

Rural areas have potential to feed and employ 'younger, more crowded planet' – UN report

9 October 2017 – Long seen as poverty traps, rural areas are in fact key to economic growth in developing countries when pegged to food production, according to a new United Nations agriculture agency report released Monday.

With 'sweeping transformations' that can unlock the potential of rural areas to help feed and employ a younger, more crowded planet, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) report [State of Food and Agriculture 2017](#) argues that millions of youth in developing countries who are poised to enter the labour force in the coming decades need not flee rural areas to escape poverty.

The overarching conclusion of this report is that fulfilling the [2030 Agenda](#) depends crucially on progress in rural areas, which is where most of the poor and hungry live, said FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva, in his foreword to the report.

The report says that between 2015 and 2030, people aged 15-24 are expected to rise to 1.3 billion, with the lion's share being in rural zones. However, it continues, lagging growth in the industrial and service sectors in many developing countries will not be able to absorb the massive numbers of new job seekers nor will agriculture in its current form.

Rural people who relocate to cities will likely run a greater risk of becoming part of the urban poor, instead of finding a pathway out of poverty. Others will need to look for employment elsewhere, leading to seasonal, or permanent migration.

According to the report, targeting policy support and investment to rural areas to build food systems and agro-industries connected to urban zones especially small and medium size cities represents a strategic intervention to create employment that would allow more people to stay, and thrive, in the countryside.

Too often ignored by policy-makers and planners, territorial networks of small cities and towns are [important reference points for rural people](#) the places where they buy their seed, send their children to school and access medical care and other services, noted Mr. da Silva.

Policy-makers are urged to recognize the catalytic role of small cities and towns in mediating the rural-urban nexus and providing smallholder farmers with greater opportunities to market their produce and share in the benefits of economic growth, he added.

The report underscores that transformed rural economies won't necessarily be

a panacea that solves all the pressures that drive people to relocate, but they will generate much-needed jobs and contribute to making out-migration more of a choice, rather than a necessity.

While urbanization provides a golden opportunity for agriculture, it also presents challenges for millions of small-scale family farmers, the report stated.

As more profitable markets may lead to value chains dominated by large processors and retailers to the exclusion of smallholders supportive public policies and investments must be hard-wired into policies to harness urban demand as an engine for transformative and equitable growth, ensuring market participation by small-scale, family-farmers.

The study lays out three lines for action:

- Put in place a range of policies designed to ensure that small-scale producers participate fully in meeting urban food demands;
- Build up the infrastructure to connect rural areas and urban markets, including rural roads, electrical power grids, storage facilities and refrigerated transportation systems; and
- Including not just mega-cities into well-connected rural-urban economies but knitting in smaller, more spread-out urban areas as well.