

# Asia Pacific Skills & Employability Network

## E-Discussion Summary

### Rural Skills Development

20 May – 31 May 2013

#### INTRODUCTION

The *Asia Pacific Skills and Employability Network* (AP Skills) was launched as part of the ILO Knowledge Network series in 2009, as a direct result of the ILO's constituents' request for better knowledge sharing. The Network is a so-called *Community of Practice* (CoP), an interactive network that serves as a platform for discussions and exchange of ideas, resources and information. Since the initiation of the CoPs in 2007, five CoPs<sup>1</sup> have been established and they are all widely used in the Asia-Pacific region.



The specific aim of the AP Skills Network is to optimize human resource development processes towards improving the skills and well-being of women, men, youth and persons with disabilities across the Asia-Pacific region.

One of the most important features on the CoP is the online discussion forum, and the AP Skills Network have to date organized five online discussions<sup>2</sup>, in which professionals and practitioners have shared their ideas and experiences on various issues related to decent work in Asia and the Pacific. The most recent one, on *Rural Skills Development*, was hosted in May 2013. The topic of rural skills was chosen because it was one of five priority areas at a Visioning Workshop held in 2012 in Bangkok, Thailand.<sup>3</sup> The e-discussion was facilitated by Akiko Sakamoto and Paul Comyn, both ILO Skills Specialists in Asia Pacific region.

#### BACKGROUND

Rural areas provide employment and a source of livelihood for a large number of people in the Asia and the Pacific region. Despite of substantial rural-to-urban migration, the rural population continues to grow. While rural livelihoods are becoming diversified, agriculture remains the largest economic sector and source of employment in many Asian countries.

In recent decades, the Asia-Pacific region has experienced rapid economic growth and has shown progress in reducing rural poverty. For example, the overall rate of extreme poverty has dropped from 48 percent to 34 percent over the past decade<sup>4</sup>. This is largely due to the

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<sup>1</sup> [APMagNet](#), [APYouthNet](#), [Skills and Employability](#), [APGreen Jobs](#), [APIRNet](#)

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://apskills.ilo.org/discussions/past-discussion-forums>

<sup>3</sup> Read the full report here: <http://apskills.ilo.org/about/about/skills-visioning-event-report>

<sup>4</sup> *IFAD Rural Poverty Report 2011*. International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD): Rome, 2010.

productivity increase in the agricultural sector and rapid growth in nonfarm rural sectors, such as trading, services, transportation, handicrafts, remittances, and small-scale manufacturing.

Despite these achievements, rural areas tend to have more unemployment, underemployment, and poverty. Economic opportunities for rural populations are hampered by scant economic investment in rural development, poor infrastructure and lack of employment and other services. With regard to skills development, rural women<sup>5</sup> and young people are often faced with challenges in accessing adequate education and training. This may be due to financial barriers (e.g. training and transportation costs) and non-financial barriers (e.g. scarce education and training infrastructure, inflexible training schedules).



Training providers are concentrated in urban and semi-urban areas, and thus their outreach to rural communities is limited. The quality of the training may also be an issue: trainers may be unqualified, equipment and technology outdated, and teaching and training methods ill-suited to rural contexts. Further, the training offered does not always match the skills needs of the labour market.

However, with improvements to employment and economic opportunities, rural areas have high potential for productive livelihoods. Skills development is central to this; it is key to improving employability and livelihood opportunities, reducing poverty, enhancing agricultural and non-farm productivity, and promoting environmentally sustainable development in rural areas.

The main challenge is equipping women and men in rural areas with appropriate skills to innovate and adopt new technologies in agriculture and to access employment in the rural non-farm economy. Equally important is to expand rural employment opportunities to ensure that working in rural areas, whether in agriculture or non-farm work, is an attractive option.

This Skills and Employability Network e-discussion focused on the issue of rural skills development with particular attention on how access to skills in rural areas can be enhanced through mobile training, distance learning and agricultural extension services.<sup>6</sup>

The main questions guiding the discussion were:

1. How can we extend training opportunities to reach out rural areas? (Should more public training institutions be built in rural areas? Would working with non-formal providers [e.g. rural area based community organizations, or NGOs] be a solution? How about mobile or technology solutions?)

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<sup>5</sup> Rural women are more likely to be contributing family workers, subsistence farmers or home-based microentrepreneurs in the informal sector, or performing low-paid, unskilled work as seasonal workers.

