figure 2. Gender and residential distribution of cotton pickers**

(a) Gender



(b) Place of residence



## ► 4. Working conditions of cotton pickers

This chapter analyses the findings on cotton pickers' working conditions based on survey data collected during the observation.

### 4.1 Payment and compensation

A positive development in 2024 is the net increase in the payment that cotton pickers received per kilogram of cotton picked. Only 12 per cent of surveyed cotton pickers in 2024 earned more than one manat per kilogram the previous year. Measures implemented by the government to increase the piece-rate wages per kilogram of cotton picked<sup>5</sup> significantly improved this figure, raising it to 71 per cent in 2024. While 29 per cent of cotton pickers are still earning below the government-mandated standard of one manat per kilogram in 2024, the vast improvement within a single year demonstrates the potential for rapid progress in enhancing working conditions for a substantial number of workers.

**Figure 3. Results from the 2024 observance; percentage distribution of picker's pay per kilogram**

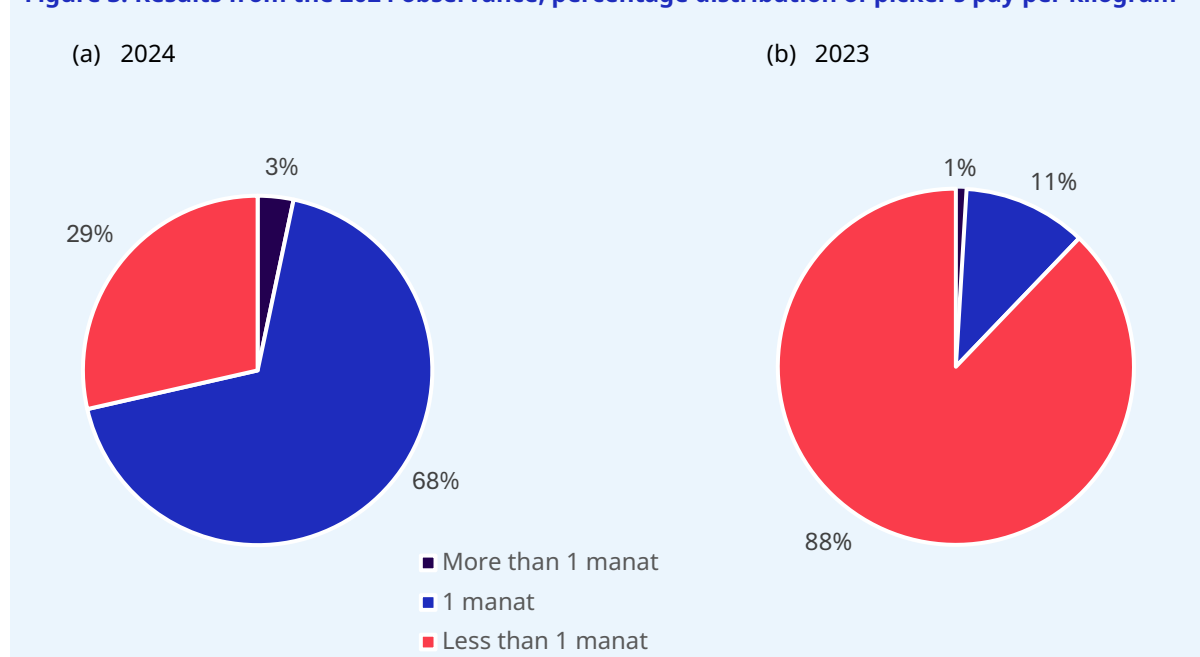
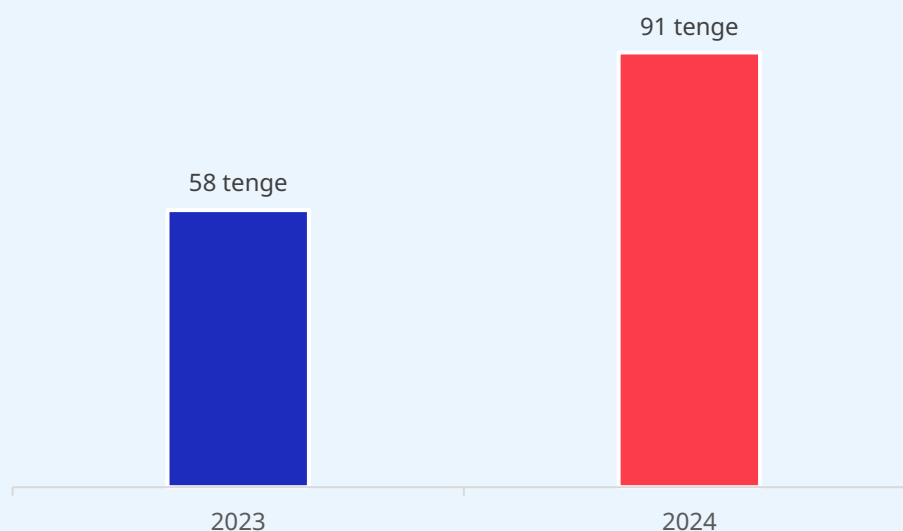


