



International  
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Organization

# ► Decent work deficits among rural workers

Key findings  
and recommendations  
for trade unions





## ► **Decent work deficits among rural workers**

Key findings and  
recommendations  
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*Decent work deficits among rural workers: Key findings and recommendations for trade unions*

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# Foreword

Just like cities and towns, rural areas contain a variety of economic sectors – both public and private, formal and informal. Moreover, rural areas are home to a significant number of workers, ranging from agricultural labourers on large plantations, smallholder farmers and miners to public servants, such as teachers and healthcare workers. In many countries, particularly in developing economies, a majority of the population live and work in rural areas as producers and consumers of goods and services. The extent to which rural populations and, more specifically, rural workers are consulted during, and integrated into, policy design and implementation says a lot about governments' commitment to the principle of leaving no one behind enshrined in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

This report is a summary of the findings of 16 case studies commissioned by the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) in mid-2021 to examine the situation concerning decent work and existing opportunities for trade union organizing in rural economies in selected countries and economic sectors in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Eastern Europe. It is our hope that the conclusions and recommendations presented here will be a valuable reference for current and future work on the rural economy. The more specific aim of this project was to strengthen trade unions' capacity to work together with governments, employers, and other development partners on addressing

decent work deficits in rural economies especially during a crisis.

The findings of the case studies underlying this synthesis report are a good reminder that workers in rural areas have many aspirations, but that realizing them is a tremendous challenge. Many of these workers are young and left school at an early age with little or no skills training. The transition from education to gainful employment is difficult, if not impossible, for many young people in rural areas. Most rural workers operate in the informal economy, which includes a large proportion of women working as unpaid care workers who have no access to maternity leave and other essential protections. Many young men are employed as seasonal, temporary and migrant workers and do not enjoy the benefits of belonging to a trade union. Additionally, women and children are heavily involved in unpaid family and child labour.

This report shows that decent work deficits are found in every sector studied, and in relation to every substantive element covered by the ILO framework of Decent Work Indicators. The most salient deficits have to do with employment opportunities, adequate pay, stability and security of work, social protection, health and safety, and social dialogue. Other problematic areas are compliance with labour laws and institutional enforcement capacity. Moreover, there are significant concerns about equal treatment and opportunities,

especially for marginalized workers (including female, migrant and domestic workers). Child labour, forced labour and excessive hours of work are still a reality in some countries and sectors.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the reality of the structural problems and development constraints faced by rural areas and economies. As reported in the case studies, governments launched various kinds of social protection programmes in response to the pandemic, including cash transfers, tax relief and in-kind support (for example, through food distribution). However, the impact of these interventions on rural workers was limited and access was especially challenging for those precariously employed. The crisis has confirmed that decent work and living wages are pivotal to the sustenance of economies and to cohesive, peaceful and resilient societies.

Looking forward, this report calls for a comprehensive approach to policymaking, for interagency cooperation, and for multi-stakeholder and multilateral tools in support of development. The economic, development, trade and investment, employment and social protection policies of countries must become more ambitious, as must their frameworks for a just transition to a greener economy and their labour market information systems.

The same applies to the ILO's Decent Work Country Programmes. It is important to move beyond a focus on urban centres and to ensure that employment opportunities are created for people everywhere, and especially for young people in rural areas. Targeted, coordinated, collective, concerted and timely actions to that end must be implemented through social dialogue and collective bargaining.

I thank all our contributors for their invaluable role in the successful completion of this project. In particular, I must thank my ACTRAV colleagues Hilma Mote, Mohammed Mwamadzingo, Sergeyus Glovackas, Amanda Villatoro and Mamadou Square for diligently crafting the conceptual framework behind the research work and coordinating its implementation.

It is my pleasure to invite you to read the report, assimilate the conclusions and act on the recommendations. Join us as we embark on this journey of transformation of the working conditions for workers and the operating environment for their organizations in rural economies across the globe.

**Maria Helena André**

Director

ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV)

*July 2022*

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## Executive summary

The ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) recognizes that rural workers and employers constitute a huge reservoir of often untapped potential in the global economy – one that has not received sufficient attention either internationally or within national development and labour agendas. At its 329th session in March 2017, the Governing Body of the International Labour Office concluded that poverty in emerging and developing countries was

predominantly a rural phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> On average, the share of the population living below the poverty line is two to three times greater in rural areas than in urban ones. In extreme cases, such as Cameroon and Viet Nam, this ratio may be as high as 4.5 to 1.<sup>2</sup> High levels of poverty and informality are persistent features of such economies, as most investments do not strategically target rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

### ► Who reside and work in rural areas?



About **80** per cent

of the world's poor reside in rural areas. Their working lives are often characterized by severe decent work deficits including governance gaps, informality, underdeveloped production systems, limited access to public services and inadequate social protection coverage.

Rural economies also include non-agricultural economic activities in sectors such as mining, manufacturing, utilities, construction, commerce, tourism, transport, and financial, personal and government

services. The poorest rural households often rely on income from wage employment, mostly owing to their lack of access to productive assets that would enable them to succeed in self-employment.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See [International Labour Office \(ILO\), doc GB.329/POL/1](#), which presents the progress in the implementation of the Office strategy for decent work in the rural economy.

<sup>2</sup> ILO, ["Economic Diversification of the Rural Economy"](#), Decent Work in the Rural Economy Policy Guidance Notes, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> ILO, [Work for a Brighter Future – Global Commission on the Future of Work](#), 2019.

<sup>4</sup> See the [ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work](#).

Against this background, the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work (2019) set out to advance decent work in the rural economy by calling on the ILO to focus, inter alia, on “promoting the transition from the informal to the formal economy, while giving due attention to rural areas”.<sup>5</sup>

As the ILO department that ensures that workers’ representatives can effectively participate in the Organization and that the views and concerns of workers are integrated into its activities at all levels, the Bureau for Worker’s Activities (ACTRAV) has prioritized efforts to promote decent work in the rural economy.

In 2003, ACTRAV organized an International Workers’ Symposium on Decent Work in Agriculture. In the conclusions adopted by the symposium, ACTRAV was called upon to implement follow-up activities, including research, seminars and projects, to assist in strengthening the capacity of trade unions to organize and represent agricultural workers, so that they could participate effectively in the promotion of decent work – ideally, through South–South cooperation.

The ACTRAV sub-cluster on the rural economy developed a strategy for 2020–21 to support decent work for rural workers in commercial agri-business supply chains – notably by building the capacity of trade unions to promote employment opportunities for young people in rural areas, collaborating with workers’ organizations to advance rural workers’

inclusion in social dialogue and collective bargaining, and advocating the extension of social protection to all workers in the rural economy.<sup>6</sup>

The COVID-19 crisis has had a devastating impact on rural workers, who were already highly concentrated in informal employment and experiencing decent work deficits before the pandemic. Like previous global economic and financial crises, it has revealed the limitations of the current development paradigm for rural populations and, more specifically, for rural workers. The adoption of a global, regional and national policy and programmatic focus on addressing the root causes and the structural and systemic nature of poverty and unemployment in rural areas and among rural workers cannot be put off further.

To prevent more rural workers and their families from being pushed into insecure forms of employment, it is more imperative than ever that trade unions, employers and governments act quickly and consistently to change and improve the lives and working conditions of rural workers.

## About this initiative

To inform the development of a medium-to long-term strategy for the promotion of decent work in the rural economy, ACTRAV

<sup>5</sup> See the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work, para. II(A)(xiv).

<sup>6</sup> ILO-ACTRAV, *Decent Work in Agriculture* [Labour Education, Nos 131–132], 2003.

commissioned, in mid-2021, 16 case studies covering 15 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Central Asia, and Latin America. The case studies on Armenia, Liberia, Sao Tome and Principe, and Ukraine dealt with the general situation of rural workers. The remaining 12 case studies were sector-specific: floriculture in Bangladesh, banana production in Cameroon and Ecuador, cocoa farming in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, tea production in India and Kenya, coffee production in Ethiopia and Kenya, palm oil production in Indonesia, tobacco farming in Malawi and sugar cane production in the Philippines.

The sectors described vary widely in terms of the scale of enterprises work arrangements (wage labourers, self-employed smallholders using family labour).

A range of different categories of workers – including permanent workers, casual/temporary workers, subcontracted workers and informal workers – were present in most cases. These and other factors, such as pay structures (piece-rate pay versus hourly/monthly wages) and inconsistencies in labour law protections for workers engaged in different types of work, were all found to be associated with different risks and levels of decent work deficits.

### ► Economic activities in the rural economy



The **rural economy** vary widely in terms of the scale of enterprises (large plantations, smallholder farms), ownership structure (state-owned companies, private national companies, multinational corporations).

This summary report synthesizes the findings from the 16 case studies, highlighting workers' experiences, lessons learned and recommendations to help guide ACTRAV's future efforts targeting rural economies, including capacity-building and crisis preparedness work with trade unions.

The report contains chapters on decent work deficits in rural economies and on government and trade union responses to the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on rural work. It also includes recommendations for governments and employers' and workers' organizations on how to promote decent work in rural economies.

## Core findings

### Decent work deficits

Decent work deficits were identified in every sector studied and for every substantive element covered by the ILO framework of Decent Work Indicators. The most salient deficits were in employment opportunities, adequate pay, stability and security of work, safety at work, social protection and social dialogue. Another significant concern in most of the countries and sectors studied was equality of opportunity and treatment, especially for female workers. Child labour, forced labour and excessive hours were flagged in most of the countries studied. Thus, child labour was identified in agriculture in Armenia, cocoa farming in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, palm oil production in Indonesia, banana production in Ecuador, tobacco farming in Malawi, tea production in Kenya and sugar cane production in the Philippines. Issues related to forced labour were reported for tobacco farming in Malawi, sugar cane production in the Philippines, palm oil production in Indonesia, tea production in India and cocoa farming in Côte d'Ivoire.

**Deficits in employment opportunities** were reported in almost all sectors. In some sectors this was due to a lack of job growth, but in most cases such deficits stemmed from a high level of informality, including the prevalence of both informal enterprises (typically smallholder farms) and informal or "casual" day labourers (hired without written contracts or on a daily or temporary basis). Women were found to be engaged

disproportionately in informal work across all sectors.

**Deficits in adequate earnings and productive work** were reported in all the countries and sectors studied. In many cases, wages were reported to be at or below the national minimum wage (Armenia, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Indonesia, the tea sector in Kenya, and Malawi). In sectors in which wages are close to or above the national minimum wage, the latter is considerably below a living wage (as in Cameroon's banana sector), and there are also countries, such as Ethiopia, without a national minimum wage.

Factors such as the prevalence of seasonal and irregular work and uncompensated family labour can make it challenging to evaluate wage levels in rural economies.

**Decent working time deficits** related to excessive hours of work and to working more hours than agreed were reported in six of the countries (Armenia, Ecuador, Ghana, Indonesia, Malawi and the Philippines). Particularly in agriculture, low remuneration and piece-rate payment schemes were found to prompt workers to have excessively long hours of work or to bring in family members, including underage children and spouses, to increase the household's income. The additional labour and hours incurred are often not remunerated.

None of the case studies explicitly addressed **deficits in balancing work, family and**

**personal life.** However, the studies on Armenia, Bangladesh and Sao Tome and Principe indicated that rural workers in the sectors of interest did not have access to parental leave, and that female workers were denied the right to maternity leave. Both these benefits are virtually never available to subcontracted and temporarily employed workers. Several case studies noted that the dual burden of agricultural work and family and caregiving responsibilities left many rural women with hardly any time to take care of themselves properly.

The Ukraine study, for example, points out that “working conditions for women in rural areas are characterized by women being under constant strain; they have practically no time to rest, with their daily workloads exceeding 15 hours.”

