



CSM Proposal

“Working conditions of plantation workers and the need for Public Policy ensuring their Food Security and Nutrition”

as part of the CFS Multi-Year Programme of Work (MYPOW) 2018-2019

Background information

There is both great irony and great sadness in the fact that those who feed the world – small farmers and agricultural workers – have the least resources to feed themselves and their families and are amongst the population groups most affected by food insecurity and poor nutrition. Many of the food products we take for granted are grown on plantations yet the workers who grow them often cannot afford to eat them.

There are clear indications that barriers (legal, physical and psychological) to the self-organization of plantation workers and small farmers into organizations that can collectively defend their interest hamper the ability of both groups to achieve their rights to food security and nutrition. Whilst there has been considerable focus on the position of small, family farmers (e.g. the FAO’s Year on Family Farming 2015) there has been no systematic analysis of the underlying causes of the position of agricultural workers nor on the public policy measures required to improve their food security and nutrition.

The global agricultural workforce is estimated to be between 1 billion to 1.3 billion people of which 30 -40% (i.e.300 -400 million) are ‘waged’ workers. Many of them work on plantations, producing short-rotation crops, vegetables, pineapples, and cut flower, cotton, and sugar cane, and tree crops such as bananas, coffee, nuts, rubber, tea, and oil palm. Plantation worker’s jobs and terms and conditions of employment vary tremendously, creating diverse and sometimes overlapping categories: permanent (full-time), temporary / casual or seasonal workers.

Lack of accurate data, especially as national employment registration schemes for waged agricultural workers are weak or absent, hinders efforts to raise the economic and social conditions of these workers.

The situations of workers on plantations depend on many factors, such as the terms of employment and contracting, the crop characteristics and farming practices, the legal and policy institutions, the local context or the role of migrant employment.

They work long hours in challenging climatic conditions, often with little access to safety and health protection, sometimes even without potable water. Their salaries are low, often below poverty levels, their geographical isolation can mean they are dependent on the employers for not just their jobs but their home, schools their children attend, medical facilities or transport.

Food rations (e.g. rice, sugar, salt) are sometimes provided by employers as part of benefits but their quality is usually very low.

ILO statistics indicate that women are making up an increasingly large part of the plantation workforce – especially in cut flowers and vegetable production, new crops not traditionally seen as plantation crops but increasingly grown on large scale holding employing thousands of workers. Sexual harassment is widespread. Lower wages and lack of maternity protection are routine for many women plantation workers – both impacting directly on their food and nutrition security.

Plantation workers do not have access to potable drinking water both in terms of quality and quantity and access to sanitation. Research conducted by the IUF found that on most of the plantations visited, workers got less than 1 liter of water to drink during 9 hours of work. The available water was unsafe for human consumption, for example it was stored in rusted uncovered tanks or pesticide containers.

Finally, increasing use of precarious work and outsourcing contribute to financial instability of plantation workers and their families thus further undermining their food security. The ILO has adopted a package of Conventions, recommendation and other instruments to address the situation of plantation workers, specifically Convention 110 that could give guidance to the CFS and policy makers on all levels.

Case reports on working conditions in the plantation sector focusing on different crop-systems and different regions have repeatedly documented the violations of workers' rights (according to the key ILO Conventions) and human rights, in particular the right to adequate food: Wages are mostly paid according to harvest volumes on a precarious basis, often far below a living and sometimes even the legal minimum wages. Working conditions are unsafe, healthcare is inappropriate. Access to clean water is not ensured. Housing conditions are not appropriate. Collective organizing and bargaining by workers is undermined. Sexual harassment of female workers is a widely cited problem.¹

2. How the topic contributes to the CFS objectives and mandate and the value add/rationale for the Committee addressing this matter

a) CFS Mandate and value added

The CFS, as the foremost inclusive international and intergovernmental platform aiming at reducing hunger and malnutrition and enhancing food security for all human beings, needs to pay particular attention to those social groups most affected by hunger and malnutrition.