Figure 4 highlights the increase in pay in absolute terms, with the average payment rising from 58 tenge per kilogram to 91 tenge per kilogram. This represents a significant relative increase of 57 per cent. These advancements are encouraging, and there is potential to further reduce the remaining gap by next year, moving closer to ensuring fair compensation for all workers. As part of the roadmap research initiatives, the ILO is conducting a study on “attractive wages and incomes” for cotton pickers. This study was implemented during December 2024 and involved interviews with households and farmers, as well as an analysis of living costs, to determine what constitutes an attractive wage that could incentivize free and voluntary participation in the cotton harvest. The preliminary results of a small-scale study in Lebap and Mary indicate

<sup>5</sup> In early 2024, the Government increased wages for each kilogram of cotton picked to between 80 tenge and 1 manat 20 tenge per kilogram depending on the time of picking and quality.

that paying cotton pickers at least 1.2 manat per kilogram collected would enable the average worker to reach the national minimum wage. However, the minimum wage itself is insufficient to cover the per capita spending needs of households in the lowest 25 per cent of the spending scale. To ensure that wage workers can attain a minimum living standard—defined as spending per capita at least equal to that of the bottom 25th percentile—the minimum wage would need to be approximately 1,512 manat per month, which corresponds to a payment of about 1.3 manat per kilogram.

**Figure 4. Results from the 2024 observance; Average pay per kilo**



## 4.2 Prevalence of contracts

The majority of cotton pickers (78.4 per cent) do not have a written contract. This lack of formal agreements directly impacts key aspects of their working conditions, such as remuneration, benefits, and termination clauses. Without contracts, workers are more vulnerable to arbitrary working conditions imposed by employers, which may contribute to the prevalence of child labour and forced mobilization.

## 4.3 Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)

Occupational safety and health (OSH) measures in the cotton industry are essential due to the diverse and significant risks faced by workers. Cotton pickers encounter a range of hazards, including physical, mechanical, chemical, biological, ergonomic, and psychosocial risks. While some hazards are common across various contexts, others are specific to local conditions. Conducting context-specific OSH assessments for Turkmenistan could play a crucial role in identifying unique risks and determining appropriate mitigation measures. For instance, the *Cotton Harvesting Safety Guide* offers a detailed analysis of OSH concerns in the Australian context, emphasizing tailored approaches to risk management.<sup>6</sup>

Children engaged in cotton picking are particularly vulnerable to specific hazards, such as exposure to pesticides, which can have heightened developmental effects on their nervous and endocrine systems due

<sup>6</sup> See page 12 of: Temperley, J. and T. Lower (eds.). *Managing Cotton Harvest Safety - a practical guide*, from Bircham, J. and L. Fragar, 2001: "No. 30 Cotton Picking - Guidance notes for the cotton industry". Australian Centre for Agricultural Health and Safety (ACAHS), Moree, NSW, 2014.

to their smaller size, rapid growth, and underdeveloped metabolism. Additionally, prolonged stooping to pick cotton can lead to musculoskeletal injuries, while carrying heavy loads increases the risk of fatigue, heat stress, and spinal injury. Further risks include dehydration, heat stress, and a lack of basic facilities such as access to water, sanitation, and shaded rest areas, all of which can exacerbate the physical toll on child workers.<sup>7</sup>

In relation to these dimensions, the observance examined the availability and use of personal protective equipment (PPE), uncovering significant gaps. Currently, only 40 per cent of surveyed cotton pickers are provided with basic PPE, such as gloves, aprons, or masks, exposing 60 per cent to inadequate protection. This lack of proper equipment directly contributes to adverse health outcomes. Observance data indicates that 8 per cent of workers reported experiencing negative health effects from their work. Among these, 41 per cent suffered from head, neck, or joint pain, 33 per cent experienced dizziness or fainting, 10 per cent reported difficulty breathing or coughing, and another 10 per cent cited other health issues.

Addressing these challenges requires ensuring wide distribution and free access to PPE, combined with comprehensive training programs and the establishment of safe working conditions.

## 4.4 Food and water provision

The availability of potable drinking water and adequate food is a critical component of ensuring the basic needs are provided for cotton pickers, particularly given the demanding nature of their work. Cotton picking often occurs in extreme temperatures, sometimes exceeding 40 degrees Celsius during the harvest season. Such conditions significantly increase the risk of dehydration, which can lead to severe short-term effects such as heat exhaustion and, over the long term, contribute to chronic kidney disease —a condition that disproportionately affects agricultural workers worldwide.

Ensuring access to sufficient potable water is essential for safeguarding the health and productivity of cotton pickers. Encouragingly, 91 per cent of surveyed workers reported that farmers provided enough water or tea to meet their needs. However, 9 per cent of workers indicated that their water needs were not met. This gap, though relatively small, represents a critical deficiency that can and should be addressed promptly through targeted interventions, such as improved access to water supply systems or mobile hydration units.

