

## Rural Employment and Decent Work

### The Challenge

Rural areas are home and workplace to half the world's population, 75 per cent of the poor and a majority of the jobless and underemployed. Contexts are complex: modern, productive and high-return agriculture and industries coexist with widespread small-sized, traditional, survival-type rural activities. Some developing countries, mainly in Asia and in Latin America, have achieved rapid poverty reduction through increased agricultural productivity, improved local processing, storage, transportation, and access to global markets, as well as better-enabled human resources.

Rural policies need to be context-specific and integrated – reflecting local features and potential as well as addressing important deficits. They also need to be interconnected as regards investment, incentives, infrastructure, labour market institutions, skills, entrepreneurship, working conditions, social protection, labour rights and workers' and employers' representation, to defend local interests and guide national strategy and resources towards rural areas.

Today's sharp reevaluation of rural development is linked to pressing concerns such as the poverty reduction drive of the Millennium Development Goals, food security, the environment and climate change, economic growth, youth employment, women's empowerment, the management of migration flows, and socio-economic stability, that push to unleash rural potential for sustainable growth, employment, wealth creation and resilience to crisis.



### The ILO Response

ILO's current rural employment work builds on the solid foundations of over 40 years of ILO work on rural areas, peaking in the 1970s - 80s, that offers a host of powerful concepts, approaches, tools and lessons learned.

In 2008 the International Labour Conference adopted a Resolution and a Plan of Action on *Rural employment for poverty reduction* that emphasize the employment dimensions of rural development alongside labour standards, social protection and social dialogue, pointing to their interconnectedness and mutually reinforcing nature, and calling for coordination and cohesion both within the ILO and in the countries concerned. Supporting ratification and implementation of relevant ILO Conventions such as the Employment Policy Convention, 1964 (No. 122), the Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969 (No.129) and of some 30 others targeting rural activities forms part of this.

In 2011, the ILO Governing Body strongly supported a strategy for *Unleashing rural development through productive employment and decent work*. Pillars of that strategy are: making rural work and development an ILO priority; a combination of shared responsibility, coordination and synergies in ILO rural work; advocating for diversification and up-grading of rural economies; multidisciplinary, integrated approaches; external partnerships; an emphasis on capacity building for rural work; and on rural youth and women empowerment.

The ILO Rural Employment and Decent Work Programme prompts, coordinates and monitors ILO action; produces and helps disseminate and advocate products and approaches to promote rural work; engages in and supports strategic initiatives; and promotes external linkages.

Rural dimensions are mainstreamed into about half of ILO's Decent Work Country Programmes and over 80 ILO projects target wholly or partially rural areas, mostly in Africa and Asia. Major ILO global policy frameworks such as the Global Jobs Pact (2009) integrate rural components, prompting constituents to "recognize the value of agriculture ... and need for rural infrastructure, industry and employment". The International Labour Conference's conclusions concerning the recurrent discussion on employment

(2010) also underscore that “increasing rural productivity and investment in agriculture and rural areas are essential to reducing inequalities and promoting more inclusive economies”.

Partnerships with key actors play a major role, given the magnitude and complexity of rural challenges and opportunities. They include links with the Food and Agriculture Organization, International Fund for Agricultural Development, International Co-operative Alliance, and increasingly with other United Nations Agencies and Organizations as well as Non-Governmental Organizations, academia and the media. The ILO is also a member of the UN High-Level Task Force on the Food Crisis.

Building capacity is ILO’s overarching priority in rural work. It comprises:

- strengthening rural data collection systems;
- prompting inclusion of rural dimensions in national employment policies;
- developing local economic development approaches, including value chains benefiting rural stakeholders;
- advocating and supporting employment-intensive infrastructure development and maintenance;
- helping develop local demand-based skills, extend national training systems and provide career guidance to rural areas;
- promoting entrepreneurship adapted to micro-, small and medium rural enterprises, including rural cooperatives;
- developing rural micro-insurance and micro-credit solutions;
- strengthening social protection, and a culture of occupational safety and health;
- advocating for the application of labour law to all rural workers;
- developing rural employment and decent work integrated approaches in technical cooperation, and helping mainstream successful approaches into national policies;
- providing practical guidance on technical issues through policy briefs;
- reviewing best practices worldwide on effective rural transformation policies, programmes and initiatives, to identify drivers of rural development and productive, decent job opportunities;
- promoting young rural men and women’s access to the media and modern technology to acquire “a voice”, to access and share labour market, success stories and other information, and establish synergies;
- preparing guides and training materials, for example on rural labour inspection, rural tourism, and integrated approaches to rural employment and decent work;

- making available relevant ILO tools for rural employment, including on entrepreneurship, career guidance, skills development, Occupational Safety and Health, HIV/AIDS, disadvantaged groups, strengthening the social partners.

Special attention is paid to youth and women, as real “engines” of rural development, whose potential remains largely under-appreciated, under-developed and under-used. Comprehensive approaches that encourage the active participation of youth and women are indispensable to build their capacities, give them a voice and increase their contribution to productive farm and non-farm activities and rural transformation.

## Key Tools and Resources

In addition to the above-mentioned ILC Resolutions: ILO: Over 38 Conventions and 23 Recommendations providing commitment and guidance in advancing rural decent work. See <http://www.ilo.org/ilolex/>

International Labour Office (ILO). 2008. *Promotion of rural employment for poverty reduction*, Report IV, 97th Session of the International Labour Conference, Geneva, 2008 (Geneva).

—. 2011a. *Report of the Committee on Employment and Social Policy*, GB.310/13 (Rev.) (Geneva).

—. 2011b. *Unleashing rural development through productive employment and decent work: Building on 40 years of ILO work in rural areas*, GB.310/ESP/1 (Geneva).

De Luca, L., et al. 2012. *Unleashing rural development potential through decent work: Building on the ILO rural work legacy, 1970s-2011* (Geneva, ILO).

FAO-IFAD-ILO: Set of 7 policy briefs on Gender and Rural Development

ILO: Set of over 25 policy briefs on rural technical issues, groups and sectors

ILO: Toolkit of over 55 ILO rural-relevant technical tools

FAO-ILO website *Food, Agriculture & Decent Work*, at <http://www.fao-ilo.org/>



Loretta De Luca  
Coordinator, Rural Employment and  
Decent Work Programme

Contact us:  
Employment Sector  
Rural Employment and Decent  
Work Programme  
Employment Sector  
International Labour Office  
Route des Morillons 4  
CH-1211 Geneva 22 / Switzerland  
Tel: +41 22 799 6111  
Email: [rural@ilo.org](mailto:rural@ilo.org)  
[www.ilo.org/rural](http://www.ilo.org/rural)