
Oxfam's Behind the Barcodes Campaign

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In June 2018 Oxfam International launched a new global campaign to 'end human suffering in supermarket supply chains'. Part of this campaign involves producing an annual ranking of major food retailers like Tesco and Walmart against four key social benchmarks, and calling on consumers to contact them using social media to ask them to improve their performance. The first annual update was published in July 2019.

This article explains what the campaign is, explores Oxfam Great Britain's (GB's) role in it, and looks at what it might be able to do to increase its impact. It also looks at the campaign against the wider backdrop of large NGOs becoming attracted to the use of ranking corporates as a way of driving social progress...or at least as a way of preventing further social decline.

What is Oxfam?

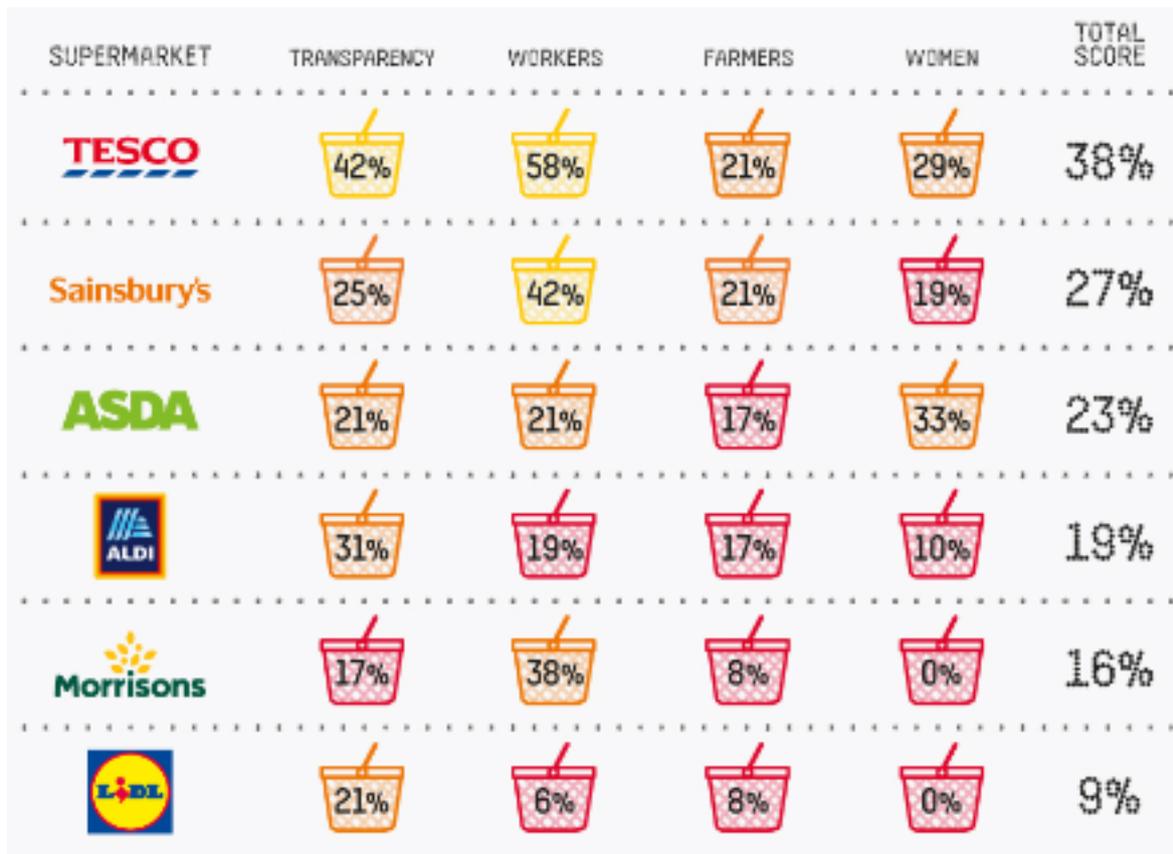
Oxfam is a complicated organisation. According to its US website, in 2017-2018 it worked with 3,663 partner organizations in more than 90 countries, spending \$1.27 billion and reaching more than 22.2 million people in its long-term development and humanitarian assistance programmes (Oxfam America, 2018). In the UK alone in 2019, it was the 12th biggest charity by revenue, pulling in over £427 million in revenue (Charity Commission, 2019). Although primarily concerned with delivering humanitarian programmes in the global South, Oxfam has long recognised the importance of addressing the root (political) causes of poverty and has seen the importance of campaigning on these issues as core to its mission. Well known campaigns it has been involved in include the 2005 global coalition Make Poverty History and Oxfam's annual focus on global inequality which draws attention to the 80 billionaires who own as much as the poorest 3.5 billion people (Oxfam, 2018). In the UK, Oxfam was also involved in establishing the Fairtrade coffee brand Cafédirect in 1991, and the Fairtrade Foundation the following year.