The issue of food provision presents a more pressing challenge. A significant 38 per cent of cotton pickers stated that farmers did not provide enough food to meet their needs.

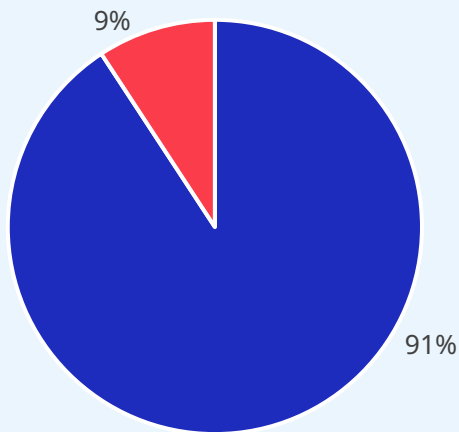
These gaps highlight important decent work deficits that must be further explored and prioritized to enhance the overall working conditions and welfare of cotton pickers.

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<sup>7</sup> ILO, [Hazardous child labour in agriculture – Cotton sector](#), Safety and health fact sheets, International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (PEC), Geneva, 2004. ILO, [Occupational safety and health in global supply chains – Summary of key findings from recent research conducted by Vision Zero Fund](#), Geneva, 2022. ILO, [Code of practice on safety and health in agriculture, Sectoral Activities Programme](#), Geneva, 2010. ILO, [Child labour in cotton – A briefing](#), Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Branch (FUNDAMENTALS), Geneva, 2016.

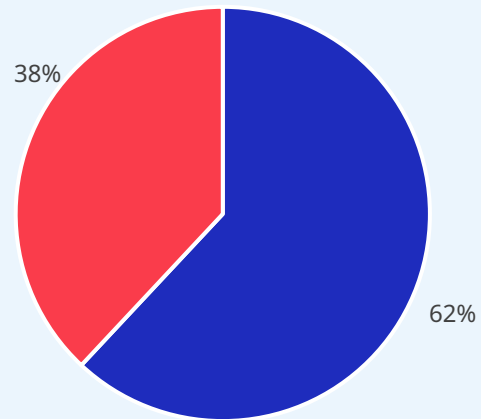
**Figure 5. Percentage of pickers that reported being provided sufficient water and food in the field**

(a) Water



■ Yes ■ No

(b) Food



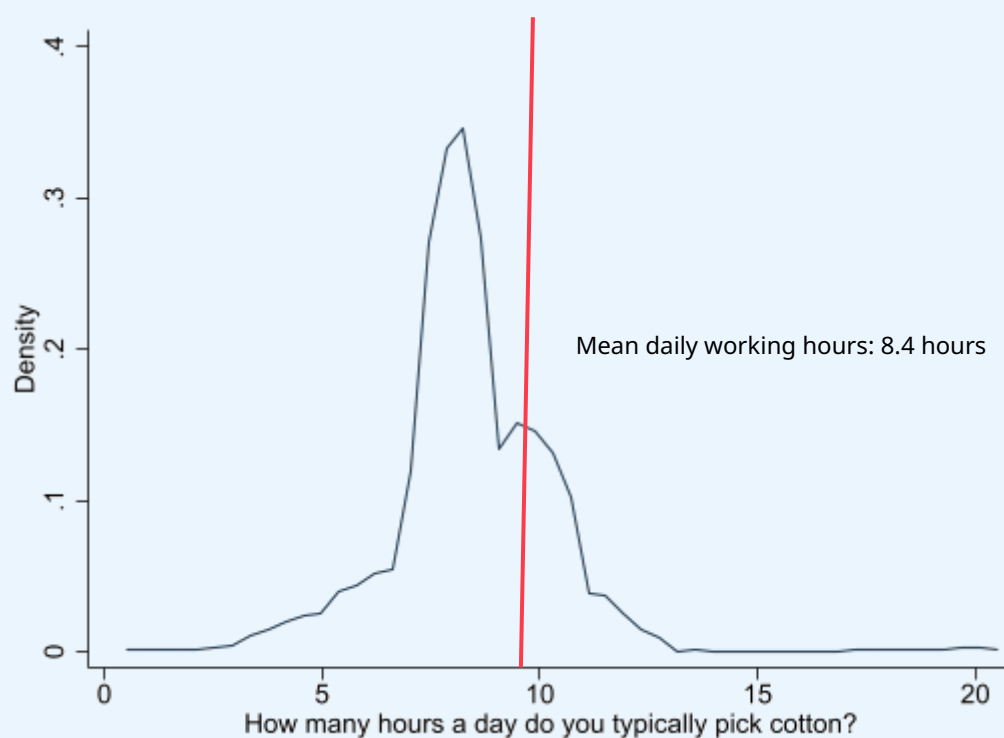
■ Yes ■ No

## 4.5 Working hours

Cotton pickers work an average of 8.4 hours per day, but about a quarter of workers exceed 9 hours per day, with some work significantly longer. Prolonged hours, especially in extreme heat, increase risks of heat stress, dehydration, and long-term health issues. To protect workers, structured breaks during the hottest hours should be mandated and institutionalized to ensure equitable and safe working conditions. These measures, coupled with compliance monitoring and awareness campaigns, are essential to safeguard the health and well-being of all cotton pickers.