As for **work that should be abolished, child labour** was identified as a concern in seven sectors (agriculture in Armenia, cocoa farming in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, palm oil production in Indonesia, banana production in Ecuador, tobacco farming in Malawi, tea production in Kenya and the sugar industry in the Philippines). These are mostly sectors characterized by smallholder production. In some sectors, children engage in uncompensated family labour, assisting their parents on smallholder family farms or in other types of small business. In other cases, non-family child labour arrangements were reported. Hazardous child labour – a worst form of child labour – was frequently noted, particularly in agriculture. In Armenia, for example, 95 per cent of the children engaged in hazardous work are employed in agriculture.

#### ► Hazardous work and child labour



### Up to **95 per cent** of the children engaged in hazardous work are employed in agriculture

Hazardous child labour – a worst form of child labour – was frequently noted, particularly in agriculture. Both hazardous work and child labour were common in sectors characterized by smallholder production. Often, children engage in uncompensated family labour, assisting their parents on smallholder family farms or in other types of small business. In other cases, non-family child labour arrangements were reported.



Children are also involved in hazardous work in the cocoa sectors in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, the palm oil sector in Indonesia and the tobacco sector in Malawi. Common production practices, such as piece-rate payment schemes and seasonal labour migration, which can lead to relations of debt bondage between migrant workers and employers, were associated with a heightened risk of child labour, as parents put their children to work to increase earnings or to meet debt obligations. Issues related to **forced labour** were reported in five of the sectors studied (tobacco farming in Malawi, sugar production in the Philippines, palm oil production in Indonesia, tea farming in India and cocoa farming in Côte d'Ivoire). These issues had mainly to do with induced indebtedness and workers' multiple dependencies on employers.

**Deficits in the stability and security of work, and in social protection** were widely reported. The most common concerns were about the stability and security of work, casual and temporary work arrangements (sometimes related to seasonality of production), and subcontracting. The instability of rural work is exacerbated by the exclusion of casual, temporary, daily, seasonal and subcontracted workers from many national social protection schemes and employer-provided benefits.

**Deficits in equal opportunities and treatment in employment** revolved primarily around issues of gender-based discrimination in rural work. Across most of the rural sectors examined, women are disproportionately represented in the most

precarious positions, including informal, casual and temporary work, and unpaid family labour. Female workers also tend to hold low-paying, low skilled jobs and to earn less than their male counterparts, and they may be subjected to workplace harassment and abuse. In sectors where smallholders are present, men often have greater control over the means of production owing to gendered social/cultural customs or land titling practices. In general, women have less access to justice and redress than men, as reflected, for example, in the low representation of women in trade unions. Gender inequalities are compounded in many cases by the fact that senior leadership positions in communities, workplaces and trade unions are often held by men.

The case studies on Bangladesh, Cameroon, Ecuador, Ghana, Indonesia and the Philippines mentioned chemical exposure due to the use of pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals in agricultural production as a core **challenge in terms of ensuring a safe work environment**. Exposure to agricultural chemicals poses a particular risk to children, and to pregnant and lactating agricultural workers; it may also have a detrimental effect on the reproductive and non-productive health of both women and men. Lack of access to personal protective equipment (PPE), injuries and physical deformities as a result of carrying heavy loads and using sharp tools, exposure to heat, venomous reptiles such as snakes, and other environmental hazards were all noted as frequent occupational safety and health issues for rural workers. The unsafe working conditions of children in the cocoa sector in Côte d'Ivoire are of particular concern.

In violation of national law, children working in that sector are involved in applying pesticides, clearing fields using dangerous manual tools, and handling heavy loads.

Deficits regarding social dialogue were reported in 13 of the 15 countries (Armenia, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Malawi, the Philippines, Sao Tome and Principe, and Ukraine). In the rural sectors in many countries, trade unions are either non-existent or face major barriers to accessing workers' organizations, such as farmers' groups and cooperatives.

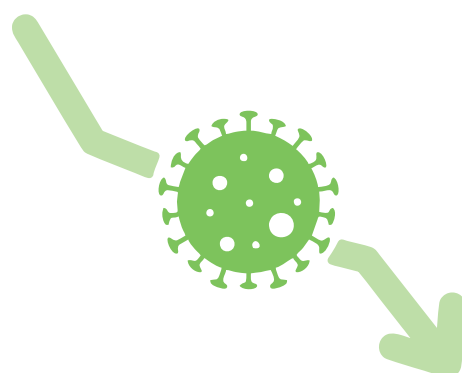
In some countries, legal constraints, the geographical dispersity of workers and other structural factors inhibit the organization of workers into trade unions. In countries where unions do exist, various issues were reported, such as their effectiveness or accessibility for rural workers being undermined by an

inadequate legal environment for union operations. Social dialogue and worker representation for female, informal, casual, seasonal, temporary and self-employed workers, along with the representation of smallholders, were identified as areas of particular concern in the case studies.

## The COVID-19 pandemic and rural work

The COVID-19 pandemic had wide-ranging effects on the rural economic sectors covered by the case studies. Some key differences emerged in terms of the severity and nature of its impact on rural economies in comparison with urban economies. While much work in urban areas slowed down or stopped altogether because of government imposed restrictions on movement and gatherings, the lower worker population densities in rural areas, the fact that agricultural processes take place outdoors and the designation of agriculture as "essential" helped to cushion some rural industries from the harshest impacts of COVID-19-related public health regulations.

### ► COVID-19 impacts



The impact was less pronounced in export oriented agricultural sectors characterized by large-scale production of food items such as bananas, tea and palm oil. Sectors comprised predominantly of smallholders experienced a wide range of impacts that ultimately resulted in exacerbated decent work deficits, including delayed or non-payment of wages. In the case of Sao Tome and Principe, **the pandemic caused a 39 per cent drop in income for rural workers; 7 per cent of the rural population lost their jobs, and poverty increased by 20 per cent.**

In contrast, the Bangladeshi floricultural sector, which produces mainly flowers for domestic use in political and social events (most of which were prohibited at the height of the pandemic), suffered a dramatic fall in demand with ensuing reductions in prices and farmers' incomes, leading to delays in and defaulting on the payment of wages to workers. Sectors made up predominantly of smallholders often experienced a wide range of impacts that ultimately resulted in exacerbated decent work deficits.

▶ In the coffee sector in Ethiopia, for example, there were widespread labour shortages, transport delays and contract cancellations. In Sao Tome and Principe, the pandemic caused a 39 per cent drop in income for rural workers; 7 per cent of the rural population lost their jobs, and poverty increased by 20 per cent.

The most significant impacts of the pandemic reported for rural workers had to do with deficits in employment opportunities and adequate earnings. The stability and security of work were also affected in several sectors, as were safety at work and social dialogue. Social protection was an issue of concern in five sectors (palm oil production in Indonesia, tobacco farming in Malawi, cocoa farming in Ghana, banana production in Cameroon, and agriculture as a whole in Armenia and Sao Tome and Principe), while there were problems related to equal opportunities and treatment and decent working time in four sectors in six countries (Armenia, Ecuador, Ghana, Indonesia, Malawi and the Philippines).

▶ In the cocoa sectors in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, it was found that child labour increased during the pandemic, as school closures and the reduced availability of adult migrant labour prompted parents to put their children to work on the cocoa fields.

No impact on forced labour dynamics was reported in the case studies. This may reflect the difficulty of documenting the risk of forced labour, rather than the absence of such dynamics.

▶ In many of the sectors, women bore the brunt of the pandemic's impact, either in terms of lack of access to stable employment because of layoffs and reduced working hours (for example, in floriculture in Bangladesh and palm oil production in Indonesia), or in terms of dramatic increases in working hours due to a greater childcare burden as a result of school closures.

In some cases, the increase in working hours among women was due to local labour shortages, as in cocoa farming in Ghana, tea production in both India and Kenya, and the agricultural sector as a whole in Ukraine.

## Government responses

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, governments attempted to halt the spread of the disease while supporting

their countries' economies during the global economic downturn. They restricted gatherings, including gatherings in workplaces, and imposed lockdowns that limited the mobility of people, goods and services. Plummeting demand for certain products reduced labour demand in some agricultural sectors. In other cases, sectors producing food products deemed "essential", such as bananas, were exempted from COVID-19-related restrictions and weathered the pandemic relatively well.

Governments also launched tailored social protection programmes, including cash transfers, tax relief and in-kind support (for example, through food distribution), but their impact on rural workers was limited and access was especially problematic for those precariously employed.

Economic support measures and stimulus packages were also adopted to help farmers but, again, their impact on the sectors studied was limited. Typically, sectors with larger-scale producers were more easily able to access these government programmes. Some countries also amended their labour laws to support businesses, but in certain cases this was accompanied by an alarming erosion of workers' rights. Overall, the effectiveness of government measures was limited when it came to reaching the most vulnerable rural sectors and workers.

## Trade union responses

Trade unions leaped into action to support their members and, more broadly, local communities. Unions across the sectors studied struggled to continue their ordinary activities, but they often still managed to undertake new initiatives addressing the impacts of the pandemic.

In addition to engaging in lobbying, advocacy and bipartite and tripartite negotiations, they raised their members' awareness about COVID-19 related hygiene practices (such as handwashing and the disinfection of surfaces) and provided them with PPE.

However, the ability of unions to carry out their usual functions and effectively respond to the challenges created by the pandemic was limited, in particular owing to mobility restrictions (lockdowns) and the resistance of employers, who took advantage of the situation to counteract union mobilization and organizing. In rural economies in which unions were already minimally active before the pandemic, workers were left even more unprotected.

## Recommendations

A series of recommendations for future initiatives aimed at overcoming decent work deficits in rural economies were presented in the case studies.

### ► Strengthen labour administration in rural economies



Unions called for the enforcement of existing laws through more comprehensive inspection and monitoring, reforms to national legal frameworks to support the protection of rural workers, the formalization of informal sectors and workers, the ratification of relevant ILO Conventions and adherence to international labour standards, and the integration of rural economic sectors and diverse categories of rural workers into social dialogue processes, both in law and in practice.

Workers and other key informants interviewed for the case studies also recommended strengthening the capacity of trade unions and other grassroots workers' and smallholders' associations; enhancing tripartite and bipartite processes to ensure that the voices of rural workers are considered in decisions

impacting on their welfare; strengthening crisis preparedness and social protection in rural economic sectors, and supporting smallholder farmers through improved access to credit, land and other resources necessary for them to engage in production and employment creation.

### ► Improve trade union presence and productive capacities in rural economies



Strengthening the capacity of trade unions and other grassroots workers' and smallholders' associations; enhancing tripartite and bipartite processes to ensure that the voices of rural workers are considered in decisions impacting on their welfare; strengthening crisis preparedness and access to social protection, and supporting smallholder farmers through improved access to credit, land and other resources necessary for them to engage in productive and sustainable employment opportunities.

It would also be valuable to look further into decent work deficits in non-agricultural sectors of rural economies.

### ► Non-agricultural work in the rural economy



**non-agricultural sectors** in rural economies and the unique challenges and needs of rural workers facing unequal treatment and opportunities (especially women, workers from racial or ethnic minority groups, workers with disabilities, migrants and indigenous workers), and of those precariously employed (informal, casual and temporary workers and day labourers) must become a priority for the ILO.

Overall, the analysis suggests that the future ILO-ACTRAV strategy on the promotion of decent work in the rural economy should prioritize the following areas:

#### Additional research and policy analysis

Targeted research and analysis on the issues highlighted above would facilitate the design of programmes that effectively advance the Decent Work Agenda in the countries and sectors studied and in rural economies in general. Additional desk and/or field research in these countries and sectors could be valuable as well, particularly if future programmatic engagement by ILO is envisaged there.

