

RURAL DEVELOPMENT through DECENT WORK

FOR GROWTH, PRODUCTIVE JOBS, INCOME, FOOD SECURITY, GOOD WORKING CONDITIONS, EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES, RIGHTS, VOICE, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, CRISIS RESILIENCE



International Labour Office

Sectors

Rural Policy Briefs

Agriculture: An Engine of Pro-Poor Rural Growth

Agriculture is the mainstay of many rural economies, ensuring food security, employment, livelihoods, export earnings and economic development. Integrated strategies that address the multiple factors that hamper its development, including insufficient infrastructure, skills, innovation, food processing and marketing, access to land, good working conditions, and that strengthen the voice of agricultural workers and employers, can help lift the majority of the world's poor out of poverty.

Facts and figures

- Agriculture accounted for 35 percent of employment in 2009, representing some 1.07 billion workers.¹
- Global employment in agriculture has been on the decline and now represents 5 percent of the workforce in Europe and North America. In Africa and Asia, employment in agriculture is expected to decrease from 70 percent in the 1980s to 50 percent by 2015.²
- The vast majority of farmers are small-holders; an estimated 85 percent farm on less than two hectares. In countries as diverse as Bangladesh, China, Egypt and Malawi, 95 percent of farms are smaller than two hectares.³
- Agriculture is predominantly associated with rural areas, but also been practised in urban and peri-urban sites for centuries.
- It is estimated that food production needs to increase by 70 percent to feed the expected world population of nine billion in 2050.⁴
- Global supply of commodity crops has been on the decline, causing price hikes in wheat, rice, maize and other agricultural commodities. Between 2000 and 2008, global stocks for wheat decreased by 24 percent, and for rice by 39 percent.⁵
- There has been increased concentration within all major food and agribusiness sectors; five companies control 90 percent of the world's grain trade; six corporations control three fourths of the global pesticides market; and one Trans National Corporation (TNC) controls 80 percent of Peru's milk production.⁶
- Women produce over half the food worldwide, and in developing countries comprise 43 percent of the agricultural labour force, the highest proportion of women workers in any sector.⁷
- Out of some 335,000 fatal workplace accidents, about 170,000 occur among agricultural workers.⁸ Agriculture is one of the three most dangerous sectors to work in, along with forestry and mining.
- Some 60 percent of child labourers aged 5-17 years work in agriculture, sometimes as young as 5-7 years old, in contrast to 7 percent in industry, 26 percent in services and 7 percent in other sectors.⁹



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Why action is needed

- Complex, interlinked issues, such as increasing food demand and population growth, decreasing farm labour and dependence on limited environmental resources, make agriculture and food production issues a priority for the international community.
- The process of trade liberalisation has meant that domestic agricultural prices have less relation to domestic demand and supply conditions and are more correlated with international price movements, increasing their unpredictability and volatility.
- A number of developing countries are highly dependent on exports of certain agricultural commodities (e.g. cocoa, coffee, tea), which constitute a major source of income and foreign exchange. This is particularly true for least developed countries, for which primary commodities make up to 70 percent of total trade.¹⁰
- Loss of land and landlessness among rural households is on the rise, owing mostly to demographic pressures, but also to climate change, conflicts, migration, and acquisitions of large pieces of land by foreign actors.
- Agricultural farmers and workers consistently display the highest incidence and most acute forms of poverty, due mainly to low



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productivity, widespread underemployment, the seasonal nature of work, informality, lack of legal recognition and coverage, low pay for labourers, restricted access to social security and other forms of social protection, and lack of a representative voice.

- Despite the risks involved in agricultural work (See Box 1), rural workers are among the least well protected in terms of access to basic health services, workers' compensation, long-term disability insurance and survivors' benefits.
- Large numbers of young people are shunning agriculture mainly because of lack of good job prospects and returns, and poor socio-economic infrastructure in rural areas.
- Fundamental principles and rights at work, namely freedom of association and collective bargaining, elimination of child labour, abolition of forced labour and non-discrimination are often denied in the agricultural sector of many developing countries.
- Child labour is highly prevalent in situations of poverty, parental illiteracy, lack of social protection, low paid, casual, unorganized labour and weak labour inspection; all particularly widespread in agriculture.
- Children working in agriculture are often invisible, as most work as unpaid family workers in dispersed small-scale farms, or are hidden by employers, facilitated by the limited reach of labour inspectors in rural areas.