**Figure 6. Average working hours for cotton pickers**



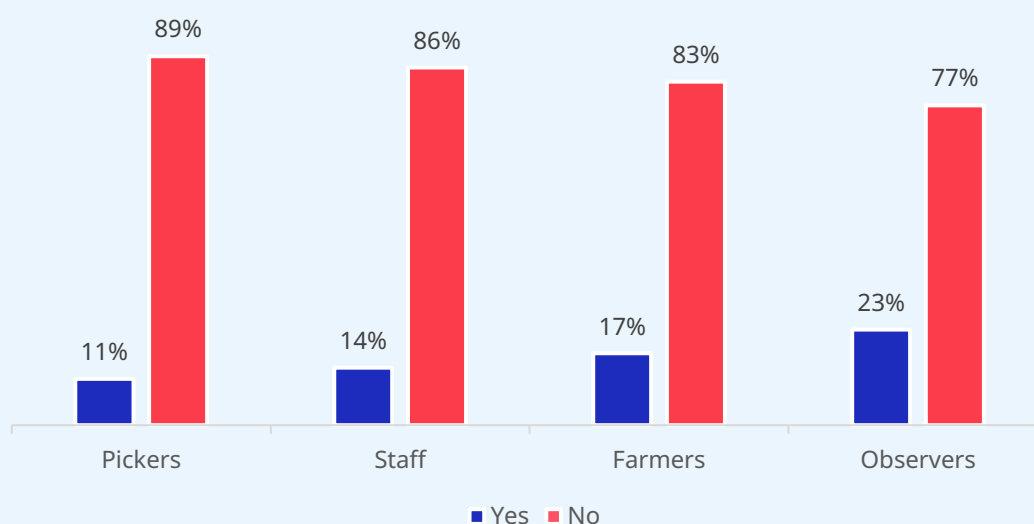
## ► 5. Children picking cotton

In 2024 the Government of Turkmenistan added cotton picking and cotton growing to the list of hazardous work that is prohibited for all children under 18 years of age. As previously addressed, cotton picking presents various hazards such exposure to extreme temperatures, lifting heavy loads and ergonomic risk that all pose extreme risk to children. Addressing the issue of children picking cotton is a critical priority for ensuring their well-being and compliance with national and international standards.

To assess the extent of child involvement in cotton picking during the period of observance, information was gathered from cotton pickers, farmers, and staff of public institutions and state-owned enterprises who participated in the 2024 season. Various sources of information confirmed the presence of children working in cotton fields (see Figure 7), with 17 per cent of farmers reporting child involvement on their farms, while 14 per cent of staff and 11 per cent of pickers indicated they had worked in fields where children were also present. Furthermore, ILO observers directly confirmed the presence of children picking cotton in all regions, with 23 per cent of farms affected. The consistency of findings across different sources indicates that child involvement in cotton picking is not an isolated issue and requires appropriate interventions.

Further studies are needed to identify the root causes of children's involvement in cotton picking. This phenomenon may be linked to structural factors in rural areas, such as social norms, adequate income and wages for cotton pickers, poverty, piece-rate payment systems, lack of social protection, informality, weak enforcement and oversight, and other underlying drivers. To have a better understanding of the root causes, the ILO offers a comprehensive range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies designed to provide deeper insights into national and regional child labour dynamics. These tools help identify key drivers of trends and inform the development of effective policy approaches to address the root causes of child labour.

**Figure 7. Percentage of individuals that reported children picking cotton in cotton fields they had been working in during the 2024 season by respondent type**