The cross-cutting analysis carried out for this synthesis report also highlighted a general need for further research to design effective strategies for promoting decent work among rural workers. Additional studies are required on the root causes of decent work deficits in rural economies, on what decent work actually means for smallholders and other non-waged workers, and on the perspectives of rural workers in sectors with low levels of union activity.

#### Strategic engagements with national governments

A “rural lens” to strategies for policy advocacy and policy framework development must be applied. The policy advocacy engagements must explicitly consider the impacts of general economic, development and more especially labour

and employment policies on rural workers. An integrated policy approach that put decent work for rural workers at the centre of sustainable development is crucial. Some stakeholders specifically requested support from the ILO in lobbying for and encouraging positive policy changes to protect rural workers' rights. The oversight role of trade unions must be strengthened to enable them to engage more pro-actively in the promotion of rural workers' rights.

### Support for unions and other workers' organizations that are active in rural economies

Given that workers in rural economies are often less organized than those in urban settings, the ILO could play an important role in strengthening the organized labour movement in rural economies. Existing unions active in rural economies should be proactively identified and supported through capacity-building and by promoting their inclusion in social dialogue and collective bargaining mechanisms with the government and employers.

In countries and sectors in which rural workers are not formally organized in unions, ACTRAV must actively facilitate unionization, particularly where informal workers' organizations such as farmer groups or cooperatives already exist.

The mapping of existing unions and other kinds of workers' organizations that are active in rural areas would help to inform the development of country-specific strategies in that respect.

In view of the unique support needs of seasonal farm-workers who move from crop to crop or from farm to farm the ILO strategy must specifically focus on finding ways to promote the organization of this vulnerable subgroup of rural workers.

### Support for smallholder farmers

Much work in rural economies is carried out by smallholder farmers and their families. Although such workers are typically not formal employees, they make up a substantial proportion of the rural workforce and are subject to many of the same decent work deficits as hired workers. The ILO could develop a strategy to address the decent work-related needs of this group of workers through engagement, capacity-building, awareness-raising and other efforts focused on rural civil society organizations, farmer groups, cooperatives and other rural organizations. Additional research and the conceptualization of an effective approach for the ILO in such contexts would be valuable.





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# Chapter 1

## Introduction and methodology

# Chapter 1: Introduction and methodology

## Background

In 2003, ACTRAV organized an International Workers' Symposium on Decent Work in Agriculture. In the conclusions adopted by the symposium, ACTRAV was called upon to assist trade unions in organizing agricultural workers and participating effectively in the promotion of decent work, ideally through South-South cooperation. This included a mandate to conduct research, hold seminars and implement projects aimed at promoting decent work in rural economies.

Building on the previous results and to inform the development of future strategies for the promotion of decent work in rural economies, ACTRAV commissioned, in mid-

2021, 16 case studies covering 15 countries across Africa, Asia, Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America. The case studies on Armenia, Liberia, Sao Tome and Principe, and Ukraine dealt with the general situation of rural workers. The remaining 12 case studies were sector-specific: floriculture in Bangladesh, banana production in Cameroon and Ecuador, cocoa farming in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, tea production in India and Kenya, coffee production in Ethiopia and Kenya, palm oil production in Indonesia, tobacco farming in Malawi and sugar cane production in the Philippines.

ACTRAV subsequently prepared this summary report on the findings from the case studies to inform policymaking







and trade union interventions. The report synthesizes the findings from the 16 case studies, highlighting workers' experiences, lessons learned and recommendations to help guide ACTRAV's future efforts directed at rural economies, including capacity-building and crisis preparedness work with trade unions. The report contains chapters on decent work deficits in rural economies and on government and trade union responses to the impacts of COVID-19 on rural work. It also includes recommendations for governments and employers' and workers' organizations on how to promote decent work in rural economies.

## Methodology and limitations

This synthesis report was prepared on the basis of a review of the 16 original case studies, with no additional research or verification of the findings contained in them. The synthesis was performed by collating and analysing findings from the case studies in a matrix and grouping them into roughly 35 thematic subcategories corresponding to the ten substantive elements of decent work. The findings from each case study were used to determine whether (and which) decent work deficits were present in a given sector. Categories for pre-COVID-19 (baseline) decent work deficits and the impacts of the crisis were also created.

Most of the case studies (9 out of 16) focused on African countries (Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi and Sao Tome and Principe). Four studies dealt with Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and the Philippines) two focused on Europe and Central Asia (Armenia and Ukraine) and one covered Latin America (Ecuador). Four case studies considered rural workers in general (Armenia, Liberia, Sao Tome and Principe, and Ukraine). There were two studies each on banana production (Cameroon and Ecuador), cocoa farming (Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana), coffee production (Ethiopia and Kenya), and tea production (India and Kenya) and one each on tobacco farming (Malawi), sugar cane production (Philippines), palm oil production (Indonesia) and floriculture (Bangladesh).

Two charts were produced to illustrate the sectors with decent work deficits, and to indicate in relation to which substantive elements of the ILO framework of Decent Work Indicators these occurred: one chart for pre-pandemic data (see table 1), and the other for findings during the pandemic (see table 2). Subsequently, qualitative analysis of the commonalities and differences between the sectors was conducted. Trends and patterns in decent work deficits were analysed, especially regarding the structure of a given sector and the type of work involved (that is, informal versus formal, temporary versus permanent).

The case studies employed a variety of methodologies. Some included both qualitative and quantitative analysis of interview and survey data from research conducted with workers in the relevant sectors. Others relied exclusively on secondary data, providing reviews of the

existing literature. Among the case studies involving research with human participants, the type of data, the questions asked, the number of participants, and the type of interviews or surveys conducted varied widely across the countries.

For example, the Sao Tome and Principe the study included data from 218 interviews conducted in 21 localities in the country.<sup>7</sup> In Ukraine, the data were derived from 15 telephone surveys with the members of two unions, and from five in-depth interviews and 137 questionnaires.<sup>8</sup> In Kenya, 50-minute interviews were conducted with 13 farmers and 33 workers.

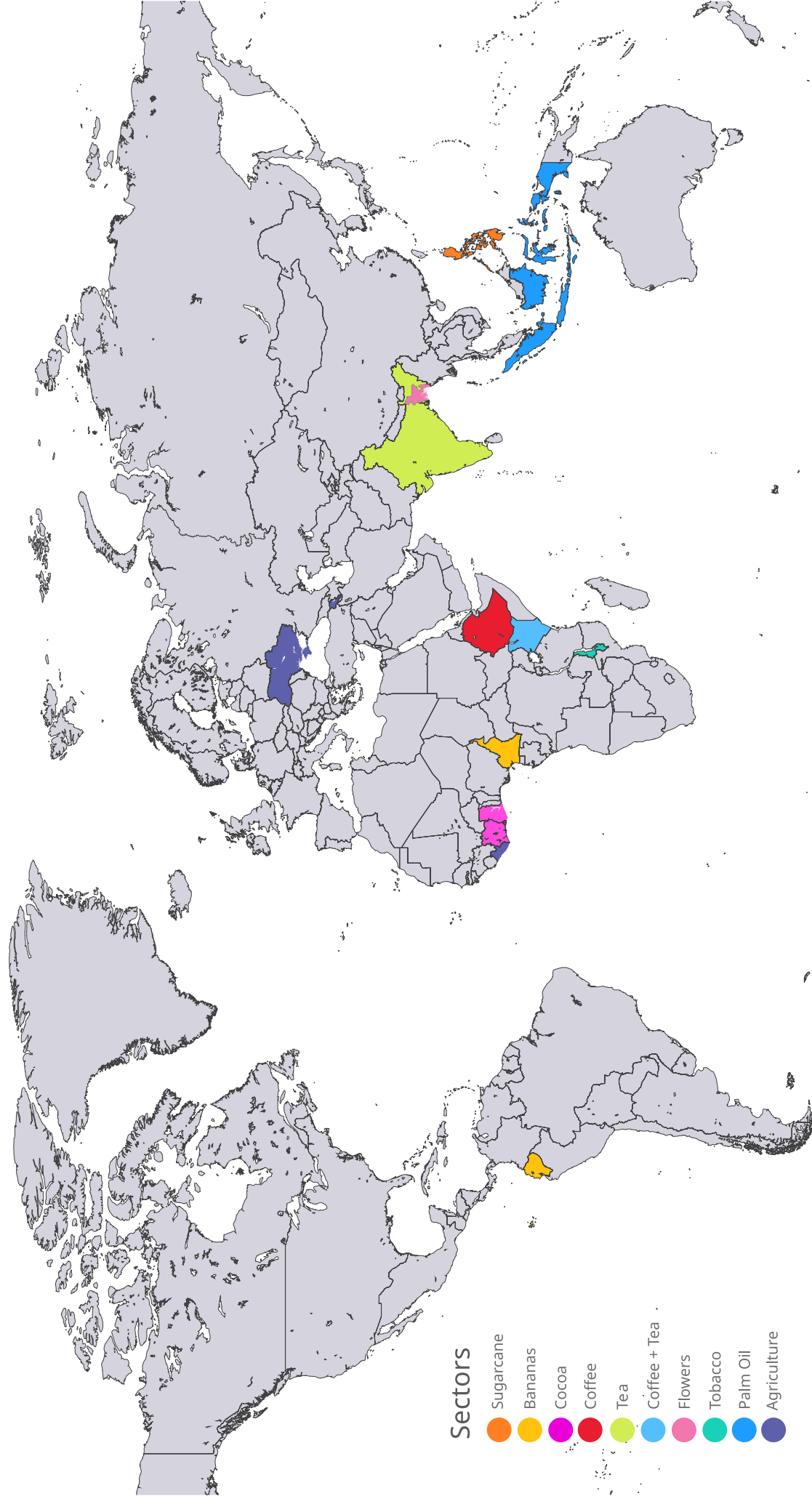
The Ghana and Indonesia studies were both based mainly on secondary data, but also drew on interviews with union representatives and other stakeholders.<sup>9</sup> The structure of the reports and the topics addressed also varied.

<sup>7</sup> Case study on Sao Tome and Principe, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Case study on Ukraine, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Case study on Ghana, p. 4; case study on Indonesia, p. 3.

Figure 1. Countries and rural economic sectors covered by the case studies









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## Chapter 2

Decent work deficits in  
rural economies



## Chapter 2: Decent work deficits in rural economies

This chapter examines the decent work deficits reported in the 16 case studies as existing before the COVID-19 pandemic with reference to each of the ten substantive elements of decent work. The data in the case studies are mainly qualitative because

of the focus on workers' experience of decent work deficits. Therefore, this report uses qualitative interpretations rather than the quantitative statistical indicators. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on decent work is discussed in Chapter 3.



**Table 1. General findings on decent work deficits before the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>10</sup>**

Country	Sector	Employment opportunities	Adequate earnings and productive work	Decent working time	Work that should be abolished		Stability and security of work	Equal opportunities and treatment in employment	Safe work environment	Social protection	Social dialogue
					Child labour	Forced labour					
Armenia	Agriculture	•	•	•	•			•	•	•	•
Bangladesh	Flowers	•	•				•	•	•	•	•
Cameroon	Bananas		•				•		•	•	•
Côte d'Ivoire	Cocoa	•	•		•	•	•		•	•	
Ecuador	Bananas		•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•
Ethiopia	Coffee	•					•			•	•
Ghana	Cocoa		•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•
India	Tea					•	•	•	•	•	•
Indonesia	Palm oil	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Kenya	Coffee	•	•				•		•		
Kenya	Tea	•	•		•		•				
Liberia	Agriculture	•						•			
Malawi	Tobacco	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
Philippines	Sugar	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Sao Tome and Principe	Agriculture	•					•			•	•
Ukraine	Agriculture	•	•				•	•		•	•

Note: A dot indicates a reported deficit.

