

Turning family farm activity into decent work

Poverty and family farming

Many of the world's poorest people depend on family farming* for their livelihood. Family farms account for almost 90 percent of the world's farms.¹ Most are small-scale operations with low yields and productivity levels, especially in developing countries. As a result, many farming families do not earn a decent living.

Poverty and low farm productivity tend to be closely associated with poor working conditions. Most work is done by family members, who engage in long, arduous and sometimes hazardous work to cut costs and compensate for the farm's low productivity. While this keeps the family farm viable in the short run, such working conditions ultimately undermine the well-being and productive potential of the family. Women



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and children are particularly susceptible to such conditions, which can affect their health and education. Similar situations are also found among rural households engaging in non-farm activities (see Table 1).

Table 1 - Working conditions in family farming

FAMILY MEMBERS WORKING AS CONTRIBUTING FAMILY LABOUR	FAMILY FARMS EMPLOYING NON-FAMILY RURAL LABOUR	FAMILY MEMBERS ENGAGING IN OFF-FARM EMPLOYMENT
<p>Many families and family members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earn meagre incomes because of their limited access to productive resources, training, information and markets; • Work long hours, which can limit their opportunities to acquire new skills. Because of intra-household dynamics, women often bear a heavy burden of their family's domestic and farming work; • Are unable to protect themselves from work-related hazards or are unaware of cost-effective ways of doing so; • Subject their children to hazardous and developmentally disruptive work. Almost 60 percent of the world's child labourers work in agriculture, often as unpaid family workers.² 	<p>Rural workers employed on family farms may:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive low wages due to the limited commercialization of the farms on which they are employed; • Lack access to stable employment because of the limited need for full-time workers on poor family farms; • Engage in arduous and hazardous work that family members are unwilling to do themselves; • Lack access to social protection because of the informal nature of their work. 	<p>Many family members pursue off-farm employment out of distress, and may have no choice but to settle for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Precarious, poorly remunerated and hazardous work; • Informal jobs that limit their access to social protection schemes and workers' organizations. <p>Meanwhile, those who remain on the farm may face labour shortages that force them to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the workload of family members, particularly women and children; • Change farming practices towards less productive activities.

* FAO has proposed the following working definition for the International Year of Family Farming: "Family farming includes all family-based agricultural activities, and it is linked to several areas of rural development. Family farming is a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production which is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labour, including both women's and men's." While family farming involves not only economic functions – but also environmental, reproductive, social and cultural functions – this thematic brief concentrates on the labour aspects of family farming.

Decent work for family farmers

Support for smallholder family farming can and should go hand in hand with the promotion of the Decent Work Agenda. To be lasting, productivity gains must translate into improved working conditions and well-being. Only then can family farming achieve its full potential and contribute to sustained poverty reduction. The promotion of **decent rural employment** (as defined in Box 1) should therefore be an integral part of broader efforts to enhance productivity, incomes and food security among family farmers.

This entails providing support for agriculture and family farms that cuts across all four pillars of decent work, namely:

- enhancing productivity on family farms to increase incomes, reduce family members' excessive work burden, and generate employment opportunities for landless rural workers and youth;
- improving occupational safety and health and extending the outreach of social protection to enhance the productive potential of family members;
- integrating International Labour Standards into national labour legislation and applying them in agriculture and rural areas to address gender-based discrimination and prevent child labour; and
- building stronger and more inclusive producers' organizations to increase family farms' bargaining power, access to markets and resources, and improve their ability to influence policy processes.

Governments must take the lead in putting this into practice. [FAO's work with the governments of Malawi and Tanzania](#) is indicative of how this can be done. In both countries, FAO supported the governments to develop policies and programmes that explicitly prioritize the creation of decent rural employment opportunities,³

Box 1 – Decent rural employment

While ILO leads the [Decent Work Agenda](#), FAO is working to better apply these standards to agriculture and rural areas through the promotion of **decent rural employment**. This involves promoting more productive self-employment and wage work in agriculture and rural areas, while also addressing the factors that undermine workers' well-being and productive potential. These decent work deficits include: weak enforcement of labour laws; insecure and low incomes; poor health and safety conditions; child labour; gender inequality in pay and opportunity; inadequate social protection; and a lack of social dialogue.

Box 2 – Youth and family farming

The drudgery and poor remuneration associated with low-productivity family farming have turned many young people away from pursuing careers in agriculture. Productive, dignified and decent family farming work is needed to engage youth. This will not only serve as a source of employment for rural youth – a key strategy for addressing the stubbornly high unemployment, underemployment and poverty among young people living in rural areas – but can also be a catalyst for further growth, as youth possess significant innovative potential. This will help bring greater economic dynamism to family farming and rural areas, thereby reducing poverty among youth and adults alike.

with a particular focus on women and youth. For instance, to foster a new generation of young farmers, FAO implemented Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools (JFFLS) trainings in both countries,⁴ and then encouraged local actors to take over and scale up the approach. FAO also worked with government officials to put child labour and gender equity higher on the policy agenda, while improving their capacities to act on these priorities. In particular, FAO documented gender inequalities in rural labour markets in both countries, and used these findings to help policymakers make more informed decisions. Meanwhile, in Malawi, FAO contributed to developing a national Framework for Action on child labour in agriculture.

The private sector and civil society can play an important complementary role. In Malawi and Tanzania, FAO engaged with agribusinesses and other private investors to increase their awareness of the productivity gains that can come from respecting the principles of decent work. FAO also involved private sector and civil society actors in the planning and implementation of JFFLS trainings, ensuring greater national ownership of the training curricula and process.

FAO country-level work in Malawi and Tanzania illustrates good steps towards effectively turning family farm activity into decent work. Building on this, FAO is committed to doing more through support that covers all four pillars of decent work, while adapting its tools and approaches to the needs and realities across countries. During the International Year of Family Farming and beyond, FAO and its partners⁵ stand ready to support countries to create decent work conditions in agriculture and on family farms.

Endnotes

1. S.K. Lowder, J. Scoet and S. Singh. 2014. *What do we really know about the number and distribution of farms and family farms in the world?* Background paper for the "State of Food and Agriculture 2014". ESA Working Paper No. 14-02. FAO, Rome; IFPRI. 2008. *Annual Report 2007-2008*. Washington, D.C., IFPRI.
2. ILO. 2013. *Marking progress against child labour: Global estimates and trends 2000-2012*. Geneva, ILO.
3. FAO supported the governments in revising 34 policies, strategies

and programmes to better integrate the principles of decent work into existing agricultural and rural development efforts.

4. FAO has implemented JFFLS trainings in over 20 countries to date, including in the [West Bank and Gaza Strip](#).
5. For instance, FAO is working with ILO, IFAD, IFPRI and IUF through the [International Partnership for Cooperation on Child Labour in Agriculture](#), and has partnered with ILO to advance the [Global Employment and Decent Work Agenda in agriculture and rural areas](#).

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