



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION (FAO)

**Contribution to the
2015 United Nations Economic and Social Council
(ECOSOC)
Integration Segment**

ECOSOC 2015 Integration Segment: Contribution from FAO's Decent Rural Employment Team

Achieving decent work for all: FAO's integrated support to sustainable development through the promotion of decent rural employment

- **FAO is committed to promoting decent work in the agricultural sector and the rural economy.** FAO is strengthening the normative understanding of the ways in which the Decent Work Agenda can be applied to agriculture and rural areas. To enhance this understanding, FAO has developed an *applied definition of decent rural employment (DRE)*¹, and is supporting its Members to put this concept into practice through an *Integrated Country Approach*. The approach works across FAO's core functions (policy advice, technical support, capacity development, knowledge generation and partnership development) and aims to enhance the DRE content of national policies, institutions and interventions for agricultural and rural development. FAO has specific work programmes on promoting decent rural youth employment and entrepreneurship, better managing rural migration, preventing and reducing child labour in agriculture, enhancing occupational safety and health, and improving information systems and knowledge on DRE. Women and youth are given priority throughout these efforts. The growing body of country-level work is mirrored by the priority that FAO attaches to these thematic areas in its Strategic Framework, where DRE is a dedicated organizational result under FAO's strategic objective on rural poverty reduction.
- **FAO considers DRE as a principal driver of all three dimensions of sustainable development.** Chronic poverty is among the main causes of biodiversity loss and unsustainable natural resource management in rural areas, as poor farmers often face pressures to overexploit resources to meet their immediate needs. FAO regards productive and decent employment – including diversification into non-farm employment, green jobs and the ecological literacy of rural workers – as vital to reducing these pressures and supporting *environmental sustainability*. Meanwhile, from an economic viewpoint, the agricultural sector is underperforming in many developing countries. Some of the causes are employment-related, including: poor working conditions; lack of skills; extensive use of practices such as child labour; pervasive underemployment; a lack of collective organization; and persistent gender- and age-based inequalities that constrain the productive capacities of women and youth. Promoting DRE will enhance the *economic sustainability* of agriculture and food systems by directly contributing to their overall productivity and productive capacity through a more skilled, better organized and healthier workforce. Such improvements can also give rise to a virtuous cycle of rural productivity and income growth over the medium to long term: producers and rural workers will generate increased returns from their labour, which can increase local and regional demand for higher value products and thereby drive growth and greater dynamism in rural economies. Furthermore, DRE opportunities can attract youth to agriculture, and thereby reverse the trend of ageing farmer populations that, if left unaddressed, may lead to shortages of skilled agricultural labour and ultimately food supply. Finally, DRE will improve the *social sustainability* of agriculture and food systems – a long-neglected dimension of sustainability to which FAO assigns particular importance – by promoting the right to decent work *for all*, including for rural workers in the informal economy and small-scale producers, thus increasing their skills, livelihoods options and resilience; by reducing rural poverty, unemployment, underemployment and the social tensions that they inevitably generate; by eliminating practices such as child and forced labour in agriculture, which are severe violations of human rights; and by reducing gender- and age-based discrimination and therefore fostering more inclusive growth. Overall, DRE represents an important channel through which the income and benefits derived from growth can be shared

¹ In FAO's applied definition of DRE, the term "rural employment" covers any activity, occupation, work, business or service performed in rural areas for remuneration, profit, social or family gain, in cash or in kind. It applies to waged, salaried and self-employed workers, including contributing family workers.

more equitably. As such, it is one of the key missing links that needs to be activated for growth to translate into lasting poverty reduction. Faith in the notion that the benefits of economic growth will automatically trickle down to the poor has been discredited. To provide an example, between 2000 and 2012, sub-Saharan Africa experienced strong and sustained growth; about one-quarter of the countries in the region grew at an annualized rate of 7 percent or better, and several African countries were among the fastest growing in the world. Yet for each percent increase in per capita consumption over this period, sub-Saharan African countries only reduced poverty by about 0.69 percent – far below the average rate of 2 percent that was documented elsewhere in the world. This is because much of sub-Saharan Africa’s growth occurred in resource-intensive sectors that failed to provide significantly more or better jobs for the poor. It is thus of crucial importance to ensure that growth and DRE go hand-in-hand if we are to achieve lasting poverty reduction and integrated sustainable development.