Box 1

Major Occupational Hazards in Agriculture

Frequent hazards related to agricultural work include:

- Dangerous machinery such as tractors, trucks and harvesters, and cutting and piercing tools
- Hazardous chemicals such as pesticides, fertilizers, antibiotics and other veterinarian products
- Toxic or allergenic agents such as plants, flowers, dusts, animal waste, oils
- Carcinogenic substances or agents: certain pesticides such as arsenicals and phenoxy-acetic herbicides, UV radiations, parasitic diseases such as bilharziasis and facioliiasis
- Transmissible animal diseases such as brucellosis, bovine tuberculosis, hydatid disease, tularaemia, rabies, Lyme disease, tinea, listerioses
- Infectious and parasitic diseases such as leishmaniasis, malaria tetanus and mycosis
- Ergonomic hazards such as the use of inadequate equipment and tools, unnatural body position or prolonged static postures, carrying of heavy loads, repetitive work and excessive long hours
- Extreme temperatures due to weather conditions
- Contact with wild and poisonous animals: insects, spiders, scorpions, snakes and certain wild mammals

Source: ILO: *Safety and Health in Agriculture* (Geneva: 2000), Available at http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---safework/ocuments/publication/wcms_110193.pdf

- Boys and girls working in farms often miss out on schooling if they work full time, and even if enrolled in school, their attendance and performance suffer. This harms their future job prospects and jeopardizes the longer-term outlook of their families and communities.
- Many migrants are involved in agriculture and are especially vulnerable to discrimination and dangerous working conditions, while lacking social protection, decent wages and representation.
- Despite the relatively high levels of ratification (122 countries to date) of the ILO Right of Association (Agriculture) Convention No. 11 (1921), workers' organizations, collective bargaining and social dialogue are often absent in agriculture.
- Investing in agriculture is considered among the most efficient and effective ways of raising people out of poverty and hunger.¹⁰
- By increasing access to the same resources as men, women could boost their output by up to 30 percent, leading to a 4 percent increase in total agricultural output.¹¹
- Agro-industry tends to code female tasks as unskilled, with women employed for labour intensive tasks while men are preferred for machinery work, supervisory roles and to receive training. As a result, women earn less than men and have lower development perspectives.
- Diversification into non-farm activities can reduce poverty by creating employment and expanding market opportunities for agricultural products. Non-farm activities can also improve labour productivity, particularly for youth who remain underemployed in rural areas.
- Agro-ecology, the practice of applying ecological principles to food production, can increase production and contribute to conserving plant biodiversity and resources. Agro-ecology works especially well with complex farming systems and is designed for local micro environments.
- Science and technology can best help the poor, marginalized and indigenous communities when it is affordable, participatory, locally adapted, site-specific, gender sensitive, and when it strengthens local crop biodiversity, and builds on farmers' knowledge.

Policy options

Investing in Agriculture

- Foster major investment into agriculture and rural development, making it a priority on national agendas.
- Empower rural women, youth, indigenous people and marginalized communities, reinforcing their rights and assuring their participation in designing and implementing the agriculture and rural development agenda.
- Encourage private investment in food production, post-harvest storage, processing and marketing, including investment in food and agricultural science, technology and knowledge development and transfer.
- Increase targeted investment in developing countries towards rural infrastructure, education and health.
- Promote investment in agricultural knowledge systems and in interactive knowledge networks.
- Foster collaboration among farmers, scientists, and industry.



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- Support public-private partnerships for improved commercialization of applied knowledge and technologies.
- Develop basic knowledge about agriculture and agri-business activities, including entrepreneurship, in rural schools and training initiatives.
- Improve access to information and communication technologies (ICT) to farmers so they can anticipate market behaviour and buy and sell their crops strategically.
- Promote the organization and strengthening of small-holder farmers' associations, as well as of employers' and workers' associations.
- Promote cooperatives in agriculture, food processing and marketing.
- Strengthen the voice of farmers and their organisations, rural civil society and grassroot non-governmental organisations in trade negotiations through mechanisms for dialogue and dissemination of good practice worldwide.
- Support the reduction of trade barriers and trade-distorting support to agriculture through international trade negotiations.
- Stabilize commodity prices, including through the effective use of floor price mechanisms and exploration of domestic and international supply management systems.
- Strengthen regional, national, and local value chains and markets to boost local production and consumption and buffer against volatile food prices in international markets.
- Protect sensitive domestic agricultural sub-sectors and infant agro-industry processing industries through tariffs and other instruments.

