

# Priority issues for African agriculture

*To tackle poverty worldwide, conditions in agriculture must be improved. But in turn, such improvements depend on progress in developing decent work in that particular sector. African data provide strong evidence of the link between decent work and sustainable development.*

---

**Mohammed Mwamadzingo\***

Regional specialist on workers' education  
ILO Office in Harare

---

Agriculture is the most important economic sector in Africa, employing a majority of the working population. Its contribution to the total value of production, as measured by gross domestic product (GDP), ranges from around 20 per cent (the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya and South Africa) to over 90 per cent (Burkina Faso, Burundi, Niger and Rwanda). Hence, economic development and the welfare of the majority of African people are heavily dependent on the performance of the agricultural sector.

The current state of agriculture in Africa gives cause for serious concern. The most disturbing aspect is the steady decline in food production per capita over the past two decades. Generally, the growth in food production of about 1.3 per cent per year for sub-Saharan Africa has not been sufficient to keep pace with population growth of over 2.5 per cent for the region. As a result, it is estimated that food consumption per person has been falling. Estimates from UN agencies indicate that nearly 30 million Africans (out of a total of 650 million) face the threat of famine. The number at risk in the Horn of Africa is about 15 million, while over 14 million

in southern Africa and hundreds of thousands in the Sahel region of West Africa are already affected.

Of the 18 African countries facing food emergencies in 2001, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) found that eight were experiencing civil strife and three were suffering the after-effects of conflict, such as internally displaced people and returning refugees. The other seven had been affected by drought, cyclones or food deficits that could not be made up by imports because of a lack of funds. In many affected countries, corruption or mismanagement have been part and parcel of the conflict situation, or have developed from bad governance, turning droughts and food shortages into famine. The HIV/AIDS pandemic has also taken its toll, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. A 2002 report by the FAO estimates that in the 25 most affected countries in Africa, 7 million agricultural workers have died from AIDS since 1985, while 16 million more deaths are likely in the next two decades.

To make up for food shortages, several governments have resorted to imports on a large scale, while the production of cash crops for export has either stagnated or declined. Africa's share of world trade in many major export commodities has fallen substantially over the last two decades.

Yet there is immense potential for restructuring the distribution, use and regulation of land and natural resources towards effective poverty reduction and

\* This article is a summary of the contribution made by the author to the International Workers' Symposium on Decent Work in Agriculture which took place on 15-18 September 2003 in Geneva. The full text is available on the ILO website at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/dialogue/actrav/new/agsymp03/afriodoc.pdf>

development. To realize this potential, agriculture must be seen to be the key sector supporting Africa's commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), under which poverty is to be halved by 2015. And "decent work" will be central to achieving that objective.

Decent work, according to the ILO formula, means work based on fundamental rights, access to jobs and to living wages, social protection and ongoing social dialogue. According to this definition, there is of course a clear link between decent work and sustainable (that is to say economically sound, ecologically balanced and socially fair) development. Does agriculture in Africa meet those criteria?

## Workers' rights

Let us first look at the situation of workers' rights. By November 2003, of the 99 countries that had signed up to the eight core Conventions of the ILO, 34 were from Africa. Two years before, there had been just 19. The pace of ratification for Conventions of direct relevance to agricultural workers has been much slower, with only 18 African countries having ratified the Minimum Wage Fixing Machinery (Agriculture) Convention, 1951 (No. 99) (out of a total of 53 ratifications worldwide), while only one African country (Côte d'Ivoire) is among the 12 that have ratified the Plantations Convention, 1958 (No. 110). However, labour observers are according less importance to a country's ratification of Conventions than to the actual implementation of the rights enshrined in them. Indeed, many governments are barely compliant with the Conventions they have ratified. According to reports compiled by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), abuses of workers' rights have been on the increase in Africa, especially in the agricultural sector.

For instance, the cut flower industry in Kenya has constantly been accused of human rights abuses. Reports allege that women workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in the form of sexual

harassment, no maternity leave, overcrowded housing and low pay.

Horticulture has become one of Kenya's main foreign exchange earners, second only to tea. In 2001, it exported 95,200 tons of produce worth US\$3 billion. The country is now the world's second-largest exporter of cut flowers.

