



## INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISATION

### Opening remarks by Ms Jane's Hodges, Director, Bureau for Gender Equality (Rome, 31 March 2009)

Chair,  
Distinguished Panellists,  
Participants.

It gives me great pleasure to participate in this Inter-agency Technical Meeting on Gender and Rural Employment. It is particularly gratifying to be in a meeting - in the spirit of partnership - to share knowledge and experiences of promoting gender equality with colleagues from other UN agencies, from the research community, with development practitioners and theoreticians as well as representatives of our ILO tripartite constituents.

This is a very important meeting for a number of reasons, but I will highlight just three. Firstly, we welcome the opportunity to strengthen our collaboration with the research community. Deepening our knowledge base on the gender dimensions of rural employment is a vital part of being more effective in helping shape policy formulation amongst our constituents. Data, trends, examples of good practices and innovative policies as well as a solid evidence base on the different experiences and needs of rural women and men, can better guide policy development. And it can help convince policy makers with scarce resources to prioritise gender sensitive investment in rural communities.

Secondly we are very pleased to be working closely with FAO and IFAD on this venture. Through greater collaboration and building upon our respective mandates we can make a more profound impact in meeting international community's goals of eradicating poverty. We know that as UN agencies we need to prioritise attention to rural areas - since 75 percent of the world's poor live in rural communities in developing countries. We also know that poverty is not simply a question of income, but also of access to health care, education, potable water, improved sanitation, roads, markets and opportunities for productive employment. In all of these areas, data show that rural populations fare worse than urban, and often that rural women fare worse than rural men. Economic growth, while necessary, is now recognised as insufficient to reduce the gap between rich and poor, men and women or



between urban areas and countryside. Indeed the phenomenon of jobless growth and widening income disparities in many countries has highlighted the need for pro-poor growth policies in rural areas with employment at their centre. In this context it is particularly important that we deepen our partnerships within the UN family to tackle these issues.

Thirdly this meeting takes place against the backdrop of the global financial crisis. Poverty levels around the world are deepening. There is great danger that progress that has been made over the past years may be unravelling. ILO projections from the 2009 Global Employment Trends report suggest that there may be a dramatic increase in the numbers of people joining the unemployed, the working poor and those in vulnerable employment.

- In the worst case scenario the projections are that some 200 million workers mostly in developing countries will be pushed into extreme poverty.
- The number of working poor - people who are unable to earn enough to lift themselves and their families above the US\$2 per person, per day, poverty line, may rise up to 1.4 billion, or 45 percent of all the world's employed.
- In 2009, the proportion of people in vulnerable employment - either contributing family workers or own-account workers who are less likely to benefit from safety nets that guard against loss of incomes during economic hardship - could rise considerably in the worst case scenario to reach a level of 53 percent of the employed population.

We don't know yet how the gender dimensions of this crisis will play out. But we do know from previous crises that women workers – particularly those in casualised temporary work - may be amongst the first to lose their jobs. Such women workers are often seen as a flexible buffer workforce who can be drawn into the labour force during labour market upturns and expelled in downturns. This is often reinforced by an inherent 'male- breadwinner bias' which perceives women as only having a contingent attachment to the labour-force due to their family responsibilities. Moreover, with the job losses, cuts in social services and infrastructure, women's care burdens and unpaid work become intensified as they struggle to hold families together.

We may also see a reversal of rural-urban migration as job losses cut deep. There is some evidence of this in China for example with the decline of export oriented manufacturing resulting from the crisis. And, as we saw in the Asian financial crisis, huge job losses will likely be experienced in female dominated sectors such as domestic work. Many of these women will be forced back into rural communities and into the burgeoning informal economy where decent work deficits are particularly severe. In such cases, rural areas are often very hard hit by the loss of remittances that had been sustaining whole communities.



These developments underscore the importance of the Decent Work agenda and its four inter-related pillars of rights, employment, social dialogue and social protection. The international community has embraced the Decent Work concept and recognised its critical importance in forging a pathway out of poverty. Decent work involves creating opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income. It means security in the workplace and social protection for families. It involves better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives. And importantly it means equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.

What does Decent Work mean in a rural context? It may be more appropriate to discuss this in terms of decent work deficits. In the **Rights Pillar**, we know that rural workers are left unprotected by labour legislation, that the eight core labour standards are often not recognised or realized. Agriculture for example has the largest proportion of child labour than any other sector – some 70 percent. The rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining are often not respected, and the rights to equal pay and non discrimination are a long way from being enforced.

Under the **Social Protection Pillar**, rural communities often remain remote from access to social security, health insurance, pension and safety nets that can cushion the impacts of deep poverty.

Under the **Social Dialogue Pillar**, organisation, representation and consequently bargaining power, is particularly weak in rural areas. The voices of rural workers and own account operators - particularly female voices - are rarely heard.

And under the **Employment Pillar**, rural communities are characterised by underemployment and high levels of working poverty. Poor infrastructure and limited access to skills, productive resources and markets contribute to low productivity and incomes in rural areas.

Recognising these deficits, the ILO held a General Discussion on the *Promotion of Rural Employment for Poverty Reduction* in 2008. The Conclusions of this discussion is the guidance that the ILO's tripartite constituents have given to the ILO for its future work on rural employment. Framed within the four pillars of Decent Work, the guidance includes support to member states to develop gender sensitive rural employment policies; support to the development of rural enterprises, cooperatives and entrepreneurship amongst youth and women. It also includes support for large scale rural employment programmes such as employment guarantee schemes.



Under the rights pillar, the ILO must seek to promote the ratification of labour standards including the eight core labour standards, and support the extension of national laws to all rural workers. Social protection strategies include the extension of social protection to all, including the rural poor; and the promotion of occupational safety and health in rural enterprises and communities. And under the Social Dialogue pillar the ILO must help build the capacity of rural employers' and workers organisations, particularly in the agricultural sector.

This technical meeting is an important part of the ILO's follow-up to the General Discussion and will help strengthen our knowledge base in order to better support our members states and our social partners in their efforts to eradicate poverty in rural areas.

Importantly for the ILO, this year gives great prominence to gender equality. The 2009 General discussion at the International Labour conference will be on gender equality. In the lead up to the conference we have launched a year long campaign with a different theme each month related to gender equality in the world of work. (Campaign materials are available at our stand).

The ILO has always seen that gender equality has its rightful place at the heart of decent work. It cuts across all four pillars. For the ILO gender equality is important not just for normative considerations of social justice but also because it makes very good economic sense. The evidence base shows that gender equality is good for businesses, for national economies and for the global economy. From the community level through to national development strategies and even the global level of achieving all eight millennium development goals, gender equality has a critical role to play in economic regeneration and in the fight against poverty.

With FAO and IFAD, may I welcome all the participants and wish you a very productive and lively discussion on this important theme.

Thank you for your attention.