<sup>6</sup> For more background information, see the *Rural Skills Development: Background Note*, available at: <http://apskills.ilo.org/discussions/resources/background-note-e-discussion-on-rural-skills-development>

2. What kinds of skills are needed to support the development of rural communities and economy?
3. What are measures to encourage women, young people and disadvantaged groups in rural areas to take up training?
4. What are the key success factors for improving access to skills training in rural areas?
5. What are some good examples of how training services are delivering formally recognised skills in rural areas (e.g. mobile training schemes, peer training approaches, etc.)?
6. What are some good examples of how distance/blended learning and mobile phone services can deliver skills training in rural areas?
7. What are good examples of how agricultural extension services have been integrated with formal skills training programs to deliver nationally recognised training to farmers and farm workers?
8. How can skills training in rural areas lead to better and advanced skills for the beneficiaries?

## SUMMARY

The discussion attracted some 40 in-depth and well-informed comments from experts and practitioners. The participants were mainly from the Asia Pacific region but a few comments were also received from other regions. Many of the comments came from the participants of [Solutions Exchange](#), which is a knowledge sharing network initiative by the United Nations Country Team in India. The AP Skills discussion topic and questions were cross-posted under the *Work and Employment Community* of the *Solutions Exchange* Network.



In the following summary, the participants' contributions to the discussion are grouped under the guiding questions/discussion themes.

### EXTENDING TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES TO REACH OUT RURAL AREAS

(Public training institutions/ non-formal training providers/ mobile or technology solutions)

During the e-discussion, both skills development provided by **training institutions** and through **non-formal providers** was discussed. With regard to formal training institutions (whether public or private), **establishing training institutions or upgrading existing ones** to provide **relevant, good quality training** was emphasized. However, to achieve this, many preconditions were elaborated: the skills training provided needs to be demand driven, reflecting the needs of the labour market. There needs to be linkages between the institutes and industry; modern audio-visual facilities to train on new technologies and techniques; as

well as trained human resources to impart training. For example, in the context of India, *Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs)* (aiming to develop skilled workforce for the industry) were highlighted as examples of rural training providers, especially if their capacity for rural livelihood promotion would be built.

The issue of **certification of rural skills** came up in the discussion. One comment emphasized the **need to develop nationally compatible and recognized standards for rural trades**, including different certification levels in a particular trade as well as examination and accreditation procedures and bodies. It was suggested that an **active involvement of the employers' body of a particular industry** is necessary for achieving common quality standards and certification.

However, **non-formal training providers** - community colleges, NGOs, peers as resource persons, master trainers, and employers – **are also crucial players in rural skills development** – some could even argue that they are more essential than formal training providers. It was acknowledged that often good results are brought about by both **formal and non-formal providers working together**.

The participants provided a variety of examples on non-formal training or combinations of formal/non-formal training – as well as suggestions on how it could be organized:

- **Working together with rural community organizations.** One famous example that combines rural skills development with income generating opportunities is Thailand's One Tambon One Product (OTOP) scheme. Under this programme, the villagers establish groups or cooperatives and analyse the local livelihoods opportunities, the skills and raw materials they already have in the village and the skills they still require to start producing a particular product or service. Training is then organized by a responsible Ministry, such as the Ministry of Industry or Ministry of Agriculture. The training includes not only technical aspects but also marketing and entrepreneurship training. Each village will also have a mentor that supports the village in their work.
- **Integrating skills training to existing infrastructure projects or rural employment schemes.** This was suggested in the context India, where the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREG)* scheme could combine skills training with employment opportunities (note: the scheme guarantees hundred days of wage-employment per year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work).
- Another example is from Laos where UNESCO implemented a skills development project in rural Laos. The project strategy was based on setting up a **network of local training providers**, building a database of local experts, conducting rapid needs analysis in the villages and making annual skills development plans under the provincial and district level.
- **Informal apprenticeships.** A participant from Ghana highlighted the informal apprenticeship system that is common in many African countries as main method of basic skills development in the rural areas:

*“[Informal apprenticeship] comprises of various trade areas, including welding and fabrication, auto mechanics, hair dressing, dress making, carpentry, masonry, among others. The system has its advantages and disadvantages, but as most youth in the rural areas do not easily get access to formal technical and vocational schools basically due to access, the informal apprenticeship has become an effective way of skills development for the youth. The youth acquire the skills on the instructions of a master craftpersons for an average period of three years and on cost sharing basis. In most cases there is some sort of agreement, either on paper or verbal and the agreement stipulates the training period, responsibilities of the trainee and that of the trainer.*

One area of great weakness is the quality of training and its assessment. This is left with the Trade Association for the specific trade who does the assessment and issue a local certificate as certificate of participation. This kind of certificate cannot be used as a means of professional progression but meant to be used either to set up one’s own business or employed within the trade area.”

- **Peer training.** Successful farmers can be used as resource persons to train other farmers in innovative ways of farming, thus bringing benefits to the wider community. A comment from India:

*“Farmers learn from other farmers easily. Hence farmers who have experimented and got good results are involved as resource persons for trainings. In addition, we have to involve technical persons and scientists.”*

A number of discussants acknowledged the need to **involve the private sector enterprises and employers** also in rural training initiatives, for example, through on-the-job or apprenticeship training. Furthermore, large enterprises, for example in the food industry, can also link with a number of small producers, providing both skills development, technological upgrading and livelihoods sources.

