



International  
Labour  
Office

# SKILLS FOR EMPLOYMENT

## Policy Brief

# SKILLS FOR RURAL EMPLOYMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

This policy brief explains why action is needed to improve rural skills development in the context of the broader development challenges faced by rural communities. It outlines some of the key characteristics of education and training in rural communities, and sets out a range of policy options open to governments and social partners seeking to improve rural skills and employment opportunities. It is illustrated with examples of good practice, and concludes with a review of the support provided by the ILO for training in rural communities.

## The challenges facing rural communities

Development of rural communities is increasingly a priority both at national level and within international development efforts. The reasons for this increasing prominence of the rural sector on the political agenda include the persistence of poverty in rural areas, urbanization, globalization and climate change – and, most recently, the food crisis, with shortages and rapidly increasing prices. The Millennium Development Goal on the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, and the global goal of achieving decent work for all, will not be achieved unless rural poverty is reduced.

Historically, agriculture has been an engine of economic development, providing the food, fibre and fuel with which to create more diversified products and services in other sectors. In many countries, agriculture continues to be the mainstay of rural livelihoods, a major contributor to GDP and an important source of export earnings. Agriculture cannot play this dynamic, wealth-creating role without an enabling policy environment which ensures adequate institutions, decent work, and sufficient, well-targeted public and private investment.

Three-quarters of the world's poor live in rural areas, where decent work deficits are typically severe. Rural labour markets are often dysfunctional. Labour market institutions, and labour

organization and representation, tend to be weak. Underemployment is widespread and incomes are generally low. Access to social protection is extremely limited. Rural workers are often vulnerable: in many places they are not fully covered by national labour law, and their rights more broadly are often not recognized or enforced. As in urban areas, a large share of economic activity in rural areas tends to be informal.

Rural economies face a wide range of challenges that urban areas are more likely to overcome, in matters such as transport links, access to sanitation and health services, and a consumer base in close proximity to support small and medium enterprise development. Those working in rural areas also face all the difficulties associated with a paucity of economic opportunities, underinvestment, poor infrastructure and public services, including education, and, in many cases, weak governance and underdeveloped markets.

## Why action on skills is needed

Flourishing rural areas are vital to regional and national development. Education, entrepreneurship, and physical and social infrastructure all play an important role in developing rural regions. Skills are central to improving employability and livelihood opportunities, reducing poverty, enhancing productivity and promoting environmentally sustainable development.

Migration from rural to urban areas has placed enormous pressure on many cities to accommodate newcomers, greatly increasing demand for infrastructure and services and often leading to increased levels of pollution and other forms of environmental degradation. Providing employment and decent incomes in rural areas is a principal means of both stemming this tide of migration and reducing poverty.

The need to increase agricultural production and ensure food security has focused attention on the difficulties that rural communities face in promoting livelihoods in both farm and non-farm activities.

The ILO supports skills development to improve the employability of workers, the productivity of enterprises and the inclusiveness of economic growth.

Education, training and skills development in rural areas face particular challenges:

- Access to education and training is often limited by both financial barriers (e.g. training and transport costs) and non-financial barriers (e.g. scarce education and training infrastructure, inflexible training timetables).
- Especially for poor rural children and adults, the opportunity costs of education and training may be too high to justify their giving up income-generating activities and/or unpaid work that helps to sustain their families.
- Many rural people do not have access even to basic education. This hampers their access to technical and vocational training.
- Unequal gender relations and traditional gender roles entail specific difficulties for rural girls and women in accessing education and training.
- What education and training is available is often of inadequate quality. Teachers and trainers may be unqualified, equipment and technology outdated, and teaching and training methods ill-suited to rural contexts.
- In many developing countries, training systems tend to operate in isolation from the labour market and employers' needs, so that training does not always match demand for skills.
- Environmental degradation and climate change present particular risks to rural livelihoods that need to be managed. This requires developing new, innovative strategies and skills to enable rural women and men to learn about and use new environmentally friendly technologies.

Governments and rural communities need to address these challenges in a comprehensive way that gives priority to promoting better access to relevant and quality skills development.

## Rural employment and skills development: An overview

Rural economies are becoming more diversified. While agriculture is still the main source of livelihood, an increasing share of rural households' incomes comes from non-farm activities.

The structure of rural employment varies across developing regions. Off-farm work employs approximately 48 per cent of adult rural males in Latin America, the Caribbean, South Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa, and 38 per cent in East Asia and the Pacific, but only 20 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. For women, the proportions tend to be lower, but vary less from region to region: for example, approximately 25 per cent of adult rural women are engaged in off-farm activities in East Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean (World Bank, 2007; IFAD, 2010).

