



Food and Agriculture Organization  
of the United Nations

**FAO Statistics Division**

Working Paper Series

ESS / 15-10

**DECENT WORK INDICATORS  
FOR AGRICULTURE AND  
RURAL AREAS**

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES, DATA  
COLLECTION CHALLENGES  
AND POSSIBLE AREAS FOR  
IMPROVEMENT

OCTOBER 2015

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## **Decent Work Indicators for agriculture and rural areas**

### **Conceptual issues, data collection challenges and possible areas for improvement**

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**Key words:** data, decent work indicators

#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to achieve three main objectives. First, to assess the relevance of concepts and indicators of Decent Work (DW) for rural areas and employment in agriculture, especially in low-income countries, where coverage, data availability and reliability are particularly problematic. Second, to examine some of the main reasons for the lack of data on DW for rural areas and agriculture, particularly with reference to problems with data collection, such as: the scarcity of employment-focused surveys; sampling challenges that lead to some categories of the working poor to be missed out or under-represented; questionnaire design issues; challenges in survey implementation from selection to training to supervision of interviewers. Third, the paper proposes a selection of more relevant indicators as well as some ways to improve data collection and their quality to better capture the realities of DW, especially in low-income countries (LICs). In this regard the paper presents options for the integration of DW indicators in existing national agricultural surveys, noting the main practical challenges and possible solutions.



# **Decent Work Indicators for agriculture and rural areas: Conceptual issues, data collection challenges and possible areas for improvement**

Background Paper

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## **1. Introduction**

This background paper aims to achieve three main objectives. First, to assess the relevance of concepts and indicators of Decent Work (DW) for rural areas and employment in agriculture, especially in low-income countries, where coverage, data availability and reliability are particularly problematic. Second, to examine some of the main reasons for the lack of data on DW for rural areas and agriculture, in terms of problems with data collection, particularly: the scarcity of employment-focused surveys; sampling challenges that lead to some categories of the working poor to be missed out or under-represented; questionnaire design issues; challenges in survey implementation from selection to training to supervision of interviewers. Third, the paper will attempt to propose a selection of more relevant indicators as well as some ways to improve data collection and their quality to better capture the realities of DW, especially in low-income countries (LICs).

The first Section of the paper focuses on three problems and tensions in the implementation of a DW agenda in developing countries and especially in the measurement challenges this agenda raises. By looking at the available lists of Decent Work Indicators (DWIs), their conceptual origins, their availability from existing data repositories, ideas about alternative indices, debates about their applicability to different contexts, and a critical appraisal of the quality of what is available, this section highlights three basic problems with DW concepts and indicators:

1. Context specificity is important for relevance of concepts and indicators. A long and rigid list of DWIs may reflect aims for universalism and the imperative of international comparability. However, while all dimensions DW are desirable, not all indicators are relevant and applicable to all contexts, so there is an external validity problem if an

extensive list of DWI is used. As a result, there is a danger of focusing on too many indicators/dimensions many of which suffer from very poor coverage in terms of countries, i.e. some countries with only a very limited set of available data for some very broad background indicators for economic opportunities (employment rates, for instance).

2. Many of the available indicators in several low-income countries, especially in Africa, are basic employment indicators that serve as ‘background information’ (how many people are active, or employed in rural areas, or the employment rate) but do not provide any indication of ‘quality’ and key indicators of quality (returns to labour, frequency of employment i.e. underemployment rates, non-wage conditions, etc.) are often missed from agriculture/rural datasets. Especially in agriculture a proper measurement of overall working conditions (including quality job aspects) is crucial. In this sector, the employed population tends to have specific employment conditions which tend to be structurally different from other economic sectors. Standards DWIs might therefore result inadequate to measure job quality in agriculture.
3. Generally the quality of available labour statistics for rural areas in developing countries, especially in low-income countries (LICs) in Africa, is very poor and may contain biases that would require some rethinking of survey design issues as explored in more detail in Section 2 of this paper.

The scarcity and low quality of labour statistics for agriculture and rural areas stem from two main factors:

- (a) Scarcity of employment-focused surveys, since labour force surveys (LFS) are not sufficiently frequent or not focused on rural areas, and most household budget surveys (HBS) cover too many topics, contain extensive and time-consuming modules on consumption, and are focused on welfare indicators (education, health, consumption) rather than on employment and earnings;
- (b) Inadequate survey design to capture the realities of rural employment, especially in LICs, including sampling and non-sampling problems.

Section 2 of this paper discusses some of these problems, especially issues of survey design. It also proposes a number of possible areas for improvement, in relation to the most suitable DWI as well as to survey design options. The main alternatives would require:

1. Some more selectivity in DW indicators, i.e. trying to focus on a smaller but more relevant set of indicators, including some that are not currently being collected (for example, detailed data on returns to labour, whether self- or wage-employment, as well as more precise measures of underemployment and occupation multiplicity/multiple job-holding).
2. Better survey designs for greater rural employment focus, including longer modules on DW indicators, alternative sampling methods, better design of questionnaires and questions, and far more training and supervision of interviewers and data collectors.

The paper will particularly focus on the types of countries that are more affected by the scarcity and inadequacy of rural labour statistics, namely *low-income countries*, especially in Africa. There will be therefore more use of examples from Sub-Saharan Africa, in order to better inform pilot exercises in Burkina Faso and Togo, coordinated by FAO in collaboration with the ILO.

## **2. From concepts to indicators: the meaning and measurement of DW in rural areas**

This section offers an overview of some conceptual issues, how the concept of ‘DW’ has been built and the dimensions attached to it, as well as some tensions between its holistic character and its applicability in a wide range of contexts and situations. It will be argued that its applicability is variable across contexts and that many dimensions of DW indicators may not be fully relevant or feasible in LIC contexts, where agriculture represents the main source of livelihood (as own-account or wage work) and most people reside in rural areas. This section will particularly focus on dimensions of quantity (measures of employment and underemployment for different types of employment) and quality (especially on returns to

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