

# SARD and... agricultural workers

Agricultural workers suffer high rates of poverty, food insecurity, death, injury and illness. They are also often denied basic human rights.

Policies targeted to improve the livelihood security and working conditions of agricultural workers will benefit rural communities and their economies and will also have flow-on benefits for regional and national economies.

## Did you know?

- Globally, there are 450 million agricultural workers. This group constitutes more than 40% of agricultural labour and is increasing in number and proportion of the agricultural workforce.
- In many countries, more than 60% of agricultural workers live in poverty.
- Agriculture is one of the three most dangerous industries: 170,000 deaths resulted from workplace accidents in agriculture in 1997 and about 7 million agricultural workers died from HIV/AIDS between 1985 and 2001.
- Fewer than 20% of agricultural workers have basic social security.
- 70% of the children engaged in labour that is detrimental to their development and well-being work in agriculture.
- 20-30% of agricultural workers are women, who are a marginalized group in most rural areas.

## Why is action needed?

- Agricultural workers are among the poorest and most food insecure groups.
- Agricultural workers often work in hazardous occupations, suffer exploitative working and pay conditions, have insecure contracts with frequent periods of unemployment, and have little access to social protection.
- The number and importance of agricultural workers are increasing as agriculture becomes more commercialized and the ownership of farm businesses more concentrated.
- Globalization and increased competition at the farm level and along the chain have brought about higher rates of casual employment in agriculture, which threatens the livelihoods of agricultural workers.
- Agricultural workers and their trade unions play an important role in the achievement of SARD and their contribution should be further enhanced.

## What are the policy goals?

- Generate opportunities for decent, stable and productive employment in agriculture, including adequate wages.
- Ensure that agricultural workers can meet their and their family's daily needs and improve their livelihoods.
- Respect the basic human rights of agricultural workers.
- Reduce death, injury and illness in agriculture by ensuring safe working conditions.
- Eliminate forms of child labour that are harmful to children's development and well-being, and especially the worst forms of child labour.
- Reinforce agricultural workers' member-based organizations, including their trade unions.
- Engage and empower agricultural workers in the development process.

### Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD)

Agriculture and rural development are sustainable when they are ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just, culturally appropriate, humane and based on a scientific approach.

Rural development policy must aim to meet the nutritional and other human needs of present and future generations; and maintain, and where possible, enhance the productive and regenerative capacity of the natural resource base. It must also provide for the durable employment of those generations, reduce their vulnerability and strengthen their self-reliance.



## The policy issues

Agricultural workers include those that work on farms and plantations and in primary processing facilities for food and fibre production. They work for cash and/or in-kind payments and do not own or rent the land or equipment used in their work. They include permanent/full-time, seasonal, temporary/ casual, migrant, indigenous and piece-rate workers (those paid per unit of work) and small farmers who often undertake paid agricultural employment to supplement their farm incomes.

Agricultural workers and small farmers experience a range of disadvantages and barriers to their well-being. These are discussed below.

### Poverty and food insecurity

There are high rates of poverty and food insecurity among agricultural workers and their families. These are primarily caused by low wages, weak labour markets and high unemployment in rural areas.

Poverty and under-nourishment reduce agricultural workers' well-being and their capacity to work. This reduces their own livelihood

security as well as overall agricultural productivity.

### Poor health, safety and environmental conditions

Agricultural workers suffer high rates of death, injury and illness. This is due to high levels of workplace risk (e.g. machinery and pesticide use); long working hours; limited safety measures, poor public health services and limited health and safety training in rural areas; high rates of HIV/AIDS; and poor living conditions.

Fatalities, injuries and disease all diminish the well-being, assets (labour) and household livelihood security of agricultural workers and overall agricultural productivity.

### Denial of basic human rights

Political opposition, the dispersion of the work force and high rates of informal and casual/temporary employment all limit the organization of agricultural workers in trade unions. Agricultural workers are thus often denied the basic human right to freedom of association, i.e. workers' rights to organize themselves and collectively bargain with employers. The restrictions on trade unions within

agriculture also limit the contribution that these organizations can make to sustainable development through industrial change processes, educating and training workers and protecting working environments (see Box 1).

Discrimination among agricultural workers also jeopardizes basic human rights. Women, migrants and indigenous peoples working in agriculture often experience lower wages, poorer employment conditions and higher rates of poverty and HIV/AIDS infection.

Forced labour is also higher in agriculture than in other sectors.

### Poor employment conditions

Wages in the agricultural sector are low and do not necessarily rise with increased productivity. Social security (e.g. medical insurance and employment protection) is poor and worsening with the increasingly casual nature of agricultural labour. Weak legal frameworks govern employer-employee relationships in agriculture and are difficult to enforce in remote rural areas.

These poor employment conditions result in high rates of poverty, insecure employment, abuse of power by employers/contractors, illegal movement of persons, poor transparency in health and safety reporting, and ultimately in low labour productivity and economic development.

### High rates of child labour

High rates of child labour in agriculture are attributed to high rates of poverty, seasonality of agricultural production with sharp peaks in labour demand, lack of schools, prevalence of piece-rate payments, and weak labour laws. These conditions encourage the use of child labour to meet the household's basic needs.

Some types of work can hinder children's well-being, development and their future livelihoods. Child labour



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can also undermine the bargaining power of adults for higher wages.

## Exclusion

Agricultural workers are often excluded from decision-making processes as they are not always recognized as a distinct group with specific needs and interests, and they are not organized.

Agricultural workers must participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives to achieve positive outcomes for their well-being and maximize their potential to contribute to SARD.

