

Knowledge Paper



ECHOing Change: Promoting Decent Work Standards in the Seed Supply Chain

Introduction

On January 29, 2025, the ECHO Forum convened at T-Hub, Hyderabad, bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders from the seed industry, civil society, academia, and government bodies to deliberate on critical issues shaping the future of labour practices in India's seed sector. The forum, titled *ECHOing Change: Promoting Decent Work Standards in the Seed Supply Chain*, served as a collaborative platform to review progress, exchange insights, and identify actionable pathways to strengthen decent work standards in the sector, with a particular focus on child labour elimination, minimum wage compliance, gender equity, and safe working conditions.

Setting the Context

The forum commenced with a welcome address by UVL Ananda, President of ECHO and Head of Corporate Communications & Public Affairs at East-West Seed India, who underlined the importance of moving beyond identifying challenges to implementing practical solutions. She emphasised the need for collective industry action to ensure that fair labour practices become the norm across the seed supply chain, highlighting the growing expectations from global markets for responsible sourcing and ethical standards.

ECHO's Five-Year Journey

Dr. Davuluri Venkateswarlu, General Secretary of ECHO, provided an overview of the organisation's evolution, tracing its roots from the early 2000s when it began as the Child Labour Elimination Group (CLEG) and later as the Child Care Program (CCP) focused on addressing child labour in hybrid cotton seed production. He described the formalisation of ECHO in 2019 as a multi-stakeholder platform aimed at fostering systemic change in the seed sector. Key milestones shared included the establishment of field structures and regional committees, the expansion of focus to minimum wage compliance in corn and vegetable seed production, the publication of position papers, and the development of collaborative tools and resources for industry stakeholders. Dr. Davuluri acknowledged that while progress has been made, challenges persist—particularly the declining commitment from some companies and the need for stronger field-level implementation aligned with global labour standards.



Plenary Discussion: The Role of Business in Promoting Decent Work Standards

The plenary discussion, moderated by UVL Ananda, brought together prominent voices from across the seed sector and academia. Speakers emphasised the critical need for the seed industry to transition from informal labour practices to more structured, transparent systems that align with international standards such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the ILO guidelines. They discussed the role of digital tools like blockchain and traceability systems in improving accountability and highlighted the increasing demand from global markets, particularly in Europe and the United States, for ethical sourcing. The plenary also addressed the persistent challenges of child labour elimination post-COVID and the need for concerted efforts across the industry to ensure safe, equitable working conditions for women workers.



Panel Discussion: Decent Wages in the Seed Supply Chain – The Way Forward

A focused panel discussion on minimum wage compliance was moderated by Subhadra Gupta. The discussion examined the challenges in implementing minimum wage standards, including informal wage structures, limited awareness among growers, inconsistent enforcement, and the need for stronger internal compliance mechanisms within seed companies.

Panelists highlighted the importance of integrating wage clauses into grower agreements, adopting digital wage tracking systems for transparency, and ensuring regular monitoring and independent audits. The role of civil society organisations in facilitating collaboration between farmers, companies, and policymakers was emphasised as critical for bridging gaps and building trust.

Ranjit Prakash of the ILO spoke about the importance of establishing independent wage monitoring mechanisms and fostering tripartite partnerships between businesses, government, and labour organisations. Dr. Suresh Motwani shared Solidaridad's experience in sustainable agriculture and wage monitoring, while Vikram M.N. reflected on BASF's learnings from the WISH project, emphasising the need for consistent audits and accountability. Dr. Davuluri stressed the urgency of stronger policy interventions and greater industry ownership in addressing wage disparities.

Collaborative Group Discussions

Following the panel discussions, participants engaged in group discussions focused on identifying practical solutions to key challenges in the sector. Groups deliberated on strategies to standardise wage policies, foster community awareness through engagement and digital platforms, improve field-level monitoring through digital record-keeping and age verification systems, and integrate corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives to complement decent work efforts. The discussions reflected a shared recognition that building a responsible and resilient seed sector requires alignment of policy, capacity building, and technology adoption.

