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Round table on youth in future agriculture: Towards a productive and sustainable Asia-Pacific

Executive summary

Agriculture and rural economies in many parts of Asia and the Pacific are changing rapidly in response to various challenges and new opportunities. Nonetheless, in the future, the region's farmers will have to produce more food than ever before. As the region's agricultural workforce is ageing rapidly, there are concerns about who the region's future farmers will be, what skills they will need, what incentives may be required to motivate them to work in agriculture, and what support they may require. Responsible government agencies and supporting institutions will need to consider appropriate actions to attract skilled and competent young people to the agriculture sector, taking into consideration the respective roles of young men and women in the region's future agriculture. This document provides background information and issues to be considered during the roundtable session designed to exchange views on these challenges and suggestions for ensuring a vibrant and sustainable future for agriculture in the region.

Guidance sought by the Regional Conference

The Regional Conference is invited to:

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- openly discuss issues related to the future of youth in agriculture, including sharing their perspectives on attracting and retaining youth to the agricultural sector, what support efforts have proven most effective to date and what should be initiated in the future to make agriculture more rewarding and lucrative for youth, what roles various institutions can play to ensure a vibrant young work force in agriculture, and how better understanding and support for sustainable agriculture can be instilled among urban populations (especially urban youth).
- exchange views on these challenges and share suggestions for ensuring a vibrant and sustainable future for agriculture in the region.

1. Agriculture and rural economies in many parts of Asia and the Pacific are changing rapidly in response to various challenges and new opportunities. Nonetheless, in the future, the region's farmers will have to produce more food than ever before, as a result of lingering food insecurity and rising populations in some countries, increasing purchasing power of consumers and diversification of diets (including meat products that require more feed inputs to produce). As the region's agricultural workforce is ageing rapidly, there are concerns about who the region's future farmers will be, what skills they will need, what incentives may be required to motivate them to work in agriculture, and what support they may require.

2. In nearly every Asia-Pacific country (indeed, throughout the world), the number of young farmers is declining. While reliable data are often lacking, it is generally recognized that the number of youth engaged in agriculture, and entering the agriculture sector, is declining in most areas – if not in absolute terms, certainly as a percentage of the total rural population (which itself is declining in many areas). The average age of farmers in Thailand is reported to be 54 years; in the Philippines the average age is 57 years; in Japan, more than 65 years. In many areas, the ageing of agriculture is coupled with feminization of agriculture.

3. The decline in the number of young farmers mirrors various sociological and demographic trends and phenomena, including urbanization and out-migration. Nearly half (46 percent) of the population of the Asia-Pacific region now lives in urban areas and the urbanization trends are accelerating; some countries such as Australia, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia and New Zealand are more than 70 percent urbanized. Migration – both to domestic urban centres and abroad – is an increasing drain on rural populations, especially youth. Rural youth tend to be more mobile, risk-taking and driven to seek more promising opportunities.

4. The reduction in the number of young farmers may be a logical and positive development in many situations, particularly in the face of increasingly attractive alternative livelihood options available in other sectors and increased efficiency in the agriculture sector that requires fewer farmers to produce the food needed to meet the region's requirements.

5. In other instances, however, the decline in the number of youth engaging in agriculture reflects wider fundamental challenges and constraints, including structural impediments to productivity growth and profitability, especially in smallholder agriculture; barriers to entry in the sector; challenges posed by the impacts of climate change; and requirements to shift to more sustainable agriculture and management of natural resources.

6. Within many circles, there is a widespread lack of youth interest in agriculture. Farming is perceived as “lowly” work taken up by the less-educated and those without other options. There is a perception that there is little or no money to be made from farming, and there are few incentives to engage in agriculture. While efforts are being made in some countries to increase the productivity and returns from farming, promote value-addition and enhance non-farm employment, these measures are lagging in many areas, especially with respect to youth.

7. There are additional constraints and obstacles that discourage or prevent the entry into agriculture, and practice of agriculture, even by those youth who would like to earn their livelihoods in the sector. These include:

- lack of access to land (insecure land tenure, high cost of land, etc.);
- high cost of inputs and production for farming, resulting in indebtedness;
- lack of access to capital and financial services;
- lack of rural infrastructure and social opportunities;
- labour-intensive nature of traditional farming;
- price volatility of farm commodities;
- trade restrictions, poor infrastructure and inadequate transport services that constrain market access;
- lack of knowledge, information and education, and inadequate extension services, particularly related to marketing;
- lack of participation in farm policy development and agricultural governance;
- lack of non-farm wage employment opportunities in agriculture (including in plantations and agro-processing) and other rural economic activities;
- poor working conditions, exposure to occupational hazards and lack of access to social protection;
- inadequate technical knowledge, particularly with respect to adaptation to climate change; and
- un tapped potential for green jobs creation for youth.