What is the 'Behind the Barcodes' campaign about?

The table below shows the campaign's 2019 scorecard for six UK food retailers. They are each ranked against four issues:

1. Transparency/Accountability (including disclosure of suppliers and human rights policies);
2. Workers (including freedom of association and living wages);
3. Farmers (including support for small farmers and living incomes);
4. Women (including tracking impacts on women and advocacy around women's rights).

Worthy of note, at this early stage, is the fact that even the best scoring company (Tesco) only gets a 38% score.



The scorecard was just one element of a much larger piece of research that Oxfam International published in June 2018 called Ripe for Change: Ending human suffering in supermarket supply chains. It provided:

- a detailed economic analysis of the poverty at the far end of key supermarket supply chains;
- rankings of 16 global supermarkets operating in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands;
- and detailed recommendations for actions for Governments, Supermarkets, Investors and Citizens.

In the words of Winnie Byanyima, Oxfam International’s Executive Director, the report was designed “to expose the economic exploitation faced by millions of small-scale farmers and workers in food supply chains, and to mobilize the power of people around the world to help end it.”

A key element of ‘mobilising the power of people’ for Oxfam GB has been to set up a special consumer-facing website for the campaign called oxfamapps.org/behindthebarcodes/. The screen-grab below shows the type of one-click social media actions that it is asking consumers to take. This is just the action that appears when you click on Asda. Others are generated for the other companies.

@Asda, you've made progress to ensure human rights are respected in your supply chains, and you're still third on @OxfamGB's supermarket scorecard. But you still need to do more to improve workers and farmers' rights. #BehindTheBarcodes

 TAP TO TWEET

 SHARE ON FACEBOOK

 EMAIL ASDA

At Ethical Consumer, along with most other seasoned corporate campaigners like Oxfam, we have discovered that twitter and Facebook, for all their faults in other respects, are great ways of engaging companies in issues that they might want to otherwise avoid. This is because everyone else can see when they are not replying to a post asking them specific questions about ethical issues. No reply at all is therefore very unusual.

The impact of the campaign

	2018	2019
	23%	38% ↑15%
	18%	27% ↑9%
	17%	23% ↑6%
	1%	19% ↑18%
	5%	16% ↑11%
	5%	9% ↑4%

The table above shows the first ranking, which appeared in the June 2018 ‘Ripe for Change’ report, and the re-ranking that occurred in June 2019. It shows that every supermarket has improved in just 12 months, and in the cases of Tesco and Aldi, quite significantly.

This kind of annual revisiting of rankings is great for campaigners because the progress is visible for all to see. It also shows that the method—publishing a ranking and then getting supporters to use social media to encourage companies to address it—appears to be effective. The campaign has publicly stated that it is will produce this annual ranking for a few years to come. So it will be interesting to see whether these rates of improvement can be maintained.

One of the unique elements of this ranking is its use of ‘Women’ as a ranking criteria, and I am not aware of its use as a stand-alone benchmarking element in the supermarket sector before. The detailed requirements of this ranking will therefore be focussing the minds of supermarkets on a range of issues that they had perhaps not considered. The impact in this area is likely therefore to be larger.

Disappointingly there doesn't seem to be an annual update on the progress (or lack of it) made in the last 12 months for the other recommendations of the broader political 'Ripe for Change' campaign. Has the June 2018 report been used in arguments to increase living wages in any Southern economies, for example? Or have any institutional investors used it to engage with retailers? Although you might ask what this has to do with consumers, I think for a campaign as large and complex as this, it can be useful for everyone involved to see how all the other elements are doing. This would allow everyone to see the bigger picture on an ongoing basis, and give a sense of being involved in something larger. It would not be necessary to formally report annually on every recommendation to produce something useful in this space.

