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.

At the Brussels Development Briefing on Major Drivers for Rural Transformation in Africa: Job Creation for Rural Growth, 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.

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.

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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

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

Peter Wobst, FAO
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
neurs, rather than subsistence producers. This is helping to create new employment opportunities.

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

FAO. Rural youth employment in developing countries: a global view. 2010 http://tinyurl.com/7qgxumb
Nkurunziza, Janvier D. Generating rural employment in Africa to fight poverty. 2006 http://tinyurl.com/748jknv
Overseas Development Institute. Rural employment and migration: in search of decent work. Briefing Paper No 27. 2007 http://tinyurl.com/7ej7hc4

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