

Issues paper
ECOSOC Brainstorming Dialogue Sessions organized in preparation for the
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“Promoting an integrated approach to rural development in developing countries for poverty eradication and sustainable development”

In 2000, world leaders committed themselves to an ambitious set of goals and targets for improving the living conditions and well being of the world’s people. First among the goals, adopted in the Millennium Declaration is the **goal of halving the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015**. Worldwide, 75 percent of the extreme poor live and work in rural areas. Consequently, rural poverty reduction and development are top priority areas for action for many developing countries. But meeting the goal of cutting poverty by half will require that the issue of extreme poverty in rural areas is also seriously addressed by the international community.

While the share of ODA going to rural areas and the agricultural sector has fallen dramatically in the 1990s, **recent major United Nations Conferences and Summits** have recognized and indeed underlined the need to create an enabling environment for rural poverty eradication and the development of rural areas. The Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development, the Rome World Food Summit: five years later and the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development have advocated for a new political impetus in these fields and addressed various policy issues of direct relevance to the theme of ECOSOC 2003, including sustainable agriculture, food security and poverty alleviation in rural areas.

At a time when the international community focuses its consideration of major development challenges on the **implementation of commitments made**, the Economic and Social Council is called to provide for a practical exchange of views on successful experiences in the area of rural development and to mobilize support for activities in this field by all development partners, including governments, UN organizations, NGOs and the private sector.

It is all the more important to make this “implementation perspective” prevail in the ECOSOC debates as the **integrated approach to rural development** advocated by the development community, requires a participatory and demand-driven process involving all actors, including the rural poor themselves. Local ownership of development initiatives is at the centre of an integrated approach to rural development in order to adequately address and respond to the specific development challenges that exist in different rural localities. Decentralization and the strengthening of local institutions can also contribute significantly to the empowerment of the rural poor. Participants in the Council’s meetings are invited to share their particular experience with rural development initiatives and present lessons learned from specific activities. Particular

attention deserves to be paid in this regard to the role of women in rural communities, as well as to other marginal or vulnerable groups, such as forest dwellers, pastoralists and indigenous people.

Strengthening the rural economy is a key component for alleviating rural poverty and fostering rural development. Broad-based and equitable economic growth in rural areas requires significant increase in agricultural productivity as well as investments in non-farm activities. Access to markets at all levels access to financial services, including through rural micro-finance, and rural infrastructure development and maintenance are also important elements of an integrated approach to rural development. Interesting activities have been carried out in these fields over the last years, which deserve to be shared and discussed at the Council's meetings.

However, the objective of poverty reduction will not be reached without attention also being paid to **social development in rural areas**. Appropriate employment strategies, including labour intensive investments, can have a strong positive impact on the lives of the poor, in particular when specific consideration is being given to the fact that poor people often work in the informal sector. Access to social services, particularly health and education, is also of major concern, particularly at a time when HIV/AIDS has severely depleted the rural workforce, in particular in Sub-Saharan Africa. Addressing the challenges of primary education and health care services, combating HIV/AIDS and empowerment of rural women should then be key social priorities. Innovative experiences, driven by civil society organizations, are of particular relevance in that respect.

Rural poverty eradication and development is intrinsically linked to and in fact an important component of **sustainable development** strategies and objectives. Access to water and other natural resources is one of the main concerns of rural people, especially the rural poor. It is estimated that 637 million people live in rural areas under severe water stress. The management and conservation of natural resources is closely related to the questions of access to and ownership of land, including the issue of land reforms and of the status of open-access resources and common property resources. Further, environment degradation is a major impediment for rural development, as agriculture expansion has too often contributed to ecosystem destruction, deforestation or desertification. Implementation of tools, such as the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification and other relevant international instruments should be discussed in terms of their implications for action in rural areas. The use of sustainable agricultural technologies, including agroecology and biotechnology, is also important in that respect.

Tools for including key rural development policies in the national development process should also be explored, such as the CCA & UNDAF and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. Methods for involving the rural poor themselves in the elaboration of these instruments should be discussed.

The development of strong **alliances and partnerships** are indispensable for combating rural poverty and achieving rural development objectives. Horizontal

partnerships need to be established and strengthened on the local level to foster collaboration between local actors as well as on the national level among various sectoral Ministries and Departments (i.e. agriculture, infrastructure, environment). Vertical partnerships are likewise necessary to connect relevant local, national and international stakeholders, including donors, and to integrate and coordinate their respective contributions and activities.

ECOSOC members may wish to discuss and explore how partnerships among multilateral and bilateral organizations, national institutions, NGOs, grassroots organizations and the private sector have contributed to rural poverty eradication and supported an integrated approach to rural development. Thoughts could be presented on how the principle of demand driven and self-organization of the rural poor, key in this new approach to rural development, can be further implemented.