The level and nature of agricultural work also vary. While some farmers in developing countries are engaged in high-return agricultural businesses (for example, cultivation of certain high-value crops for export), most remain engaged in low-productivity subsistence farming (ILO, 2008b). Education and skills increase the ability of individuals to innovate and adopt new technologies in farming to increase productivity and agri-

**Table 1. Average years of education of rural 18–25 year-olds, selected countries**

	Sub-Saharan Africa	South Asia	East Asia (excl. China)	Middle East and North Africa	Europe and Central Asia	Latin America and Caribbean
<b>Urban</b>						
Men	8.5	7.3	10.1	9.3	10.6	8.7
Women	7.6	6.5	10.1	9.2	11.1	8.9
<b>Rural</b>						
Men	5.5	5.3	8.0	6.8	9.7	5.7
Women	4.3	3.0	7.7	5.0	10.0	5.8

Source: World Bank, 2012 (calculations weighted by 2000 population based on 58 countries excluding China and India).

cultural yields (Hartl, 2009). Evidence from Asia suggests that better education and training increases the chances of finding high-paying non-farm employment, whereas lack of education tends to limit options to agriculture or low-wage non-farm employment (ILO, 2008b).

Access to training is a major constraint on the opportunities for rural people in developing countries. For example, nearly 90 per cent of agricultural workers in India have no formal training (ILO, 2008b), and a study among small-scale entrepreneurs in Kenya has indicated that over 85 per cent of those working in the rural informal economy have no business or technical training at all (Haan, 2002). Many young people from rural areas are disadvantaged in trying to enter urban labour markets because of their low level of education and lack of relevant skills experience.

Rural girls and women are often the most disadvantaged. For example, in South Asia rural women aged 18–25 have completed on average only 3 years of schooling, as compared to 6.5 years for their urban counterparts (see table 1).

In many developing countries, most training in rural areas takes place outside the formal training system. For example, in Benin, Senegal and Cameroon, informal apprenticeships account for almost 90 per cent of all trades training (ILO, 2012).

## Policy options

There is a wide range of policy initiatives that can be undertaken by governments, the social partners and local communities to improve the situation of rural workers through skills development and thereby contribute to increased productivity and incomes and improved social welfare.

### Developing an integrated approach to rural skills development

#### **Key message:**

An integrated approach is essential to ensure that development of skills and employment opportunities in rural areas draws on the wide range of policies, institutions and actors in the training sphere that can support and expand training delivery in rural regions.

An integrated approach may include the following aspects:

- Integrating skills development into rural development policies and strategies, such as agricultural policies, and

### **Box 1. Supporting agricultural productivity and employment through alternative products**

In Liberia, research undertaken jointly by the Government, the ILO and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) identified the technology and technical skills needed to revive production and jobs in agriculture, particularly in rubber plantations, crop production, horticulture and livestock. The objective was to identify crops and livestock which enhance employment opportunities for young people and give them an alternative to migrating to the informal urban economy. This objective is part of a broad strategy for realizing the potential of a restored agricultural sector to contribute to national employment objectives. Findings show that rice production and cultivation of seedlings for tree crops and vegetable production could generate a larger number of jobs per acre at higher probable incomes than traditional crops. The research highlighted the need for investment in many areas to facilitate a transition to alternative crops, including training in the production, processing and marketing of these products, as well as investment in physical infrastructure.

*Source: IFAO and information from Liberia Ministry of Agriculture, 2007, cited in ILO 2008a*

private sector development and entrepreneurship policies (see box 1).

- Strengthening coordination and collaboration with the private sector in skills development, both to increase the relevance of training, and to improve and facilitate its delivery. Employers in particular, but also workers' organizations, NGOs and community groups should be involved in planning and implementing programmes.
- Assessing labour market needs and economic opportunities, and linking training to the skills requirements in the particular rural context.
- Collecting and analysing data, disaggregated by gender, age, ethnicity, disability and other relevant dimensions, to enable appropriate services and programmes to be designed.

- Developing diversified skills development policies that consider formal, non-formal and informal training.<sup>1</sup> While access to good quality formal training is important, it is also crucially important in improving skills provision in rural areas to include innovative non-formal and informal training into national training systems

## Expanding access to quality education and vocational training

### Key message:

Lack of access to quality education and training is the foremost constraint on the employability of rural populations.