Improving the agricultural workplace

- Strengthen social safety net programmes, such as employment guarantee programmes, food and cash transfer programmes, vouchers, schemes facilitating access to production inputs, and monitor their effectiveness.
- Link the provision of assistance in safety net programmes to complementary social, health and productive services.
- Extend basic social security, such as health insurance, and provide legal protection to ensure minimum wages and other fundamental decent working conditions in rural areas.
- Widely disseminate agricultural Occupational Safety and Health basic principles and practices, including through national education and training curricula.
- Develop and incorporate practical educational curriculums in rural schools, providing important information on business, innovation and successful farming methods in addition to conventional courses.
- Ensure the protection of migrants and other groups more vulnerable to discrimination and disadvantages.
- Support the outreach of workers' and employers' organizations to self-employed rural workers in small-scale and family farms and non-farm activities, including those in the informal sector and migrant workers.
- Promote the involvement of employers' and workers' associations and cooperatives in scaling-up action against child labour, hazardous agricultural work and other shortcomings.
- Decentralize labour inspection, using local municipalities and authorities to help address issues such as hazardous working conditions and child labour.

Enhancing Agricultural Productivity

- Support programmes that promote low-cost and low-fuel dependent farming, such as community seed banks, water harvesting, soil conservation, land reform and organic fertilizers while investing in research and development focused on low input methods (See Box 2).
- Scale up successful agro-ecology and sustainable farming approaches, including low-input "social technologies" which build on small innovations and community management.
- Develop programmes that provide reliable, timely, and reasonably priced inputs to smallholder farmers, especially women and youth, such as pesticides, fertilizers seeds,



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information and communication technology, as well as the financial resources to access them.

- Promote the use of and access to information communication technology, such as cell phones and the internet, to allow farmers to obtain up-to-date information on weather conditions, prices, market outlooks, business deals, and available training opportunities. Their low cost and accessibility makes them particularly valuable for small producers in remote areas.
- Develop awareness of agricultural insurance among small-scale farmers and strengthen the ability of agricultural insurance institutions to carry out their mandates to lower or mitigate the risk faced by financial institutions in lending to small-scale farmers.
- Support the decentralization of financial and credit lending institutions to rural areas for small-scale farmers to improve their access to inputs (e.g. seeds, fertilizer, and machinery) and repayment rates.
- Encourage policies that actively support the distribution of public goods, such as agricultural research, extension services, irrigation and communication infrastructure.
- Decentralize and strengthen the capacity of local and regional authorities to formulate gender sensitive policies and plans based on gender disaggregated need assessment.

Box 2

Work Improvement in Neighbourhood Development (WIND)

Since the mid-1990s, the ILO WIND approach has been providing simple and low-cost solutions to ameliorate working and living conditions, and safety and health in agriculture and rural communities, while improving productivity. WIND works to empower small-scale farmers, other producers and their families and communities to take action. The approach is flexible and adapts well to area-specific challenges, resources and strengths.

The practicality and self-sustainability of WIND has facilitated its spread to 23 countries. In Vietnam, the success of the approach, which initiated over 100,000 improvements in one province alone, prompted its incorporation into the government framework for OSH in agriculture. In Kyrgyzstan, WIND has been successfully used since the 2000s to empower women farmers through vocational training in bee keeping. As a result, WIND-based programmes have also been implemented in neighbouring Kazakhstan and several regions in Russia.

As observed in Kyrgyzstan, in addition to improving safe work, WIND can promote gender equality, skills development, and entrepreneurship, as well as social dialogue and tripartite relationships, thus easing its integration into national policy.

Source: Kawakami, T., Khai, T., and Kogi, K. Work Improvement in Neighbourhood Development Programme (WIND): training programme on safety, health and working conditions in agriculture (Vietnam: 2005), Available at http://www.ilo.org/asia/whatwedo/publications/lang-en/WCMS_099075/index.htm

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- Implement policy interventions to close the gender gap in agriculture and rural labour markets, namely:
- Eliminating discrimination against women in access to land and agricultural resources, education, extension and financial services, and labour markets;
- Investing in labour-saving and productivity-enhancing technologies and infrastructure to free women's time for more productive activities;
- Facilitating the participation of women in flexible, efficient and fair rural labour markets.

