

Rural youth and the COVID-19 pandemic

SUMMARY

- The COVID-19 pandemic is affecting all parts of society and livelihoods around the globe. It is though worth recognizing that disadvantaged segments of populations like rural young women and men will be impacted harder. Nevertheless, when proactively engaged, they have demonstrated to be innovators in their own sectors to surmount the pandemic impact.
- In rural areas, the education, vocational education and training system may already be disadvantaged by the underdevelopment or lack of certain services. The closure of education and learning facilities, may leave behind millions of rural youth, owing to the difficult context they live in, paired with difficulties in accessing technologies for distance learning. All this may further result in inhibiting their school to work transition.
- Around one in five of the world's youth are not in employment, education or training with young women outnumbering young men two to one. Furthermore, the youth unemployment rates are about three times as high as those of adults (ILO, 2019). The COVID-19 crisis will increase this already tough scenario and intensify their unemployment rates and possibly their labour market vulnerabilities. The youth cohort¹ aged 15-17, may experience heightened barriers to prepare and access decent employment opportunities with the current crisis and be more vulnerable to child labour if exposed to hazardous work as a negative coping mechanism. Overall, young people represent a large majority of the workforce in the informal sector and therefore may not be able to access COVID-19 social protection measures put in place by countries.
- Rural youth are often unheard and not consulted. Although it is increasingly recognized that youth participation has an important role in decision-making, including during the COVID-19 pandemic discourse, too often their participation remains symbolic or passive.

POLICY ISSUES

Rural youth constitute a vast group that often face both the challenges of age-specific vulnerabilities and those of the underdevelopment of rural areas. Nearly 1 billion of the world's 1.2 billion youth aged 15-24 reside in developing countries. Their numbers are growing more rapidly in lower-income countries than in higher-income countries and 88 percent live in rural

¹ United Nations (UN) youth ageframe. The UN defines 'youth', as those persons between the ages of **15 and 24 years**, (see A/36/215 and resolution 36/28, 1981). By that definition, therefore, children are those persons under the age of 14. It is, however, worth noting that Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines 'children' as persons up to the age of 18. This was intentional, as it was hoped that the Convention would provide protection and rights to as large an age-group as possible and because there was no similar United Nations Convention on the Rights of Youth. Within the overall youth cohort as defined by the UN, the **15-17 age cohort** tend to experience particular barriers in accessing decent employment related to their age as they have reached the legal age of employment, and often have finished compulsory education, yet they are under 18. When this age group engages in hazardous work, it is considered child labour, moreover they tend to experience may other exclusionary challenges including legal barriers. For more information please see the [Conference Proceedings of Rural Youth 15-17](#).

areas of developing countries and 75 million of them are unemployed (IFAD, 2019). In many developing countries, education, vocational education and training systems tend to operate in isolation from the labour market and employers' needs; therefore, training does not always match the skills demand. Rural youth mostly work in the informal sector and are likely to have vulnerable jobs, additionally, their access to quality education, vocational education and training is often limited by financial barriers (e.g. training and transportation costs) and non-financial barriers (e.g. scarce education and training infrastructure, inflexible teaching/training schedules, etc.). It is also worth noting, that specific rural minorities and vulnerable groups, like for example, indigenous youth, youth with disabilities, young migrants, young refugees, girls and rural young workers 15-17, may face additional vulnerabilities, challenges and possibly marginalization, owing to their specific difficulties in accessing training, resources and employment. Further to these challenges, constraints also exist, and in particular for rural youth, in access to land, natural resources, finance, technology, knowledge and information with insufficient participation in policy and strategic dialogues, making it difficult for them to seize opportunities for improving their lives and contributing to the rural economy. Furthermore, unequal gender relationships and traditional gender roles entail specific additional difficulties for rural young women.

Key policy issues to be considered are the following:

- **The COVID-19 pandemic has shifted education and vocational education from a more "traditional" face-to-face learning to online**, on an unprecedented scale in history. These interruptions can have long-term consequences for the affected young cohorts and are likely to further increase inequality for rural youth. As observed from previous health emergencies (e.g. most recently during the Ebola outbreaks), the impact on education, vocational education and training is likely to most negatively affect countries with already low learning outcomes, high dropout rates, and low resilience to shocks and in particular in developing countries given that distance learning remains out of reach for those without means to connect. This may cause further loss in human capital and diminished economic opportunities in the future. There is also, so-far, very little knowledge, or evidence, in how to transform face-to-face, group-based and hands on approaches which are very much used in agricultural trainings, into on-line formats that need to be used during the pandemic or in view of unforeseen further closures or blockages. Furthermore, social protection schemes linked to schools (e.g. school feeding) are presently blocked, hampered or limited by the closures.
- **Rural youth are being hit hard by the COVID-19 in respect of employment.** Experience shows that younger workers are often the first to have their working hours cut or to be laid off (ILO, 2020). Since 2008, economic declines have led to a much faster increase in the youth unemployment rate compared to the rate for adults. Rural young people, and especially young women, are highly vulnerable since most of them are likely to be employed in the informal economy and often have low-paid, less-secure and less-protected jobs, and are more likely to live in working poverty. Also, young entrepreneurs and youth cooperatives will face similar problems, because the overall difficult economic situation can make it harder for them to find resources and financing while lacking the know-how to cope with the ongoing difficult business conditions. Furthermore, rural youth aged 15-17 are, owing to the overall risk of increased poverty, at a greater risk of exploitation of hazardous work and thus child labour, especially in the agricultural sector. In addition, social protection mechanisms that are being implemented in the context of the COVID-19 crisis to safeguard incomes may not be accessed by rural youth or do not take into consideration the specific vulnerabilities they face.
- **Other specific groups of youth**, such as indigenous peoples, adolescents, youth in humanitarian or crises contexts, young migrants, young refugees, young people with

disabilities and other minorities who are potentially marginalized and in fragile situations, may be exposed to further vulnerabilities. These youth may experience the highest degree of socio-economic marginalization owing to factors such as their lack of access to effective surveillance and early-warning systems and health services, furthermore, they can be further socially isolated if they don't access the communities regularly through employment or education for example. In the case of indigenous youth, various difficulties have been assessed in connection to the lack of translation of key health information into indigenous languages. Further, reported cases showed how lockdowns of indigenous communities did create a vacuum in which different actors take advantage to further encroach on indigenous territories and natural resources. As per young migrants and young refugees, their legal status and language barriers may limit access to otherwise publicly available preventative materials, health care and social services. In addition, the risk of youth enrolment in criminal organizations or extremist groups cannot be ruled out as a negative coping strategy in specific fragile contexts due to increased poverty and social marginalization.

- **The impact of COVID-19 is not gender neutral.** Disease outbreaks increase women's and particularly young women's duties in caring for elderly and ill family members, as well as for their children and siblings who are out of school and therefore may be further hit by secondary impacts of the outbreak. Furthermore, quarantine measures imposed in the countries, as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic are putting some women at heightened risk of domestic violence while cutting them off from essential protection services and social networks. Globally, 60 percent of women, including young women, are in the informal economy and one in three women work in agriculture (UN WOMEN, 2020), therefore many of them, will often not benefit from social safety nets as access to safety nets frequently depends upon a formal participation in the labour force. Thus, the subsequent economic stress on families and the inability to access food due to the outbreak is extremely high, while also putting adolescent girls and young women at greater risk of exploitation, child labour and gender-based violence.
- **Making rural youth's voices heard during the COVID-19 pandemic could be difficult given the underdevelopment of certain rural areas.** Too often rural young people's voices are not heard during different dialogues or processes, and so their already complex and multifaceted needs are not met. Policies, strategies and processes, often fail to account for the heterogeneity of youth, and so do not provide them with effective support. The pandemic, may limit even further their inclusion and potential contribution to COVID-19 related processes and the design of instruments to support them during the time of outbreak and thereafter.

EXAMPLES OF SELECTED PRACTICES TAKEN IN SUPPORT OF RURAL YOUTH

In respect of education, vocational education and training, various measures in different countries have been taken in different countries to try to outreach to all students including in rural areas.

- In Argentina, the educational portal of the Ministry of Education via the programme *Seguimos Educando*, began broadcasting educational content from April 2020, and provides daily specifically produced educational contents both via television and via radio.
- In Jamaica, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Information has provided a number of services for students from all levels of the education system, including, printing services and printed learning kits for students without Internet connection; educational television lessons and zero-rated data access to the ministry website which houses educational content and online examination workbooks.

- In Egypt, the Ministry of Education and Technical Education has extended the access to the Egyptian Knowledge Bank to students, providing content by grade level and subject that can be accessed by mobile phone or computer.
- In Tunisia, and specific to agricultural related education and for young agri-entrepreneurs, the Tunisian government-run incubation centres *pépinières d'entreprises agricoles* have developed, and are presently organizing, a series of trainings online in order to ensure continuous support to their young agricultural students.
- In Kenya, the Ministry of Education shared guidelines for enhancing teaching and learning for its 15 million students out of school as a result of school closures. Four main platforms are being used for delivering educational programmes and resources to learners. Furthermore, in partnership with the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, radio programmes are being broadcast on multiple radio channels and education television broadcasts have begun on the Edu Channel TV owned by Kenya Institute for Curriculum Development.
- In Bhutan, the Ministry of Education launched the Bhutan e-Learning programme, allowing students to access lessons through educational television as well as on YouTube.
- In Fiji, the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts has initiated supplementary radio programmes for students without internet and also for out-of-school youth.