Sector is on the US Department of Labor List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor, but child labour was not reported in the case study.<sup>11</sup>

Sector is reported as having forced labour in the case study but is not on the US Department of Labor List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> The balancing of work, family and personal life was not included in the table because none of the case studies explicitly mentioned it as an issue, and the discussion of maternity leave (one of the key criteria of this substantive element of decent work) was inconsistent.

<sup>11</sup> US Department of Labor, [2020 List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor](#), 2020, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> US Department of Labor, [2020 List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor](#), 2020, p. 23.

## Employment opportunities

Deficits in employment opportunities were reported in almost all sectors. In some sectors this was due to a lack of job growth, but in most cases such deficits stemmed from a high level of informality, including the prevalence of both informal enterprises (typically smallholder farms) and informal or “casual” day labourers (hired without written contracts or on a daily or temporary basis). Small holdings were the principal mode of production in the agricultural sectors in Armenia, Liberia and Sao Tome and Principe, and in cocoa farming in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana. In these contexts, informal (typically unpaid) work by family and community members was a primary source of labour. Paid informal work was reported in Indonesian palm oil production, the Kenyan coffee and tea sectors, the Philippine sugar industry, Ukrainian agriculture and the Bangladeshi flower sector, all of which are characterized by a mix of smallholders and medium and large producers. Informal work in these sectors involved some degree of family labour on smallholder farms, as well as casual labourers on larger farms.

In some sectors, such as Indonesian palm oil production, workers engage in multiple forms of labour to make ends meet, including both formal work on plantations and casual labour in the same or other sectors.<sup>13</sup>

In floriculture in Bangladesh, most labour is informal and workers tend to work for multiple employers in any given month. Informal flower workers do not go through a formal hiring process and they are not provided with identification cards or formal contracts (a practice contravening Bangladeshi law). Additionally, they are sometimes hired through labour brokers referred to as sardars, who bring workers to different farms in need of workers.<sup>14</sup>

While informality was not reported as a concern among permanent workers in the Cameroonian banana and Indian tea sectors, which are the only two sectors studied that are characterized by highly formalized, large plantation-style production units, informal employment was an issue of concern among temporary workers, especially those hired by third-party recruiters.

Women are disproportionately engaged in informal work across all sectors. In Ethiopia, both women and forcibly displaced population groups are disproportionately employed in the informal economy and in informal work arrangements. For women, this is especially pronounced in the health and social care, service and manufacturing sectors.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Case study on Indonesia p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Case study on Bangladesh, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> Case study on Ethiopia, p. 10.

## Adequate earnings and productive work

Deficits in adequate earnings and productive work were reported in all the countries and sectors studied.

In many sectors, wages were reported to be at or below the national minimum wage (Armenia, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Indonesia, the tea sector in Kenya, and Malawi). In sectors in which wages are close to or above the national minimum wage, it is important to note that the minimum wage is far below a living wage (as in Cameroon's banana sector). There are also countries, such as Ethiopia, without a national minimum wage.

Other factors may complicate the analysis of decent wages, including seasonal

and irregular work schedules, and uncompensated and family labour. In Ghana, for example, the reported wage for cocoa farmworkers was about 30 Ghanaian cedis (US\$4.90) per day, which is substantially higher than the national daily minimum wage of 12.53 cedis (US\$2.05). However, the case study notes that these payments are sporadic over the year, meaning that workers' average annual income is much lower.<sup>16</sup>

A similar dynamic exists in the Philippine sugar sector, where farmworkers are employed for only six months a year; outside that period, they depend on loans from their employers to cover their living costs.<sup>17</sup> Adequate earnings deficits were also related to delayed payments in the Bangladeshi flower sector and to wage arrears in the Ukrainian agricultural sector.

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<sup>16</sup> Case study on Ghana, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Case study on the Philippines, p. 26.



## Decent working time

Decent working time deficits related to excessive hours of work and working more hours than agreed were reported in six of the countries (Armenia, Ecuador, Ghana, Indonesia, Malawi and the Philippines). In the agricultural sector in Armenia, for example, the rural workers interviewed reported working longer hours than they had originally agreed, sometimes without compensation.<sup>18</sup> In Indonesian palm oil

production and Malawian tobacco farming, the remuneration for work is so low that workers are induced to work excessive hours.<sup>19</sup> In Malawi, low piece-rate pay sometimes results in tobacco workers bringing in their spouses (especially wives) and children as uncompensated helpers to increase their output and thereby their wages.<sup>20</sup> Working hours in Indonesia, the Philippines and Ghana (for smallholder farmers) may be as high as 10 to 12 hours per day.<sup>21</sup>

- ▶ “Working conditions for women in rural areas are characterized by women being under constant strain; they have practically no time to rest, with their daily workloads exceeding 15 hours, which is against all physiological norms. They have no time remaining nor do they have opportunities to take care of their health. Conditions that would allow them to combine maternity with professional development/career growth are lacking. Rural women perform domestic chores, raise children, and take care of them and the elderly members of the family.”<sup>22</sup>

## Balancing work, family and personal life

None of the case studies explicitly addressed deficits in balancing work, family and personal life. However, the studies on Armenia, Bangladesh and Sao Tome and Principe indicated that rural workers in the sectors of focus did not have access to maternity leave.

The Ukraine report notes that the burden of agricultural work and family and caregiving responsibilities left rural women with hardly any time to take care of themselves properly.

Maternity leave is available to rural workers in the Cameroonian banana sector and the Philippine sugar cane sector. While permanent workers employed directly by banana plantations in Cameroon reportedly have access to maternity leave, this is not the case with subcontracted temporary workers.<sup>23</sup> The Philippines recently passed a new law that extends maternity leave, but there has been pushback from employers, some of whom claim that it will result in discrimination in the hiring of women.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Case study on Armenia, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. 13; case study on Malawi, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Case study on Malawi, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. 13; case study on the Philippines, p. 36; case study on Ghana, p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Case study on Ukraine, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Case study on Cameroon, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> Case study on the Philippines, p. 26.

## Work that should be abolished

### Child labour

Child labour was identified as a concern in seven sectors (agriculture in Armenia, cocoa farming in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, palm oil production in Indonesia, banana production in Ecuador, tobacco farming in Malawi, tea production in Kenya and the sugar industry in the Philippines). Apart from the Philippines and Indonesia, the sectors in which child labour was reported are characterized predominantly by smallholder production. In some sectors, children engage in uncompensated family labour, assisting their parents on smallholder family farms or in small businesses. In other cases, non-family child labour arrangements were reported.

Some of the work in which children are engaged is described as hazardous work, in which case it may qualify as a worst form of child labour. In Armenia, though all agricultural work is not designated as inherently hazardous, many children are engaged in hazardous agricultural work. Overall, 95 per cent of children engaged in hazardous work in the country are employed in agriculture, and a higher proportion of young girls can be found in hazardous jobs in agriculture.<sup>25</sup> Children are also involved in hazardous work in the cocoa sectors in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire. In Ghana, children aged 5–17 years make up 44 per cent of farm labour in cocoa-growing areas, and almost all (97 per cent) of these children are involved in hazardous work.<sup>26</sup> In Côte d'Ivoire, the share of child labour in cocoa farming increased from 32 to 48 per cent between 2008 and 2018, and over the same



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<sup>25</sup> Case study on Armenia, pp. 5 and 17.

<sup>26</sup> Case study on Ghana, p. 10.

period the rate of children's involvement in hazardous work also increased, namely from 28 to 37 per cent.<sup>27</sup> Hazardous work is also performed by children in Indonesian palm oil production. Child workers in the sector carry heavy loads and are exposed to chemicals in the work environment.<sup>28</sup> Malawian child tobacco workers also engage in hazardous work. The tobacco sector in Malawi is on the list of the worst forms of child labour maintained by the US Department of Labor.<sup>29</sup>

Child labour is exacerbated by production practices in certain sectors. Piece-rate pay arrangements (pay per quantity produced or harvested) can encourage the use of child labour, as is the case in the Indonesian palm oil industry.<sup>30</sup>

In the Philippines, child labour is intertwined with patterns of debt bondage owing to the seasonal nature of sugar cane production and the predominant residential arrangements of workers in the sector. Philippine sugar cane

workers typically work only six months a the year, but after that period they continue to reside on the farm and are dependent on it for almost all their families' basic needs. This arrangement can result in child labour, as workers' children, especially girls, may be sent to the landowner's house to work as unpaid domestic helpers. The children's labour is in this way used to pay back part of the family's debt to the landowner or employer.<sup>31</sup>

In Côte d'Ivoire, smallholders may recruit child workers from outside the family through crossborder migration, which in some cases may be linked to human trafficking.<sup>32</sup> Arrangements like these may meet the definition of "worst forms of child labour" if they are indeed associated with debt bondage, trafficking, and coercion or involuntary work.<sup>33</sup>

The US Department of Labor includes Kenyan coffee and Liberian rubber on its list of goods produced by child labour,<sup>34</sup> though child labour was not mentioned in the case studies on these countries and sectors.<sup>35</sup>

An ILO report from 2008 on decent work deficits in the Kenyan coffee sector noted that while child labour had been widespread on coffee farms during the previous decade, awareness-raising campaigns and improved policies on child labour had resulted in a significant decrease in child labour on larger estates in recent years. However, the report noted that piece-rate pay continued to incentivize the participation of children as a way of helping to improve their parents' earnings.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Case study on Côte d'Ivoire, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Case study on Malawi, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Case study on the Philippines, p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> Case study on Côte d'Ivoire, p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Article 3 of the [Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 \(No. 182\)](#).

<sup>34</sup> US Department of Labor, 2020 List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor, 2020, p. 22.

<sup>35</sup> Case study on Kenya (coffee); case study on Liberia

<sup>36</sup> Leopold M. Mureithi, "[Coffee in Kenya: Some Challenges for Decent Work](#)", ILO Sectoral Activities Programme Working Paper No. 260, 2008.



## Forced labour and debt bondage



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Issues related to forced labour were reported in tobacco farming in Malawi, the sugar industry in the Philippines, palm oil production in Indonesia, tea production in India and cocoa farming in Côte d'Ivoire. In India, Malawi and the Philippines, such concerns revolve primarily around indebtedness. In India, for example, employers may offer workers high-interest loans that plunge them into a cycle of induced indebtedness.<sup>37</sup> In Malawi, smallholder farmers are also prone to becoming trapped in a vicious cycle of indebtedness because of the contract farming system, labour costs and loans.<sup>38</sup>

As noted above, farmworkers in the sugar industry in the Philippines depend on the patronage of the landlord or employer during the off-season. They accumulate debt to the landowner, who meets all the basic needs of the workers and their families, including the costs of festival celebrations, marriages, baptisms, school fees, transport and even burials. During this time, children, especially girls, may be sent to the landowner's home to work and pay back part of the debt incurred.<sup>39</sup> In Indonesia, compulsory labour may also be a concern.<sup>40</sup> The possible trafficking of child workers in the cocoa sector in Côte d'Ivoire described above is another decent work deficit related to forced labour.

<sup>37</sup> Case study on India, p. 18.

<sup>38</sup> Case study on Malawi, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Case study on the Philippines, p. 26. Sugar in the Philippines is not listed by the US Department of Labor among the goods produced by forced labour, but it is listed among those produced by child labour. US Department of Labor, 2020 List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor, 2020, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> This is mentioned but not explained on page 10 of the case study on Indonesia.

## Stability and security of work

Deficits in the stability and security of work were reported in 13 of the 16 sectors covered by the case studies (the three exceptions were agriculture in Armenia and Liberia, and tobacco farming in Malawi).<sup>41</sup>

The most common concerns related to stability and security of work were seasonality of production, casual and temporary work arrangements (sometimes a consequence of seasonality), and subcontracting.

