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Targeting the rural poor: the role of education and training

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Today we would like to share with you a major education challenge which is critical for poverty reduction strategies and is unavoidable if we want to reach the goals of Education for all by the year 2015. This is the challenge of educating large numbers of people in the rural space in order to achieve sustainable rural development. It is our hope that when we have described the scope of the challenge you will agree that, although the problem is large and complicated, solutions can be found.

Poverty and Poverty Reduction

The big challenge of the new century is the reduction of poverty. Virtually all countries and donors agree on the importance of reducing poverty and its attendant problems of inequity, lack of respect for basic human rights, ill health, lack of knowledge and skills, and marginalisation of large numbers of people. Let us look at the numbers.

An estimated 1.2 billion people world-wide are classified as poor. In practical terms this equals the current population of China, is more than the population of India, and is more than four times the population of the United States. A startling fact is that over 70% of the poor, or 840 million, in developing countries live in the rural areas¹. They are caught in the vicious cycle of being unable to access the services and opportunities that might take them out of poverty - education, gainful employment, adequate nutrition, infrastructure, and communications - because they are poor. Hunger exacerbates the problems of the poor. The statistics on the impact of hunger are sobering:

- 36 million people died of hunger or of its immediate consequences during the year 2000 and of these a child below the age of ten died every seven seconds².
- It is estimated that there are 815 million undernourished people world wide of whom 777 million are in developing countries³;
- 180 million children under the age of ten are undernourished⁴;

In addition to the devastating effects of hunger there are

- 130 million out-of-school children
- 880 million illiterate youth and adults.

While it should be noted that these statistics are global, it is reasonable to infer that a major proportion of the poor is rural, illiterate and undernourished.

It is clear to the world development community that a multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary approach is needed to reduce rural poverty and that we need to work together if we are to be successful in our goal. While there is at present no single solution to the alleviation of rural poverty, education and training are critical elements. Growth needs to be achieved with equity and rural dwellers need to have the capacity to be participants in the labour market and in society. It is accepted that farmers with basic education are more likely to adopt new technology, behave in a less risk adverse manner, and become more productive. With basic education they are better equipped to make more informed decisions for their lives and for their communities and to be active participants in promoting economic, social, and cultural dimensions of development. It is equally accepted that excess rural labour has to find work outside the farm whether in rural or urban settings and that without basic literacy and numeracy, individuals are unlikely to be hired for anything more than basic wage labour. Businesses, large or small, are unlikely to choose to invest in rural areas if skilled or trainable human resources are unavailable.

A declining interest in education, training, and rural development

Education and training are two of the most powerful weapons in the fight against rural poverty and for rural development. Unfortunately these are also among the most neglected aspects of rural development interventions by national governments and by donors. The decade of the 70s, when there was considerable interest and investment in traditional agricultural education, has faded into the past and new investments have been few and far between. There are a number of reasons for the declining interest in traditional agricultural education (including Vocational Education and Training, Higher Education, Research and Extension). One of these was a false sense of complacency that arose when the famous green revolution appeared to offer limitless science-based solutions to the production of staple grains, especially rice and wheat. To an extent policy maker felt that agricultural education had solved the problem of food production and turned their attention to other seemingly more urgent challenges. The growth of urbanisation and the change in the balance of political influence also saw policy makers become more attentive to urban issues than to education in rural areas.

A fresh approach

Developing countries and the donor community are taking a fresh approach to rural problems and the traditional focus on production agriculture has given way to a focus on rural development⁵. There is a belief that if poverty is to be reduced and if sustainable rural development is to be a reality, there has to be concern about all of the people who live in what is termed the rural space. In the past "rural" was synonymous of agriculture. Agriculture was the most important economic sector for it produced vital food supplies and was the largest employer. Despite its strength, production agriculture could not absorb all surplus rural labour nor could it influence other sectors such as health, education and infrastructure to invest at a level sufficient to transform the rural areas. Today the rural development approach recognises that there are many different stakeholders in the rural space. Some continue to make a living from agriculture, while others have a wide range of occupations in non-farm settings, which range from small villages to larger market towns to peri-urban settlements. The concept of rural development is not new⁶ but what is different is the serious commitment to making it work this time.

The diverse collection of stakeholders in the rural space will need education and training that differs from that available in the past. What is needed today is a broader education approach serving the needs of an expanded audience, and focusing with priority on basic learning needs of rural children, out-of-school adults and youth, and the rural poor. This is what we call education for rural development.

What would FAO like to see happen?

- The donor community and developing countries combine for an all out assault on rural poverty
- Enhanced human capital in the rural space that can be employed and trained especially for off-farm rural employment opportunities
- Increased availability of off-farm employment
- More investment in education, infrastructure, communications, and health care, essential enabling factors for sustainable rural development
- Provision of better survival skills (life skills) for those who choose to remain in the rural areas and for those who decide to migrate to urban settings
- General practice of sustainable agriculture and natural resource management.