## What are the policy options?

### Livelihood security

- Ensure effective labour markets and promote diversification of rural employment.
- Increase wage-earning employment opportunities for women in rural areas.
- Adopt social protection measures such as employment schemes (e.g. emergency relief or poverty-targeted public works).

### Workplace health and safety

- Promote the adoption of agricultural practices that reduce health and safety risks and hazards for workers (e.g. integrated pest management practices and the use of protective equipment) and consumers (e.g. food safety requirements). This could include education and training programs to build agricultural workers' knowledge and skills.
- Regulate working time while maintaining the flexibility required to manage seasonal and market-related fluctuations in the demand for agricultural labour (ILO Convention 184).
- Consult workers in developing workplace policies to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS and related discrimination (ILO Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS).

- Allow workers to select their own workplace safety representatives (ILO Convention 184).

### Employment conditions and social security

- Ensure conditions for agricultural workers are consistent with national and international labour standards and legislation.
- Maintain a flexible labour market and extend to casual / temporary workers the employment conditions and social security provisions that are provided to permanent workers.
- Establish and enforce minimum wages for agricultural workers and equal pay for men and women.
- Use social protection policies such as pensions and employment schemes to alleviate poverty, reduce vulnerability and ensure that agricultural workers are covered by insurance against death, injury and disease (ILO Convention 184).
- Define new forms of employee-employer relationships predominant in agriculture in

legislation. Ensure that both parties' status, rights and obligations are clear and reinforced in contracts and that workers are protected from exploitation.

- Use codes of conduct, contracts and collective-bargaining agreements to improve working conditions.

### Agricultural workers contribute to SARD by:

- Implementing sustainable agricultural practices
- Maintaining food safety standards
- Maintaining a safe, healthy and environmentally sound workplace
- Providing labour for the agricultural sector.

### Examples of trade unions contributing to SARD:

- Inclusion of sustainability and labour condition clauses in collective bargaining agreements (e.g. *limit to duration of casual employment in Kenya*)
- Inclusion of SARD, food security and sustainable development issues in workplace health and safety programmes (e.g. *The Labour Environmental Alliance Society in Vancouver, Canada on elimination of toxins in the workplace and community*)
- Communication network for raising workers' awareness of SARD (e.g. *The Transport and General Workers' Union and the management of 'mad cow disease' in the UK*)
- Education and training of workers to develop their knowledge and skills relating to SARD (e.g. *Training in Integrated Pest Management (IPM) by the IUF and Global IPM Facility*)
- Coordination with NGOs and civil society groups, producers and the private sector at all stages of the supply chain (e.g. *IUF and the Coordination of Latin American Banana Workers' Unions and multi-national banana company, Chiquita to respect labour standards*)
- Coordination and communication networks at national, regional and international levels (e.g. *IUF and the International Flower Coordination in drafting an international Code of Conduct*).



- Establish a national inspection system to enforce labour laws and conditions.

## Respect for basic human rights

- Enable employers and workers to establish and join their own trade unions (ILO Conventions 11, 87 and 98).
- Support trade unions and other institutions that represent and assist agricultural workers.
- Keep agricultural workplaces free from discrimination against HIV/AIDS sufferers, women, indigenous people and migrants (ILO Conventions 100 and 111) and from forced labour (ILO Conventions 29 and 105).

## Child labour

- Ensure that children engaged in labour have reached the minimum legal age to work (ILO Conventions 138 and 182), that their health and safety are fully protected and the appropriate prior training is provided (ILO Convention 184).

## Participation

- Recognize agricultural workers as a distinct occupational group with specific needs and interests.
- Build the capacity of agricultural workers to produce good quality, safe, affordable food and fibre in a sustainable way.
- Engage workers in identifying and managing the impacts of development projects on labour markets, labour conditions and individual workers.
- Involve agricultural workers and their trade unions in the decision-making processes that affect them.

The inter-linked nature of the disadvantages and barriers experienced by agricultural workers warrants an integrated policy response that incorporates elements of all of these recommendations.

These recommendations are consistent with relevant International

## Guide to International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions

No. 11 – Right of Association (Agriculture) Convention, 1921

No. 29 – Forced Labour Convention, 1930

No. 81 – Labour Inspection Convention, 1947

No. 87 – Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948

No. 98 – Right to Organise and Collectively Bargain Convention, 1949

No. 100 – Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951

No. 105 – Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957

No. 111 – Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958

No. 129 – Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention, 1969

No. 138 – Minimum Age Convention, 1973

No. 182 – Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999

No. 184 – Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention, 2001

Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work

Code of Practice on HIV/AIDS

Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, which are identified in brackets and listed in full at the end of this brief.

## Global commitments

Signatories to the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (1992) have committed to achieving SARD (Chapter 14 of Agenda 21) and to strengthening the role of agricultural workers' unions (Chapter 29). These commitments have been re-enforced in follow-up agreements such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002), the World Food Summit: Five Years Later (2002) and the Millennium Development Goals.

Agriculture and rural development cannot be sustainable unless those employed in agriculture can maintain sustainable livelihoods (i.e. meet their everyday needs), are treated equitably and are guaranteed basic human rights. Agricultural workers can contribute to SARD also through the implementation of sustainable agricultural practices.

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## References

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**FAO, ILO and IUF 2005.** *Agricultural Workers and their Contribution to Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development.* [www.fao.org/docrep/008/af164e/af164e00.htm](http://www.fao.org/docrep/008/af164e/af164e00.htm)

The "SARD and..." Policy Briefs are designed to encourage and assist governments in developing and implementing policies to achieve sustainable agriculture and rural development.

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