



Not what decent work looks like.  
Photo: ILO/M. Crozet

## Decent jobs for rural youth

Today, the concept of decent work, introduced at the 87<sup>th</sup> International Labour Conference in 1999, is central to several international policy instruments and agendas. Our authors present the concept and give various examples of how it can be tailored to the needs of rural youth.

Productive employment plays a central role in the economic and social integration of youth. However, youth continue to face difficult access to labour markets and good working conditions. Recent analysis shows that young people continue to be over-represented among the unemployed. Two out of five economically active youth around the world are unemployed, or work, but live in poverty. The higher incidence of working poverty among youth relates to the fact that youth are more likely to work in the informal economy. Globally, more than three-quarters of working youth are in informal jobs. Agriculture is still a major employer and will remain important in the future, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. Yet, rural areas are progressively los-

ing a vital part of their workforce as young people migrate to cities or move abroad in search of better economic opportunities.

Against this background, new, context-specific solutions must be devised to provide decent work opportunities for all young persons, also considering the challenges and opportunities linked to a rapidly evolving world of work.

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### ■ The meaning of decent work, and how to measure it

The International Labour Organization (ILO) considers that the promotion of decent work, grounded in tripartite social dialogue and broad-based consultations among national stakeholders, can significantly contribute to addressing the global employment challenge and to achieving poverty reduction and sustainable development goals. Introduced at the

87<sup>th</sup> International Labour Conference in 1999, the concept of “decent work” is now central to several international policy instruments and agendas, including the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDG 8: “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”). The ILO describes the concept with the following words:

*“Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.”*

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The concept embeds a number of substantive elements (see left Box on page 11) which are closely linked to the four inter-related pillars of the Decent Work Agenda, that is, (i) promotion of International Labour Standards and fundamental principles and rights at work, (ii) employment creation, (iii) social protection for all and (iv) strengthening social dialogue and tripartism.

A set of related indicators have been proposed to measure the effects of public policies in terms of youth employment outcomes, but they may also serve as a reference to appraise the quality of an employment offer at the time it is made. Decent Work indicators can be adapted and included in national monitoring frameworks.

Within the scope of the sustainable development discourse, increasing attention has also been given to the relations between decent work and climate change. There is large evidence of the reality of climate change and its negative effects on economic activities and workers. On the other hand, climate change prevention, mitigation and adaptation measures can create “green jobs” in some economic sectors, including for young people in the rural setting.

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■ **A well-balanced policy mix is needed**

The ILO’s Call for Action on Youth Employment recognises that there is

no one-size-fits-all solution towards decent work for young people. There is a need for a context-specific, rights-based, and integrated approach reflecting national and local circumstances. A well-balanced policy mix will encourage investment and job creation, while ensuring that young workers’ rights are respected. As youth is not a homogeneous group, appropriate measures should be taken for both well-educated youths with access to knowledge, and possibly to resources, and the masses of uneducated and poorly skilled youths. Action must address the rural/urban divide, as rural youth are often less educated than their urban counterparts and rural areas offer fewer opportunities for educated youth to employ their skills productively.

**Policy options include:**

■ **Giving rural youth a voice and larger role in their communities.**

The multiple capabilities and potential of young rural women and men should be acknowledged, and young people should be more meaningfully involved in decision-making at the community and national level. Special attention must be given to gender imbalances and empowering young rural women. The ILO/IFAD Taqeeem initiative (see right Box on page 11) is conceived to provide evidence on what works towards gender equality in rural employment in the MENA region.

■ **Making rural areas and professions more attractive for youth.**

This can be achieved by investing further in mechanised agriculture, agribusiness and agro-tourism, or by applying value chain approaches to rural development (e.g. the ILO has worked quite extensively on forest-based value chains for rural employment). Larger application of new technologies in agriculture and off-farm activities including processing, storage and distribution would also make rural professions more appealing to young people. Information technology plays a crucial role in this respect. In Kenya, youth-led start-up FarmDrive uses data analytics, and mobile phone technology to connect smallholder farmers with financial institutions.

■ **Structural transformation to boost youth labour demand.**

Reflecting on this aspect, a recent ILO study elaborates on three main priorities, namely (i) support to knowledge creation and strategy design, (ii) support to family farms and the diversification of rural incomes, and (iii) strengthened rural-urban linkages and territorial policies.

