



## FACTS ON *Agriculture*

The agricultural sector has by far the world's largest labour force. Sustainable practices in agriculture are critical to our food security, human health, and the health of the environment.

Today, most of the world's poverty is rural. Agricultural workers tend to be among the poorest segments of society, often with inadequate housing, little to no access to health care, and few educational opportunities. Vast numbers of children work in agriculture because their families cannot otherwise support them. Forced and bonded labour are present in many agricultural communities. Rural poverty forces many small farmers to abandon the land and migrate to cities to look for work, thereby draining productive energy from rural communities and adding to the social and infrastructure problems of cities. It also contributes to the use of environmentally destructive farming practices.

Farm work is among the world's most dangerous occupations. Tractors, harvesters, and other heavy machinery cause the most injuries and fatalities in agricultural work. The proliferating use of chemicals kills and maims thousands through continued exposure, accidents, or misuse. Agrochemicals are linked to long-term illnesses, reproductive impairments, and ongoing harm to the Earth and its resources.

Efforts to address all of these issues – and to build socially sustainable agriculture – should be focused on providing decent living and working conditions, and sustainable livelihoods, for those who work the land. Farmers and other agricultural workers should be able to live in dignity with basic rights and freedoms, such as those contained in ILO core labour standards: freedom of association and the right to organize, an end to forced labour and child labour, and the elimination of employment discrimination.

Sustainable agriculture and rural development have the potential to offer a decent livelihood to those living in rural areas. By tackling the economic, social and environmental problems facing rural communities – and doing so in an integrated manner – agricultural productivity can be increased, opportunities for off-farm employment expanded and the lives and well-being of rural workers greatly enhanced.

### *Key Statistics*

- Half of the world's labour force is in the agriculture sector.
- Of the 1.3 billion women, men and children who work in agriculture, 450 million work for wages.
- Women account for over half of agricultural labour.
- Seventy percent of the world's working children are involved in agriculture.
- Agriculture is one of the top three hazardous occupations, along with construction and mining.
- 170,000 agricultural workers die each year in workplace accidents.
- The fatal accident rate in agriculture is double that of other industries.
- 40,000 agricultural workers die each year from exposure to pesticides.

## *Toward Socially Sustainable Agriculture*

The goal of socially sustainable agriculture is based on the notion that people who work the land ought to be able to earn a decent livelihood – and that they and their families should be able to live in dignity, with respect for their basic rights and freedoms. It also means they should have access to medical care, education for their children, and protection from occupational accidents and disease. To be socially sustainable, good agricultural practice should do the following:

- Provide adequate employment, income and food security to those who earn their living from the land.
- Eliminate forced labour, bonded labour and the exploitation of children and other vulnerable members of society.
- Ensure safe and healthy conditions of work, including appropriate working time arrangements with adequate periods of rest.
- Train workers in the safe and efficient use of machinery.
- Provide adequate training and appropriate protective equipment to those who transport, handle, apply or dispose of pesticides and other agrochemicals.
- Ensure that the welfare needs of farmers and agricultural workers are met. These include access to medical care, occupational safety and health services and social security.
- Be supported by integrated national policies on occupational safety and health, environmental protection and rural development.

## *Role of the ILO*

Those who work in agriculture should enjoy the same basic rights as those who work in other sectors. In many countries, they still do not. The ILO works with governments, employers' and workers' organizations to promote basic principles and rights. In practice, these principles and rights have proven crucial in terms of enabling workers to attain a living wage, achieve greater bargaining power, and improve their living and working conditions.

Finding ways to improve the safety, health and working conditions of agricultural workers remains a challenge, as the sector is more diverse and less organized than the industrial sector. In 2001, the ILO adopted the Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention (No. 184), which provides a framework on which national policies on occupational safety and health in agriculture can be developed and implemented. It offers guidance on preventative and protective measures regarding the principal hazards facing agricultural workers: machinery safety, the handling and transport of materials, chemicals management, animal handling, and the construction and maintenance of agricultural facilities. Other provisions concern the protection of young workers, temporary and seasonal workers, and women workers both before and after childbirth – as well as highlighting the need for insurance against injuries and disease, and for the provisions of welfare facilities.

## *Relevant ILO Conventions*

Convention No. 184 on safety and health in agriculture  
Convention No. 141 on rural workers organizations  
Convention No. 129 on labour inspection (agriculture)  
Convention No. 110 on plantations

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