¹ IUF et al. 2014, Harvesting Hunger. Plantation Workers and Their Right to Food, <http://www.iuf.org/w/sites/default/files/2014%20Harvesting%20Hunger.pdf>; IUF 2015: If water is life...why do agricultural workers die every year from lack of access to potable water? <http://www.iuf.org/w/sites/default/files/If%20water%20is%20life.pdf>



The plantation workers are without any doubt one of these large social groups most affected by hunger and malnutrition. There is an evident and urgent need for public policies for ensuring their food security and nutrition.

The added value of the CFS here is to give guidance for policies to improve food security and nutrition of plantation workers. Based on a comprehensive approach and a clear understanding of the causes of the current situation, the CFS should come up with policy recommendations to support public policies to enable plantation workers in advancing the progressive realization of their right to adequate food.

b) Contribution to the CFS's overall objective

The proposed theme would contribute to the achievement of CFS overall objective to strive for a world without hunger and contribute to the progressive realization of the rights to adequate food, by focusing on of the most affected groups and public polices to ensure their food security and nutrition.

In addition, the following criteria for the CFS MYPOW would be fully met:

a) Improved policy convergence on key food security and nutrition issues

There is a clear need for policy convergence on food security and nutrition of plantation workers. While their extraordinary contribution to food security and nutrition on the global level is acknowledged, there is a fragmentation of policy approaches and institutions on the national and global level in dealing with the problems related with food insecurity and malnutrition of plantation workers.

Plantation workers realize access to food predominantly through wages, but sometimes wages are not adequately paid, or minimum wages are not sufficient for an adequate standard of living. Many plantation workers are not covered by social security schemes. Rights of workers, particularly women, including their right to form an association, are often neglected, with a negative impact on food security and nutrition of them and their families. In addition, their health situation needs to be addresses.

Fragmented policy approaches are not appropriate to address the complexity of these food security and nutrition problems of plantation workers. The need for improved policy convergence, coordination and coherence is evident and key to overcome the unacceptable situation faced by many millions of plantation workers and their families today.

b) Relevance and global impact

Globally it can be estimated that roughly 300 – 400 million people work as hired workers in agriculture of which a significant part work on plantations. Studies by several actors have shown that malnutrition is widespread along the agricultural supply chain. The relevance and global impact of CFS policy guidacne for food security and nutrition of this large social group would be huge.

c) No-Duplication:

This proposal does not run the risk of duplication of relevant work carried out by other bodies and institution, but rather represents an innovative approach which, given the characteristic of the CFS, would allow for expertise to be fostered and agreements reached through scientific and political dialogue and knowledge-sharing in an inclusive and participatory way. This would help building the capacity of national governments to develop and promote necessary public policy for a transition towards sustainable food systems which particularly foster food security and nutrition of plantation workers.

d) Knowledge and evidence

Many actors, including FAO, ILO and IUF have engaged in analyses on the role of agricultural and food workers for sustainable agriculture, rural development and food security and nutrition. See for example the following publications:

- [FAO, ILO and IUF Agricultural Workers and their contribution to sustainable agriculture and rural development](#)
- [IUF report on report on Water and Food security](#) (2015)
- [Harvesting Hunger Plantation Workers and the Right to Food \(IUF, FIAN and Misereor\)](#) (2014)
- [A life without dignity – the price of your cup of tea](#) (2016)

In 2015, the IUF and FIAN as part of the Global Network on the right to food and nutrition prepared a systematic analysis of how the working conditions of tea plantation workers in India undermine their right to food and nutrition. As the workforce is mainly women, it examines in detail the gender-related aspects of food security and women workers.

e) Rome-based agencies support

The Rome-based agencies are well placed to provide technical support to the topic. Moreover, the proposed theme here provides an important opportunity for enhanced inter-agency cooperation of RBA with ILO and other UN bodies, taking into account the different specific expertise each of the institutions have on certain aspects of the theme. Such strengthening of collaboration of RBA with ILO and other UN bodies would foster policy coherence across the UN system around this issue and encourage national ministries of agriculture, labor, health, etc., to advance inter-ministerial coordination and cooperation to effectively implement solutions.