■ **Increasing access to appropriate education and training.**

For example, FAO’s Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools (JFFLS) methodology, already adopted in at least 18 African countries, combines training for youth on agricultural, business and life skills. In Egypt, the ILO implements the Training for Rural Economic Empowerment (TREE) programme as part of the “Decent Jobs for Egypt’s Young People” project. Already applied in several other countries, the TREE methodology is based on the identification of employment and income-generating opportunities at the community level, focused on rural areas.



*Forest-based value chains hold a big potential for decent rural youth employment.*

*Photo: ILO/Nadine Osseiran*

**Framework of decent work indicators – Substantive elements**

- Employment opportunities
- Adequate earnings and productive work
- Decent working time
- Combining work, family and personal life
- Work that should be abolished
- Stability and security of work
- Equal opportunity and treatment in employment
- Safe work environment
- Social security
- Social dialogue, employers' and workers' representation

Source: ILO

**Taqeem Initiative: Strengthening gender monitoring and evaluation in rural employment**

Taqeem (meaning “evaluation” in Arabic) is a partnership between the ILO and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) as part of an IFAD-financed project, titled “Strengthening gender monitoring and evaluation in rural employment in the Middle East and North Africa.” Through rigorous impact research, this capacity development and learning grant project aims to understand “what works” in the promotion of gender mainstreaming, with the ultimate goal of reaching gender equality in rural employment outcomes across the region. Taqeem has built up a portfolio of twelve impact evaluations, the majority being randomised controlled trials (RCT), to measure the impact of active labour market policies, including on skills development, entrepreneurship and employment services for youth and women.

For more information, see: > [www.ilo.org/taqeem](http://www.ilo.org/taqeem)

■ **Entrepreneurship and access to productive resources.** An IFAD-supported initiative under the Agricultural Resource Management Project (ARMP II) in Jordan taps into the region’s traditional knowledge base to initiate 400 small-scale enterprises for women in the southern part of the country. Relying on the sustainable use of local resources, these businesses centre on food processing, dairy and pickle production, and the harvesting of mushrooms. In Lebanon, Berytech Foundation’s Smart Agri-food Innovation Hub (Agrytech) creates jobs and opportunities for youth and women through start-ups which improve competitiveness in the agri-Food sector and related value chains. Agrytech conducts business development sessions for entrepreneurs in the sector, provides incubation services, including funding for start-ups, and holds regular networking events. Community ownership, worker ownership and co-operative and social entrepreneurship are growing areas of interest for young people, and the ILO has been supporting related initiatives in Zambia, Kenya, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.

■ **Innovations in public employment programmes.** Public employment programmes (PEPs) in India, South Africa and Ethiopia have introduced innovative solutions for the involvement of young people

in rural infrastructure rehabilitation, green works and the provision of social services to local communities. When combined with other youth-focused active labour market programmes, such as youth wage subsidies, vocational and life skills training, and entrepreneurship training, PEPs show larger potential in enhancing youth employability.

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■ **Working together globally to leave no-one behind**

In intervening on the subject of decent work and sustainable development, Guy Ryder, ILO Director-General, recently stated: “We cannot understate the challenges that lie ahead for the world of work. But we can realise the vision of sustainable development of this transformative agenda by 2030 if we all come together in a global partnership of governments, business and trade unions, as well as multilateral organizations, civil society and ordinary people. Each and every one of us has a role to play, to ensure no one is left behind.”

For leaving no-one behind, there is indeed a need for more collective, well-co-ordinated efforts. Through its Youth Employment Programme, the ILO endeavours to shape and strengthen collaborations in the youth employment area, at the national and broader levels. The most comprehensive partnership on youth

employment was launched in February 2016 under the designation “The Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for Youth” as a UN system-wide alliance. The Alliance, which is formed of 23 UN agencies, will leverage the convening power of the United Nations system by bringing together not only its different entities but also governments, social partners, the private sector, youth representatives, entities of the United Nations, civil society, parliamentarians, foundations, the academia and other partners. The Alliance complements the work of the UN Inter-agency Network on Youth Development (IANYD) and its System-wide action plan on youth (Youth-SWAP), which was launched by the UN Secretary-General in 2012.

A key thematic priority of the Global Initiative is youth in the rural economy, with global action being pursued in areas of evidence-based and innovative programmes and policies. These include the development of efficient training approaches, promoting efficient agribusiness and value chain models, facilitating access to productive resources, and job creation for young people through green practices and green jobs. The initiative is to build on the above-mentioned and other examples of good practice world-wide.

For references and further reading, see online version of this article at: > [www.rural21.com](http://www.rural21.com)