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The Rural Livelihood Information System

Piero Conforti

Senior Statistician
FAO Statistics, Division, Rome

SUMMARY

Information on rural incomes, livelihoods and living conditions plays a fundamental role in understanding medium and long term trends in the structural transformation of agriculture and rural economies. Comparable data are required to properly design, monitor and assess the impact of context-specific policies aimed at making the transformation more inclusive to reduce rural poverty, hunger and inequality.

To fill this gap, FAO, the World Bank and IFAD have developed a Rural Livelihoods Information System (RuLIS). RuLIS, that scales-up the production and compilation of data on incomes, livelihoods and rural development from a large pool of countries, and link them to policy making.

Distinguished Delegates are kindly invited to comment on the RuLIS initiative and its perspective, and particularly on the involvement of national and regional institutions in the future development of the project.

I. INTRODUCTION

Information on rural income and livelihoods is crucial for the formulation of evidence-based development policies. Comparable data are necessary to understand trends in the structural transformation of agriculture and rural economies, and the role that different types of rural households play in this transformation; to properly design context-specific policies aimed at making the transformation more inclusive, with the goal of reducing rural poverty; and to assess the impact of policies and adjust them.

Increased demand for information on rural income and livelihoods will also be required by policies aimed at implementing the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and to monitor its progress. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), that constitute the 2030 Agenda, demand wide-ranging information on a number of domains such as rural poverty, food insecurity, rural livelihoods, smallholder productivity, social protection, decent rural employment, migrations, sustainability and resilience, among others. Specifically, monitoring progress towards SDG 2.3 requires the definition and estimation of indicators 2.3.1 (Volume of production per labour unit by classes of arming/pastoral/forestry enterprise size) and 2.3.2 (Average income of small-scale food producers, by sex and indigenous status). These indicators must be based on comparable and harmonized micro-data on rural income and livelihoods.

Accessible, timely and comparable information on rural incomes, livelihoods and their evolution, however, is not available in many countries, nor easily accessible. Much of the data on rural development needs to be computed from the household level, and gathered through surveys. Research institutions usually have the capacity to process micro data from surveys; however, they do not have easy access to large pools of harmonized micro- and macro-level information from different countries, let alone harmonized indicators across countries. Policy makers and practitioners often lack the capacity to process complex sets of information.

To contribute toward filling this gap, while at the same time enhancing the use of existing data, the FAO Statistics Division has joined forces with the World Bank's Living Standard Measurement Study team and IFAD, under the aegis of the FAO Strategic Program 3 (on reducing rural poverty) in building the [Rural Livelihoods Information System \(RuLIS\)](#). RuLIS will scale-up the production and compilation of data on rural incomes, livelihoods and rural development from a large pool of countries, and link them to policy making.

In particular, RuLIS will intervene in the micro-data value chain by:

1. providing a wide set of harmonized indicators and variables on rural livelihoods
2. lowering the costs for individual users of accessing micro-data and micro-data-based indicators
3. improving the harmonization of rural livelihoods indicators built from micro data
4. promoting transparent standardized methodologies to compute variables and indicators and easily accessible tools to replicate and customize the computation.

RuLIS will be a timely micro-founded complement to the ongoing efforts aimed at improving the collection of rural and agricultural data. It uses information generated by FAO and the World Bank in partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), such as the Living Standard Measurement Study. It uses methodologies developed by the Global Strategy for improving Agricultural and Rural Statistics (GSARS), and the associated AGRIS project, supported also by USAID.

The information provided by RuLIS will fill an existing gap and address the needs of a wide variety of users, from the less experts, interested in more general information, to the more experts, interested in details. As such, RuLIS offers a timely micro-founded complement to the ongoing efforts for improving the collection of rural and agricultural data, such as the 50 by 2030 initiative.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOPIC

RuLIS was conceived as a joint product by three institutions that have considerable experience and comparative advantages on providing information on rural livelihoods. The FAO, IFAD and the World Bank are producers and users of such information. They collectively have the incentive to produce high-quality data and information, access to microdata produced by official national sources and the expertise, institutional knowledge, background and contacts required for successfully generating them.

In recent years, a number of projects have been undertaken which have provided information on income and related livelihoods in rural areas. The first, in chronological order, is the Rural Income Generating Activities (RIGA) project. RIGA is a research project, which decided to make its data available to the public upon request. As of December, 2015, RIGA covered 42 surveys from 22 countries in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Eastern

Europe. The second is the Smallholder farmers Dataportait (SHDP). Other relevant, from which RuLIS has taken expertise and practices are The Gender and Land Rights Database (GLRD), which collects harmonized sex-disaggregated data on land management and ownership; and the World Agricultural Watch (WAW). Building on the experience gathered with these projects, RuLIS is up-scaling their outputs within a single initiative of higher impact.

