

Informal Summary
ECOSOC Coordination Segment
Round table discussion on the theme “Coherence: Strengthening the normative and operational link in the work of the United Nations on rural employment”

UNHQ, New York, 9 July 2008

Chair: H.E. Mr. Antonio Pedro Monteiro Lima, Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council.

Panellists: Mr. Tareq Md. Ariful Islam, Vice-Chairperson, Commission for Social Development.

H.E. Mr. Olivier Belle, Chairperson, Commission on the Status of Women.

Mr. Juan Eduardo Eguiguren, representative of the Chairperson, Commission on Science and Technology for Development.

H.E. Mr. José Eduardo Dantas Ferreira Barbosa, President, Executive Board, WFP.

H.E. Mr. Zdzislaw Rapacki, Chairperson, Governing Council, International Labor Organization (ILO).

Moderator: Mr. Assane Diop, Executive Director, Social Protection Sector, ILO.

Key messages:

- Creating opportunities for employment and decent work in rural areas is vital to achieving the MDGs, especially MDG1, since most of the world’s poor live in rural areas. Efforts to achieve these goals require coordination among intergovernmental bodies of the UN system.
- In large measure, the challenge of rural poverty reduction revolves around raising the productivity and earnings of agricultural workers.
- Increasing agricultural productivity and diversification of economy through technical progress and investments is central to poverty reduction.
- National development strategies need to incorporate rural employment generation especially for youth and women as a central objective.
- Rural employment generation requires innovations, such as gender-sensitive micro-credit schemes, or adoption of new technologies, including biotechnology.
- The link between the UN’s normative and operational work on rural employment can be strengthened and greater coherence achieved through greater dissemination of information, including decisions, from functional commissions to actors operating on the ground.

H.E. Mr. Antonio Pedro Monteiro Lima, Vice-President of ECOSOC, stated that several functional commissions have produced comprehensive policy guidance on this issue. However, this guidance is not always reflected in the work of governing bodies of relevant UN specialised agencies. By providing a venue for dialogue between the Council’s relevant subsidiary bodies this round table provides an opportunity for these bodies to discuss how they can better harmonize their work and thereby promote greater coherence as well as strengthen the normative-operational link in their work related to rural employment. Mr. Lima further stated that the Council might wish to consider

holding this type of dialogue every year and focus on different aspects of United Nations development agenda.

Mr. Assane Diop, Executive Director of the Social Protection Sector of the ILO, highlighted the importance of the topic of rural employment, given that about half the world's population and three quarters of the world's poor live in rural areas. He highlighted that "coherence" must not become "complication". Efforts to coordinate must not delay but should accelerate "delivery as one". In this respect, the panel should focus on how to translate relief efforts towards the food crisis into raising the productivity and earnings of agricultural workers.

Mr. Tareq Islam presented the work of the Commission for Social Development in the area of employment. He stressed that employment and decent work need to be a central objective of development strategies in order to achieve the MDGs. A resolution adopted during the 46th session of the Commission sets out a policy framework to achieve full employment and decent work in the context of poverty reduction strategies that incorporates macroeconomic policies, enterprise and rural development, education, training and skills, social protection and regulatory policies. It requests the Secretary-General to report on its implementation to both the Commission and the General Assembly. The resolution highlighted policies for enterprise development and employment opportunities for youth and rural women. The resolution encouraged all relevant United Nations agencies to collaborate in assessing and adopting the toolkit developed by the ILO for Mainstreaming Employment and Decent Work. Lastly, Mr. Islam stated that the United Nations efforts should be designed to promote employment-led rural development. Expanding the traditional sectors of rural employment by creating opportunities i.e. through vocational training and micro-credit is key in this regard.

Mr. Oliver Belle, the Chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women, emphasized the critical role of women in rural development. Most of the food production in developing countries is in the hands of women and they are the most affected by the global food crisis. He stated that women face multiple challenges in rural labour markets. They are mostly engaged in seasonal farm work, which does not provide sustainable livelihoods, but are discriminated against in other labour markets. Inequalities in access to land and credit persist. Mr. Belle also highlighted that there are several normative frameworks on these issues, such as the Beijing Platform of Action. However, these need to be better disseminated to local authorities in a comprehensible way, i.e. by local staff of the UN specialised agencies. There is also a need for more gender sensitivity in the UN's work, for example in micro-credit schemes, and a need for more sex-disaggregated data, including on violence against women.

Mr. Eguiguren delivered a statement to the ECOSOC on behalf of the Chairperson of the Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD). He briefed the Council on the work of the CSTD in the field of rural development, including under its new mandate to oversee the follow-up of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Since 1995, the CSTD has been actively promoting the use of science and technology for rural development. The Commission highlighted that lack of awareness

and easy access to information on already established and proven technologies constrains their adoption in developing countries and called for intra- and intergovernmental cooperation, private-public partnerships and targeted training and technology support programmes. The Commission further highlighted that agricultural biotechnology offers potentials for achieving MDG1 and promoting sustainability. However, there is uncertainty about its socio-economic and ecological risks. A proposal has recently been put forward to organise an international conference on agricultural technologies jointly by the CSTD and UNCTAD, to raise awareness about the need to adapt agricultural technologies to deal with the food crisis. Examples of how the Commission's work on policy guidance has been translated into concrete actions include a project on Network Centres of Excellence aiming at South-South cooperation in scientific research and the launch of UN-biotech, an interagency cooperation network on biotechnology.