Despite a rather hostile environment, the Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers' Union (KPAWU) has continued efforts to organize workers in the horticulture sector.

In South Africa, up to the democratic elections of 1994 which marked the end of apartheid, farm workers were excluded from labour legislation. Efforts to change and improve the often shocking conditions of farm and rural workers led to the adoption, in September 1995, of a new Labour Relations Act. Although this represented a major leap forward for workers, it still contained some serious restrictions on the rights of farm workers, and employers were able to exploit those loopholes in order to escape their obligations, in particular towards sub-contracted or contracted employees. In 2002, amendments to the Labour Relations Act further improved coverage for all rural workers. Child labour has remained a major problem in agriculture, however. Estimates from 2002 showed that 59 per cent of children who were working for pay, profit or family gain were working in the rural sector.

In Zimbabwe, agriculture accounts for 26 per cent of the total paid labour force. Yet the Fast-Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) introduced in 2000 by President Mugabe is alleged to have affected at least 150,000 farmworkers' families (nearly half of the total workforce on Zimbabwe's commercial farms) with only 10 per cent of them having been offered resettlement. To date, the plight of the 300,000 farm workers and their 1.5 million dependants is not clear. They have been the hardest hit by Zimbabwe's FTLRP (see article by Marni Pigott and Luc Demaret, p. 1). Since 2000, five farm workers and five farm owners have lost their lives as an indirect result of the FTLRP, and job losses have affected the livelihoods of many.

## A major employer, but a bad boss

Agriculture is the largest employer in the formal economy of many countries in Africa. The structure of employment and wages in the sector, and changes to that structure, are therefore important factors for incomes and poverty levels across the continent.

Wages in agriculture are always much lower than in other sectors of African economies. In many countries, agricultural pay is less than half of the wages paid in manufacturing, mining or construction. So most African countries are unlikely to emerge from the quagmire of poverty unless conditions in agriculture are drastically improved.

In Kenya, for instance, the agricultural sector provides 251,000 job opportunities for Kenyans, approximately 15 per cent of the total waged employment. But the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC), a respected non-governmental organization, has constantly accused farmers of paying their workers a pittance (scarcely US\$25 a month in some cases).

In Zimbabwe, the actual size of the farm-worker population is a subject of controversy. Surveys carried out by NGOs contrast with official estimates provided by the Central Statistical Office (CSO). A reliable survey carried out in 1997 put the total number of agricultural workers at 451,456. And in 1999, statistics revealed that of all employed female workers, 70 per cent were in the agricultural sector. Regardless of gender, only a small percentage of farm workers have incomes above the minimum wage of ZW\$1,932 (2001 figure). In fact, farm workers are amongst the lowest-paid in Zimbabwe and their working conditions have increasingly been affected by globalization and structural adjustment programmes. When prices fall on the global market, farmers pass on the effects to farm workers in the form of reduced wages and of job retrenchments.

In South Africa, the agricultural sector (which includes forestry) employed around 880,000 workers in September 2000. Most workers were permanent (60 per cent) with the remainder comprising

fixed period contract, casual, seasonal or temporary workers. Based on the information available, there appears to have been a significant drop in permanent employment and an even more dramatic drop in other types of employment between 1993 and 2000. The recent attempt by Government to introduce a minimum wage within the agricultural sector should be stressed in the light of the meagre incomes (as little as R350) that some farm workers have been receiving. The proposed minimum wage of about R650 for agricultural workers may, however, still be too little in the light of South Africa's high inflation rate.

## Social security – only for the few

An overview of social security in Africa indicates that most national schemes cover employees in the formal sector only. Up to 90 per cent of the active population in most developing countries is thus excluded from social security schemes. In sub-Saharan African countries, the poor coverage of social security (approximately 10 per cent of the population), is mainly due to the dominance of rural, informal and self-employment sectors.

