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Increasing rural employment in sub-Saharan Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa faces enormous socio-economic challenges, one of the greatest being the lack of work in rural areas. Over the next 40 years, Africa's population will double. Each year, another 10 million – soon to be 20 million – young people will enter the labour market. Already, tens of millions of rural Africans have no work, or not enough to lift themselves out of poverty.



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Two-thirds of Africa's labour force are involved in agriculture. Danie Nanyako, from Mlaviwa village, Malawi, prepares his fields.

At the Brussels Development Briefing on *Major Drivers for Rural Transformation in Africa: Job Creation for Rural Growth*¹, experts proposed a range of measures to increase employment. Governments should introduce policies which stimulate the growth of the rural farm and non-farm sectors. They should increase investment in education and vocational training in rural areas, especially for young people. Policies should ensure that women, who represent a major workforce in rural areas, receive the same benefits and support as men. Small-scale farmers should be encouraged to work together to improve their productivity and access to markets.

POLICY POINTERS

➤ **Introduce policies** which help to link the farm and non-farm economies and stimulate the growth of agricultural value chains

➤ **Invest in people**, especially the young, by providing them with the education and vocational training they need to take advantage of new employment opportunities

➤ **Close the gender gap** by providing women with access to the same opportunities as men

➤ **Encourage and strengthen organisations** which enable small-scale producers to improve their access to markets and develop their bargaining power



FACING THE FACTS

In sub-Saharan Africa, 65% of the labour force is involved in agriculture, which generates 32% of the Gross Domestic Product. Despite its significance, agriculture is failing to provide a decent living – defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as jobs that pay a living wage and offer reasonable and fair conditions – for the majority of the workforce.

Rural labour markets are distinguished by high levels of informality, a preponderance of casual employment and high rates of self-

employment. Rural working conditions are often poor and access to social protection limited. Labour legislation is rarely enforced and rural workers are poorly organised. According to ILO, 76% of the working population in sub-Saharan Africa are involved in 'vulnerable employment' and 56% live in extreme poverty, on US\$1.25 per day or less. Most hired farm labourers find themselves in ill-paid or seasonal work. It is not so much formal unemployment that is the problem, as under-employment.

In 1985, there were 281 million people of working age in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2005, there were 489 million, and there will be a

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Stimulating the growth of the food-processing sector can help to create employment. Cleaning and filleting fish from Lake Victoria in a factory in Uganda.

“Promoting decent rural employment opportunities provides the best pathway to reduce poverty and achieve food security.”

Peter Wobst, FAO

projected 616 million people of working age by 2015. The rapid growth in the number of young people seeking work poses new challenges for African countries, where youth unemployment is currently twice as high as that for adults.

The rural non-farm economy is becoming increasingly important in sub-Saharan Africa, but has yet to achieve the rapid growth seen in countries like India and Brazil. The demand for goods and services produced in the non-farm sector derives from several sources. Those linked to agriculture include the demand for consumer products from farming households; the demand for agricultural inputs and services; and the demand from urban populations for fresh and processed foods. The non-farm sector also benefits from other activities, such as manufacturing and telecommunications, which have no direct links to agriculture. Government spending on services also accounts for a significant share of non-farm employment in many rural towns.

It is estimated that in Africa each dollar of additional income in agriculture generates an additional US\$0.5–0.6 of income in the rural non-farm economy. Stimulating agricultural production will therefore remain a key

component of employment strategies. This is explicitly acknowledged by the Rural Futures Initiative supported by the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

POLICIES FOR PROGRESS

Stimulating the growth of the rural non-farm economy

The growth of the non-farm economy will be crucially important when it comes to creating new jobs in rural areas in sub-Saharan Africa. It can play a vital role in linking farmers with national and international markets and ensuring that a greater share of the profits in the value chain returns to rural areas. This is particularly important in countries which are undergoing the early stages of economic development.

Policies to increase rural non-farm employment will involve many sectors, including financial services, transport, health, education and the management of natural resources. The spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs) will also help to stimulate rural employment. Take, for example, a recent experience in Rwanda.

The country's first telecentre, providing access to the Internet, market information and other services, was set up in 2004. Since then, 150 similar centres have been established; a further 850 will be set up over the next four years. These centres are boosting rural employment and helping farmers and others gain better access to the market.

Investing in education and vocational training in rural areas

The average adult male in rural Africa has less than four years of education; the average adult woman less than three years. Although there has been a significant increase in primary school enrolment in Africa during the last decade, especially among girls, governments need to make greater investments in education and vocational training.

“It’s about investing in people, as well as bricks and mortar.”

