

## Decent Work in Agriculture

*By Umesh Upadhyaya*

Out of the 440 million wage-employed workers in agriculture worldwide, 2 millions are the ingredients from Nepali agriculture. This two million includes both market agriculture labour force and fully informal agro labour force. But overwhelming majority of them is in casual & irregular employment. Almost 300,000 agricultural workers are in long-term labour relation and approximately 1.7 millions are in casual labour relation. Of the workers under long-term labour relation, debt bondage is estimated to cover 50 % of the labour force. Even under casual relation, there are various forms of bondage scattered here and there.

### Problems of Nepalese agriculture

- Small portion of arable land is available because of difficult topography as mountains & hills cover 83 % of the total land area
- Productivity of both Land and labour is too low and hence per hectare yield is very low
- Inputs and subsidies from the state are insufficient and being curtailed
- Irrigation facility is limited to 1/4<sup>th</sup> of the land under cultivation and not useful for all season
- Technical know-how of the farmers and peasants is poor and still 'ox & plough' technology is massively used
- Subsistence farming is the basic nature of Nepali agriculture and marketing aspect is poor. Hence the role and margin of middlemen is vital to the extent of heavy exploitation of small & middle farmers and peasants
- Very backward condition of basic infrastructure of Transportation and communication-information in majority part of the country has created pocket economies
- Mechanization and modernization of agriculture is still far off

- Backward socio-economic conditions of the majority of population is a hurdle in the development of agriculture
- Country has drastically changed into food grain importing country from a status of food grain exporting country

Major Problems being faced by self employed and wage dependent workers in agriculture

- Insufficient and non-implemented Minimum wages
- Hurdles in getting fair prices & market access
- Traditional and present status of social protection: Too weak to protect
- Majority under food insecurity position
- poverty related problems and ineffective programmes of poverty reduction

### **Social exclusion**

Social exclusion is to the maximum based on caste ethnicity, level of income, landlessness, widowhood, disability and chronic diseases.

### **Issue of social transformation**

Issue of social transformation of Nepali society is dependent on Awareness & attitudinal change in the agricultural workers community. Unionization of wagedworkers & self-employed workers is the prerequisite for change in the society. Unionization assisted by other types of organizational structures like cooperatives, mothers groups, peasant association, and youth organizations can create a series of other interventions covering right, welfare and self-reliance.

### **Forced labour & discrimination**

Forced labour and discrimination is concentrated mostly in agriculture in Nepal. Debt bondage is the major form and other forms of bondage based on backward socio-cultural values and acute poverty are in existence

Discrimination based on caste/ethnicity and so-called untouchability in addition to Gender discrimination is a common phenomenon. Age-based discrimination against child workers is considerable

### **Exploitation of women workers and child labour**

Particularly in rural agricultural sector if the male worker is bonded or is in long term contract, women and children from his families are exploited in a condition of Long hours of work without any additional payment They are often used as attached labour providing just one meal without any payment of wages in cash or kind. male children are generally used as cattle-herders and female children as domestic workers

### **Sustainable development through agriculture**

As  $\frac{3}{4}$  of population and workforce is dependent on farm & farm related agro-occupations, sustainable development of Nepal is not possible without full progress and improvement in agriculture

### **Issue of OSH in Agriculture**

- Related to pesticides
- Related to animal hazards

### **The vulnerable groups of agricultural workers in Nepal**

- Dalits
- Mushars
- Tharus
- Kamaiyas
- Women workers
- Children as rural domestic workers and cattle-herders

### **Experiences of:**

#### Organizing

- In modern farms, like Tarahara farm public sector and Amdubba farm of private sector
- Scattered individual workers working for the landlords, rich farmers and medium farmers
- Bonded workers of various forms like kamaiyas
- Off-farm varieties of works

#### Mass awareness and trade union education

- Mass meetings
- Door to door campaigns

- Trade Union education for committee networks
- Operation of Study Circle groups

#### Mass mobilization & movement

- Kamaiya liberation movement
- Minimum wage movement

#### Services to the masses

- Health camps
- Non Formal Education to the children
- Formal education support to the children
- Adult literacy classes
- Income generating activities through micro groupings