In Kenya's horticulture, the Kenya Flower Council (KFC) has worked with the Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers' Union, the Kenya Human Rights Commission, the Central Organization of Trade Unions (COTU) and others to draw up high standards. The agreed standards include wages above the Government minimum; a six-day working week of 46 hours and overtime rates paid for additional hours; 21 days' paid holiday a year; two months' paid maternity leave and paid sick leave after one month's service; employers will provide reasonable housing for employees, or pay rent in addition to wages. Growers have 12 months after joining the KFC to achieve these standards. Any subsequent failure to comply with this code of practice results in the suspension of membership and of the entitlement to use KFC branding. The KFC is at great pains to ensure that its members meet the agreed criteria.

In Zimbabwe, the Government still regards the health and education of farm workers as the responsibility of their employers. The employers in turn keep the social costs of production to the minimum in order to maximize their profits. Employers therefore regard housing, health care and social amenities as financial burdens. Generally, workers receive no protection from the State against the practices of unscrupulous employers, particularly in the event of their retirement. Numerous traditional problems documented by many reports and literature include infant mortality, malnutrition, illiteracy and low educational standards, occupational morbidity, and poor access to sanitation (ventilation, toilets and piped water) and to health facilities. The overall living conditions of farm workers rank among the lowest of all social groups in Zimbabwe. Their situation has been made even more precarious by the land occupations, massive land transfers and the spread of HIV/AIDS during the last decade.

In South Africa farm workers, who had previously been excluded from the definition of employees under the apartheid legislation, are now fully recognized as such and enjoy full protection of the law and collective bargaining rights. However, despite Government efforts to improve living standards and working conditions for farm workers, implementation continues to be a problem. The reality is that farm workers are still not enjoying the full benefit of post-apartheid regulations. Of all the country's formally employed, agricultural workers earn the lowest wages. The prevalence of child labour is a further cause for concern, as is the gap between female and male workers both in pay and in social security provisions such as unemployment benefits, medical services and pension or provident funds.

### Social dialogue emerging

For years, social dialogue in Africa was mere window-dressing, as one-party governments pretended to bargain with and consult organizations that were under

their control. The democratization process launched in most African countries since the early 1990s has, fortunately, transformed the scene.

Most African leaders now appear to be committed to genuine dialogue and to putting resources into addressing the social issues affecting the continent. The recent encouraging trend towards involving civil society, including trade unions – albeit on an ad hoc basis – in the search for solutions to the continent's problems is seen as one such positive development. The decrease in the number of countries plagued by political instability, and the increase in those that are beginning to improve governance, may actually be linked to such progress.

Social dialogue also seems to be making its way on to the regional agenda. The creation of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) as an integral part of the African Union, aimed at enhancing economic development and good governance, may provide a further avenue for positive change.

However, it must be stressed that Africa is far from being at peace with herself. Recent events in various parts of Africa are a vivid reminder of this. The predominance of agricultural workers in Africa means that they will always be among those worst hit by the lack of social dialogue.

As a way forward, there is no doubt that South Africa has set up one of the most comprehensive legislative systems globally to protect and promote decent work in general, including agricultural work, and that social dialogue there can be seen as a potentially encouraging model. However, collective bargaining in agriculture still needs to be seriously strengthened in practical terms.

### Conclusions

Policy-makers in Africa, whether in government, business or labour, will have to address the challenges of decent work in agriculture through the following perspectives:

- A balance between the economic survival of farms and the protection of the fabric of rural civil society.
- Strategies for on-farm transformation that take into account the complex relationships between farm workers and employers.
- The development of forms of “social contract” that will allow for the development of paths to competitiveness that protect the adequacy, sustainability and dignity of farmworker livelihoods. A workable social contract will have to include organized labour, organized agriculture and the State.

Independent information on farm workers is still scarce. Most available studies have ignored the economic aspects of wage labour on commercial farms and

have concentrated on social conditions, which have been understated in most cases. The impact of land and agrarian reforms, the effects of the devastating spread of HIV/AIDS, links between sustainable agriculture and decent work, labour arrangements in the context of international trade policies, labour arrangements with new farmers (permanent or casual hiring), and the empirical measurement of labour productivity in agriculture are among the areas that need further investigation.

Finally, agriculture must be the focal sector in supporting the MDGs. In turn, the MDGs must attempt to encapsulate decent work in agriculture as part of the set objectives, with key measurable indicators. There is a need to focus on agricultural workers (and rural people in general) as principal target groups, if the MDGs are to be met.