

Trade Union views on Sustainable Agriculture
Views of IUF¹ and the TUAC²
Submission for Consultations with the OECD Committee
for Agriculture, 5, December 2005

For agriculture and rural development to become truly sustainable and for global food security to be increased, the women and men who work daily to produce the world's food have to play even greater and more participative roles. The role of farmers in sustainable development is well recognized, and is firmly established as part of Agenda 21, Chapter 14. However, in the processes of sustainable agricultural development and improvement of world food security, both the needs and the contributions of the 450 million waged agricultural workers have been virtually overlooked to date. They are a huge and, in most regions of the world, a growing group of workers who account for over 40 per cent of the total agricultural labour force.

These workers are at the heart of the commercial food production system. Yet these working women and men remain largely invisible to policy and decision-makers in governments, agricultural and rural development agencies, intergovernmental organizations, science and research institutions, agricultural banks and credit institutions as well as in many civil society organizations and groups. They are hardly ever acknowledged in United Nations documentation outside of the ILO, or in rural development strategies. If they are never acknowledged, how can their needs as part of the core rural poor be assessed and programmes to eradicate their poverty and hunger developed? How can their already substantial contributions to sustainable agriculture and rural development and food security be expanded and strengthened?

Agriculture cannot be sustainable whilst over 40 per cent of the workforce suffer precarious employment and poor working conditions, and live in poverty. The problem is becoming even more acute as growing economic pressures are eroding the already low levels of protection of agricultural workers in terms of wage levels, employment security, health, safety and

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environmental standards, and social protection. Additional problems are posed by the fact that more and more women workers are being recruited on a casual basis and growing numbers of migrant workers are being hired. In order to make a living wage, it is common for the family of a migrant worker including the children - to work on the farm or plantation. These "helpers", as they are often termed, do not figure on the payroll and their existence is not officially recognized by government agencies.

Decent work deficits:

- 1. Lack of freedom of association and the right to bargain;**
- 2. Poor health and safety conditions;**
- 3. Extensive use of child labour;**
- 4. Increasing use of migrant labour in poor, sometimes even forced labour conditions.**

1. Lack of freedom of association and the right to bargain;

Levels of trade union organisation are low and there is frequently a legal barrier to freedom of association eg farmworkers are exempt from labour legislation, there are also countries which still forbid trade union organisation among agricultural workers.

2. Health and safety

Agriculture is in top three most dangerous industries, alongside mining and construction; and is the industry with the most fatalities. In addition many lives are blighted by exposure to pesticides and serious accidents.

There is an urgent need to improve health, safety and environment standards in this sector, so as to prevent and reduce the large number of fatal and non-fatal accidents and cases of ill-health.

3. Child labour remains a blight on the industry. The ILO estimates that 70% of child labour takes place in agriculture.

4. Migrant workers

Agriculture in many OECD countries relies increasingly on migrant workers - these workers are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, even forced labour situations. There is government recognition that measures need to be taken to protect migrant workers eg Gangmaster registration act in the UK but more needs to be done by governments to ensure migrant workers are protected. Again this is an area of work which clearly needs intergovernmental and inter UN agency co-operation.

Successful sustainable development requires that waged workers are given considerably more attention as a distinct group, with its own political, economic and social needs and contributions; that they figure in sustainable rural development strategies and programmes; and that more support is given to building and strengthening links with agricultural workers and their trade unions in the interests of sustainable development and poverty eradication.

This is the challenge for international policymakers, for Agenda 21, for the implementation and success of the many plans coming out of the world summits, and for regional, national and local conferences and initiatives on making sustainable development a reality.

We would make the following recommendations to Governments and the international community to help bring about the necessary changes:

RECOMMENDATION 1

Support the application of the ILO 8 Core labour standards contained in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Support the development and promotion of an agenda for fair and decent work in agriculture in all relevant forums.

RECOMMENDATION 3

The OECD and international agricultural agencies must recognize waged agricultural workers as a group distinct from farmers, and must directly work with these workers and the trade unions that represent and organize them.

RECOMMENDATION 4

There must be recognition that waged agricultural workers and their trade unions:

- (i) already play an important role in promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development, and world food security; and
- (ii) could in future play a much greater role in promoting these, given proper political, technical and financial support.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Strengthen cooperation between the FAO, OECD and ILO on issues of mutual concern, notably occupational safety and health, poverty elimination, gender equality and HIV/AIDS.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Explore the possibilities for other specialised agencies to provide the technical, policy and financial support needed to increase the contribution of waged agricultural workers to SARD, world food security and sustainable development.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Recognizing the importance of employment for pro-poor growth in rural areas, the FAO and ILO should encourage development partners to assist countries to mainstream employment into investment policy and poverty reduction strategies, including those focused on rural development.