

Many workers suffer from hunger and poverty - FAO/ILO/IUF report

Geneva, October 06 2005 (ACTRAV Info): Many of the 450 million agricultural workers live in dire conditions

Many of the 450 million waged agricultural workers, the largest labour force in the world, are suffering from some of the highest incidences of poverty and hunger, according to a new report published today.

Of a total workforce in agriculture of some 1.1 billion people, waged agricultural workers account for around 40 percent, according to a joint report by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF) (*).

"Agriculture cannot be sustainable whilst over 40 percent of the workforce suffer precarious employment and poor working conditions, and live in poverty," the report said. Economic pressures are eroding the already low levels of protection of agricultural workers in terms of wage levels, job security, health, safety and environmental standards and social protection, the report said. The use of child labour in agriculture is of particular concern.

Poorly paid and increasingly female

Agricultural workers, who do not own or rent the land on which they work nor the tools and equipment they use, are often poorly paid, earning wages well below those earned by industrial workers. Millions of these workers live below the poverty line; they often cannot afford to buy sufficient food. In general, worker households spend over 70 percent of their cash salary on food.

Their employment is often unstable and temporary, the report said. Globalisation has led to less and less permanent labour and a more flexible and marginalised workforce, with an increasing presence of "middlemen", labour contractors and subcontractors. Migrant workers face particular difficulties due to their casual contracts and lack of access to social protection.

While the agricultural workforce as a whole is shrinking, as more and more small farmers leave the land, the number of waged agricultural workers is growing in most of the regions of the world. New jobs are usually in export-oriented agriculture like cut flowers and vegetable growing and packing. The number of waged women workers is rapidly increasing; they account on average for 20-30 percent of the waged workforce, and receive consistently lower wages than male workers.

Hazards at work

Agriculture is ranked as one of the three most hazardous industries, along with mining and construction. Hazards at work include, for example, dangerous machinery, livestock-transmitted diseases and exposure to toxic pesticides. There are some 355 000 on-the-job fatalities every year; it is estimated that half of them occur in agriculture. Many of those killed, injured or made ill are women and children.

In many parts of the world, agricultural workers are denied fundamental human rights: the rights to freedom of association, to organize and collectively bargain with employers. Rural workers are more subject to forced labour than other categories of workers.

AIDS is devastating the agricultural labour force in many parts of the world. The disease has killed around 7 million agricultural workers since 1985 in the 25 hardest-hit countries in Africa, while the most affected African countries could lose up to 25 percent of their agricultural labour force in less than two decades.

Child labour

Of the estimated 246 million children around the world who go to work, over 170 million (70 percent) are employed in agriculture. Each year, 22 000 children are killed on the job, many of those in agriculture.

Children work as cheap labour because their parents do not earn enough to support the family or to send their children to school. Children in agriculture often work 10 hours per day and earn less than one dollar per day.

Improving conditions

The report criticises governments, development agencies, science and research institutions, agricultural banks, credit institutions as well as many civil society institutions for ignoring the often desperate situation of farm workers in spite of the fact that agricultural workers play an important role in sustainable agriculture, rural development and world food security.

The study emphasizes the contribution of waged agricultural workers and their trade unions to rural development and sustainable agriculture, it suggests how living and working conditions could be improved.

The report calls for the development and promotion of an agenda for fair and decent work conditions in agriculture. The application of ILO's Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work should be supported; FAO and other agencies should recognise waged agricultural workers as a group distinct from farmers, and should cooperate with them and their trade unions; agricultural workers and their unions should receive stronger political, technical and financial support to enable them to play a much greater role in promoting sustainable agriculture; poverty reduction strategies should also focus on generating rural employment opportunities and improving labour conditions in rural areas.

(*) Agricultural Workers and their Contribution to Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development

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