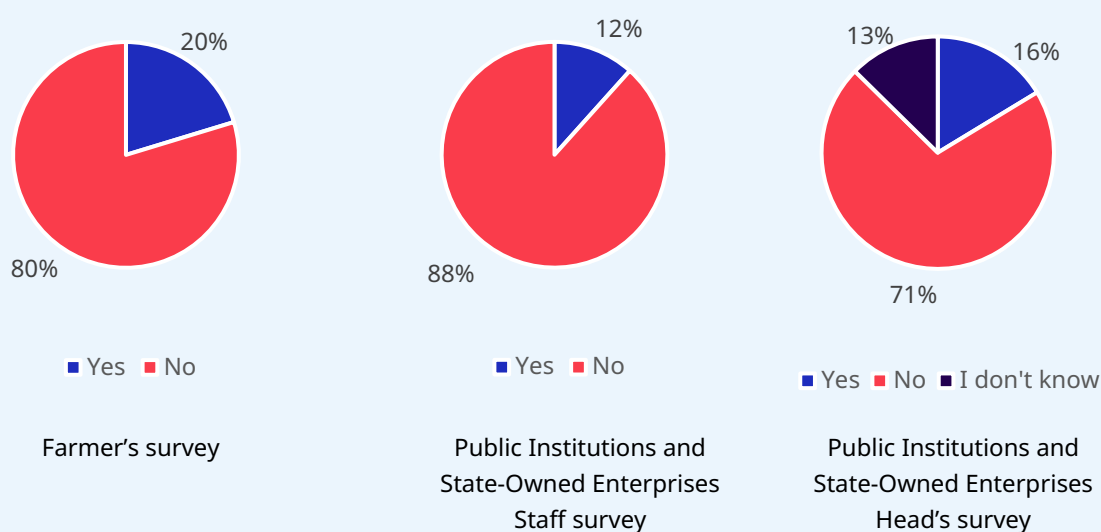


## ► 6. Forced mobilisation

### 6.1 Involvement of public employees in cotton picking

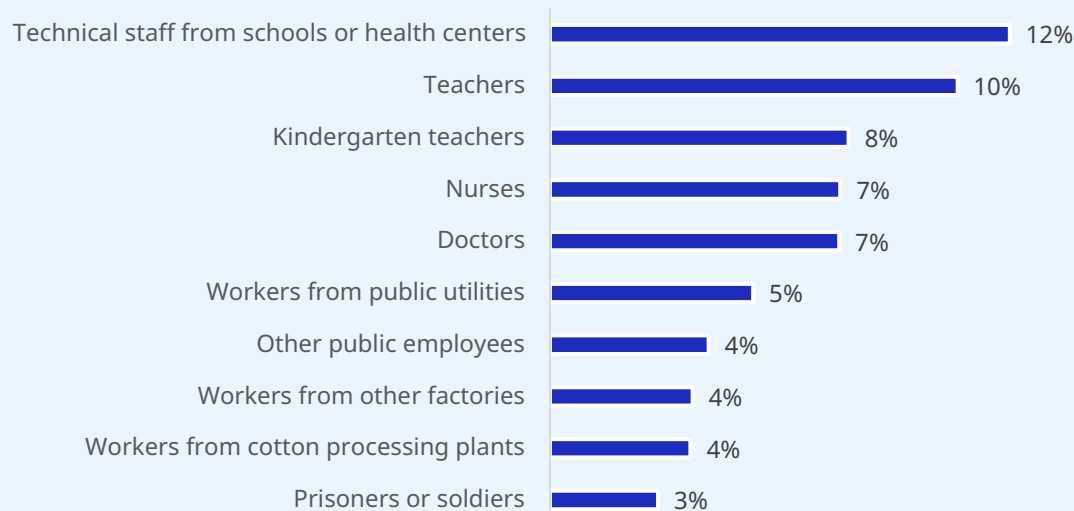
Data on the involvement of public servants in the cotton harvest was collected from interviews with farmers and with heads of public institutions and state-owned enterprises as well as from surveys of the staff in public institutions and state-owned enterprises. The results from all of these sources corroborate that civil servants have a non-negligible participation in cotton picking. In this regard, 20 per cent of farmers interviewed indicated that public employees were working on their farm during this harvest season. Aligning with this finding, 12 per cent of public employees surveyed participated in cotton picking during the harvest, and 16 per cent of institutional heads interviewed reported that their staff were involved as well. The triangulation of these statistics confirms the participation of civil servants in cotton picking. Data on the involvement of public servants did not reveal whether they participated in cotton picking during regular work hours, or in their spare time, on weekends or during vacation.

**Figure 8. Percentage of respondents indicating that public employees had been involved in cotton picking during the 2024 harvest season by respondent type**



The data collected from interviews with farmers also allows for the disaggregation of the types of civil servants most commonly involved in picking cotton, as seen in Figure 9. During the 2024 season, 12 per cent of farmers reported that technical staff, such as cleaners, from schools, kindergartens, and/or medical centres had worked on their farm. Teachers were the second most common group that farmers reported to have been working on their farms (10.3 per cent of farmers reporting teachers working on their farms), followed by kindergarten teachers (8 per cent), nurses (7 per cent) and doctors (7 per cent).

**Figure 9. Percentage of farmers who reported different groups of civil servants working on their farms by type of civil servants**



To determine whether this participation constitutes forced mobilization, further exploration is needed to assess the presence of coercion to impose work in cotton picking, such as whether workers would face negative consequences for refusing to pick cotton. This aspect is examined in the next section. For now, it can be noted that the involvement of civil servants in the field may indicate a pattern or risk of forced mobilization.

A stronger indication of potential forced mobilization is that 5 per cent of public institution heads interviewed reported directly providing staff to participate in the cotton harvest. 16 per cent of staff in public institutions who reported they had picked cotton indicated they were recruited by their employer or a public authority.

