

DECENT WORK IN AGRICULTURE IN ASIA

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FOREWORD

Decent work in agriculture is an important area of work of the ILO since its inception in 1919. Several important ILO Conventions, are primarily concerned with improving conditions of work for the 1.3 billion women, men and children who work in agriculture. Some of these important ILO Conventions are as follows:

- Convention No. 87 (1948) – Freedom of Association and Protection of the Rights to Organize Convention
- Convention No. 98 (1949) – Rights to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention
- Convention No. 110 (1958) – Rural Workers' Organizations Convention, and Recommendation No. 149
- Convention No. 184 (2001) – The Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention and Recommendation

Half of the world's workers are found in agriculture. About 40 per cent, accounting for 450 million workers, are found in wage employment, while the remainder works in the informal sector.

Poverty and low incomes are primarily found in those countries in which agriculture is moving slowly and absorbs a large share of the labour force. Pockets of poverty are also found in high, value-added agriculture characterized by low-skill employment with low-pay and poor trade union organization. It is common for migrant workers to be employed in agriculture, and women and children are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and abuse. There are also devastating consequences for indigenous people, who also find themselves in a situation vulnerable to abuse and denied their basic human rights.

The world's agricultural labour force is projected to continue to rise until 2006, albeit at a slower rate, after which it is expected to decline in absolute terms. The declining proportion of labour in the agricultural sector reflects the accelerating trend towards industrialization and urbanization in all regions. The rate of growth of the labour force in agriculture is now lower than either total labour force or population growth.

The economically active population working in agriculture is currently growing fastest in sub-Saharan Africa (1.9 per cent per annum), followed by South Asia (1.5 per cent) and the Middle East/North Africa (0.8 per cent). In all other regions the growth is either negligible (0.1 per cent in Latin America) or negative (-3 per cent in North America and Western Europe).

Decent work deficits are pervasive in the agricultural sector. They are expressed in the widespread denial of rights at work, in poor quality employment and high levels of unemployment, in unsafe working conditions and lack of income security, and finally in the inadequate representation of agricultural workers in social dialogue, which is necessary to improve their working lives. It is a fact that all conditions of work are worse in agriculture than in other sectors of the economy. Incomes are lower and poverty levels are twice those of urban workers. Incomes are also unevenly distributed than in the rest of the economy. Two-thirds of the world's population in poverty are in agriculture.

Women in rural areas suffer even greater poverty than men and are less able to exercise their basic rights, despite their high levels of labour force participation. Indeed, women account for about 40 per cent of the total agricultural workforce, but they are often paid less than their male counterparts. Child labour and bonded labour are also present in the agricultural sector.

One of the important characteristics of agricultural work is that working and living conditions are interwoven. Workers and their families live on the land, where they are affected by environmental hazards such as pollution and occupational risks. Community exposure to pesticides can come in the form of contamination of foodstuffs, the misuse of containers for food or water storage, the diversion of chemically-treated seeds for human consumption, and the contamination of ground water with chemical waste. Rural communities often lack the education and information they need to respond appropriately to the risks they face.

The ILO has never accepted the concept that injury and disease 'go with the job'. The ILO was founded to ensure everyone has the right to earn a living in freedom, dignity and security, in short, the right to decent work. The ILO's Safe Work Programme has been designed to respond to this need. Its primary objectives are: to create worldwide awareness of the dimensions and consequences of work related accidents, injuries and diseases; to promote the goal of basic protection for all workers in conformity with international labour standards and to enhance the capacity of member States and industry to design and implement effective preventive and protective policies and programmes.

As a means to raise awareness and to promote the ILO mandate in the context of the rapid globalization of agriculture throughout the world, the problems facing workers in agriculture need to be highlighted concerning social exclusion, poverty alleviation, fundamental rights, sustainable agriculture in sustainable economic and social development, food security and decent work in agriculture.

ILO standards, especially those on forced work, freedom of association, collective bargaining, non-discrimination and child labour, are all critical to vulnerable agricultural and rural workers who are often denied fundamental rights, decent work and lack basic food for their families, even though they produce food for the world.

The right to join and/or form independent and democratic workers' organizations of one's own choosing is a cornerstone of the ILO's position on social justice. By 1921, just two years after its founding, the ILO adopted a Convention extending to agricultural workers the same rights of association as for industrial workers. Legal impediments to the freedom of association of agricultural workers remain in some countries, but the real challenge is to assure the full exercise of this right in practice.

For agricultural workers, numerous obstacles remain. Trade union organizations are generally weak in rural areas, with little more than 2 to 7 per cent of the workforce organized, with some exceptions in Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe.

Collective bargaining is often limited to large plantations. Seasonal, migratory and casual labour processes, with the added constraints of illiteracy, ignorance of workers' rights, and isolation

render the task of organizing among rural workers particularly difficult. ILO tripartite bodies have consistently recalled the need to apply in practice basic labour rights in rural areas and strengthen rural workers' organizations.

Many agricultural workers are poorly protected by national labour law. Some countries specifically exclude the agriculture sector from their general labour legislation. In others, general protective legislation may not be fully applicable to the agriculture sector, or may simply not be applied. For example, exclusions based on the size of an undertaking or on the contractual status of the worker are common. In many cases, labour laws are not applied because employers and workers are unfamiliar with the details of the law, application is found to be impractical in agricultural enterprises, or enforcement is weak.

In some cases, specific legislation has been enacted which accommodates the special characteristics of agricultural work, providing for flexible working time arrangements, the partial payment of wages in kind, the provision of housing and health care. Typically, casual, temporary or seasonal agricultural workers do not have labour protection equal to that of permanent employees.

The world community has set ten ambitious Millennium Development Goals through the United Nations, the aims of which are to reduce poverty and hunger, to increase access to safe drinking water, to health care and to education and to implement national strategies for sustainable development.

All of these goals are of direct interest to those who live and work in rural areas. Indeed, ensuring rural workers' access to secure employment and decent working and living conditions are critical steps in reducing poverty and achieving sustainable livelihood.

Developing sustainable solutions to ensure decent employment in agriculture is no easy task, but is one we must apply ourselves to with dedication. The ILO remains dedicated to the goal of decent work, based upon decent employment and income opportunities, fundamental principles and rights at work, social protection for all, and strengthening tripartism through social dialogue.

This report is the result of the Asian regional seminar which was held in Bangkok in August 2003 based on case studies carried out by resource persons in Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Philippines. The contributions of the participants during the seminar also added to the knowledge on the realities of deficits in the decent work standards of agricultural workers.

On behalf of the ILO, I thank everyone who has contributed to the success of the seminar and the publication of this report.

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