FAO’s action-oriented recommendations

- Promote the creation of farm and non-farm DRE opportunities through targeted investments in the agricultural sector that respect the [Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems](#).** Global food production will need to increase by about 70 percent by 2050 to meet the world’s future food needs. This presents a clear need for greater public sector investment, as well as considerable opportunities for private investors. For such investments to support integrated sustainability, the newly adopted Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems should be used as guidance, as they cover all three dimensions of sustainability. Investments that maximize the creation of DRE opportunities² – for example, sustainable value chain development that engages small producers and their organizations, or employment-intensive rural infrastructure programmes that favour local job creation – can be particularly catalytic in producing positive outcomes with respect to all three dimensions of sustainability.
- Support education and skills development to increase the employability and sustainable productive capacity of female and male rural workers of all ages.** The skills that individuals possess are key determinants of their productive and income-earning potential. For instance, farmers’ capacities to sustainably intensify and commercialize their farming operations depend in part on whether they possess the requisite agricultural, business and entrepreneurial skills. Meanwhile, the extent to which production intensification is done in an environmentally sustainable manner is contingent on farmers’ understanding of [Climate-Smart Agriculture](#) practices. As such, countries should ensure greater physical and financial access to education, including formal and informal Technical and Vocational Education and Training and extension services. Countries should also ensure that curricula are designed to equip rural people with the suite of skills (agricultural, business, life, ecological) needed to drive agricultural development that is simultaneously more productive, equitable and environmentally sustainable.
- Support young rural women and men to access productive and decent rural employment opportunities.** In the majority of developing countries, over 50 percent of the population is under 25 years of age. Meanwhile, despite recent progress in reducing poverty, about 1.2 billion people continue to live in extreme poverty, almost three-quarters of whom live in rural areas. This includes a significant number of young people. Creating productive and gainful farm and non-farm employment opportunities for youth in rural areas is therefore a pressing priority. Improved opportunities and better working conditions in agriculture will have the added benefit of attracting youth to the sector, thereby breaking the unsustainable trend of ageing farmer populations. To make this happen, countries should address the multiple barriers that young people face.³ This means improving their access to relevant skills development opportunities, productive resources,

² As listed in Principle 2 of the Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems.

³ For a detailed list of the barriers that typically prevent young people from engaging in agriculture, see *Youth in Agriculture: Key Challenges and Concrete Solutions*.

markets, representative organizations and job placement services. At country level, this support should be delivered at scale, including through national youth employment programmes and integrated rural development interventions. At the global level, a coordinated strategy on decent youth employment should be channelled through initiatives such as the UN Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development's System-Wide Action Plan on Youth.

- **Adopt a more integrated and coordinated approach to agricultural and rural development.** To have a truly substantial impact on all three dimensions of sustainability, support for DRE must occur in the context of broader economic growth and rural development. Countries should therefore put in place more integrated rural development interventions, where the agriculture sector is a main driver of growth. This includes: fostering diversification of the rural economy; improving management of urbanization and economic mobility; and supporting transformative social protection systems. In this process, a policy dialogue that is more inclusive of farmers and rural workers is crucial to identifying appropriate integrated policy solutions. Finally, increased efforts should be devoted to improving overall coordination towards a global strategy for decent work in rural areas, with a particular emphasis on creating productive employment opportunities for the rural youth. In this regard, regular coordination mechanisms should be established – ideally in the frame of the implementation of the SDGs – that involve relevant United Nations organizations, the private sector, International Financial Institutions and regional and global development partners.