8. While it is generally recognized that farmers in Asia and the Pacific will be fewer in number in the future than at present, there is similar recognition of the need to train, attract and retain knowledgeable, efficient, competitive and innovative youth to agriculture. This will be essential not only to meet the growing demand for food and reinvigorate agriculture in the region, but also to provide meaningful livelihood opportunities for rural youth – many of whom are currently unemployed or underemployed.

9. To counter the trends of declining interest of youth in agriculture, alternative visions are required for the future of agriculture in the region. Such visions will need to consider and accommodate the various aspirations and needs of different segments of the region's youth – in terms of gender, ethnicity, caste, etc. Such visions must also factor in the realities of national and regional demographics, societal transformations, market dynamics, and non-farm employment opportunities, among others.

10. Among the measures that national governments, development organizations and other institutions may consider in addressing these challenges are the following:

- 1) Work to generate a more positive image of agriculture as a respectable profession, with successful young farmers as role models; provide high visibility and recognition to outstanding young farmers.
- 2) Give conscious and explicit focus to youth in policies, incentive programmes, education and capacity development, infrastructure development and social institutions in agriculture and rural development; prioritize the needs and aspirations of youth in rural development planning.
- 3) Give young people a stronger voice in agriculture and rural development governance and in formulating agriculture policies and programmes.

- 4) Clarify land tenure and support mechanisms that make it easier for young farmers to access land, including through land titling, purchase, long-term lease or rental arrangements, inheritance and inter-generational land transfers, etc.
 - 5) Seek ways of providing increased access to credit and other financial services for youth to finance inputs for agricultural production, agri-businesses, agro-tourism, and other farm and non-farm livelihood inputs, and provide mechanisms for affordable insurance to protect against catastrophic losses.
 - 6) Support the modernization of agriculture to make agricultural work less strenuous and tedious through appropriate mechanization, modern technology and sustainable improved practices.
 - 7) Strengthen the capacity of young people to successfully engage in the modern world of competitive agriculture through improved technological training, education on niche products and organics, enhancement of ICT and marketing skills, introduction to new crops, training on value-added processing, etc.
 - 8) Recognize the importance of non-farm income and decent livelihood opportunities in rural economies; provide training for young people in alternative rural livelihood opportunities as a complement to on-farm income.
 - 9) Recognize and support the potential of green jobs for rural youth engagement in agriculture and rural economic activities, especially in view of increased exposure to climate change and environmental risks.
 - 10) Build entrepreneurial and marketing skills among youth and provide specific support for youth in self employment and for the start-up of small agriculture-based enterprises.
 - 11) Develop and nurture youth and farmer support organizations, young farmer associations, youth employment networks, and farmer-to-farmer exchanges featuring youth in agriculture; facilitate the inclusion of youth in existing farmer associations and networks; encourage the use of ICT and social media to link youth and foster open communication among young farmers and those working in the agriculture sector.
 - 12) Recognize and support the growing interest of youth in urban and peri-urban agriculture, and in related aspects of processing and marketing.
 - 13) Review and reform formal education and vocational training in agriculture to reflect the changing needs of the sector, make curricula more attractive to potential students, and better prepare young graduates for successful careers in agriculture.
 - 14) Promote innovative mechanisms to better manage rural labour migration and enhance the productive investments of remittances in young farmers' activities.
 - 15) Generate age- and sex-disaggregated data and evidence and monitor changes in the agriculture sector that affect youth over time; seek to fill gaps in data and understanding through targeted research, data compilation and analyses.
11. Despite the declining trends of youth engagement in agriculture in many areas, progress is being made in various places to enhance the image of agriculture and food systems among the youth, facilitate the entry of young farmers into agriculture and make the sector more profitable and attractive for youth. With adequate support, young people can become a powerful force for innovation and

creativity in agriculture and rural communities. Such resurgence of interest in agriculture by young people can be bolstered by targeted support and concerted efforts to make agriculture “cool,” lucrative and rewarding.

12. Participants in the roundtable dialogue are invited to share their perspectives on attracting and retaining youth to the agricultural sector, what support efforts have proven most effective to date and what should be initiated in the future to make agriculture more rewarding and lucrative for youth, what roles various institutions can play to ensure a vibrant young work force in agriculture, how better understanding and support for sustainable agriculture can be instilled among urban populations (especially urban youth), and other issues. Participants are encouraged to exchange views on these challenges and share suggestions for ensuring a vibrant and sustainable future for agriculture in the region.