In Bangladesh, flower workers who are unable to work enough hours with a single employer seek to work for multiple employers at the same time in order to try to earn a steadier income, and are often hired through informal, unregistered labour brokers called sardars.<sup>42</sup> The Kenyan tea sector has seen recent increases in subcontracting and casualization.<sup>43</sup> The Indian tea sector employs large numbers of temporary, casual and day labourers.<sup>44</sup> In some cases, official government statistics and employer records may not capture casual, subcontracted and family workers.<sup>45</sup>

Market structure and fluctuation also influence the stability of work. In Côte d'Ivoire, the volatility of cocoa prices increases farmers' vulnerability to poverty and keeps them in a situation of permanent precariousness.<sup>46</sup>

Stability of employment is particularly problematic in the Indonesian palm oil sector, where the increased participation of smallholder producers in the industry has resulted in diminished stability and security of waged labour on plantations.

Permanent palm oil plantation workers in Indonesia are being replaced with contract and temporary workers, and some firms have begun outsourcing labour (hiring workers through subcontractors) to avoid responsibility for potential violations of workers' rights. Instability of work in the sector is particularly severe for workers designated as "non-core" (that is, maintenance workers and fertilizer/pesticide applicators), who are denied permanent status because of this classification. Women predominate in these "permanently temporary" non-core positions.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>41</sup> In line with the ILO's guidance on the measurement of decent work, informality was not included as an indicator of decent work deficits in relation to the stability and security of work. Instead, it is considered under employment opportunities. See ILO, "Measurement of Decent Work Based on Guidance Received at the Tripartite Meeting of Experts on the Measurement of Decent Work (September 2008)", 2008.

<sup>42</sup> Case study on Bangladesh, p. 10.

<sup>43</sup> Case study on Kenya tea, p.4.

<sup>44</sup> Case study on India, pp. 15–17.

<sup>45</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Case study on Côte d'Ivoire, p. 13.

<sup>47</sup> Case study on Indonesia, pp. 11–12.

Furthermore, the instability faced by casual, temporary and seasonal workers is exacerbated by the fact that they are frequently excluded from national social protection schemes and employer-provided benefits (for example, in Armenia, Cameroon, Indonesia and Malawi) and from membership of and participation in trade unions (as in Indonesia).

### Equal opportunities and treatment in employment

Deficits in equal opportunities and treatment in employment identified in the case studies revolved primarily around issues of gender-based discrimination in rural work. Across most of the rural sectors examined, women are disproportionately represented in the most precarious positions, including

informal, casual and temporary work, and unpaid family labour.

Women are disproportionately represented in low-paying, low-skilled positions in the agricultural sector in Armenia, Liberia and Ukraine, and in sugar cane production in the Philippines. In Bangladesh, women working in floriculture earn roughly 30 to 40 per cent less than their male counterparts.<sup>48</sup> In Ukraine there is a gender pay gap of 18.7 per cent in agriculture.<sup>49</sup> In sectors where smallholders are present, men often have greater control over the means of production owing to gendered social/cultural customs or land titling practices (for example, in Armenia, Ghana and Indonesia).

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<sup>48</sup> Case study on Bangladesh, p. 4.

<sup>49</sup> Case study on Ukraine, p. 14.





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In the Indonesian palm oil sector and Malawian tobacco farming, women are reportedly subject to workplace harassment and abuse. Women may also have little meaningful participation in trade unions in certain sectors, such as Indian tea production.<sup>50</sup>

Only a few other examples of unequal treatment were described in the case studies. One exception was the Indian tea sector, where workers belonging to the Adivasi ethnic group are excluded from land ownership.<sup>51</sup>

## Safe work environment

Deficits in relation to a safe work environment had to do mainly with chemical exposure due to the use of pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals in agricultural production. Chemical exposure was listed as a primary safety concern in Bangladesh, Cameroon, Ecuador, Ghana, Indonesia and the Philippines. Injuries from sharp tools and ergonomic risks were also mentioned (Bangladesh and Ghana), as was heat exposure (Bangladesh).

The unsafe working conditions of children in Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa sector are of particular concern. In violation of national law, children working in that sector are involved in applying pesticides, clearing fields using dangerous manual tools, and

<sup>50</sup> Case study on India, p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Case study on India, p. 13.

handling heavy loads. Children in these work roles are also at risk of exposure to environmental dangers, such as venomous snakes and scorpions.<sup>52</sup>

A lack of access to the PPE required to protect workers from workplace hazards was noted in Armenia, India, Indonesia, Kenya (the coffee sector), Malawi and the Philippines. For example, on Indonesian tea plantations, there were reports of workers being exposed to dangerous and prohibited agrochemicals, such as paraquat, and of employers failing to provide workers with the necessary PPE, such as respirators, or providing them with ill-fitting PPE, resulting in workers experiencing a variety of symptoms related to chemical exposure.<sup>53</sup> In India, it was reported that PPE was sometimes distributed to workers during labour inspections, and then taken away by management afterwards.<sup>54</sup>

## Social protection

Deficits in social protection were noted in 12 of the 16 sectors covered by the case studies. Social protection concerns are particularly salient for workers in precarious work arrangements, including informal, casual, temporary and subcontracted workers and day labourers. Precariously employed (non-permanent and self-employed) rural workers in palm oil production in Indonesia, tobacco farming in Malawi, cocoa farming in Ghana, banana production in Cameroon, and agriculture as a whole in Armenia

and Sao Tome and Principe lack access to national social protection schemes, owing either to exclusionary policies or to difficulties in accessing the available benefits. In the Indonesian palm oil sector, only 8.6 per cent of plantation workers are enrolled in the national insurance scheme, mainly because most casual and contract workers are not registered with the social security system. These workers also lack access to health and accident insurance, death benefits and pensions.<sup>55</sup>

## Social dialogue: Employer and worker representation

Deficits regarding social dialogue were reported in 13 of the 16 sectors covered by the case studies. In many sectors, trade unions are either non-existent or face major barriers in accessing workers' organizations. Social dialogue and worker representation for female, informal, casual, seasonal, temporary and self-employed workers, along with the representation of smallholders, emerged as areas of particular concern in the studies.

In some cases (the Indian tea sector, banana production in Cameroon), employers provide amenities and benefits to fill some of the gaps in government social protection schemes including employment-based medical insurance and on-site medical facilities. However, temporary, informal and casual workers were sometimes excluded from these benefits.

<sup>52</sup> Case study on Côte d'Ivoire, p. 18.

<sup>53</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p.18.

<sup>54</sup> Case study on India, p. 20.

<sup>55</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. 14.



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## Sectors with low union activity

There are no unions actively representing workers in the floricultural sector in Bangladesh, nor are any bipartite or tripartite collective negotiations conducted in the sector. Existing Bangladeshi legislation stipulates that workers employed on farms with fewer than five workers may not form unions. Additional complicated legal requirements around worker organizing constitute significant barriers to improvements in social dialogue.<sup>56</sup>

In Armenia, agricultural workers are represented by the Trade Union Organization

of Workers of the Agro-Industrial Complex of the Republic of Armenia. The union has 20 member organizations, including territorial and regional unions, and approximately 5,000 workers are members. Self-employed workers are also entitled to join. The union represents workers, who are members but find themselves unable to pay their membership fees owing to unemployment, informality or engagement in seasonal work. In general, however, Armenian agricultural workers have very little awareness of formalized labour relations. Another barrier preventing the

<sup>56</sup> Case study on Bangladesh, p. 17.



union from exerting greater influence are the legal restrictions on the right to strike.<sup>57</sup>

➤ In Côte d'Ivoire, the ability of trade unions to make progress in representing rural cocoa workers is impeded by the geographically dispersed nature of the sector, the location of farms in isolated rural areas, and the use of family and seasonal labour.

Furthermore, the country's five main trade union centres have, until recently, focused mainly on formal workers in the public sector and in very large companies, rather than on agricultural workers. Cooperatives, which are another possible source of support and advocacy for rural workers, tend to be oriented towards the marketing and sale of cocoa, rather than defending the interests of smallholders or workers.<sup>58</sup>

## Sectors with high union activity

In sectors, such as banana production in Cameroon and Ecuador, tea production in India and palm oil production in Indonesia, trade unions work closely with rural workers. However, deficits in social dialogue are present even in sectors with substantial union activity. In Cameroon, seven unions operate under one common platform in

order to represent workers of the two largest employers, the Cameroon Development Corporation and the Plantations du Haut-Penja.<sup>59</sup> However, workers are reportedly dissatisfied with trade union management, insufficient transparency and accountability in the management of funds, and other issues.

➤ Additionally, in the past few years, the unions have experienced employer interference in bipartite negotiation processes. Workers have been fired and employers have deployed security guards in response to union organizing activities, which has caused unrest among workers and their families.<sup>60</sup>

The Indonesian agricultural and forestry sector has a very low union density rate, despite the presence of many unions. Close to half of the plantation workers who are registered as union members belong to the sector's largest union, the Federation of Plantation Workers' Unions, but several other unions are also involved in organizing palm oil workers. Casual workers in the Indonesian palm oil sector are typically excluded from union membership, and unions that have worked with casual workers have encountered resistance from employers.

<sup>57</sup> Case study on Armenia, pp. 11–15.

<sup>58</sup> Case study on Côte d'Ivoire, pp.15 and 21.

<sup>59</sup> Case study on Cameroon, p. 19.

<sup>60</sup> Case study on Cameroon, p. 15.

Furthermore, employers in the sector have been known to form company, or “yellow”, unions (with management-level staff occupying leadership positions) to prevent external unions from gaining power. In one case, workers who tried to join an alternative union were reportedly demoted from permanent to casual status.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to trade unions, a few other organizations are active in the Indonesian palm oil sector. The Indonesian Palm Oil Association is an organization of palm oil producers which generally promotes the industry and participates in social dialogue initiatives. Some Indonesian palm oil employers are members of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), a certification scheme launched in 2004 by the palm oil industry and the World Wildlife Fund that brings together a diverse set of international and local stakeholders, including civil society groups, to support sustainable production in the palm oil industry. “Responsible consideration of employees” is one of the guiding principles of the RSPO (covering specific provisions on wages, contract substitution, forced labour and child labour, freedom of association and prevention of harassment). However, violations of this and the other principles have been documented on RSPO-certified plantations. Participation in the RSPO is voluntary, and it is not structured as a social

dialogue mechanism, which means that unions are not involved.<sup>62</sup>

Many unions are involved in the representation of rural workers in India’s tea sector, including most of the national unions and many small and local trade unions. For instance out of 50 tea estates in Assam, for instance, 47 had unions, of which 43 had just a single union. Despite a relatively high level of unionization in comparison with other sectors in the country, the unions representing tea workers face challenges in negotiating for workers’ basic rights owing to financial instability and the precarious working and living conditions that beset the sector’s workers. Furthermore, the unions that are active in the tea sector are affiliated with major political parties, so their ability to defend workers’ interests shifts when there are changes in the ruling party. Undemocratic practices in the process of selecting union leadership (such as appointment by nomination) awaken the mistrust of rank-and-file members.

In general, tea workers have little faith in the unions and sometimes see them as being in collusion with management.

Overall, the Indian case study suggests that worker-management relations in the tea sector are very tense and characterized by frequent violence.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. 10.

<sup>62</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. 10. See also Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, “RSPO Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Palm Oil Production”, October 2007.

<sup>63</sup> Case study on India, pp. 13–15.



## Conclusions

Some cross-cutting patterns can be observed in the decent work deficits experienced by rural workers across the 16 sectors studied.

Precariously employed workers bear the brunt of most decent work deficits in the rural economy. The exclusion of smallholders, self-employed workers, and casual and informal workers from regulatory oversight, social protection schemes, employer-provided benefits and trade union representation increases their vulnerability to decent work deficits and violations of their rights.