Conclusion and Outcomes

The forum concluded with a strong consensus on the need for sustained collaboration, industry-wide commitment, and actionable follow-through. ECHO's role as a facilitator of dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and policy alignment was reaffirmed, and the following key outcomes were identified as immediate priorities for the sector:

- Strengthening minimum wage compliance by integrating clear clauses in grower agreements and adopting digital wage tracking systems to enhance transparency and accountability.
- Expanding ECHO's membership to include a wider range of seed companies, civil society organisations, and stakeholders committed to ethical labour practices.
- Promoting gender equity and ensuring safe working conditions for women in seed production.
- Building capacity at the field level through regular training and engagement with farmers, contractors, and labourers.



- Leveraging digital tools such as traceability systems and digital payments to improve transparency in wage practices and reduce informal transactions.
- Publishing knowledge resources, including best practices compendiums, position papers, and field-level insights to guide industry learning and compliance efforts.
- Aligning Indian seed industry practices with global frameworks such as the ILO guidelines and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to ensure sustained access to international markets.

The forum reinforced a clear message: ensuring decent work standards is not only a matter of compliance but a strategic imperative for the long-term resilience and credibility of India's seed industry. ECHO's commitment to driving collaborative action remains strong, and the forum set the stage for continued engagement and tangible progress across the sector.

Speakers and Participants

The forum featured a distinguished group of speakers and panelists, representing leadership from across the seed industry, civil society, and academia:

- **UVL Ananda**, President, ECHO; Head of Corporate Communications & Public Affairs, East-West Seed India
- **Dr. Davuluri Venkateswarlu**, General Secretary, ECHO
- **Professor E. Haribabu**, Former Pro Vice Chancellor, University of Hyderabad
- **Dr. Ram Kaundinya**, Advisor, Federation of Seed Industry of India (FSII)
- **Dr. Venkatram Vasantavada**, Managing Director, Seedworks International Pvt. Ltd.
- **Rajendra Velagala**, Managing Director, BASF | Nunhems
- **Dr. Rupendra Singh**, Director, Bayer Bioscience Pvt. Ltd.
- **Dr. Suresh Motwani**, Solidaridad
- **Ranjit Prakash**, National Coordinator, International Labour Organization (ILO)
- **Vikram M.N.**, BASF | Nunhems

About ECHO

Enabling Child and Human Rights with Seed Organizations (ECHO) represents a pioneering collaboration between the seed industry and non-governmental organizations, united in their mission to foster ethical practices within the hybrid seed industry. Established in December 2019, ECHO has built upon the foundational work of earlier initiatives such as the Child Labor Elimination Group (CLEG) and the Child Care Program (CCP) forum, which began around 2003. These initiatives laid the groundwork for what has now become the largest multi-stakeholder forum dedicated to promoting child rights and decent workplace standards within the seed industry as a coalition of national and multinational seed companies, NGOs, and research institutes.

ECHO brings together diverse stakeholders, including public and private seed companies, voluntary organizations, and professional associations. They collaboratively protect human rights and ensure decent work conditions throughout the seed production supply chain. Through the collective efforts of its members, ECHO has become a beacon of ethical commitment and action, addressing pressing human rights issues and setting new standards for social responsibility in the agricultural sector.



ECHO EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERS:



Ms. AnandaUVL
East-West Seeds
- ECHO President



Ms. Subhadra Gupta
Syngenta
- ECHO Vice President



Dr. Davuluri Venkateswarlu
Glocal Research
- ECHO General Secretary



Mr. Satish S Hegde
Advanta UPL
- ECHO Joint Secretary



Ms. Mouchumee
HMClause
- ECHO Joint Secretary



Mr. Saikat De
BASF | Nunhems
- ECHO Treasurer



Mr. Mathew KS
Bayer
- ECHO Member



Mr. Raja Vadlamani
Seed Works
- ECHO Member



Mr. M. Radha Madhav
Individual - ECHO Member



Mr. Pramod Kulkarni
Individual - ECHO Member





Let's collaborate to shape strategies and a
road map towards decent work standards