New report: Food companies fail to address water related human rights risks in Peru’s Ica valley

Large-scale production of fruits and vegetables has created an acute water scarcity in Peru’s Ica valley, with detrimental impacts for local communities. Still, despite an awareness of existing challenges, companies buying such products from the region have failed to identify and act on water-related human rights risks, a new report from Swedwatch and Diakonia shows.

Water scarcity is a global threat that already affects large parts of the world’s population. In recent decades, the desert area of Ica in southern Peru has seen a dramatic decline in access to water as the production of food items such as asparagus and avocado has increased. While the agriculture sector, dominated by the production of export crops, accounts for up to 90 per cent of yearly groundwater extraction, residents in some areas only have access to water for a few hours every week.

Access to water is a human right, and lack of water is associated with several human rights risks. In the report To the last drop - Water and human rights impacts of the agro export industry in Ica, Peru: the responsibility of buyers from Swedwatch and Diakonia, findings show that export agriculture in Ica has many severe implications for its local communities. Lack of water and poor water quality cause health problems, increased competition over water has led to violent conflicts and small-scale farmers have been forced to leave their lands due to drying wells and lack of irrigation.

"The water scarcity in the Ica valley is acute and affects the health and livelihoods of local residents. As there is a direct connection to the large-scale production of fruits and vegetables, buying companies have a clear responsibility and opportunity to act", says Malena Wåhlin, author of the report at Swedwatch.

The report also finds that measures taken by local authorities to halt the overexploitation of groundwater have not been effective, and that agro export companies have acted in breach of existing water regulations. However, despite knowledge of the lack of water in Ica, Swedish food companies have failed to recognize and address human rights risks and impacts, and to follow up on their suppliers’ compliance with human rights requirements.

Furthermore, findings reveal other forms of human rights risks associated with the large-scale production of fruits and vegetables. These include labour rights violations at export farms where, according to interviewees, unfair dismissals are common and where the few existing labour unions report harassment against union members and their families.

“The Swedish companies should strengthen their human rights risk assessments in their supply chains, in particular when it comes to impacts on access to water. This should be done in close consultation with local communities as well as organisations and human rights defenders actively working in the area”, says Diakonia Secretary General Georg Andrén. “The responsibility of the companies is connected to the leverage they have. Collaborative action might be needed with business peers to increase their possibilities to create positive change.”

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The report To the last drop was conducted in cooperation with the Peruvian organization CODEHICA.