In respect of employment, the most common measures taken so far include the introduction of cash grants, temporary employment schemes, simplification of bureaucracy for hiring and also the extension of temporary visas to support the agricultural workforce. It is worth noting, that although rural youth have been assessed to be included in some employment measures initiated so far by various governments, no very specific ones responding to the COVID-19 impact for rural youth have been detected in the literature so-far.

- In India, the government launched the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) initiative in 2006, in order to provide financial services and products to individuals who do not have access or possibilities to open bank account or saving schemes. As part of the initiative, strong efforts have been made to reach out to youth in India to participate and access the model. In doing so, accounts and saving accounts can be opened also by minors and youth at large, informal workers, unemployed youth, including from rural areas. As part of the government's COVID-19 economic stimulus, a vast number of account holders in PMJDY, including women, young women and youth from rural areas, will be receiving INR 500 per month for at least three months. This will support them in their basic needs until their activities will be able to re-start. A further support will be benefiting a vast number of farmers, including young ones, which be receiving instalments of INR 2 000 per month for a certain amount of time.
- In Australia, the government is making temporary changes to visa arrangements to help farmers, including young ones, to access the workforce they need to secure the country's food and produce supply during COVID-19. The changes allow those within the Pacific Labour Scheme and the Seasonal Worker Program to continue to work in agriculture and food processing until the crisis has passed.
- In France, due to the lockdowns, seasonal agricultural workers from Morocco, Tunisia and Spain have not been able to travel and the government estimated that at least 200 000 people would be needed to ensure seasonal fruit and vegetable harvests. The *Fédération nationale des syndicats d'exploitants agricoles*, France's main agricultural union, has set up the "Des bras pour ton assiette" (arms for your plate) website, where French people of [legal] working age and healthy can register to make themselves available to farmers that are in need of workers. To encourage applications, those who

volunteer will be combining their partial unemployment benefits with the remuneration of a seasonal worker, which roughly equals minimum wage, particularly in sectors that are at a standstill, such as the catering industry.

- Similarly as in France, in Italy “Coldiretti”, the major organization representing agricultural entrepreneurs in the country, has put online all the farmers’ requests, in terms of essential workers, needed to support the harvests via the portal “Job in country”. It is worth noting that so far, 60 percent of the demands have been fulfilled by young people aged 20-30.

In respect of youth participation in processes and encouraging *proactive responses* during the COVID-19 pandemic, different examples globally have been reported.

- The Inter-Agency Network on Youth Development (IANYD) has involved globally 168 youth organizations including representatives from rural youth, young producers, young women, indigenous youth, young people living with disabilities, and other minorities, along with 50 United Nations entities, including FAO, to develop a joint statement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Specifically for agripreneurs, the FAO has rolled out the initiative “Coping with COVID-19: voices of young agripreneurs” to hear from youth networks and groups of young farmer champions mostly across selected African countries, furthermore, in order to reduce access barriers while aligning with the #StayHome directives, FAO used a variety of communication channels to reach rural youth, based on local contexts and preferences (e.g. online surveys, WhatsApp, social media, email or dedicated digital platforms such as ChispaRural.GT).
- Regional organizations have also launched initiatives to involve young women and men in COVID-19 consultations and responses, for example, the African Union (AU) has initiated the “Virtual AU Youth Consultation Series on African Youth Collective Response to COVID-19”. The youth consultation series aim to inform and amplify youth-led initiatives, including from rural youth and particularly those involved in agriculture, and unite youth’s collective responses.
- In Spain, rural actors, including youth, held a Rural Hackaton to tackle the economic problems that COVID-19 may trigger. The online event hosted several stakeholders who shared their initiatives in order to address the economic consequences of COVID-19 in rural communities while also providing information on new sources of income for rural businesses.
- In South Sudan, Cameroon, Kenya, Sudan and Ethiopia, during this time of potential misinformation about COVID-19, youth and youth-led organizations have turned to online platforms and digital media to outreach to their peers and communities, also in rural areas, to share correct information and recommendations among them. The DefyHateNow, a youth-led organization, has initiated the #211CHECK collective, which is a digital community of youth working in various fields who collaborate to fight misinformation and raise awareness on coronavirus prevention and protection among youth but also among rural communities.
- In the Syrian Arab Republic, the Youth for Change Group led by young women and men and supported by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), is working to raise awareness and provide psychological support to their wider communities amid the COVID-19 crisis. The group works at increasing the involvement of marginalised groups

while protecting the most vulnerable in their communities in particular young people with special needs and those disabled by war.

