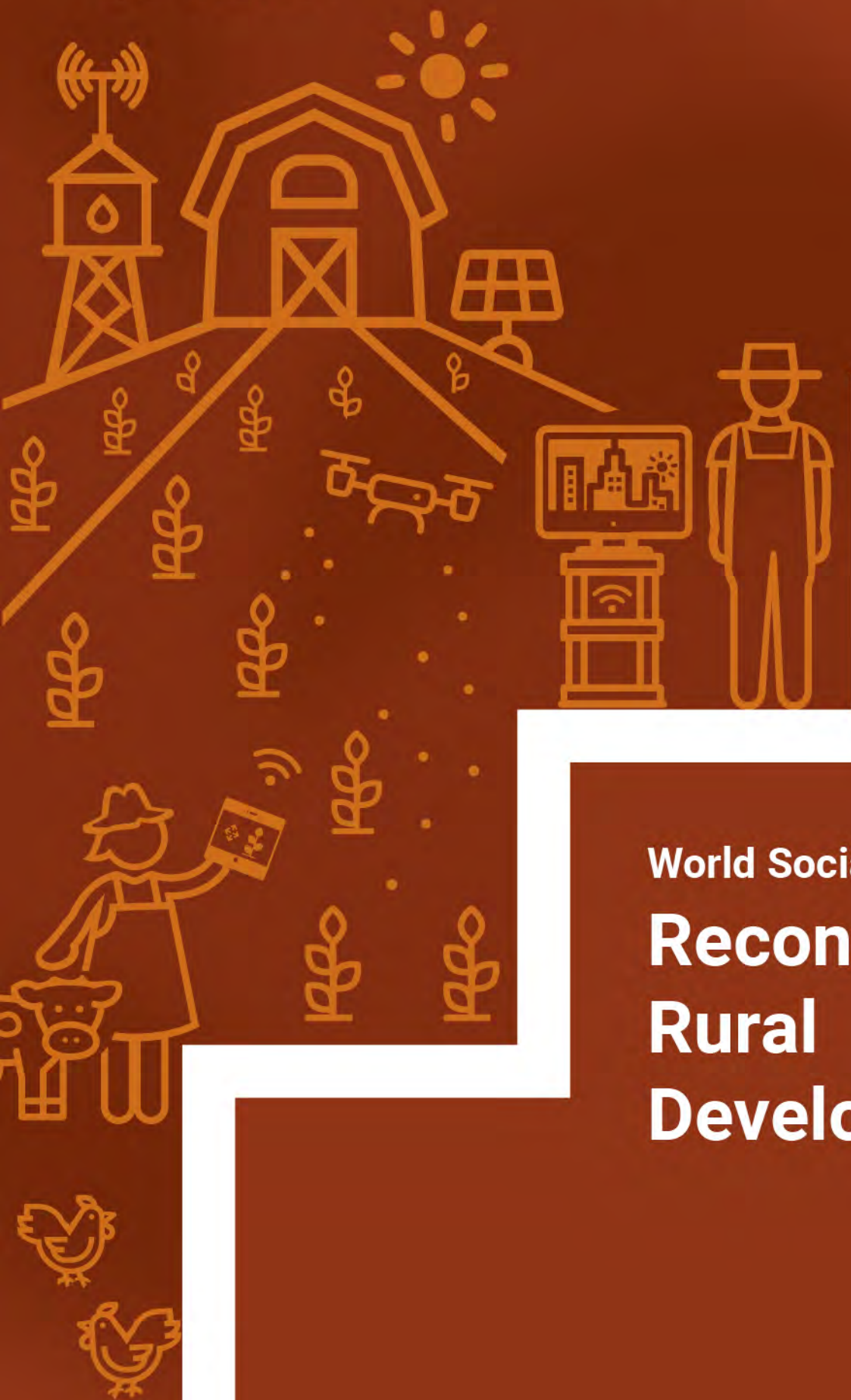




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Department of Economic and Social Affairs



World Social Report 2021
**Reconsidering
Rural
Development**

Department of Economic and Social Affairs

The *World Social Report* is a flagship publication of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA).

UN DESA is a vital interface between global policies in the economic, social and environmental spheres and national action. The Department's mission is to promote and support international cooperation in the pursuit of sustainable development for all. Its work is guided by the universal and transformative 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, along with a set of 17 integrated Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations General Assembly. UN DESA's work addresses a range of crosscutting issues that affect peoples' lives and livelihoods, such as social policy, poverty eradication, employment, social inclusion, inequalities, population, indigenous rights, macroeconomic policy, development finance and cooperation, public sector innovation, forest policy, climate change and sustainable development.

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Foreword

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused immense suffering around the world. It has taken millions of lives, reversed decades of development progress, exacerbated gender inequality and made the task of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 even more difficult.

Through response and recovery efforts, however, opportunities exist to build a greener, more inclusive and resilient future. The experience of the pandemic has shown, for example, that where high-quality Internet connectivity is coupled with flexible working arrangements, many jobs that were traditionally considered to be urban can be performed in rural areas too.

This change has opened up new opportunities for rural development, which is fundamental to achieving the SDGs. Some 67 per cent of the populations of low-income countries and 60 per cent of lower-middle-income countries are rural. Rural areas contain most of the planet's natural capital, which is currently being depleted and degraded. Furthermore, about 80 per cent of those below the poverty line live in rural areas, and about one-fifth of rural people live in extreme poverty – a rate that is four times higher than for the urban population.

In this context, the *World Social Report 2021* calls for a reconsideration of rural development, aimed at ending the rural-urban divide and better protecting the health of the planet. It calls for renewed attention to in situ urbanization as a model of rural development that can both raise the living standards of rural people and mitigate urban ills. It also urges greater investment in sustainable agriculture and infrastructure and expanding rural access to the Internet, since rural household access is generally half that of urban areas.

I commend this report to all policymakers and other stakeholders committed to ending the rural-urban divide and accelerating efforts to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'António Guterres', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke extending to the right.

António Guterres
Secretary-General of the United Nations

Acknowledgements

The *World Social Report* is the flagship publication of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) on major social development issues.

Under the general guidance of Liu Zhenmin, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, and Elliott Harris, Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development and Chief Economist, S. Nazrul Islam, Officer-in-Charge of the Development Research Branch of the Economic Analysis and Policy Division (EAPD) in UN DESA, led the core team of the 2021 report, comprising Hoi Wai Jackie Cheng, Kristinn Sv. Helgason, Nicole Hunt, Kenneth Iversen, Alex Julca, Hiroshi Kawamura, Martijn Kind, Marcelo LaFleur and Yern Fai Lee.

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World Social Report 2021

An urgent reconsideration of rural development is needed for achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The current strategies and patterns of rural development are failing to meet either the socioeconomic or the environmental Goals of this Agenda. Four out of every five people who face extreme poverty around the world live in rural areas. Many rural areas are witnessing severe depletion and degradation of natural resources, contributing to climate change and the recurrence of zoonotic diseases, such as COVID-19.

The *World Social Report 2021: Reconsidering Rural Development* points to the ways in which rural development can be reset to achieve sustainable development. It calls for moving rural development to the centre of attention, instead of relegating it as an appendage of urban development; for ending the rural-urban divide through the adoption of the in situ urbanization model; for ending within-rural inequality; and for achieving rural development while preserving the environment. *World Social Report 2021* shows that new digital and frontier technologies are creating opportunities for achieving these goals. What is needed is to seize these opportunities and to convert into reality the long-standing goal of eradicating the rural-urban disparity.

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