Regardless of the training provider, a number of comments mentioned that the training provided in the rural areas should incorporate experiential learning methods, learning by doing, and learning through demonstrations.

Mobile training is discussed **below**.

#### **KINDS OF SKILLS THAT ARE NEEDED TO SUPPORT THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL COMMUNITIES AND ECONOMY**

There was a strong consensus among the participants that in order to support rural development, any skills training in rural areas **should match the rural realities, respond to the needs of the local rural job opportunities and the market demand** – be it in services, products, trades or agriculture. Depending on the rural context this might mean different things, which makes the **mapping the economic and employment opportunities** crucial.

Yet, **matching the training provision to skills demand seems to remain a challenge**. It was pointed out more than one time during the discussion that there is a missing link between the rural training provided and the needs of the rural economy (or, indeed, urban economy

if rural people were migrating). This link should be made stronger and be accompanied with post-training employment services and counselling.

Another important aspect of skills provision is to not only provide skills for the formal labour market but for work in the informal economy (see also discussion **below** ). This requires training in entrepreneurial skills by specific entrepreneurship institutes, projects or programmes. To complement such training, **post-training support** in accessing markets, equipment, loans and start-up capital was regarded useful.

It was also stressed that rural training should impart soft skills (leadership, interpersonal relationships, conflict management, time management, life skills), and literacy, numeracy, IT and language skills.

### MEASURES TO ENCOURAGE WOMEN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS IN RURAL AREAS TO TAKE UP TRAINING

Many of the participants emphasized the importance of **equal access to rural training for women and men**, as well as for groups of people that are often in **disadvantaged position** in the labour market, such as ethnic youth and people with disabilities.

It was pointed out that facilitating women's (and other disadvantaged groups') access to training requires **strong policies and strategies** in place. This should be accompanied with **training that is relevant for local job opportunities**, as many women prefer to work close to their homes. For example, in the case of Nepal (as highlighted by one participant), it is the young men who migrate to urban areas and abroad, while women usually stay in the rural areas.

Similarly, a participant from India wrote:

*"To encourage women to access training institutes, the institutes must offer courses that help them get decent, local jobs... /... This will help the women in becoming economically independent while at the same time boost their self-esteem. This may be helpful especially because women themselves prefer to live with/close to the family rather than going out to an unknown place to work."*

However, it was also noted that employment opportunities in the formal economy are often still lacking in the rural areas, and the formal labour market may discriminate against women, despite their certified training degrees. Thus, self-employment is often a more realistic option. Training of women for livelihoods opportunities should therefore be followed with **linkages to relevant markets and value added activities**.

A number of issues regarding **the training design and implementation** were also raised and can be summarized as follows:

- Different groups of people should be taken into account already in the design of the training programme. With regard to gender equality, the training designed should require the participation of both men and women as a prerequisite (however sometimes in separate groups depending on the culture);

- Local institutions, such as village development committees, NGOs, women’s self-help groups and clubs could be used to identify potential trainees and encourage them to attend;
- In addition to technical training, it may be sometimes useful to include training (modules) on health management, life skills and financial management;
- Sharing stories of successful peers may encourage others take to up training;
- The trainees from disadvantaged groups may also benefit from confidence building, such as training modules building self-esteem and self-confidence as well as follow-up support after the training has finished;
- The location of the training should be safe, easily reached and in the village vicinity;
- The training schedule should be flexible to enable women to attend;
- The trainers should ideally have positive attitude towards and some sensitization in including diverse trainees in their training sessions.

### **KEY SUCCESS FACTORS FOR IMPROVING ACCESS TO SKILLS TRAINING IN RURAL AREAS**

A broad spectrum of factors that facilitate the access to rural skills training were identified during the discussion. Firstly, there needs to be **relevant policies in place** and **adequate funding and/or financial incentives** for rural skills development available. Secondly, rural **communities themselves need to be involved** in training planning and design, skills needs assessment as well as monitoring of the training. This increases their commitment and reduces absenteeism and drop-out rates. In addition, the following factors relating to the training implementation would improve rural people’s access to training:

- Training **costs** should be kept low, in order for people to afford the training;
- **Location** of the training (institutes) should be close to the people, for example utilizing schools and community halls. Mobile training might be the most practical solution in some rural areas. This avoids high transportation costs and lengthy commuting times that are not feasible for a lot of trainees. If the training centre is far away, room and board should be provided;
- Training should **flexible in terms of date and time** (for example short-term mobile training), to allow for flexible “entry and exit opportunities”. As a discussant from India puts it:

“Typically organized sector employment is clock-based employment, while the cultural ethos in rural areas in Asia is still based on what I call sun-based - the exact timing is not so crucial, and hence the trend is to work in shorter spans of time, broken up with rest as one feels the need, breaks for multiple days for festivals (often connected with the harvest cycle). This is seen even in the training programmes - absenteeism and arriving late is common, and people expect one to accept their reasons, because they are genuine for them.”