A proposal for education for rural development

Improved education will be critical if rural development is to succeed. Some of the essential actions and activities will include:

1. *Placing education for rural development at the core of the global and national development agenda* with a focus on basic learning needs of rural livelihoods and Education for All (EFA). Education is a prerequisite to building a food secure world, reducing poverty and conserving and enhancing natural resources. However, educational opportunities are not equally distributed. Access to education is lower among rural children, youth and adults and the gap between urban and rural illiteracy is not closing. Quality of education is lower in rural areas: curricula and textbooks in primary and secondary schools are often urban biased, irrelevant to the needs of rural people, and seldom focus on issues such as skills for life and rural development. Curricula of Vocational and Technical Agricultural Education and Higher Education still focus heavily on production and productivity, and are often obsolete. Institutional capacity to address

education for rural development and food security needs strengthening. This is why there is a need to pay attention to:

- *Expanding access* to education and improving school attendance in rural areas by promoting or supporting, for example, initiatives that aim at improving children's health and capacity to learn. These include: school canteens and gardens; information and communication technology; distance education; education of rural girls and women; life long education; skills for life in a rural environment; and flexible school calendars to accommodate the needs of local productive cycles.
 - *Improving the quality* of education to make it relevant to rural livelihoods needs and interests. This can be done for example by supporting participatory curriculum development; teacher training; environmental education; nutrition education and education to prevent HIV/AIDS.
2. *Strengthening Institutional Capacity* in planning and managing education for rural development by supporting new partnerships at national levels between government agencies (Ministry of Agriculture, Education, Health etc.), private and public organisations, universities, civil society, and mass media. Similarly at international level among agencies or departments specialised in rural development, such as FAO, IFAD, WFP or the Rural Development Department of The World Bank⁷, and with agencies and departments specialised in education.
 3. *Addressing Education for Rural Development systemically* and overcoming the "spare projects" approach, which targets isolated parts of traditional agricultural education. Basic education, secondary, vocational, higher education, literacy and skill training need to be seen as contributors to the development of human capacity for rural development therefore assistance to some or all of them should be approached in a systemic way. A systemic approach was adopted in Colombia and Cuba and perhaps we can learn from such experiences.
 4. *Helping traditional agricultural education adjust to the needs of a changing sector and the needs of the rural space to become part of a strategy of education for rural development.* In many countries traditional agricultural education systems have failed to respond to the human resources needs of a changing agriculture sector, resulting in high unemployment of graduates. Now, with a focus on rural development, the market needs for a graduate has again changed. Future graduates will need to have knowledge and skills beyond those required to work on production agriculture. These will include the ability to work with non-traditional clients such as the private sector, NGOs, decentralised local government, and civil society groups. Future graduates will have to be able to view the rural space as a dynamic environment that will require non-traditional alliances and solutions if it is to be sustainably developed.
 5. *Inviting and involving new stakeholders in developing education approaches for rural development.* If education and training for rural development is to have the desired impact it will have to open up to new stakeholders who will influence the content of curriculum, participate in management, and be instrumental in influencing government and business, in order to provide the policy and material support needed to sustain a revitalised system.

If nothing is done we can expect:

- More negative exploitation of natural resources as the rural poor move into forests or other protected areas in search of cropland
- Continuing degradation of land leading to erosion, and watershed deterioration
- Lower productivity by the farming poor
- Increased rural-urban migration compounding already serious urban poverty and social problems
- Deepening of rural poverty
- More widespread under-nourishment
- Social unrest
- Postponement of sustainable rural development

An Initiative

FAO is attempting to catalyse the revitalisation of education and training for rural development. A study now underway with UNESCO/IIEP will lead to a resource document that will have wide circulation in member countries. The study will define the need for revitalisation by collecting and analysing cases that illustrate change that has been completed or is in process, and showing that the change process can be successfully implemented. The findings of the study will be reinforced with a series of regional workshops during which the study and its examples of systems' change will be analysed and additional individual country analyses will be encouraged. The study will be completed by mid 2002 and the resource document distributed before the end of July 2002.

Role of the International community

There is much that the international agencies and donor's community can do together with developing countries to analyse the problems with systems for supplying education for rural development, identify what is required to bring about positive change, make the commitment to change, and begin the process.

What is needed is assistance with exposing countries to the realities of providing education for rural development by:

- Holding common views about the importance of dealing with education for sustainable rural development, as a crucial component of EFA strategies and systems reforms.
- Supporting a common approach to bringing about the needed changes.

- Encouraging dialogue between education ministries or departments and other key rural stakeholders such as ministries of agriculture and natural resources, health, infrastructure, finance, the private sector, NGOs and civil society.
- Supporting countries in analysing their existing education and training approaches to meeting the needs of rural development and, if appropriate, funding interventions that support the change process also within Sector Wide Approaches in education (SWAs).
- Undertaking careful analysis before responding to requests for assistance from agricultural education systems to make sure that the requesters are reflecting an education for rural development viewpoint.
- Producing global and local statistics on education disaggregated by rural and urban areas in a systematic manner.