## 6.2 Consequences of non-participation in cotton picking

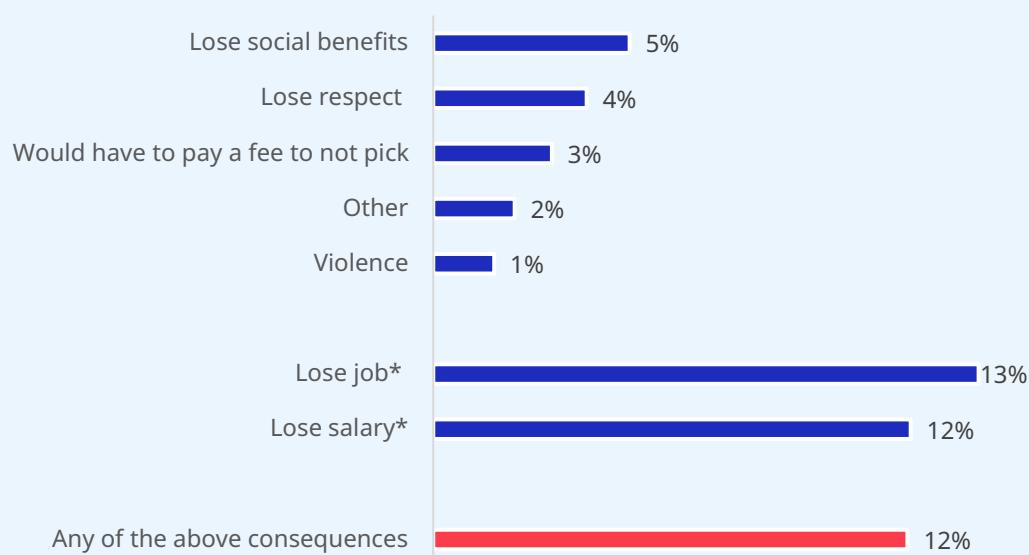
A key component of the definition of forced mobilization is the presence of coercion to compel individuals to do work against their will. The consent to work must be freely given and informed and exist throughout the employment relationship. Consent, however, may well be negated by the presence of some form of coercion. The observation exercise explored this aspect of forced mobilization by quantifying the consequences pickers could have faced if they had not picked cotton during the 2024 season. Cotton pickers and staff of public institutions and state-owned enterprises who reported picking cotton during the 2024 season were asked about personal, social and professional consequences for not participating in the cotton harvest.

During the 2024 season, 12 per cent of cotton pickers surveyed reported facing at least one consequence for not picking cotton. The most frequently reported consequence, cited by 5 per cent of pickers, was the loss of social benefits, including unemployment benefits or health coverage. The second most reported consequence, indicated by 4 per cent of pickers, was a loss of respect within their community. This was followed by having to pay a fee to avoid picking (reported by 3 per cent of pickers), threats of violence against the pickers or their families (reported by 2 per cent of pickers), and other negative consequences (reported by 2 per cent of pickers).

Pickers who indicated that they had another main job outside of the agricultural sector were also asked about potential professional consequences they could have faced in their main job if they had not picked cotton. Of these pickers, 13 per cent reported they could have lost their main job if they had not picked

cotton during that harvest season and 12 per cent reported that they could have suffered salary loss or other benefits.

**Figure 10. Percentage of pickers who reported that they would have faced consequences if they had not picked cotton this season by type of consequence**



*Note: \* Questions only asked to individuals who have another main job outside of the agricultural sector; questions referred to the individual's main job.*

Staff of public institutions and state-owned enterprises who indicated that they had picked cotton during the 2024 harvest were also asked about potential consequences for not picking cotton. Of those respondents, 31 per cent indicated that they would have faced at least one negative consequence if they had not picked cotton during the 2024 harvest season. The most cited consequence was having to pay a fee to not pick cotton, reported by 13 per cent of staff who had picked cotton. This was followed by losing respect in their community (reported by 9 per cent), losing their salary from their job in the public institutions and state-owned enterprises (reported by 8 per cent), losing their job in the public institutions and state-owned enterprises (reported by 8 per cent), losing social benefits (reported by 7 per cent), being threatened with violence against themselves or their family (reported by 3 per cent), and other consequences (reported by 5 per cent).



**Figure 11. Percentage of PISOE staff that reported that they would have faced consequences for not picking cotton this season by type of consequence**

*(Questions only asked to staff members who reported having picked cotton during the 2024 season)*



Even in the absence of explicit threats or announced penalties many people concluded that they had to accept the work. The ILO's Committee of Experts has established that implicit or tacit threats of a penalty can constitute "psychological coercion". However, it is difficult to prove the existence of a credible threat when there is no clearly demonstrable penalty.