### GOOD EXAMPLES OF HOW TRAINING SERVICES ARE DELIVERING FORMALLY RECOGNISED SKILLS IN RURAL AREAS (E.G. MOBILE TRAINING SCHEMES, PEER TRAINING APPROACHES, ETC.)

Some participants had experience of mobile training and it was remarked by a participant that mobile training is “the future”. Mobile training is usually organized through training centres or institutes at the district/provincial level.

In the case Thailand, explained a discussant, Skill Development Centers and Institutes at a provincial level dispatch mobile training units to train rural people. The unit includes suitable equipment, tools, and materials, as well as experienced instructors who speak the local language. The funding is provide the *Department of Skill Development*.

### GOOD EXAMPLES OF HOW DISTANCE/BLENDED LEARNING AND MOBILE PHONE SERVICES CAN DELIVER SKILLS TRAINING IN RURAL AREAS

The participants of the discussion did not comment extensively distance/blended learning/mobile phone services, perhaps for lack of experience on this issue. In passing, radio programmes and mixed media training were mentioned as a means to reach out to rural population – despite the constraint of lack of power in some rural areas.

One example from Thailand was highlighted: a distance learning scheme which was initiated as a royal project (by the King) in 1989. Nowadays it also receives government and private sector funding. The scheme aims to upgrade agricultural skills, science and technology skills and English skills through **educational TV programmes**.

### GOOD EXAMPLES OF HOW AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICES HAVE BEEN INTEGRATED WITH FORMAL SKILLS TRAINING PROGRAMS TO DELIVER NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED TRAINING TO FARMERS AND FARM WORKERS

The discussion identified some challenges to integrating formal skills training programmes with agricultural extension services in coordinated manner – the major challenge being that TVET and skills development ecosystem is different to that of agricultural research and extension. Another challenge identified was the weakness of the agricultural extension system outreach (in the case of India).

However, some examples of combining skills training with agricultural extension were given, mainly from the Indian context.

- One such example is the *Sector Skills Council (SSC) for Agriculture* in India which seeks to link formal TVET linked with agricultural extension.
- A participant from Thailand describes a public-private partnership initiative whereby a food product company (C.P. Company) provides training as well as raw materials and financing for farmers to start their small farming businesses. The company then buys their products that have been produced according to their “green and clean” standards. The training technology is be provided by the Ministry in charge.

- Another example is a new private sector initiative for dairy skills development in India (Noida), established to train rural people in milk collection, milk chilling and dairy plant operating as well as in food safety, hygiene and energy conservation. These training programmes by a private company are for the village level training. In the future, the plan is to develop a basic programme for village dairy workers that can share their knowledge with others.
- A third example from India is a social enterprise, *Agriculture Enterprise Facilitation Centre (AEFC)*, operated at a sub-district level in Madhya Pradesh. See [http://vrutti.org/main/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=27&Itemid=40](http://vrutti.org/main/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=27&Itemid=40) for more information.

### **WAYS THAT SKILLS TRAINING IN RURAL AREAS CAN LEAD TO BETTER AND ADVANCED SKILLS FOR THE BENEFICIARIES**

Much of this summary has already touched upon this issue in an indirect way. Skills training “should not be seen as an end in it itself but a means to lifelong development or progress”. Improved skills enhance the trainees’ employability, and livelihoods and self-employment opportunities in the rural areas. Training can also help rural people to better take care of their environment and natural resources. Skills and knowledge transfer can also be seen as emancipating, enabling rural people to make use their skills to become more independent.

### **TO SUM UP,**

- Rural skills development is central to rural development. Rural areas need strong skills development policies, investment in training infrastructure, as well as certification mechanisms for rural trades
- There is a need to build the capacity of formal and non-formal training providers to provide good quality training, using new technologies and qualified personnel
- Training provided needs to respond to the rural realities and the labour market demand
- Employers and industries should be involved in rural development and rural training initiatives
- Besides technical and vocational skills, rural people benefit from soft skills, literacy, numeracy, IT and language skills, as well as entrepreneurship skills and post-training support
- Special measures might be needed to provide equal access to rural training for women and men, as well as for groups of people that are often in disadvantaged position in the labour market
- Several factors promote rural people’s access to training, such as community involvement in training design, implementation and monitoring; convenient location, flexible curriculum and customization of training to local circumstances

**Thank you to all the participants for making this interesting discussion happen. Please check the AP Skills Network for announcements of upcoming discussions.**