Why Now?

- A strong enabling factor is the considerable interest in Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS) being prepared by highly indebted poor (HIPC) nations. These strategies target poverty throughout the nation and involve the co-operation of all stakeholders. This overcomes the traditional pattern of non-co-operation between public sector entities such as ministries of education and agriculture. The PRS will also attract funding from agencies such as the World Bank in the form of Poverty Reduction Strategy Credits so there are incentives to pay attention to education and training for rural development especially as a poverty reduction factor.
- The Millennium Summit development goals are focusing strongly on education, and on its interaction with food security.
- The G8 is focusing on education and on agriculture and rural development as crucial topics for development.
- The trend towards decentralisation, which brings development decisions and resources closer to the rural areas. While the raising of awareness about education and training for rural development may initially take place at national level, the probability of making it happen may best be at local government level.
- The fear that globalisation of markets will lower the price of basic commodities, place developing countries at risk in the global marketplace and further disadvantage small farmers is galvanising governments to take action to be competitive in terms of commodity production, quality control, and marketing strategies.

Next Steps

We would hope that those who attend this Working Group meeting would take the message of rural development, poverty alleviation and the associated challenges to their head offices and:

1. take the time to review the FAO/UNESCO - IIEP study next year when it will be sent to all key stakeholders
2. attend a conference called by FAO designed to launch the study findings and recommendations
3. place education and training for rural development on their home agenda and also in their discussions with partner countries and within SWAs
4. consider funding the cost of a process workshop related to the critical review of how individual national education systems are addressing the needs of rural livelihoods, with a view to promoting greater investments in access and quality education for rural development
5. provide the international community with education statistics disaggregated by urban and rural areas.
6. spread the word that FAO technical assistance could be available to member states willing to put an emphasis on education for rural development within their national EFA plans

A final comment

We began with a quick review of challenges that are facing those who support education in developing countries. The analysis of educational needs related to poverty alleviation and the pursuit of sustainable rural development indicates that there is a serious problem that requires urgent attention. It is our hope that the international community involved in supporting education systems in developing countries can turn the spotlight on this problem, work with national authorities who have committed to change, and begin the process of improving the lives of large numbers of rural men, women and children. We all know that the task is complex and difficult, that it will take resources and persistence but this may be a time when the factors for success are more favourable than in the past.

Endnotes

¹Many rural farm families are also involved in non-farm economic activities. Non-farm income is becoming an increasingly important share of total rural income, averaging 42 % in Africa, 40% in Latin America and 32% in Asia. These types of enterprises include handicraft production, simple agro-processing operations, vending and marketing, rickshaw driving and, in some cases, the acquisition of improved farm inputs. (FAO, *The State of Food and Agriculture, lessons from the past 50 years*. FAO, Rome, 2000, page 52)

²Despite estimates that enough food could be produced to feed 12 billion people, thirty six million people died of hunger or of its immediate consequences during the year 2000 and every seven seconds a child below the age of 10 died of hunger. In Jean Ziegler, *Schizophrénie des Nations Unies: UNE LUTTE SANS MOYEN CONTRE LA FAIM*, in *le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2001, page 4, and also in his interview to UN Daily Highlights, 6.11.2001 "UN human rights expert calls for global coalition against hunger". (Jean Ziegler is Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Commission on human rights for the right to food)

³...and 27 million in countries transitioning to the market economies and 11 million in industrialised countries. In: *UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warns: further slowdown in hunger reduction - in most developing countries the number of hungry even increased*. Press Release 01/69. See also FAO, *The State of Food and Agriculture, 2001*, FAO, Rome, 2001 according to which 826 million people are undernourished or chronically food-insecure

⁴FAO Press Release 01/69 (quoted above)

⁵The World Bank's strategy paper for rural development titled *From Vision to Action* (1997) notes that Rural Development encompasses all activities outside urban areas related to development. The strategy paper indicates that in future the Bank would be taking a broad rural focus, as opposed to a narrow agricultural focus. "The rural sector strategy focuses on the entire rural productive system. Water resource allocation and comprehensive watershed management incorporate irrigation and drainage. The management of natural resources in sustainable production systems treats agriculture, forestry and livestock as part of a larger system. Human capital development, infrastructure, and social development are integrated into rural development strategies and programs."

⁶See for example, "The World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development", (FAO, Rome 12-20 July 1979) In FAO, UNESCO, ILO, 1979 *Training For Agriculture and Rural Development*, FAO, Rome, 1980, page 123-124

⁷See for Example: ¹³FAO, *The State of Food and Agriculture, lessons from the past 50 years*. FAO, Rome, 2000, page 311; IFAD, *Rural Poverty Report 2001: the challenge of ending rural poverty*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, page 6 and 111-114; Moulton, *Improving education in rural areas: Guidance for rural development specialist*, The World Bank 2001