

Hundreds of millions of agricultural workers face poverty, hunger – UN report

6 October 2005 –Many of the world's 450 million waged agricultural workers, the largest labour force on earth, are suffering from some of the highest incidences of poverty and hunger, according to a new United Nations [report](#) released today which calls for the promotion of an agenda for decent work conditions in the field.

"Agriculture cannot be sustainable whilst over 40 per cent of the workforce suffer precarious employment and poor working conditions, and live in poverty," the reportsaid, noting that waged workers account for around 40 per cent of the total agricultural workforce of some 1.1 billion people.

Economic pressures are eroding the already low levels of protection of agricultural workers in terms of wage levels, job security, health, safety and environmental standards and social protection, according to the study, *Agricultural Workers and their Contribution to Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development*.

Compiled jointly by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the UN International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF), it cited the use of child labour in agriculture as of particular concern.

Of the estimated 246 million children around the world who go to work, over 170 million, or 70 per cent, are employed in agriculture. Each year, 22 000 children are killed on the job, many of those in agriculture. Children work as cheap labour because their parents do not earn enough to support the family or to send their children to school. Children in agriculture often work 10 hours and earn less than \$1 per day.

Agricultural workers, who do not own or rent the land on which they work nor the tools and equipment they use, are often poorly paid, earning wages well below those earned by industrial workers, with millions living below the poverty line and often unable to afford to buy sufficient food, the report said.

Agriculture is ranked as one of the three most hazardous industries, along with mining and construction. Risks include dangerous machinery, livestock-transmitted diseases and exposure to toxic pesticides. There are some 355,000 on-the-job fatalities overall every year, half of them estimated to occur in agriculture. Many of those killed, injured or made ill are women and children.

In many parts of the world, agricultural workers are denied fundamental human rights: the rights to freedom of association, to organize and collectively bargain with employers. Rural workers are more subject to forced labour than other categories of workers. Moreover AIDS has killed around 7 million agricultural workers since 1985 in the 25 hardest-hit countries in Africa.

The report criticized governments, development agencies, science and research institutions, agricultural banks, credit institutions as well as many civil society institutions for ignoring the often desperate situation, and called for the development and promotion of an agenda for fair and decent work conditions.

ILO's Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work should be applied and FAO and other agencies should cooperate with waged agricultural workers and their trade unions, which should receive stronger political, technical and financial support to enable them to play a much greater role in promoting sustainable agriculture, it concluded.