Improving access to good education and training may include:

- Expanding the outreach of both schools and training institutions to under-served rural areas.
- Providing free basic education, as an essential foundation for further skills training, and offering financial incentives (e.g. vouchers) and non-financial incentives (e.g. meals at schools) to improve attendance.
- Providing affordable technical and vocational training by reducing financial entry barriers, and designing interventions to enable those most disadvantaged, such as working children, women in poverty, ethnic minorities and ex-combatants, to participate.
- Complementing technical and vocational training with basic education (literacy and numeracy) and life skills (e.g. confidence-building, health management, social awareness) (Brewer, 2013). This enables participants to benefit more from technical and vocational training, and may be particularly relevant for those most marginalized.
- Promoting a gender-responsive learning environment, for example, by providing safe transportation and training facilities, separate sanitation facilities, dormitories and provisions for child care (see box 2).
- Ensuring that textbooks and other learning and training materials are not gender stereotyped and sensitizing teachers and instructors to gender equity.
- Encouraging the training of women and men in trades not

<sup>1</sup> Non-formal training is structured training, usually provided through schools or other institutions, that is not recognized by the formal training system, for example, training imparted by NGOs. Informal training is non-structured training provided, for example, at the workplace.

### Box 2. Gender mainstreaming of national vocational training in Botswana

The Botswana Training Authority, in collaboration with the Women's Affairs Department within the Ministry for Labour and Home Affairs, drafted a National Policy for Mainstreaming Gender into Vocational Training and Work-Based Learning (2000) with the following objectives:

- increasing women's access to vocational education and training and reducing attrition rates once they begin the training;
- eradicating gender blindness and increasing gender awareness in vocational training institutions by integrating inclusive language into curricula, improving attitudes of trainees, instructors and administrators towards gender disparity, equality and equity in vocational training, and promoting gender training to overcome gender stereotyping and prejudice;
- articulating what constitutes sexual harassment, raising awareness of it and creating strict reporting and response mechanisms;
- developing and implementing a system of regular data collection and reporting of information by gender in all vocational training institutions about the status and training needs of men and women, with a view to reducing occupational segregation

Source: Botswana Training Authority, 2006, cited in ILO, 2008a.

stereotypically associated with one gender: for example, promoting training for women in mechanics and for men in textile work.

- Developing flexible, modular training. This will benefit those who cannot afford to take time off (for example due to seasonal or household work) or to pay for longer-term training.
- Facilitating access to training materials, toolkits, and modern equipment and technology, as well as better remuneration, for teachers and trainers.
- Outreach measures, such as mobile or distance learning through information and communication technologies (ICT). This requires expanding access to mobile phones, computers, and education and training hardware and software, and investing in the ICT training of teachers and trainers.

- Providing career guidance and practical labour market information (e.g. in schools' training facilities) to enable rural youth to make informed choices about their education, training and employment in the rural context.



## Promoting diversified skills development systems

### Key message:

Skills development in rural areas requires various types of provision, using innovative methods of delivery and capitalizing on existing social institutions.

Specific options include:

- Linking formal with non-formal training, or combining institution-based education with enterprise-based learning.
- Combining vocational and entrepreneurship training, for example by incorporating business knowledge and skills in formal secondary and tertiary education, or through community-based training programmes (see box 3).
- Complementing entrepreneurship training by facilitating rural entrepreneurs' access to micro-credit schemes, business development services and market information. This may require expanding the scope of these services and ensuring that the right legal framework is in place.
- Promoting apprenticeship systems as a viable way for young women and men to learn a trade (see box 4). Apprenticeships are a practical and usually cost-effective way to develop skills, especially for those who do not meet the entry requirements of formal training.

### Box 3. Training for Rural Economic Empowerment (TREE)

TREE is an ILO community-based training programme implemented in over 20 countries in Africa and Asia. It promotes income generation opportunities for disadvantaged women and men by ensuring that they gain skills and knowledge that they can use in their communities. The TREE strategy differs from conventional vocational training programmes in:

- identifying potential income-generating activities and related training needs before designing the content and structure of specific training programmes;
- involving the local community and social partners in each phase of the identification, design and delivery process;
- providing post-training support such as business development services to help participants gain access to waged work or self-employment.

Between 2010 and 2013, a TREE project in Zimbabwe provided training to over 2,500 young people in fish farming, poultry raising, horticulture and bee-keeping; over 75 per cent of participants went on to use those skills as entrepreneurs or in cooperative arrangements. Over 150 national officials were trained in managing TREE processes, and the Government is planning to expand the programme nationwide.

Source: <http://www.africayouthskills.org/>; ILO, 2009.

- Upgrading traditional and informal apprenticeship systems to offer higher quality training and facilitate technological advances and innovations. Depending on the local context, this may entail involving business associations of master craftspersons in upgrading activities; providing training to master craftspersons in technical, technological and entrepreneurship skills; improving working conditions within apprenticeships; improving equal access to apprenticeships for women and men; and combining apprenticeship with formal vocational training.
- Developing labour-based programmes that improve rural infrastructure as a way of transferring skills and knowledge among rural populations. Labour-based programmes can provide training in, for example, construction, maintenance and managerial skills.