Since 2007, the CSTD works as a reformed body under its new mandate to oversee the follow-up to the WSIS. The Summit established action lines to be implemented in order to bridge the digital divide and to assist developing countries in realising the potentials of ICTs. Several of these action lines address the theme of rural development. FAO and ITU have been selected as facilitators and moderators for an action line on E-agriculture. A FAO paper presented to the last session of the CSTD in May 2008 called for knowledge transfer not merely to occur vertically (between policy makers and farmers) but also horizontally (among the farming community). The General Assembly will make an overall review of the implementation of WSIS outcomes in 2015. Until then the CSTD will continue to follow closely the development of this matter.

Mr. Barbosa briefed the Council on the WFP's new Strategic Plan for 2008 - 2011. This plan will guide its work in five critical domains: (1) Saving lives and protecting livelihoods in acute emergencies; (2) preventing acute hunger and investing in the preparation for emergencies and the mitigation of their effects; (3) Post-disaster and post-conflict reconstruction of livelihoods; (4) Reducing chronic hunger and malnutrition; and (5) Reinforce countries' capacities to combat hunger, in particular through a strategy of transferring responsibilities and through local purchases. Especially the first and third points reflect the WFP's engagement in protecting, restoring and reconstructing means of subsistence. Mr. Barbosa elaborated how the changing nature of agriculture in an increasingly interdependent world challenges the WFP's efforts in this regard. The transformations brought about by globalisation, such as increased price shocks, wider markets and changing producer chains bear risks as well as opportunities to the world's farmers. For the majority of farmers in poor countries and especially smallholder farmers in Africa, globalisation poses significant challenges. On the other hand, there are several innovations aimed at surmounting those challenges, such as commodity market exchanges and insurance schemes targeted at poor farmers. For the first time, for example, the WFP in cooperation with the insurance company AXA Re developed a new risk management tool and established a programme to insure harvests against bad weather. Another example was to promote rural employment by improving means of subsistence and building resistance to shocks includes a safety-net programme aimed at providing sustained and predictable sources of revenue for the rural population through

employment programmes based on conditional transfers, such as cash for work and food for work schemes, which benefited around 8 million people in Ethiopia.

In the light of such innovations, the WFP explores new ways to purchase food products from local markets in order to maximise its impact on rural development in Africa. Where markets work more effectively, food vouchers and cash transfers can encourage beneficiaries to invest in farming and create incentives for increased productivity to satisfy increased demand resulting from increased purchasing power. Lastly, Mr. Barbosa reaffirmed the WFP's commitment to feeding the hungry in a gender sensitive way and in coherence with the UN system and other agencies. Furthermore, the WFP is committed to do so in a way that protects and restores people's livelihoods.

Mr. Rapacki stated that the ILO recognizes the importance of rural development and its role in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, especially the crucial role of rural employment in poverty reduction. The last International Labour Conference in June 2007 agreed on a framework for a comprehensive strategy to promote productive employment and decent work in rural areas. Factors such as the persistence of poverty in rural areas, urbanization, globalization, climate change and increasing food prices have led to an increased focus on rural poverty reduction nationally and globally. Globalization has created uneven patterns of growth in a rapidly changing economic landscape. In rural areas in developing countries, labour market institutions tend to be weak, underemployment widespread and incomes low. Rural workers are often not covered by national labour law, and their rights not often realized. A remaining challenge for public policy is to create conditions enabling the poor to benefit from globalization.

The promotion of rural employment must take place within the framework of sustainable development and the Decent Work Agenda. Since rural labour markets often deal with unskilled labour, low wages and low productivity, there is an urgent need for policies to promote skills, technology, sustainable enterprises and better labour market institutions in rural areas. Furthermore, increasing agricultural diversification and productivity through technical progress and investment as well as innovative measures for enhanced market access are central to poverty reduction. The ILO has a vital role in addressing rural employment for poverty reduction. The last tripartite conference called for the ILO to commit to developing and implementing a strategy on rural development and rural employment and to coordinate efforts with intergovernmental agencies at both the international and country levels to achieve improved policy coherence. Mr. Rapacki encouraged all relevant UN agencies to apply the ILO's Toolkit for Mainstreaming Employment and Decent Work in rural areas.

Interactive debate with panelists

France, on behalf of the European Union, deemed the theme of the discussion extremely topical, especially in the light of the discussions at this year's High Level Segment and ILO conference as well as the current food crisis. The EU reiterated the importance of rural development, highlighting that three quarters of the world's poor live in rural areas, and considered it a social as well as economic issue. Issues related to rural

development, such as gender equality and rural employment, are of a social nature. The increase in food prices on the other hand must be understood as an economic issue. Discussions on both farm and non-farm sector development must therefore continue. There is a need for innovations in areas such as access to credit services, land ownership rights, as well as agricultural diversity and coordination. The EU endorsed the suggestions contained in the Secretary General's report, in particular the recommendation to adopt a synergetic and integrated approach to rural development. In this regard, the EU suggested five measures: reinstating the goal of developing indicators of agricultural productivity, building a link to job creation, diversifying production in rural areas, strengthening rural-urban linkages and setting up favorable policy environments for rural employment.