Women are disproportionately represented in informal, casual and other kinds of precarious work in many sectors, and they are more vulnerable to decent work deficits, especially to instability of work and low pay, unequal treatment, workplace harassment and abuse, and exclusion from decision-making processes at work and in trade unions. In some sectors, piece-rate pay and production-based pay increase the likelihood of family and child labour. This, in turn, is linked to a greater burden on female workers, who must find a way to balance waged labour and/or smallholder production with family, household and community care work.



The decent work deficits identified in smallholder production on the one hand, and in medium- and large-scale agricultural enterprises with large numbers of hired workers on the other, are quite distinct. In the latter context, the deficits faced by rural workers are often similar to those experienced by urban workers in sectors such as manufacturing. That being said, it is not not an easy task to apply international labour standards to smallholders. Deficits in employment opportunities, for example, are often linked to smallholders' access to markets, which may take various forms, such as contract farming, direct selling to markets, cooperative sales and sharecropping/tenant farming. Employment promotion and creation of opportunities for smallholders also depend on access to land and other resources required to engage in production, including access to credit for the purchase of equipment and inputs.

The decent work deficits among workers employed by smallholders are, ultimately, trickledown effects of the deficits experienced by the smallholders themselves, as financial stresses are transferred to workers through reduced working hours, layoffs and decreased or delayed wages. Furthermore, there are few robust examples of trade unions or other forms of worker representation in sectors in which smallholder farms predominate – additional research is needed to understand why this is the case. Existing union movements have largely overlooked rural sectors or have faced significant barriers to increase their influence in these sectors, in part owing to the distinct structure of employment and production. Efforts to overcome decent work deficits for smallholders generally, and improve social dialogue and social protection mechanisms specifically, must take these differences into account.







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## Chapter 3

Covid-19 and rural workers:  
Decent work deficits and government  
and trade union responses

## Chapter 3: Covid-19 and rural workers: Decent work deficits and government and trade union responses

The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching impacts on rural workers. It exacerbated existing decent work deficits, especially in relation to employment opportunities and adequate earnings. The crisis also aggravated deficits related to stability and security of work, a safe work environment and social dialogue in several sectors.

To a lesser, but still worrying extent, the COVID19 crisis also had negative implications for decent working time, equal opportunities and treatment, social protection and, in two sectors, child labour. For example, the pandemic resulted in drastic cuts to working hours in some countries and sectors in which there was reduced demand for non-essential goods, such as flowers in Bangladesh; on the other hand, it caused drastic increases in working hours in other sectors where there was a greater demand or labour shortages.

The pandemic resulted in severe cutbacks on to working hours in some countries and sectors which experienced a fall in demand for non-essential goods [...], and in strong increases in working hours for other sectors that experienced greater demand or labour shortages.

### Overall impact on rural economies

When comparing rural and urban economies, some key differences emerged

in terms of the severity and nature of the impact of the pandemic. Urban economies stuttered to a halt because of government-imposed restrictions on human movement and social gatherings. However, due to the lower worker population densities in rural areas, the fact that agricultural processes take place outdoors (where workers could more easily be protected from infection), and the designation of agriculture as “essential”, some rural industries were spared the harshest impacts of COVID19-related public health regulations.

The banana sector in Cameroon, for example, remained highly active and profitable during the pandemic, and employment opportunities and wages in the industry appear to have been affected very little, if at all. Other sectors that reportedly experienced relatively little economic impact were tea production in India, palm oil production in Indonesia and agriculture in Liberia. Apart from Liberian agriculture, each of the aforementioned sectors is characterized by large-scale employers engaged in food production. In Ukraine, small-scale farmers were hit very hard by the pandemic, while large agricultural businesses felt little to no impact. Of course, there were major differences between the overall impacts on the agricultural sector in such countries such as Liberia and Ukraine, given their vastly different levels of development.

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Floriculture in Bangladesh, on the other hand, was devastated by the pandemic. The sector produces mainly flowers for domestic consumption, most of which are used at political and social events, including festivals and holidays. The prohibition of such activities at the height of the pandemic decimated demand for cut flowers, leading to a dramatic drop in their price (by between 53 and 83 per cent). Flower farmers experienced huge losses. Unable to sell their flowers, many were forced to leave them to wither on the fields. Farmers had to resort to paying their workers only part of their wages or to delayed payments. In some cases, wages were overdue by up to three or four months.<sup>64</sup>

Other sectors, especially those predominantly comprised of smallholders, experienced a wide range of impacts that ultimately resulted in exacerbated decent work deficits. In Ethiopia, the coffee sector experienced widespread labour shortages, transport delays and contract cancellations.<sup>65</sup> In the Kenyan coffee sector, a huge number of workers were laid off, and there were major disruptions to the supply chain, as farmers were unable to reach the market and international buyers could not fly to Kenya to make purchases.<sup>66</sup> In Sao Tome and Principe, the pandemic caused a 39 per cent drop in income for rural workers; 7 per cent of the rural population lost their jobs, and poverty increased by 20 per cent.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Case study on Bangladesh, p. 14.

<sup>65</sup> Case study on Ethiopia, p. 5.

<sup>66</sup> Case study on Kenya (coffee), p. 15.

<sup>67</sup> Case study on Sao Tome and Principe, p. 17.

**Table 2. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on decent work in rural economies**

Country	Sector	Employment opportunities	Adequate earnings and productive work	Decent working time	Work that should be abolished		Stability and security of work	Equal opportunities and treatment in employment	Safe work environment	Social protection	Social dialogue
Armenia	Agriculture	•	•				•		•		•
Bangladesh	Flowers	•	•	•			•	•	•	•	
Cameroon	Bananas									•	
Côte d'Ivoire	Cocoa		•		•		•	•	•	•	
Ecuador	Bananas	•						•			
Ethiopia	Coffee	•	•						•		•
Ghana	Cocoa	•	•	•	•		•	•			
India	Tea	•	•								
Indonesia	Palm oil	•	•				•		•	•	•
Kenya	Coffee	•	•	•			•		•		
Kenya	Tea	•	•				•	•	•	•	•
Liberia	Agriculture	•						•			
Malawi	Tobacco	•	•						•		•
Philippines	Sugar	•	•								•
Sao Tome and Principe	Agriculture	•	•								
Ukraine	Agriculture	•	•	•							•

Note: A dot indicates an element of decent work reportedly impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.



## COVID-19: Impact pathways and decent work deficits

The impact of the pandemic on rural workers was channelled through a series of distinct pathways, driven by its economic impact on global markets and by the ripple effects of government interventions.

### Depression of global markets

The COVID-19 crisis had wide-ranging impacts on global markets which, in turn, affected rural workers. Reduced demand for certain products impacted on several of the rural sectors studied. As described above, the fall in demand for cut flowers in Bangladesh and the ensuing drop in prices resulted in fewer employment opportunities and in wage delays for floricultural workers. Armenian wineries and cognac factories reduced by half the price that they were willing to pay for grapes.<sup>68</sup> In Côte d'Ivoire, cocoa farmers suffered from delayed payments. Already heavily indebted, they became unable to pay their workers' wages.<sup>69</sup> In Ukraine, the sugar beet sector was hit particularly hard, and in some extreme cases sugar factories sold off machinery as scrap metal to try to recoup their losses.

Additionally, around 3 million Ukrainian workers previously employed abroad (mostly in European Union countries) returned *en masse* to their home country, thereby flooding the labour market –

especially in rural areas. The rural unemployment rate increased from 8.6 to 10.2 per cent.<sup>70</sup>

The financial stress caused by the fall in demand also had an impact on the on smallholder producers' and employers' ability to pay for agricultural inputs. In some cases, this was due to the lack of access to credit amid the economic instability caused by the pandemic. In the Kenyan coffee sector, for example, a labour shortage increased the local cost of hiring casual labourers. The high cost of labour put a strain on farmers, forcing them to make do with fewer workers (or to reduce working hours). Additionally, their usual lines of credit dried up, as lenders feared that the instability brought by the pandemic would prevent farmers from being able to repay their loans. These factors ultimately meant that some farmers were unable to add fertilizers and prune their plants at the appropriate time of year – processes which are crucial to generating the high-quality coffee on which they depend to maximize their incomes.

### Ripple effects of governments' public health interventions

Lockdowns restructured the mobility of people and products. In Indonesia, for instance, workers who left the plantation during the pandemic had to observe a mandatory 14-day quarantine upon return, during which they were not paid. Some who left the plantation without permission were

<sup>68</sup> Case study on Armenia, p. 9.

<sup>69</sup> Case study on Côte d'Ivoire, p. 3.

<sup>70</sup> Case study on Ukraine, p. 6.

threatened with dismissal, and few workers had to pay for expensive nasal swab tests out of their own pocket to prove that they were not carrying the virus.<sup>71</sup>

In other sectors, lockdowns resulted in labour shortages, and industries depending on domestic and international migrants found themselves looking for new sources of labour. Ghanaian cocoa farmers, some of whom depend on male farmhands from other regions of Ghana as well as on international migrants from Burkina Faso and Niger, found that migrant workers were unable to travel owing to lockdowns.<sup>72</sup> As a result, their reliance on family labour increased, as did the use of child labour.<sup>73</sup> The work burden of women increased substantially, and the working hours for all family members went up beyond the already demanding schedule of 10- to 12-hour working days.<sup>74</sup>

Kenyan coffee farmers also rely on domestic migrants but, because of travel restrictions, they were forced to turn to other sources of labour during the harvest, including family labour, secondary school pupils and inexperienced local workers laid off from other jobs. Since coffee harvesters in the sector are typically paid according to the amount they harvest, these inexperienced and low-skilled workers earned particularly low wages.<sup>75</sup>

Access to migrant workers was also a lockdown-induced problem in the Philippines, which depends to some extent on the labour of migrants referred to as *sacadas*.<sup>76</sup>

Access to markets was another major issue arising from restrictions on mobility. Some lockdowns prevented smallholder farmers from transporting their products to local markets for sale (as was the case with coffee production in Ethiopia, cocoa farming in Ghana and agriculture in general in Ukraine). Ukraine is a particularly extreme example of this dynamic. After the closure of food markets in March–April 2020, some farmers reportedly resorted to dumping their unsellable produce in landfills.<sup>77</sup>

### Summary of decent work deficits due to the COVID-19 crisis

The most widespread deficits affecting rural workers concerned employment opportunities and earnings. Large numbers of workers were laid off, and many of those who were not experienced sudden and significant decreases in working hours and wages.

In Malawi, employers unilaterally reduced and suspended workers' wages and terminated contracts without notice. In the

<sup>71</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. iii.

<sup>72</sup> Case study on Ghana, p. 8.

<sup>73</sup> Case study on Ghana, p. 10.

<sup>74</sup> Case study on Ghana, p. 9.

<sup>75</sup> Case study on Kenya (coffee), p. 17.

<sup>76</sup> Case study on the Philippines, p. 34.

<sup>77</sup> Case study on Ukraine, p. 6.

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Kenyan coffee sector, many workers were laid off without pay, and those who were not dismissed were paid half the standard pay rate.<sup>78</sup> The delayed payment of workers' wages was a significant problem in the Philippines (for sugar cane farmworkers, but not for millworkers) and in Sao Tome and Principe. For example, in the Philippines, the managers of a sugar cane plantation reportedly told workers that, because of the pandemic, they could not withdraw money from the bank to pay them.<sup>79</sup>

In Ukraine, some employers tried to use the crisis as a pretext for lowering wages, and wage arrears in the agricultural sector (which were already a problem before the pandemic) reached a new high of over 64.9 million Ukrainian hryvnias (US\$2.4 million).<sup>80</sup>

In some sectors, the pandemic shifted the composition of the labour force from permanent to casual workers – either through increased hiring of the latter or through conversion of permanent to casual employment. Both practices occurred in Kenya's tea industry, where “the COVID-19 pandemic [...] destroyed permanent jobs.” This was a result of the increased mechanization of tea harvesting during the pandemic, which led to mass layoffs of permanent workers, some of whom were later rehired as temporary workers.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Case study on Kenya (coffee), p. vi.