ILO's Role

- Over 30 ILO legal instruments target agriculture, among them the Conventions on Minimum Wage Fixing Machinery (Agriculture), 1951 (No.99); on Plantations, 1958 (No.110); Labour Inspection (Agriculture), 1969 (No. 129); Rural Workers' Organizations, 1975 (No. 141); and Safety and Health in Agriculture, 2001 (No. 184).
- ILO works with member governments to ratify and implement ILO Conventions and Recommendations. It also provides advisory services to its constituents in undertaking research and enriching the knowledge base on agricultural issues, including labour markets, and value chains.
- A substantial set of ILO tools and guides target agriculture, including "Work Improvement in Neighborhood Development" (WIND) (See Box 2), "Training for Rural Economic Empowerment" (TREE), "Strategy and Tools against Social Exclusion and Poverty" (STEP), "Ergonomics Checkpoints in Agriculture", and the 2011 "Safety and Health in Agriculture: Code of Practice". These are complemented by some 40 others relating to, for instance entrepreneurship, microfinance and Local Economic Development.



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- Technical cooperation and action programmes are used at country level to introduce ILO tools and approaches for decent work-based agricultural support.
- ILO organizes international tripartite sectoral meetings and global dialogue forums resulting in recommendations for policy and action in agriculture, as well as a tripartite national capacity-building workshop, for instance on food security.
- ILO privileges integrated approaches to agricultural development that include HIV and AIDS, food security, child labour, and migration among others.
- Joint activities are undertaken with UN agencies operating through the framework "Delivering-As-One." This includes joining forces with FAO to strengthen impact on rural development and poverty reduction. In the area of food security, ILO is an active member of the High Level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis.

¹ ILO: *Global Employment Trends 2011: The Challenge of the Jobs Recovery* (Geneva: 2011)

² Croplife International: *Facts and Figures the Status of Global Agriculture* (Brussels: 2010)

³ World Bank: *World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development* (Oxford: 2007)

⁴ FAO: *Feeding the World in 2050* (Rome: 2009), Available at: <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/meeting/018/k6021e.pdf>

⁵ OECD-FAO: *Agricultural Outlook 2011-2020* (Rome: 2011)

⁶ Patel, Raj: *Hunger Free Johannesburg 2007*; see also De Schutter, Olivier: *Agribusiness and the Right to Food, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, UN General Assembly* (Geneva: 2009)

⁷ Doss, Cheryl: *If Women Hold Up Half the Sky, How Much of The World's Food Do They Produce?* (Rome: 2011)

⁸ ILO: *Safety and Health in Agriculture* (Geneva: 2000)

⁹ ILO: *Accelerating Action Against Child Labour, Report of the Director-General, International Labour Conference, 99th Session* (Geneva: 2010)

¹⁰ FAO: *Trends in World Agricultural Trade, Module 1* (Rome: 2002)

¹¹ Op. cit., *World Development Report* (Oxford: 2007)

¹² FAO: *The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-2011* (Rome: 2010), p. 42

Links

- ILO-Sector webpage on *Agriculture; plantations; other rural sectors* <http://www.ilo.org/global/industries-and-sectors/agriculture-plantations-other-rural-sectors/lang-en/index.htm>
- ILO/FAO webpage on *Food, Agriculture and Decent Work* http://www.fao-ilo.org/ilo-dec-employ/en/?no_cache=1
- IFAD/FAO/ILO: *Gender Dimensions of Agricultural and Rural Employment: Differentiated Pathways Out of Poverty* (Rome: 2010) http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_150558.pdf

Tools

- ILO: *Code of practice on safety and health in agriculture* (Geneva: 2010) http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_protect/@protrav/@safework/documents/normativeinstrument/wcms_161135.pdf
- ILO: *Ergonomic checkpoints in agriculture* (Geneva: 2010) http://www.ilo.org/employment/DepartmentsOffices/rural-development/WCMS_159051/lang-en/index.htm

- ◆ ILO: *Tackling hazardous child labour in agriculture: Guidance on policy and practice* (toolkit) (Geneva: 2006) <http://www.ilo.org/ipecinfo/product/viewProduct.do?productId=2799>

Other Materials:

- ◆ ILO: *Promotion of Rural Employment for Poverty Reduction* (Geneva: 2008) http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_norm/-relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_091721.pdf
- ◆ ILO: *Tripartite Technical Workshop on the Impact of the Food Price Crisis and Its Impact on Decent Work* (Geneva: 5-6 March 2009) http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_emp/documents/publication/wcms_106442.pdf

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