The campaign in context

Ranking consumer brands as a way of driving change is increasingly attracting the attention of larger campaigning organisations with significant resources and reach. The demonstrable effectiveness of this approach is likely driving the trend. Perhaps the classic use of this approach was Greenpeace's Greener Electronics ranking which ran for six years from 2006 to 2012.¹ It updated its rankings quarterly and refined the methodology—adding new criteria and companies—as the project progressed. It was highly successful at driving changes in policy and practice at the companies involved.

Oxfam itself has a track record of using this approach with its confusingly-similarly-named 'Behind the Brands' campaign which ran from 2013 to 2016. It looked at major food multinationals like Unilever, Nestlé and Pepsi and ranked them against seven issues: Land; Women; Farmers; Workers; Climate; Transparency; and Water. This was also able to demonstrate impact and change, and was likely to have been a key influence in the approach of this new campaign.

In 2017 one of the most complex alliances of organisations yet seen in this field, the Global Benchmarking Alliance, launched a new league table of 98 global companies ranked against internationally-recognised human rights standards. At launch, it involved 83 investment companies, support from governments in the Netherlands, UK and Switzerland, and from NGOs including Oxfam and Share Action.

This brings us to the issue of whether consumers, or indeed companies, are likely to be confused by a proliferation of contradictory rankings. Of course, rankings can only ever be based on specific criteria and methodologies and differences between these will produce different results

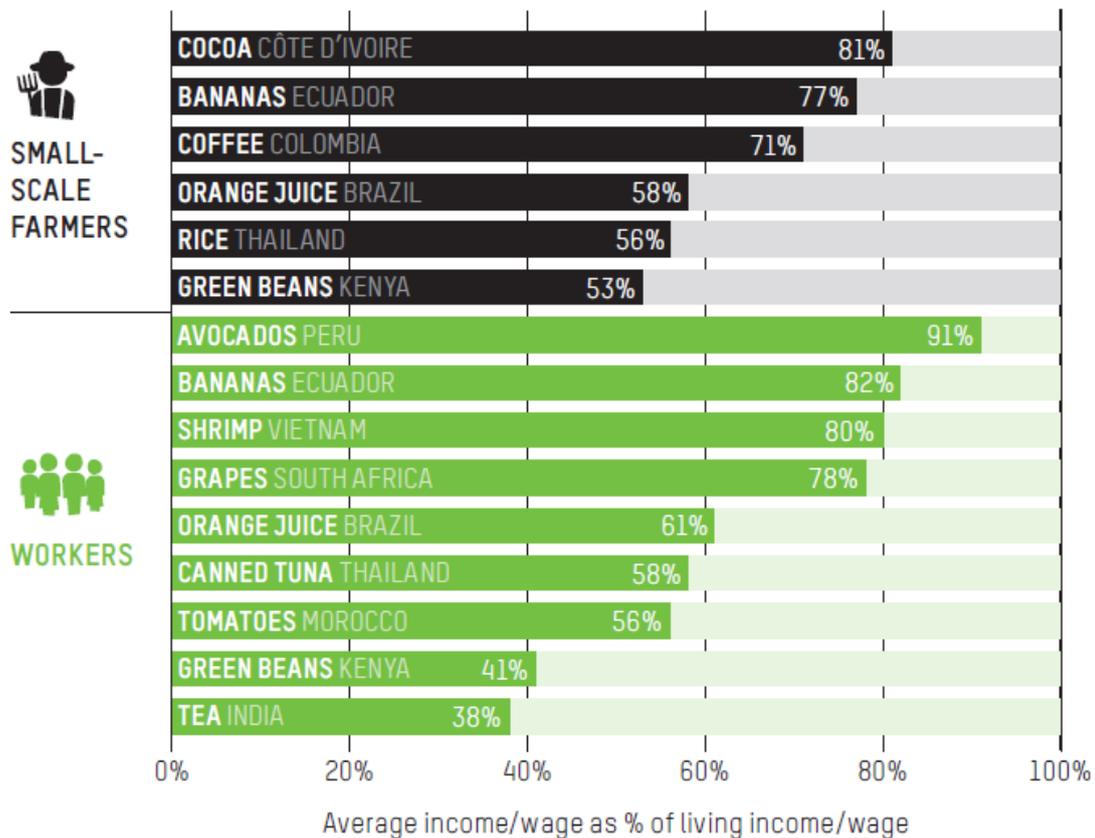
For example, in Ethical Consumer's own 2019 ethical rankings of supermarkets in 2019, Aldi was placed above Tesco and Asda. At other times, rankings come to similar conclusions and are less likely to lead to confusion. For example, both the Global Benchmarking Alliance and Ethical Consumer currently agree with Oxfam that Tesco is performing better on ethics than Asda/Walmart. As I write in my forthcoming book 'Buying Ethically' (Harrison, 2019), the more holistic a ranking can be (covering lots of issues), the less likely it is to diverge from other rankings. However, it is also important to recognise, as I argue in the book, the tension between a desire to produce one big simple answer and the practical need to urgently address some very specific problems.