A two-day expert consultation was organised in 2016, November 7 and 8, during which a group of academics and independent experts peer-reviewed and validated the methodology adopted for computing indicators in RuLIS. They also made recommendations on a core list of indicators to be published by RuLIS and on the data sharing policy and infrastructure.

RuLIS is an information product, freely available on the web, which will include four different sections plus a landing page. It is conceived as a portal including both data and, through time, a set of ordered research papers and materials developed from the dataset.

Concerning the data, RuLIS includes:

- a. 130-plus ready-made indicators from household surveys rural livelihoods at the national and sub-national levels, comparable across countries, from a broad range of domains, including:
 1. Income, Productivity and Poverty
 2. Employment, Health and Education
 3. Land
 4. Inputs and Technology
 5. Infrastructure and Services
 6. Livestock
 7. Social Protection
 8. Shocks and Migration
 9. Household Characteristics
 10. Community Characteristic

This information is broken down by gender, income quantiles, size of the operation, degree of participation in agriculture, rural and urban areas and other characteristics.

- b. Access to bulk-downloads of 240-plus individual- and household-level variables per survey – where micro-data are publicly available -- scripts, syntax files and working notes, thus allowing for maximum transparency on procedures.
- c. A section allowing users to compute customized indicators, starting from household level data, without accessing them – where micro-data are not publicly available. This would offer the considerable advantage for expert users, to be able to extract customized information from confidential micro-data, without violating the existing access constraints.

These three sections address the need of different users. The less experts are likely to access mostly the ready-made indicators. Intermediate users will likely want to modify the ready-made indicators, building customized indicators. The more experts are likely to be interested mostly in the household- and individual-level variables. These sets of cleaned micro-data allows analysing households' and individual behaviour, establishing policy-relevant correlations.

Through time, RuLIS aims at becoming a portal, linking products of other projects, which will maintain their own identity; and an outlet for a RuLIS series of technical papers, which will use the data disseminated by the project.

The publication of indicators, variable and research products is meant to be just a starting point. The idea is for RuLIS to gradually evolve into a community of practice in which experts from national and international institutions, public, private sectors and NGOs can share knowledge, methodologies and data on rural livelihoods.

The establishment of such community will be facilitated by the provision, as a starting point, of fully transparent technical material. A set of workshops, which RuLIS plans to organize as a follow-up to the publication of the first batch of information, will catalyze interest from national, regional and other international institutions in participating to the system by contributing data, research products, and improved practices.

III. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With the first publication of the data in 2018, RuLIS has taken the first step towards developing a coherent information base and a sound, comprehensive and standardized methodology for processing and harmonizing indicators and variables.

The FAO Statistics Division recommends that future be developed along three lines:

1. Maintain the system up-to date, further refining and improving methodologies;
2. Adding newly-collected and improved data and indicator to the existing pool, as suggested by additional demand for information;
3. Enhance partnership, possibly to include national and regional institutions, research institutions and other private and NGOs, to develop a community of practice and develop capacities worldwide.

This expanded partnership will bring into RuLIS additional expertise, while at the same time help developing capacities. Regional, national and sub-national communities will be provided an opportunity to take increased ownership of the analysis of information and policy design, which are critical for rural development and poverty reduction.

Most countries in the world do collect household level data that can be used for this purpose. However, national capacities to process, harmonize, disseminate and use the information in support of policy design, implementation and monitoring, is often limited.

The Statistics Division recommend that RuLIS is used to facilitate countries and their stakeholders in taking ownership of information on rural livelihoods. To this end, the project should adopt a bottom-up approach, in which institutions at the regional, national and sub-national levels, with the support of FAO, the World Bank and IFAD, contribute develop their own information base, thus feeding the global data and research products.

IV. Questions and invitations to AFCAS members

Distinguished Delegates are kindly invited to comment on the RuLIS initiative and its perspective. In particular, views and insight are sought on the interest of national institutions to be involved in:

- validating results on indicators and variables at national and sub-national levels
- using the RuLIS data to inform policy design, implementation, monitoring and assessments
- using the data to prepare policy-relevant reports to be discussed and communicated with trelevant stakeholders
- engage in capacity-building activities, such as regional- or national-level workshops on the use of micro-data from farm and household surveys to build policy-relevant information, using the methodology developed by the RuLIS.
- use the RuLIS as a tool to disseminate and foster the use of the data collected in household and farm level surveys such as those promoted by the 50 by 2030 Initiative.