Antigua and Barbuda, on behalf of the G77 and China, welcomed the debate as an opportunity to test the UN system's capacity to address rural development and employment. It asked panelists if the Ministerial Declaration in place since 2006 affected the planning of several commissions. Furthermore, G77 inquired if the commissions developed a focused approach to taking advantage of the opportunities of the food crisis for rural development. It argued that rural employment could be one of the few opportunities, if agricultural productivity, agro-industrial activities and trade increase. G77 also inquired about the extent to which the technical back up of the commissions points at ways to do something about the challenges at hand. Lastly, it was asked which commissions have come to work together on joint initiatives.

El Salvador observed that rural employment is particularly important for achieving MDG1, and highlighted the problem of underemployment. It stressed the importance of recognizing that more resources have to be located to rural areas in developing countries. Rural employment has an impact on all social themes and it requires joint coordination as well as support from the UN system as a whole. El Salvador further stated that micro-credit and skills training are particularly important tools for rural employment generation and to improve the quality of life in rural areas. It is also important to update soil registry standards, taking gender aspects into account. In addition, international cooperation with the United Nations is needed in order to increase agricultural productivity in developing countries. The wide range of marketing possibilities was emphasized in this regard.

New Zealand stressed the need for a closer link between the UN's normative and operational work and argued that more needs to be done for the work of ECOSOC's subsidiary bodies to be picked up by governments and UN agencies working at the country level. It suggested a top-down and a bottom-up approach by which this venue can be made more effective. The first suggestion argued that there is a need for better dissemination of information on the ground by the subsidiary bodies. They need to provide information that is less general and more specific to country needs for their work to be taken up by UN agencies and governments. Secondly, New Zealand encouraged specialized agencies to discuss the challenges they are facing in implementing and operationalizing the discussions taking place in ECOSOC's subsidiary bodies.

In response to comments and questions from the floor, **Mr. Rapacki** emphasized that several collaborative projects within the UN System emerged from requests by ECOSOC's subsidiary bodies. The ILO for instance collaborated with the FAO and the WHO on a joint study on synergies between labour and the environment upon request by subsidiary bodies. With regard to the comments by the European Union, Mr. Rapacki stated that the ILO shares its concern about the food crisis and adopted a resolution calling upon the governing body and the tripartite system to convene a meeting on the global food crisis, taking into account the work done by the Task Force on the Global Food Crisis.

Mr. Eguiguren agreed that there is a need to discuss the question of how topics of vital importance can be adopted by the Commissions and then be taken up by agencies. Therefore a substantive dialogue between Commissions and agencies should take place within the format of regular ECOSOC discussions and should be continued throughout the year, for example through the internet.

Mr. Belle agreed with the European Union that issues such as lack of infrastructure, access to land and credit services and gender inequality are the main obstacles to rural development. Mr. Belle elaborated three key elements of rural development. Firstly, there are just over three billion people living in rural areas worldwide and 80 per cent of all land is worked by women. Secondly, fine-tuned statistics remain extremely important since they can demonstrate the importance of women in this field. Thirdly, there is a need to strengthen the normative-operational link within the UN. For example, the Commission on the Status of Women concluded with an agreed document making specific recommendations that can help integrating the gender dimension into the planning of specialized agencies' work. Responding to New Zealand's statement, he stated that the UN's operational system must use these documents outlining agreed solutions at hand rather than to "reinvent the wheel" in order to implement decisions discussed within the ECOSOC. He invited all to read the documents, which are available on the internet, in order to make the work on the ground more effective.

Mr. Islam, in response to how commissions should act on the ground, raised the issue of political will to bring issues such as rural employment to the highest political level. He also stated that home-grown best practices such as micro-credit schemes, empowerment of women and non-formal education should be taken up by the commissions to help the UN develop its own strategies.

Mr. Diop concluded the panel stating that the UN system possesses the policies, programs and tools it needs to act at the country level. It has also identified the problems relating to rural employment. But it must build the necessary coherence in order to solve these. For this, Mr. Diop suggested a two-way approach. The United Nations must provide technical support and analytical assessment nationally and regionally. It needs a comprehensive approach to develop tools in a systematic and coherent way, which then needs to be communicated by countries. The UN system then becomes a part of national development strategies. These, in turn, need to be in line with the normative work done at the UN. He further stated that governments, private sector and rural organizations should

work together at the national level to receive and implement technical assistance. Mr. Diop highlighted national development strategies needed to focus on rural areas and there is a need to invest in various sectors such as human capital, education, water, sanitation and basic infrastructure, taking into account gender aspects and the work done by children. This multitude requires the development of a toolbox to bring trends and proposals together. He concluded that it is both possible and extremely important, especially for ECOSOC, to link normative and operational activities.