

Rethinking labour in agri-food models in Africa

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Topic:

Given the slow economic transition of SSA countries, the agricultural sector remains the largest employer, still accounting for an average of 49%¹ of the labour force, putting agriculture, food systems and employment high in national policy agendas. However, agricultural policies of many African countries are rooted in the agricultural modernization paradigm, as it unfolded in the countries of the North, which led to a drastic decline in employment in agriculture according to the classical substitution labour by capital process and had negative impacts on the environment and health. Faced with this apparent paradox, this WG aims to explore sustainable agri-food models that can provide decent jobs for the cohorts of young people entering the labour market. Agri-food model can be defined as the specific combination of agricultural production systems and the valorisation of production by agri-food value chains. They further refer to a global coherence of the relationships that men and women establish with activity, nature, technique, knowledge, the State, and the market in a given territory which represents their major endowments. Specifically, this WG aims at advancing the conceptualisation of labour in agri-food models by discussing the current approaches and available data that supports them. It will thus shed light on the socioeconomic and institutional conditions for more and better jobs in differentiated African territories, to feed the policy debate.

To this end, the WG will engage first with “Dynamic of work” (theme IV) by informing and refining the knowledge on work in a diversity of forms of farming and other value chain

¹ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.ZS?locations=ZG>

activities, a diversity of status (familiar, wage-earners) as well as the place of off-farm for family farming in the fast-changing context of rural Africa and transformation of value chains. Second, as above dynamics of work may induce different labour content in terms either of quantity or quality, the WG will also engage with “Decent work in the agri-food sector” (theme II) by contributing to evidence gaps on decent work in African family farming and agri-food chains. Third, to move away from ‘silo-based approaches’ of policies to integrated policies for tackling agricultural employment issues, the WG will also engage with the theme of “Agricultural workforce development systems” (Theme VI) by highlighting the socio economic and environmental contribution of contrasted production and distribution models (e.g., agroecology vs. chemical farming, small-scale vs. large-scale operations) with a particular attention to the territorial level, considered as key to feed and conceptualise public policies.

Aims:

The purpose of the WG is threefold: i) Share new conceptual knowledge and empirical findings on labour in agri-food models stemming from recent researches in a diversity of South and North contexts. The WG will especially share results from the [JobAgri](#) project implemented by CIRAD and ISSER in Ghana ii) Convey and discuss with a diversity of approaches on labour and decent work in agri-food system, allowing for the preparation of collective publication iii) Consolidating a network of researchers working on labour in Africa. One of the WG objectives is also to enrich North-South perspectives on employment in agriculture, and it therefore does not exclude papers, whether theoretical or empirical, that are not about Africa.

Format:

The WG suggests to structure the discussions around in 3 complementary thematic sessions.

A first session will focus on the measure of labour at the level of agricultural production systems. It will invite papers bringing original method to measure both the quantity and the quality of labour in a diversity of farming systems (crop, livestock, mixed systems) based on different farm structures (family farms, patronal farms, corporate farms). Special attention will be given to the contribution of various categories of workers (family, temporary or permanent wage -earners, service providers) and to the gender distribution of work. The session will also encourage comparative studies putting in perspective the diversity of farm structures and prospects for labour markets within territories.

A second session will invite to reflect on labour in Agri-food value chains. It will seek contributions informing the distribution of workers and the quality of jobs in a diversity of value chains as well as the socioeconomic and institutional conditions for more and better jobs in agri-food VC. Attention will be given to alternative agri-food systems (e.g. short chains) and certified value chains (fair trade, organic) which express ambitions on decent work, fair remuneration of work and/or meaningful activities.

A closing session will explore existing conceptualisation of the agri-food model that integrates the issue of labour and work. For this it will invite papers exploring theoretical frames and literature review on the topic i.e. conceptualising agricultural production and the valorisation of production by agri-food value chains. It includes employment

regulations, working conditions approaches, etc. The required global coherence of agri-food models calls for new ways of employment and agricultural development policies, to overcome policy design “in silo”. The different approaches presented applied to a set of territorial configuration should help discuss the main constraints and broad conditions toward better integrated and more effective employment policies.

Opportunities:

The community of researchers involved into work in agriculture and agri-food value chains in Africa has been identified through systematic review of literature², IAWA webinars³, research projects and international conferences. We are confident that there will be proposals including African colleagues. This working group proposal is considered as an important milestone to consolidate an African network with perspectives either on conceptualisation of “the agri-food model with labour” through papers or transversal projects. The convenors will explore different type of supports (Cirad, INRAE, Montpellier Université, TSARA⁴ initiative...) to favor the participation of African partners.

² Benoit Dedieu, Géraldine Enderli, Lionel Villard, Mohamed Taher Sraïri, Isabelle Avelange, et al.. What do we know about work and employment in agriculture in Africa? A literature review. Le futur du travail et de l’emploi dans le secteur agricole en Afrique de l’Ouest en Afrique, ISRA; INRAE; Cirad, Jan 2025, Dakar, Senegal.

³ <https://www.workinagriculture.com/news/2024-webinar-work-and-employment-in-agriculture-in-africa>

⁴ Transforming food systems and agriculture with partnership research in Africa www.initiative-tsara.org