<sup>79</sup> Case study on the Philippines, p. 42.

<sup>80</sup> Case study on Ukraine, pp. 1, 13.

<sup>81</sup> Case study on Kenya (tea), pp. 7–11.



Similarly, in Indonesia, reports emerged of managers using the pandemic as an excuse to abruptly terminate the services of long-standing employees and to replace them with precariously employed workers.<sup>82</sup>

There were gendered patterns in the impact of the crisis on rural workers. In the floriculture in Bangladesh, for example, female workers experienced a greater reduction in the number of working days than their male counterparts (men's average monthly working days were reduced from 25 to 15, while those of women dropped from 25 to 8). More women than men in the sector were completely unable to work during the pandemic. As a result, women suffered a 60 to 80 per cent decrease in income, compared with a 40 per cent decrease for men.<sup>83</sup>

In some sectors, women were the first to be laid off or have their hours reduced (as in floriculture in Bangladesh or the sugar industry in Indonesia). In some cases, this was because women are overrepresented in casual and precarious work: such workers were generally the first to lose their employment during the pandemic.

In other cases, women ended up with dramatically increased workloads because of the pandemic (for example, in cocoa farming in Ghana, tea production in India and Kenya, and agriculture in Ukraine). Women's workloads surged primarily because their formal working hours increased (owing to labour shortages and



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<sup>82</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. 19.

<sup>83</sup> Case study on Bangladesh, p. 11.

greater demand for some products), as did their family and childcare responsibilities (due to school closures and difficulties in accessing food and meeting other daily needs).

In the Indian tea sector, for instance, female workers had to wake up very early to complete their housework before going to work in the tea gardens; they would return home at 2 p.m. to resume their housework and then go back to the tea gardens to continue their waged labour.

One worker indicated in an interview that she was working three additional hours per day during the pandemic, and that her working hours were particularly extreme when the pandemic and the peak production season coincided (starting mid-March 2020).<sup>84</sup>

Social protection schemes addressing the COVID-19-related vulnerabilities of rural workers were limited. In the Philippine sugar sector, for example, workers exposed to or infected with COVID-19 were recorded as absent if they did not show up for work and received no paid sick leave.<sup>85</sup> In the Bangladeshi floricultural sector, farmworkers sold assets or took out loans to cover shortfalls in income. The unemployment and underemployment of workers in the sector also led to food

insecurity, with some workers forgoing meals so as to stretch their limited resources.<sup>86</sup> Owing to their informal status, flower sector workers had no employment identification cards and could not avail themselves of the support measures provided to formal workers in Bangladesh. In Indonesia, casual workers had difficulty accessing COVID-19-related government wage subsidies, as these were available only to active participants in the national employment insurance scheme (from which most casual workers are excluded).<sup>87</sup>

Some employers used the COVID-19 crisis as an excuse to decrease workers' pay, roll back protections for workers and retaliate against worker mobilization

In Ukraine, the Government made changes to the payment of social protection benefits in response to the pandemic. However, to be eligible for benefits, a person had to be in "official" employment, be a taxpayer and have been registered as a jobseeker for three months. Social welfare payments to Ukrainian single parents (93 per cent of whom are women) were also limited.<sup>88</sup>

Organizing rural workers became particularly challenging because of restrictions on mobility and public health fears around close physical contact between union representatives and workers. Labour inspections and the enforcement of labour laws were also affected in some sectors.

<sup>84</sup> Case study on India, p. 23.

<sup>85</sup> Case study on the Philippines, p. ii.

<sup>86</sup> Case study on Bangladesh, pp. 5–6.

<sup>87</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. iii.

<sup>88</sup> Case study on Ukraine, p. 15.

▶ The pandemic also had an impact on social dialogue in rural economies. In some sectors, organizing rural workers became particularly challenging because of restrictions on mobility and public health fears around close physical contact between union representatives and workers. Labour inspections and the enforcement of labour laws were also affected in certain sectors.

In Indonesia, for example, workers were fired for mobilizing against a proposed policy and, in general, union-busting activities increased. Indonesian trade unionists reported a reduction in the effectiveness of bipartite and tripartite negotiation processes, and health protocols were used to prevent trade union educational and negotiation activities.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, an increase in anti-union activities by employers was observed in the Kenyan tea sector.<sup>90</sup> Ukrainian agricultural employers also reportedly used the pandemic as a pretext for undermining working conditions.<sup>91</sup>

▶ In one case, the COVID-19 crisis arguably had a positive effect on social dialogue. Thus, union representation of cocoa farmers in Ghana improved during the pandemic, as the General Agricultural Workers' Union intensified its engagement with the Government on their behalf. In general, tripartite collaborations were reportedly more successful than ever before, reflecting how the crisis had highlighted the vulnerability of the country's working poor.<sup>92</sup>

Positive outcomes were also reported in the Philippine sugar industry, where bipartite and tripartite negotiations were on the whole effective in dealing with collective bargaining issues that emerged during the pandemic.<sup>93</sup> In Liberia, trade unions effectively lobbied to prevent layoffs rumoured to be forthcoming at a major employer of rubber workers.<sup>94</sup>

Access to adequate PPE to protect workers from COVID-19 (including masks, sanitizers and handwashing stations) was also a concern in many sectors. Workers often had to bring their own masks or hand sanitizer. Hospitals across the world, from Latin America to SouthEast Asia, expressed concerns about the lack of PPE available to the public.

<sup>89</sup> Case study on Indonesia, pp. iv, 19.

<sup>90</sup> Case study on Kenya, p. iv.

<sup>91</sup> Case study on Ukraine, p. 1.

<sup>92</sup> Case study on Ghana, pp. 12–14.

<sup>93</sup> Case study on the Philippines, p. iii.

<sup>94</sup> Case study on Liberia, p. v.



Limited knowledge about COVID-19 among rural workforces was another concern, as were misinformation regarding the virus and fear of vaccination. In some part of Africa, for example, a decline in access to accurate information on COVID-19 has been observed in rural communities across the continent.<sup>95</sup> Local and international health agencies in rural Africa have struggled to build robust mechanisms to enable rural populations to access accurate information. This is suspected to be linked to the continent's underfunded health system and to broader factors, such as low health literacy and political instability.

## Government responses to the impacts of COVID-19 on rural work

Public health-focused regulations on social gatherings, human mobility (such as lockdowns), and other containment and prevention measures (for instance, school closures) were ubiquitous across the rural sectors studied. Some countries exempted certain rural/agricultural sectors from these measures to allow them to continue operating (for example, banana production in Cameroon and tea production in Kenya). In Ethiopia, the Government adopted a protocol to facilitate tripartite cooperation on COVID-19 mitigation strategies.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Melody Okereke, Nelson Ashinedu Ukor, Lilian Muthoni Ngaruiya, Chikwe Mwansa, Samar Mohammed Alhaj, Isaac Olushola Ogunkola, Hadi Mohammed Jaber, Mashkur Abdulhamid Isa, Aniekan Ekpenyong and Don Eliseo Lucero-Prisno. "COVID-19 Misinformation and Infodemic in Rural Africa", *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* pp. 104, No. 2 (2021): 453–456.

<sup>96</sup> Case study on Ethiopia, p. 26.

Some countries (for example, Armenia and Ukraine) provided unemployment assistance for certain categories of workers who lost their jobs due to the crisis. Bangladesh, Ghana, Malawi and the Philippines all launched cash transfer initiatives that distributed money to vulnerable populations. However, the degree to which unemployment and cash support reached rural workers varied.

Flower workers in Bangladesh had very little access to cash support, and the cash transfers provided in Ghana and Malawi excluded rural informal workers.

Some countries also engaged in food distribution programmes (Bangladesh, Ecuador, India, the Philippines and Sao Tome and Principe). In Sao Tome and Principe, the Government worked in partnership with international organizations to distribute food as well as plants and seeds with a view to bolstering food security during the crisis.<sup>97</sup>

A variety of economic support measures were introduced for rural and agricultural businesses (Armenia, Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya and Ukraine). Access to such support, especially for smallholders and informal producers, varied. In Bangladesh, just 5 per cent of flower growers were able to access the support provided through a stimulus package created for the agricultural sector.<sup>98</sup> Ghanaian cocoa farmers were similarly unable

to access government stimulus programmes for farmers.<sup>99</sup> In Ukraine, the Government provided access to financial resources to help farms modernize, create higher value-added products and export these.<sup>100</sup> Agricultural programmes in Kenya were perhaps the most comprehensive. Measures included a stimulus package that ultimately reached 200,000 smallholder farmers, including coffee farmers. The Government also developed a voucher system to help farmers buy inputs and provided them with support in accessing international markets. Government loans were made available to farmers, with specific measures targeting female farmers. Additionally, the Government facilitated online auctions of coffee to enable the continued remote sale of coffee and waived inspection fees on imports of agricultural inputs.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, tea was classified as an essential commodity in order to facilitate its transport during curfews and lockdowns.<sup>102</sup>

General economic measures which had positive effects on rural economies included several kinds of tax relief and loan access and repayment relief (Ethiopia, Ghana and Kenya). Ghana reduced the cost of electricity and water (measures which ultimately had an impact on cocoa farmers, though they were not necessarily designed to support the rural economy in the first place). Although a tax holiday was established for healthcare workers in Ghana, cocoa farmers and farmworkers were not provided with tax relief.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Case study on Sao Tome and Principe, p. 26.

<sup>98</sup> Case study on Bangladesh, p. 6.

<sup>99</sup> Case study on Ghana, p. 13.

<sup>100</sup> Case study on Ukraine, p. 10.

<sup>101</sup> Case study on Kenya (coffee), p. 11.

<sup>102</sup> Case study on Kenya (tea), p. v.

<sup>103</sup> Case study on Ghana, p. 20.

Some countries opted to make changes to labour laws in response to the economic challenges posed by the pandemic.

▶ The Armenian Government, for example, amended the Labour Code to allow remote work and forced employers to pay two thirds of workers' salaries for involuntary idle time.<sup>104</sup>

Troublingly, two countries enacted legal changes that eroded workers' rights. India partially suspended some labour laws on a temporary basis. Normal working hours were extended, third-party inspections were discontinued, and trade unionization was suppressed.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, in Ukraine, the Government is reportedly trying to liberalize labour relations by expanding the use of fixed, short-term and "zero hours" contracts, which could have a significant impact on employment arrangements in the

agricultural sector. The proposed changes to the labour law may also further restrict the rights of trade unions.<sup>106</sup>

Overall, government measures had varying degrees of focus and their impacts on rural economies also varied. Kenya seems to have had the most comprehensive approach focused on the rural economy, greatly benefiting both smallholder coffee farmers and workers in the sector. For example, the Kenyan Government launched an economic stimulus package worth US\$503 million that reached over 200,000 smallholder farmers, ordered banks to restructure the loans granted to those impacted by the pandemic, and introduced a tax break for all those earning less than US\$224 per month, which covered most farmworkers in the coffee sector.<sup>107</sup> However, many interventions neglected rural sectors, either in policy or in practice. Where rural economies were considered, many producers were unable

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<sup>104</sup> Case study on Armenia, p. 10.

<sup>105</sup> Case study on India, p. 10.

<sup>106</sup> Case study on Ukraine, p. 9.

<sup>107</sup> Case study on Kenya (coffee), pp. 15–16.

to access aid owing to isolation in areas with poor infrastructure, the exclusion of informal economic activities and the ineligibility of casual and precarious workers.