## Upgrading skills for increased agricultural productivity

### Key message:

Agriculture is the mainstay of rural communities. By increasing productivity through improvements to agricultural practices, rural communities can increase yields and thereby offer better livelihoods, including improved employment opportunities and higher farm incomes. The World Bank, for example, estimates that GDP growth in agriculture is four times more effective in reducing extreme poverty than non-agricultural growth (World Bank, 2012).

Skills development can contribute to improvements in agricultural practice in several ways:

- Through support for small-scale producers in accessing markets, modern technology and value chains, which can channel knowledge and information for improved productivity.
- By expanding the reach of rural extension services through a combination of formal and non-formal approaches. These services can greatly enhance the technical knowledge and skills of small-scale producers and facilitate environmentally sustainable agricultural practices.
- Through training women as extension workers to enable women farmers to benefit from extension services in gender-segregated societies.
- Through the promotion of skills development in producer associations and rural cooperatives. Such associations enable farmers to pool limited resources and can be an



### Box 4. Upgrading informal apprenticeships

The ILO recognizes informal apprenticeship as an important training system in the informal economy. In informal apprenticeship, an apprentice and a master craftsperson conclude a training agreement that is embedded in local norms and traditions. The apprentice (usually a young person) acquires the skills for a trade or craft in a micro or small enterprise, learning from and working side-by-side with an experienced craftsperson.

On the basis of country research in Egypt, Ghana, Malawi, Mali and Tanzania, the ILO has developed a guide for upgrading informal apprenticeship systems. This involves the gradual improvement of a training system embedded in the culture and traditions of the society in which it is applied, and gaining improved recognition for it in the national training system.

An ILO project in Niger (2005–10) established a dual apprenticeship system combining learning at school and at the workplace in ten pilot trades, building on informal apprenticeship practices. In 2010, project activities to upgrade the informal apprenticeship system began in Benin, Burkina Faso and Zimbabwe, working closely with national business associations of master craftspersons to guide project implementation for apprentices in carpentry, tailoring, mechanics, welding, and arts and crafts.

Source: ILO, 2012.

effective means of upgrading their members' technical and entrepreneurship skills, as well as opening up access to information, markets and institutions providing inputs and know-how (see box 5).

- Through the promotion of safety, health and good working conditions in the agricultural sector. In addition to protecting workers from harm, health and safety measures can improve productivity and contribute to increased agricultural yields, for example through training on the correct use of pesticides and fertilizers (see e.g. ILO, 2005).

## The ILO's role

The ILO works with its constituents (governments and employers' and workers' organizations) to improve the employability of both those in and those seeking work, and the productivity and competitiveness of enterprises, through skills development. It assists its constituents through research and knowledge sharing, policy advice and technical assistance.

In rural skills development, ILO currently focuses on:

- reforming and strengthening national skills policies and improving training systems;
- extending training in rural communities, for example through community-based training initiatives;
- developing and upgrading skills in the informal economy;
- upgrading informal apprenticeships;
- facilitating entrepreneurship education and management training;
- promoting skills for a greener economy.

The ILO's Human Resources Development Recommendation, 2004 (No. 195), provides guidance on the content and reform of skills policies. It specifically promotes access to education, training and lifelong learning for people in rural areas.

### Box 5. A women's cooperative in India

The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) was formed in 1972 in Ahmedabad. Initially a small membership organization for poor women working in the informal sector, SEWA now has more than 1.2 million members across India. Members are involved in SEWA through unions or cooperatives. The unions, in both urban and rural areas, help members gain access to fair treatment, justice, markets and services. The cooperatives help members to market and improve the quality of their products, while also teaching them new techniques and how to expand into new products. For example, SEWA has shown salt farmers how to produce higher-value industrial salt rather than lower-value edible salt. The largest cooperative is the SEWA Bank. In 2004 the bank had more than 250,000 accounts, with deposits totalling \$14.4 million. It has encouraged thousands of poor women to regularly save their incomes through programmes such as "doorstep banking", and has offered small loans (averaging \$73). Members prefer the bank's 20 per cent interest rate to the exploitation of moneylenders.

*Source: World Bank, 2006.*



## Key ILO resources

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## Other references

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For more information on links between education and training and productive and decent work, visit the **Global Public–Private Knowledge Sharing Platform on Skills for Employment**, initiated by the ILO and benefiting from the support and collaboration of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World Bank.  
<http://www.skillsforemployment.org/KSP/en/index.htm>