#### **What ILO can do**

Basically ILO can focus its attention and action on following broad areas in order to create conducive environment for decent work in agriculture:

- Research, Publication and highlighting of major issues of agricultural workers
- Lobbying for ratification of Forced labour convention & other relevant convention concerning agricultural workers and for adequate amendment-enforcement of national legislation
- Capacity building of workers organization in agricultural sector
- Promotion to unionization, workers education and cooperatives
- Strengthening unions in minimum wage campaign
- Lobbying with government and promotion to organizations for social protection system for the labour force in agriculture
- Promotion to micro finance activities and institutions in favour of agricultural workers
- Mobilization of NGOs/INGOs/UN Agencies and other social organizations on the issue of agricultural workers

**Towards Decent Employment in Agriculture: A Practical Policy Matrix**

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Existing Condition</b>	<b>Way out for decent employment</b>
<p>Work &amp; Employment</p>	<p>¾th of the total workforce engaged in agriculture                      Heavy landlessness of the farm population                      Poverty concentration on rural farm population                      Heavy irregularity &amp; excessiveness in working hours                      Seasonal nature of employment and disguised unemployment                      Exploitative practices through the use of child labour                      Fast increasing feminization of workforce                      Out-migration for farm work abroad mainly in India</p>	<p>Overall land reform with full political commitment                      Productivity movement in combination with farsighted land use policy                      Poverty reduction programmes to push farm workforce towards off-farm &amp; non farm income generating activities                      Fixing &amp; enforcement of the work hours                      Strict abolition of child labour from agriculture</p>
<p>Rights, Bondage &amp; Forced labour</p>	<p>Poor unionization – recently started from 1995,                      From 1999 Amendment in Trade union Act provided the freedom of Association                      Discriminatory practices                      Constitutional provision and strong commitment against bondage slavery &amp; serfdom                      Various forms of bondage including debt bondage                      Ratification of Forced Labour Convention No. 29                      Enactment of Bonded kamaiya system prohibition Act                      Collective bargaining almost non existent, weak individual bargaining reflecting the acceptance of terms &amp; conditions as imposed by the employer</p>	<p>Effective enforcement of Laws against forced labour, compulsory labour &amp; bondage including debt bondage                      Unionization and promotion from every actor for unionization                      Social campaign against caste-based and gender-based discrimination                      Special programme for the protection of dalit caste workers                      Massive movement through Right based workers education programme</p>

Issues	Existing Condition	Way out for decent employment
Minimum wage	<p>Extreme diversity in wages</p> <p>Gender and caste-ethnicity based discrimination in wages</p> <p>A minimum wage of Rs. 60 per day (US\$ 0.8) declared but not in proper implementation</p> <p>Because of the poor wage incomes, agri-labourers are the Poorest segment of workers</p>	<p>Narrowing the diversity gap of agricultural wages through upgrading the bottom level wages</p> <p>Review of minimum wages every year just before the main season</p> <p>Wage indexation</p> <p>Strict enforcement of overtime payment</p>
Social protection	<p>No social protection from formal structure</p> <p>Weakening protection of traditional nature based on family, caste, ethnicity, locality and other groupings of society</p>	<p>Minimum Social Protection system at least on health issue</p> <p>making the local Village Development Committees as the focal point</p> <p>Registration of Rural &amp; agricultural workers in Village Development Committees and Municipalities</p> <p>Promotional &amp; motivational activities from State, trade Unions, NGOs and International agencies</p>
Social Dialogue & Representation	<p>No representation as agricultural workers and Agro-TUs</p> <p>The only consultation had been during the first declaration of minimum wages in agriculture in January 2000</p> <p>Feudal mentality of landlords &amp; farmers discouraging the development of social dialogue</p>	<p>Ensuring participation of trade unions of rural &amp; agricultural and informal sector workers in local level decision making process</p> <p>Establishment of Permanent wage board</p> <p>Attitudinal change in employers from feudal mentality to humanitarian mentality</p>

*(Presented in ILO Symposium on Decent Work in Agriculture August 16-20, 2003, Geneva)*