### 6.3 The practice of having to pay a fee to avoid picking cotton

One of the significant issues related to forced mobilization is the practice of requiring individuals to pay a fee to avoid picking cotton. This practice has repeatedly been raised by the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations in its comments on the application of the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention in Turkmenistan.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the workers observed in the fields are not necessarily forcibly mobilized themselves; instead, they could be replacements for civil servants and other individuals who paid a fee to avoid picking cotton. These fees can be significant, imposing a heavy financial burden on those required to pay.

In this regard, during the observance 14 per cent of pickers reported either picking cotton to substitute for someone else or to avoid paying a fee. As highlighted in the cotton pickers survey (Figure 9) and further supported by data from public institutions and state-owned enterprises (Figure 10), the payment of fees emerges as a negative consequence of not participating in cotton picking. Results from the staff survey reveal that 13 per cent of staff who picked cotton indicated that they themselves would have had to pay a fee if they had chosen not to pick cotton, and among those who reported that their coworkers participated, 10.8 per cent said their co-workers would have also had to pay a fee to opt out. Additionally, 1.5 per cent of staff surveyed reported having paid a fee to avoid picking cotton this year, while 2.9 per cent stated that their co-workers had paid to avoid participation.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, the most recent CEACR observation: [Observation \(CEACR\) - adopted 2023, published 112nd ILC session \(2024\)](#).

**Figure 12. Percentage of respondents reporting various circumstances of paying a fee to avoid picking cotton**

**Evidence of the practice of having to pay a fee to avoid picking cotton from cotton pickers and staff surveys**

***Evidence from cotton pickers survey***

Picker reported picking cotton in place of someone else or to avoid paying a fee 14%

***Evidence from staff survey***

Staff member reported that coworkers had picked cotton and that the coworkers would have had to pay a fee to not pick cotton 11%

Staff member picked cotton and would have had to pay a fee to not pick cotton 13%

Staff member reported that coworkers paid a fee to not pick cotton this year 3%

Staff member paid a fee to not pick cotton this year 2%

The full extent and character of this practice remains unknown. However, its consistent detection across multiple sources, including cotton pickers and staff of public institutions, highlights the urgent need for action and concerted efforts for addressing it.

## ► 7. Conclusion and key takeaways

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The 2024–2025 Roadmap of Cooperation between the ILO and the Government remains a crucial framework for effectively preventing forced and child labour in the cotton harvest. In 2024, the ILO and the Government collaborated on several initiatives. Substantial efforts are still needed to fully achieve the objectives outlined in the Roadmap. The key conclusions and insights from this observance should guide ILO-Government cooperation efforts in 2025 and beyond.

### 7.1 Working conditions

- **Improved payment rates:** A major positive development in 2024 was the increase in piece-rate wages for cotton pickers. While only 12 per cent of workers earned more than one manat per kilogram in 2023, this figure rose to 71 per cent in 2024 following government interventions. However, 29 per cent of workers still earn below the mandated rate, highlighting room for further progress. An ILO study on “attractive wages and incomes” finds that a wage rate of 1.2 manat per kilogram would enable many workers to reach the minimum wage, but this remains insufficient for the lowest 25 per cent of households. To ensure a minimum living standard, wages would need to be 1,512 manat per month or 1.3 manat per kilogram.
- **Lack of formal contracts:** Despite wage improvements, 78.4 per cent of cotton pickers still lack written contracts, leaving them vulnerable to poor working conditions, unstable pay, and potential exploitation.
- **Protective equipment (PPE):** Only 40 per cent of workers receive basic PPE, leaving 60 per cent without adequate protection. This lack of safety gear contributes to health risks, with 8 per cent of workers reporting negative health effects such as joint pain (41 per cent), dizziness (33 per cent), and respiratory issues (10 per cent).
- **Water and food provision:** While 91 per cent of workers reported receiving sufficient drinking water or tea, 9 per cent still face shortages, exposing them to dehydration risks. The lack of adequate food provision is a greater concern, with 38 per cent of workers stating that farmers do not provide enough food. Addressing these gaps is crucial for workers well-being.
- **Working hours:** Cotton pickers work an average of 8.4 hours per day, but a quarter exceed 9 hours, often in high temperatures above 40°C. This increases risks of heat stress and dehydration. Mandating structured breaks during peak heat hours and improving compliance monitoring are essential for safeguarding workers' health.

**Key takeaways:** While wage increases are a positive step, many cotton pickers still require higher earnings to reach a minimum living standard. Provision of written contracts and stronger enforcement, improved access to protective equipment, adequate food and water provisions, and regulated working hours should be among key priorities moving forward.

### 7.2 Involvement of children

- **Children picking cotton:** Evidence from multiple sources—including farmers, cotton pickers, and public sector workers—confirmed the presence of children picking cotton during the 2024 season. ILO observers directly observed children picking cotton in several regions, indicating that this is not an isolated issue and requires targeted interventions. The root causes need to be further studied, as factors such as poverty, social norms, piece-rate wages, and lack of contracts may contribute to children's involvement. Moreover, as wages for cotton pickers increase due to the piece-rate payment system, the absence of proper monitoring mechanisms could further drive children's

participation. Deeper research is essential to assess these drivers and develop effective policy solutions to eliminate and prevent child labour in cotton picking.