## Trade union responses to the impacts of COVID-19 on rural work

Trade union responses included a continuation of standard union activities as well as new activities. Unions denounced labour rights violations, lobbied governments and employers to take measures to safeguard workers' health, safety and labour rights during the pandemic, and participated in bipartite and tripartite processes to negotiate protections for workers. They also continued to promote collective bargaining agreements and handled workers' complaints and grievances.

New activities included public awareness-raising campaigns, information-sharing, and training and education related to COVID-19 safety and workers' rights during the pandemic (Armenia, Cameroon, Ethiopia and Ghana). These activities were carried out through direct dialogue where possible, but also through radio and television and the distribution of leaflets. Unions also distributed PPE for COVID-19 (Armenia, Ghana, Indonesia and Sao Tome and Principe). A number of unions established emergency funds to support workers (Philippines and Sao Tome and Principe).

Some unions were very active in developing and implementing safety strategies in their respective sectors. In Ghana, trade unionists issued a joint communiqué comprising a ten-point workplace guide for containing COVID-19. Additionally, the General Agricultural Workers Union, which represents agricultural workers and farmers in Ghana, called for greater government support specifically directed at the agricultural sector, including declaring farm work an essential service, educating farmers on COVID-19 prevention measures, and distributing masks and hand sanitizers to farms.<sup>108</sup>

Some trade union efforts were successful, while others struggled to gain traction. In Liberia, unions successfully lobbied to prevent a major employer in the rubber sector from laying off its workers.<sup>109</sup> In Malawi, efforts were comprehensive but ultimately unsuccessful. The Malawi Congress of Trade Unions urged the Government to adopt a range of human-centred strategies, including cash transfers to workers in the informal sector. It also called on the Government to enforce COVID-19 safety protocols in workplaces and proposed a range of financial and other interventions to support vulnerable workers. Unfortunately, the Government failed to undertake most of the requested actions.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Case study on Ghana, p. 20.

<sup>109</sup> Case study on Liberia, p. v.

<sup>110</sup> Case study on Malawi, pp. 19–20.





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## Chapter 4

### Recommendations

## Chapter 4: Recommendations

From the case studies it was possible to distil a number of categories of recommendations on legal reforms, policy design and practice, and engagement with unions, workers' and employers' organizations on social dialogue, social protection, crisis preparedness, union organizational strengthening, occupational safety and health and other key issues:

1. **Improved enforcement of existing labour laws** through more comprehensive inspections and monitoring, not least during current and future crises.
2. **Reforming, repealing and/or preventing the passage of laws that are inadequate or counterproductive** to the protection of rural workers, especially those that exclude certain rural sectors and categories of workers from legal protection schemes (labour laws and social protection).
3. **Formalization of informal processes** and worker employment statuses, and regulation of third party labour recruiters.
4. **Ratification of and adherence to relevant ILO Conventions and other international labour standards** that would help protect rural workers. These include Conventions on freedom of association, forced labour, child labour, and occupational health and safety, and standards dealing with the agricultural sector. The key instruments include:
  - Freedom of association:** Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87)
  - Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention**, 1949 (No. 98)
  - Agriculture:** Right of Association (Agriculture) Convention, 1921 (No. 11)
  - Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention**, 2001 (No. 184)
  - Labour Inspection (Agriculture) Convention**, 1969 (No. 129)
  - Plantations Convention**, 1958 (No. 110) and Protocol of 1982
  - Minimum Wage Fixing Machinery (Agriculture) Convention**, 1951 (No. 99)
  - Forced labour:** Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29)
  - Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention**, 1930
  - Child labour:** Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)
  - Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention**, 1999 (No. 182)
  - Health and safety:** Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (No. 155)
  - Chemicals Convention**, 1990 (No. 170)
  - Working Environment (Air Pollution, Noise and Vibration) Convention**, 1977 (No. 148)
5. **Integration of rural economic sectors** and diverse categories of rural workers into formal and **institutionalized social dialogue processes**.
6. **Strengthening the capacity of trade unions** and other grassroots workers' organizations involved in rural economic sectors, including:
  - Building the capacity of trade unions to participate in social dialogue processes;





- Creating tools and information packages to help trade unions and workers in general to defend their interests from a more informed position; and
  - Strengthening their organizational capacities to recruit, retain, provide relevant services to workers and networking with like-minded organizations.
7. **Strengthening tripartite and bipartite processes** to ensure that the voice of rural workers is considered in decisions that impact on their welfare.
  8. **Strengthening crisis preparedness and social protection** in rural economic sectors by including diverse categories of rural workers in social protection schemes and establishing funds to support rural businesses and workers in coping with the impacts of future crises.
  9. **Supporting smallholder farmers** by building their capacity to sell and market their products, expand their business and create higher value-added products, and by assisting them with, inter alia, access to inputs and the payment of harvest expenses, so that they have sufficient profit margins to invest in establishing decent working conditions.
- The analysis carried out for this synthesis report suggests that initiatives aimed at overcoming decent work deficits in the rural economy should begin from strong evidencebased understanding of its structure and the experience of workers at the grassroots level. Several issues emerged from the case studies that would warrant indepth investigation to establish effective strategies. These include the following and bullet or number them.

### ► **Understanding and addressing the root causes of decent work deficits**

Future initiatives to overcome decent work deficits in rural economies should be based on an in-depth analysis of their root causes, which may be structural and grounded in historical legacies of colonialism, unequal development between and within countries, and structural inequities perpetuated by international development initiatives. Considering the unique factors in every national and local context, including historical factors, that contribute to contemporary decent work deficits is key to understanding their root causes.

### ► **Understanding what decent work means for smallholders and other non-waged workers**

The pillars and substantive elements of the Decent Work Agenda can be readily applied to rural workers engaged in waged labour. However, they are not as easy to apply to the situation of smallholders, family workers, small business owners and self-employed workers, all of which are common categories of “workers” in rural settings. For instance, smallholders are business owners whose income is income based on the productivity of their enterprise. Their ability to create and sustain employment is dependent on access to credit and subsidies for agricultural

production, access to buyers and markets, and in some cases also access to hired labour. Social protection schemes such as unemployment insurance may not cover smallholders.

Meaningful participation in social dialogue also implies something different for smallholders: traditional labour union structures are often irrelevant to them, and associations and cooperatives representing smallholders are often geared towards improving sales and the prices fetched, rather than improving working conditions or defending members’ rights. The meaning of decent work for smallholders takes on additional layers of complexity if one bears in mind that they often use unpaid family labour. It has yet to be established what decent work entails for such unpaid family workers and smallholder farmers. Ultimately, the meaning of decent work for non-waged labourers must be defined and articulated more clearly to develop effective strategies for positive change in rural economies.

### ► **Understanding the needs of rural workers through unions and beyond**

Especially in rural sectors where unions have limited coverage (such as the Bangladeshi flower sector, where no union is present,<sup>111</sup> or the Indonesian agricultural and forestry sector, where just 4 per cent of waged workers are

<sup>111</sup> Case study on Bangladesh, p. 17.

union members<sup>112</sup>), in order to attain a comprehensive understanding of rural workers' experiences, it is necessary to reach out directly to them, in addition to working with unions or established civil society organizations and cooperatives that seek to advance the interests of such workers.

Future research, policy and advocacy initiatives targeting rural workers in sectors with limited union participation should involve direct interactions with workers who are not union members. To that end, use could be made of informal social networks of workers, community organizations—such as women's, youth and religious groups, and local institutions.

### ► **Understanding non-agricultural employment in rural economies**

As already noted, rural economies are diverse. While they are often characterized primarily by agricultural production, non-agricultural sectors are also present, including mining, manufacturing, utilities, construction, commerce, tourism, transport, and financial, personal care and government services. However, the 16 sectoral case studies focused exclusively on agriculture. This is also true of the four studies that dealt with the rural economy in general. Only one of them (on Sao Tome and Principe) specifically mentioned a non-

agricultural sector (tourism). Future initiatives exploring decent work in rural economies should consider non-agricultural activities as well as the agricultural sector.

### ► **Understanding the challenges and needs of rural workers facing discrimination and unequal opportunities**

As the case studies reveal, women are more likely to be engaged in various forms of informal or precarious work. They receive lower wages, are often the first to be laid off during economic downturns and face increased work burdens during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The perspectives of women should be specifically considered as an important crosscutting concern in decent work initiatives. Access to maternity and parental leave for rural workers is a related area for further exploration.

Other vulnerable groups, such as young people, people with disabilities, migrants, and indigenous and other racial or ethnic minority populations in rural economies may face unique challenges in relation to unequal treatment and access to decent work. They are also more likely to be disproportionately affected by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the case studies did not

<sup>112</sup> Case study on Indonesia, p. 16

look at these population groups in detail. Additional research is needed to understand better how they experience decent work deficits.

### ► Understanding the needs of precariously employed workers

Day labourers and informal, temporary, casual and subcontracted workers require particular attention, especially given the seasonal nature of production in many agricultural sectors and rural workers' lack of access to other employment opportunities.

### Additional research and policy analysis

There are many knowledge gaps regarding the dynamics of decent work deficits in rural economies, both in general and specifically in relation to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Targeted research on the issues

highlighted above would facilitate the design of programmes that effectively advance the Decent Work Agenda in the countries and sectors studied, and in rural economies in general.

Additional desk and/or field research in these countries and sectors could be valuable as well, particularly if future programmatic engagement is envisaged there.

From a programmatic perspective, research on technical areas related to programme design and implementation would also be helpful – for example, on payment approaches or ways of reducing the risk of decent work deficits for rural workers.

There is a significant lack of attention to non-agricultural rural sectors in most of the case studies. Where non-agricultural workers are considered, they are included in aggregate “rural economy” statistics with no sectorspecific discussion. This is another area of opportunity for further research.



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## Government engagement

A rural lens for policy advocacy and policy frameworks development, explicitly considering the impacts of general labour policies on rural workers and supporting the development and adoption of policies that promote decent work for rural workers must be applied.

## Support for unions and other workers' organizations active in rural economies

Given that workers in rural economies are often less organized than those in urban settings, ILO-ACTRAV could play an important role in strengthening the organized labour movement in rural economies.

Existing unions that are active in rural economies should be proactively identified and supported through capacity-building and by promoting their inclusion in social dialogue with the government and the private sector. In countries and

sectors in which rural workers are not formally organized in unions, ILO ACTRAV could actively facilitate unionization, particularly where more informal workers' organizations such as farmer groups or cooperatives already exist. The mapping of existing unions and other kinds of workers' organizations that are active in rural areas would help to inform the development of country-specific strategies in that respect.

In view of the unique support needs of seasonal farmworkers who move from crop to crop or farm to farm, ILO-ACTRAV could develop a strategy specifically focused on finding ways to promote the organization of this vulnerable subgroup of rural workers.

## Support for smallholder farmers


Much work in rural economies is carried out by smallholder farmers and their families. Although such workers are typically not formal employees, they make up a substantial proportion of the rural workforce and are subject to many of the same decent work deficits as hired workers.











This report is a summary of the findings of 16 case studies commissioned by the ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV) in mid-2021 to examine the situation concerning decent work and existing opportunities for trade union organizing in rural economies in selected countries and economic sectors in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Eastern Europe. It is our hope that the conclusions and recommendations presented here will be a valuable reference for current and future work on the rural economy. The more specific aim of this project was to strengthen trade unions' capacity to work together with governments, employers and other development partners on addressing decent work deficits in rural economies, especially during a crisis.

**International Labour Organization**  
Route des Morillons 4  
CH-1211 Geneva 22  
Switzerland

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ILO's Bureau for Workers' Activities  
(ACTRAV) [www.ilo.org/actrav](http://www.ilo.org/actrav)  
Facebook and Twitter: @ILOACTRAV

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