1 - It was later picked up by Greenpeace USA (in 2017) and continued by them.

What more could be done?

There are three main areas where it could be worth exploring what more could be done with the campaign: around consumer engagement; in developing the supermarket rankings; and in a more radical political analysis.

The more detailed economic analysis from the original 2018 report contained some unique research around the price paid and share of rewards received for workers for some key food items like avocados, tea and grapes (see e.g. graph below on average worker income against living wage). So, firstly, in terms of consumer engagement, it is possible that building a consumer awareness campaign around just one of these items (such as rice or avocados) would help illustrate the brokenness of the current model. Telling a story through just one product, rather than through abstract concepts, can reach a wide range of consumers where they already are. Price to the consumer is a key issue in this area and this could be a vehicle for demonstrating how significant problems can be fixed with minimal financial impact on shopping bills.



It was also slightly disappointing that buying Fairtrade was not amongst the ‘asks’ of the campaign for consumers to do. It would not be too complicated to add this to the ‘take action’ elements of the websites and documents. It is not news that the Fairtrade model is currently struggling to deliver on some of its earlier promise, nor is it the whole solution to the wider food-system problems we face. But with even Oxfam—one of the movement’s original founders—missing this opportunity to make this ask of citizens, it does feel a bit like Oxfam turning its back on this particular approach to change.

Regarding the second area where the campaign could do more—developing the supermarket rankings—the strongest arguments are for exploring the idea of extending the ranking to cover more companies. Ethical Consumer’s top three ethical scoring major food retailers—the Co-op, M&S and Waitrose—are not ranked in the UK version of this campaign. Presumably this is because they are smaller and the line needs to be drawn somewhere. However, adding them would show the other retailers how much more could be done and give consumers a wider context that reflects their real choices. It would also, in the case of the Co-op and Waitrose particularly, draw more attention to the element of the campaign that wants supermarkets to look at ‘their core business models’. The 2018 report itself is not afraid of confronting the problem of shareholder-primacy, and it would be good for an organisation of the resources and reach of Oxfam to be taking this discourse into consumer markets.

The other way to develop rankings is to expand the ranking criteria, as discussed under the Greenpeace Electronics example above. In terms of building coherent pressure over time around a set of related issues, there is an argument for ‘Behind the Barcodes’ to look at adding some more criteria over time from the ‘Behind the Brands’ experience. The Land (rights) ranking used in the earlier campaign was one we liked particularly at Ethical Consumer, because it was new and because it began to draw criteria around the urgent issue of land grabbing in Africa and elsewhere.

Finally, it should also be possible to develop the political analysis in the original June 2018 document as the campaign progresses. I was struck by Ethical Consumer’s own recent analysis of supermarkets in April 2019, which strongly reflected a growing sense of exasperation amongst food campaigners with the brokenness of our global industrialised food system on so many levels. One result of this is growing support for ideas of food sovereignty—or of redesigning the whole food system around the idea of the right to food for everyone, rather than around the idea of production for markets. Even though these ideas can be difficult for companies to grasp, and engaging with companies is a key element of this campaign, there is nothing like showing them what might be coming down the line—in terms of a reckoning for capitalism itself—unless much more radical change is forthcoming in their own supply chains, and soon.

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For Citation

Harrison, R. (2019) Oxfam's Behind the Barcodes Campaign. *Journal of Consumer Ethics*.

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