INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL MONITORING OF SYNGENTA’S SEED SUPPLY CHAIN IN THAILAND

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From August 2013 to February 2014, during periods of peak seed production activity, the FLA conducted three unannounced independent external monitoring (IEM) visits to assess working conditions at Syngenta’s seed supplier farms in Thailand. The assessments were conducted in the Mae Sot, Pobra, and Suphanburi provinces where Syngenta is sourcing corn seeds. The detailed reports can be found at http://www.fairlabor.org/affiliate/syngenta

The team of external assessors visited 36 farms and interviewed 74 workers. In Thailand, corn-growing farms are small family-run farms with few hired laborers. Growers from nearby villages help each other during peak activities. A few casual workers are hired for corn detasseling and other harvesting activities. In production regions bordering Myanmar, the labor force often involves Burmese migrant workers.

Independent External Monitoring Key Findings

1. **Code Awareness and Grievance System** – In the three visited provinces, Syngenta’s efforts to communicate the company code of conduct were visible at the farm level. Training has also been provided to field supervisors, seed organizers, and growers, focusing mainly on child labor and health and safety issues. Growers were not aware of other code elements, code awareness did not reach the workers’ level, and no effort had been made to translate the code of conduct into Burmese or communicate the code of conduct to workers who cannot read. While a grievance channel has been developed by Syngenta, not all workers know that it exists, understand, how it functions, or understand that they can use it without fear of retaliation.
2. **Child Labor** – A few child workers were identified during the IEM visits, as well as young children accompanying their parents during harvesting. Growers primarily judged whether a worker was of hiring age based on appearance, with no age verification process. Child labor was mainly identified among the Burmese migrant labor groups. Burmese workers usually do not carry legal identification documents and Thai schools do not accept children without ID documents. There was no system in place for the removal and rehabilitation of child workers.

3. **Health and Safety** – Despite Syngenta’s efforts to gradually train growers on good health and safety practices, assessors found a number of issues. The health and safety policy developed by Syngenta does not clearly identify procedures to be followed on contracted farms. Posters describing basic safety rules were identified on some farms but Burmese workers and workers who cannot read do not understand them. Growers and workers were not fully aware of the risks involved with spraying and management of chemicals or other potential hazards on the farms. Some personal protective equipment was found onsite, but in most cases the equipment was inappropriate, of poor quality, or not consistently used by the workers. No first aid kits and no medical emergency plan were available for workers.

4. **Compensation** – A few compensation related issues were identified on the visited farms. There are no minimum wage regulations that apply to the agriculture sector in Thailand. Agricultural work is considered informal and pay rates are negotiated between workers and growers. However, assessors found that rates paid to the workers were much below both the minimum wage in the manufacturing industry and the prevailing wage in the farm sector in the central provinces of Thailand. There are no wage records maintained by the growers and no efforts made to assist growers in implementing such a system.

**Corrective Action Plans**

In response to FLA’s monitoring visits, Syngenta developed and submitted corrective action plans that are included in the FLA monitoring reports. The highlights of these plans include:

1. **Code Awareness and Grievance System** – Syngenta committed to take actions to increase growers’ and workers’ awareness of workplace standards. Field supervisors and growers will be further trained on all code elements in a phased manner. Syngenta will organize a workers’ meeting in each village at the beginning of the season to educate the workers on the company code; Syngenta will also distribute informational materials to be posted at the farm level in the local languages spoken by the workers. The grievance procedures will be refined and better communicated to the workers through training and notice boards. A non-retaliation policy will also be developed and attached to it. Suggestion boxes will be placed at grower leader’s houses in key locations.

2. **Child Labor** – Syngenta developed a detailed child labor policy and procedures that will be implemented through focus training, close monitoring, root cause analysis, and review of repeated non-compliances. Syngenta will identify possible means of verifying the workers’ ages and will provide growers with a list of possible documents
to look at and to be maintained on the farms. Syngenta will conduct an assessment among migrant workers to identify the factors preventing their children from accessing education. Based on the assessment results, solutions will be discussed with the migrant workers and other local stakeholders to address the issue.

3. **Health and Safety** – Syngenta will develop health and safety policies and procedures to be followed at farms and will include it in the growers and workers’ training plan. Training will be provided to all growers and some selected workers, including Burmese migrant workers, in a phased manner. It will especially focus on safe chemical usage, personal protective equipment (PPE) usage and first aid. Workers involved in chemical handling will be taken to medical centers for annual health check-ups. Syngenta will provide some PPE to the growers and grower leaders will be encouraged to support growers in supplying PPE and first aid material to their workers. Syngenta will also provide education for grower leaders on how to keep records of accidents and occupational health issues, and how to report them to the company for further analysis. The notice board on farms will display all necessary emergency phone numbers.

4. **Compensation** – Since Thailand does not have any legal laws governing minimum wages in the agriculture sector, Syngenta will tackle this issue in a phased manner. First, Syngenta will conduct a study with the support of an external agency to assess the present wage situation of workers in this sector. The study will assess whether the current wages paid are meeting workers’ basic needs and providing discretionary income. Based on the study results, Syngenta and its production team will establish a benchmark wage for workers hired at Syngenta-contracted seed farms. Syngenta will also make efforts to educate and assist the growers in maintaining wage records on the farms.