**Key takeaways:** Child labour in cotton picking requires targeted interventions and deeper research to understand its root causes and develop effective policies for its prevention and elimination.

## 7.3 Forced mobilisation

- **Civil servants' involvement in cotton picking:** Multiple sources confirm civil servants' involvement in cotton picking: 20 per cent of farmers reported public employees working on their farms, 12 per cent of surveyed public employees participated, and 16 per cent of institutional heads confirmed staff involvement. Additionally, 5 per cent of public institution heads admitted to directly providing staff for cotton picking, and 16 per cent of public employees reported being recruited by their employer or a public authority.
- **Consequences of non-participation in cotton picking:** Coercion is a key indicator of forced mobilization, with 12 per cent of surveyed cotton pickers in 2024 reporting negative consequences for non-participation. Among those with other jobs, 13 per cent risked losing their main job, and 12 per cent could have lost salary or benefits. For public sector workers, 31 per cent faced potential repercussions, including paying a fee (13 per cent), losing respect (9 per cent), salary (8 per cent), their job (8 per cent), social benefits (7 per cent), other consequences (5 per cent), and threats of violence (3 per cent).
- **The practice of having to pay a fee to avoid picking cotton:** Among the pickers, 14 per cent reported either picking cotton to substitute for someone else or to avoid paying a fee. Additionally, results from the staff survey reveal that 13 per cent of staff who picked cotton indicated that they themselves would have had to pay a fee if they had chosen not to pick cotton, and among those who reported that their coworkers participated, 10.8 per cent said their coworkers would have also had to pay a fee to opt out. Additionally, 1.5 per cent of staff surveyed reported having paid a fee to avoid picking cotton this year, while 2.9 per cent stated that their coworkers had paid to avoid participation.

**Key takeaways:** The practice of paying a fee to avoid picking cotton was detected, with both individual workers and their colleagues reporting financial penalties for opting out. The observance findings reinforce the critical importance of the ILO-Government Roadmap's top priority for 2024–2025: the issuance of a presidential decree or instruction explicitly prohibiting specific recruitment practices such as any practice of compelling or forcibly mobilizing any person to pick cotton; the involvement of employees of enterprises or institutions in the collection of cotton during regular hours of work; and any practice requiring a person to pick cotton or hire pickers or pay for replacement pickers or otherwise finance the picking of cotton. They also highlight the ongoing need to identify and address the root causes of child labour, and to establish a fair wage that effectively incentivizes voluntary picking.

These findings highlight both the progress achieved and the ongoing challenges in improving labour conditions in cotton picking. The government has demonstrated its capacity to drive substantial improvements within a relatively short timeframe, with 71 per cent of the workforce now earning 1 manat per kilo, compared to only 12 per cent in 2023. Strengthening working conditions through an occupational safety and health (OSH) approach is crucial, as raising workers' awareness of hazards and risks can empower them to actively participate in ensuring their own safety. However, persistent risks related to forced

mobilization, financial penalties for non-participation, and child labour—especially in the absence of robust monitoring and enforcement—remain significant concerns that require sustained attention and action. Continued observance is essential to track progress, ensure accountability, and implement meaningful measures that improve the conditions of cotton pickers and their families.

The findings highlight the need for ongoing attention to various aspects of the Roadmap beyond the observance exercise. Key priorities include raising awareness about the responsibilities of authorities and employers, educating workers and the public about their rights, and enhancing avenues for lodging complaints. Strengthening enforcement and complaints mechanisms—ensuring accessibility and protection for complainants—remains essential. The findings on working conditions emphasize the importance of regulating contracts for cotton picking, improving protections for daily and casual employment, and implementing wage protection systems. In terms of oversight, establishing a centralized labour inspection system to monitor recruitment and working conditions is crucial. Additionally, regulating and reforming recruitment and employment intermediation should remain a key focus.

Looking ahead, structural reforms are needed to enhance productivity and sustainability in cotton production while promoting decent work opportunities in rural areas. These efforts should be integrated into broader long-term planning and strategies for rural employment.

This report does not directly examine issues related to farmers' working conditions. However, it is important to note that the recommendations of the International Labour Conference Committee on the Application of Standards (CAS) in 2021, 2023, and 2024 have consistently called for the abolition of the State Order for cotton due to concerns around forced mobilisation, because it imposes production targets at various levels of cotton production. The primary concern is that failure to meet these quotas can lead not only to income loss but also to the potential loss of land for cotton farming. Beyond these severe consequences, the requirement to prove compliance with production targets creates opportunities for mismanagement and corruption.

Additionally, alongside the involvement of social partners in cooperative activities, there is a pressing need to strengthen the foundations for social dialogue with employers and workers.

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