- Globally, many indigenous youth have supported the translation of key health information into different indigenous languages while using social media platforms to counteract the increased discrimination that indigenous peoples occurred in several countries during the outbreak of the pandemic.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As governments and development partners take steps to address the economic and social effects of COVID-19, they should not allow a reversal of the rural youth progress achieved in recent years in terms of inclusion in food systems, access to education, vocational education and training, and access to decent employment. While in the immediate future the majority of global resources will be redirected toward the fight against the virus, rural young women and men, should remain a top priority both during and after the pandemic in order to support them to reach their full potential, allow them to prosper and also ensure a sustainable rural recovery. Furthermore, transforming food systems to be inclusive, sustainable, efficient, healthy and in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, should be connected in all COVID-19 recovery measures.

In this respect:

- **The use of remote learning and education, vocational education and training resources** should be adopted to mitigate the loss of learning and to avoid child labour increase during the closures of schools and training institutes. Strong efforts should be directed to expanding countries' measures to cover rural areas but also to strengthen agribusiness-related education, vocational education and training while including psychosocial support. Where Internet is lacking, other tools and instruments should be introduced to make sure lessons and trainings can still be followed and delivered to remote rural areas. Efforts should also be channeled to transform face-to-face and group-based agricultural methodologies into effective on-line learning programmes in order to continue to effectively build the capacities of young farmers. Lessons and trainings can be delivered via television, mobile phones, rural radios, etc., possibly also using, where needed, indigenous peoples' various languages and other different languages spoken in rural areas, in addition to the official governments' ones.
- **Efforts should be made to retain rural young women and men's productive participation in the labour force** - something not necessarily done in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis where support measures were provided mostly in formal sectors like in large infrastructure projects that mainly employed adults and primarily male, while jobs were cut in other sectors (UNCTAD, 2020). Furthermore, efforts should be made to include young agripreneurs in public investments so to support their adaptation to a changing market while facilitate them to become agents of food systems transformation. Therefore, temporary compensation schemes, and other safety-nets measures should be extended to the informal sector and should systematically include rural young women and men that may be the first ones to be "left out" of the job market being the "last ones" that entered. Furthermore, social insurance measures such as sick leave, health insurance provision and unemployment benefits, among others, should be extended and also flexible enough to be accessed by rural youth, including ones from minorities that are potentially marginalized and ones in fragile situations and contexts. Initiatives should also take into account younger youth cohorts and younger workers aged 15-17 while implementing safety guidance and

applying safe agricultural techniques. In the mid of the pandemic and thereafter, it would be important to facilitate and encourage rural young people to develop short value chains adapted to COVID-19 circumstances. Also, for all rural youth continuing to work in essential services along the agri-food supply chain, occupational safety and health should be guaranteed along with adequate access to personal protective equipment (PPE).

- **Protecting fundamental rights such as freedom of association and expression are critical for young people to allow them to express their views and ideas.** Young people possess a tremendous transformative potential and extra efforts should be made for rural young women and men, as well as youth representatives from the various minorities to be systematically included and consulted in all dialogues concerning the impact of COVID-19 but also the post-pandemic decision making processes that will be organized by countries and by the various sectors and sub-sectors, including agricultural ones, while supporting them in developing their self-esteem and confidence in participating in such dialogues.
- **Overall, gender, age and minorities' inequalities** will need to be taken into account throughout all the measures initiated by governments and development partners both during the pandemic and in its recovery phase. Extra efforts should made to include also youth from minorities and marginalized or vulnerable youth, such as young migrants, young refugees, indigenous youth, young people with disabilities, and others also living in fragile contexts for which very specific measures need to be adopted and taken into consideration.

THE ROLE OF THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) will work with its various member countries and partners to support the systematic inclusion of rural young women and men' specific needs in the different measures designed during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the recovery phase, while also advocating to initiate specific measures such as:

- **At global and regional level**, the FAO will collaborate with different global networks, development partners rural youth organizations and regional institutions and entities to advocate for and ensure the inclusion of the specific needs of rural young women and men in policies, strategies and overall discourse during and after the pandemic in respect of education, vocational education and training, youth employment and overall inclusiveness and exposure of rural youth voices.
- **At country level**, FAO will support its Member Countries in the efforts to include rural youth concerns into policies, strategies and recovery programmes, and stress their key inclusion in food systems and productive investments during and in the aftermath of the pandemic. Specifically, efforts will be channeled to ensure rural youth employability and strengthening of youth-led agro enterprises, while providing them with an adequate level of quality skills required by the labour market in the agricultural sector and overall food system. The Organization will also support Member Countries in exchanging lessons learned and best practices specific to the needs of rural youth needs in terms of COVID-19 impacts and support the design of tailored policy and measures.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This brief was prepared by Francesca Dalla Valle, Youth Employment Specialist from FAO's Economic and Social Development Department and Reuben Sessa, FAO's Youth Focal Point and Natural Resources Officer in SP2.

