

E-Discussion on
Rural Skills Development in Asia and the Pacific
Background Note¹

Rural areas provide employment and a source of livelihood for a large number of people in the Asia and the Pacific region. Despite of substantial rural-to-urban migration, the rural population continues to grow. While rural livelihoods are becoming diversified, agriculture remains the largest economic sector and source of employment in many Asian countries.

In recent decades, the Asia-Pacific region has experienced rapid economic growth and has shown progress in reducing rural poverty. For example, the overall rate of extreme poverty has dropped from 48 percent to 34 percent over the past decade². This is largely due to the productivity increase in the agricultural sector and rapid growth in nonfarm rural sectors, such as trading, services, transportation, handicrafts, remittances, and small-scale manufacturing.

Despite these achievements, rural areas tend to have more unemployment, underemployment, and poverty. Economic opportunities for rural populations are hampered by scant economic investment in rural development, poor infrastructure and lack of employment and other services. With regard to skills development, rural women³ and young people are often faced with challenges in accessing adequate education and training. This may be due to financial barriers (e.g. training and transportation costs) and non-financial barriers (e.g. scarce education and training infrastructure, inflexible training schedules). Training providers are concentrated in urban and semi-urban areas, and thus their outreach to rural communities is limited. The quality of the training may also be an issue: trainers may be unqualified, equipment and technology out-dated, and teaching and training methods ill-suited to rural contexts. Further, the training offered does not always match the skills needs of the labour market.

However, with improvements to employment and economic opportunities, rural areas have high potential for productive livelihoods. Skills development is central to this; it is key to improving employability and livelihood opportunities, reducing poverty, enhancing agricultural and non-farm productivity, and promoting environmentally sustainable development in rural areas.

The main challenge is equipping women and men in rural areas with appropriate skills to innovate and adopt new technologies in agriculture and to access employment in the rural non-farm economy. Equally important is to expand rural employment opportunities to ensure that working in rural areas, whether in agriculture or non-farm work, is an attractive option. Integrated approaches that combine skills development with employment generation and poverty alleviation have been found to be successful in rural development efforts.

¹ Publisher sources of information for this background note: *Skills for rural development*. Policy brief. International Labour Office (ILO): Geneva, 2011 (<http://apskills.ilo.org/resources/skills-for-rural-development/>); *Gender dimensions of agricultural and rural employment: Differentiated pathways out of poverty*. Policy brief. Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), International Labour Office (ILO): Geneva, 2010. (<http://apskills.ilo.org/resources/gender-dimensions-of-agricultural-and-rural-employment-differentiated-pathways-out-of-poverty-1/>); *Unleashing rural development through productive employment and decent work: Building on 40 years of ILO work in rural areas*. Conference Paper. International Labour Office (ILO): Geneva, 2011 .

² *IFAD Rural Poverty Report 2011*. International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD): Rome, 2010.

³ Rural women are more likely to be contributing family workers, subsistence farmers or home-based microentrepreneurs in the informal sector, or performing low-paid, unskilled work as seasonal workers.

Effective rural skills development strategies may require combining training in schools and TVET institutions with workplace learning schemes and non-formal settings, and/or non-formal training providers (such as community groups, NGOs, and learning from family and peers). These approaches may include basic education, vocational and life skills training, entrepreneurship training, and agricultural extension services. The training delivery methods may also range from classroom settings to mobile training and involve programs of shorter duration to meet immediate skill needs.

Regardless of the training approach, it is crucial that the training is able to respond to community, industry and economic needs and adjust to gender imbalances and geographical differences to ensure equal access and opportunities to training. Besides training, it is also important to provide career guidance and practical labour market information to facilitate the transition from training to rural labour markets.

The ILO regards rural employment promotion among its priorities; given current environmental concerns and the global food security and economic crises, rural economic development has been given increased weight and attention. Over the years, the ILO's work on rural skills development has included extending training in rural communities primarily through community-based training initiatives. One such approach is Training for Rural Economic Empowerment (TREE) that promotes local economic and employment opportunities for rural people, particularly disadvantaged groups. On the policy level, the ILO's Human Resources Development Recommendation, 2004 (No. 195) provides guidance on the content and reform of skills policy. It specifically promotes access to education, training and lifelong learning for people in rural areas.

This Skills and Employability Network e-discussion focuses on the issue of rural skills development with particular attention on how access to skills in rural areas can be enhanced through mobile training, distance learning and agricultural extension services.

We would like to begin the discussion by inviting you to consider the following questions:

- 1. How can we extend training opportunities to reach out rural areas? (should more public training institutions be built in rural areas? Would working with non-formal providers [e.g. rural area based community organizations, or NGOs] be a solution? How about mobile or technology solutions?)**
- 2. What kinds of skills are needed to support the development of rural communities and economy?**
- 3. What are measures to encourage women, young people and disadvantaged groups in rural areas to take up training?**
- 4. What are the key success factors for improving access to skills training in rural areas?**
- 5. What are some good examples of how training services are delivering formally recognised skills in rural areas (e.g. mobile training schemes, peer training approaches, etc.)?**
- 6. What are some good examples of how distance/blended learning and mobile phone services can deliver skills training in rural areas?**
- 7. What are good examples of how agricultural extension services have been integrated with formal skills training programs to deliver nationally recognised training to farmers and farm workers?**
- 8. How can skills training in rural areas lead to better and advanced skills for the beneficiaries?**