*Felicity Proctor,
Proctor Consulting Ltd*

Young people in rural areas often lack the necessary practical skills and business acumen to fully engage in the labour market. When they improve skills through vocational training they are more likely to find decent work. Policies which increase investment in rural education and vocational training lead, among other things, to an increase in agricultural productivity. They also make it easier for rural communities to adopt new technologies, help to improve extension services and pave the way for high-value, labour-intensive activities.

In the agricultural sector, Farmer Field Schools have had considerable success in helping farmers to gain new skills. By 2008, they had benefited 10–20 million people in over 80 countries. A successful variation, Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools (JFFLS), pioneered by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), has benefited over 20,000 young men and women in 16 countries. These schools have helped to increase youth employment and access to markets through the creation of Youth Farmers’ Associations. They have also improved children’s diets and reduced rural outmigration. The most successful training programmes have been those where there has been a clear sense of national ownership.

Providing equal opportunities for women

Women represent 43% of the agricultural labour force, with their contribution being

much greater in some countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, women produce much of the basic foodstuff on which rural households depend, while men are more likely to be involved in the production of cash crops. Women also play a key role in the processing of agricultural products.

Women are more likely to be involved in vulnerable employment than men, and in sub-Saharan Africa many work as unpaid family workers or on a part-time and seasonal basis. They tend to be paid less than men, even for equivalent positions and comparable levels of education and experience.

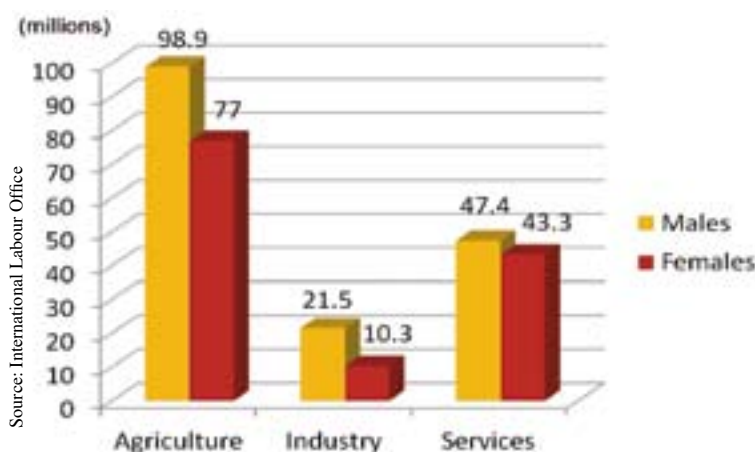
Research shows that female farmers are 20–30% less productive than men. This is because men have better access to land, credit, training and technology. FAO has demonstrated that by closing the gender gap, and ensuring that women are on an equal footing to men, agricultural output in developing countries would increase by 2.5–4% – enough to lift 100–150 million people out of hunger.

Governments in sub-Saharan Africa should introduce measures which give women equal access to the technologies and services currently available to men and the same levels of control over productive resources. This would help women to increase their output, become more involved in agricultural value chains, and gain access to new job opportunities, both on and off the farm.

Strengthening organisations which represent small-scale producers

Small-scale farmers fare best when they are organised. Not only does this give them a collective voice, and the potential to influence government policy, it also encourages them to become more productive and market-oriented.

An outstanding example of the power of collaboration comes from Brazil. Since it was set up in 2004, the Federation of Family Farmers and Smallholders (FETRAF) has



*Employment by sector and sex
in sub-Saharan Africa (year 2009)*

“

Stimulating agricultural growth will pay wonderful dividends for the rural non-farm economy.”

Peter Hazell, IFPRI

had a powerful influence on public policy. FETRAF encouraged the government to set a minimum price for family-farm produce and campaigned for the introduction of a law which obliges municipal authorities to purchase significant quantities of family-farm produce for the school meals programme. Brazil's family farms now supply 70% of the country's domestic food requirements.

In Africa, similar organisations are beginning to influence policy and improve the welfare of small-scale farmers. The National Smallholder Farmers' Association of Malawi (NASFAM), for example, represents 100,000 farmers and provides a range of services. Economies of scale mean that agricultural inputs are now cheaper for members than for those who make their purchases as individuals. Just as importantly, membership puts farmers in a stronger bargaining position when selling their produce. NASFAM is encouraging farmers to think of themselves as businessmen and entrepreneurs,

rather than subsistence producers. This is helping to create new employment opportunities.

TRANSFORMING LIVELIHOODS

Policies which stimulate the growth of the rural farm and non-farm economies will create decent jobs and reduce poverty. An increase in investment in rural education and vocational training will enable more young people to acquire the skills needed to succeed in both the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors.

Policies designed to provide women with access to the same resources as men will improve their incomes and enhance national food security. Creating a policy environment which encourages smallholders to form associations will help them gain better access to markets and give rural communities a stronger voice. ■

Further reading

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