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FAO REGIONAL CONFERENCE FOR EUROPE

Thirty-third Session

Łódź, Poland, 10-13 May 2022

Information paper on FAO support to rural youth in the Europe and Central Asia region

Executive Summary

Rural youth in Europe and Central Asia are a diverse social group facing various challenges that differ depending on specific national and local contexts. The challenging situation of youth and their role in the revitalization of rural areas were acknowledged at the 32nd FAO Regional Conference for Europe in 2020, where FAO Members suggested that further support be given to rural youth and that their empowerment be promoted through participation in governance and decision-making processes. During recent years, the issues of youth also have been integrated into global processes, such as the United Nations Food System Summit and the United Nations Decade of Family Farming.

Young women and men can be catalysts for economic growth and development in rural economies. However, there are still gaps in understanding the specific economic, social and cultural issues that affect their aspirations, livelihoods, well-being and integration into local economies. Given this, more dialogue and evidence are needed for the formulation of effective policies and interventions to support rural youth in building their livelihoods, empowering them, creating employment opportunities, and ensuring the generational renewal and sustainability of family farming. Holistic and territorial approaches complemented by inclusive policy dialogue processes and governance structures need to be promoted to enhance youth participation in agriculture and rural development, so as not to leave them behind. In addition, the establishment of inclusive, multisectoral platforms, networks and associations should be encouraged at all levels; this would give youth better access to information and enhance their engagement in decision-making processes, thus allowing the voices and needs of youth to be heard.

This information paper concludes with an overview of FAO's support focus and planned future actions related to rural youth, including further mainstreaming this cross-cutting theme in the FAO work programme and specifically focusing on supporting rural youth at both regional and country levels.

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I. Background

1. Rural youth¹ in Europe and Central Asia (ECA) make up a diverse social group. Young women and men, including those engaged in farming, may have specific needs and face different challenges in areas such as access to knowledge, education, vocational training, natural resources (land in particular) and financial resources. They also have limited access to markets, decent employment opportunities, engagement in policy processes, and much more. Young women and men can be catalysts for economic growth and development in rural economies. However, despite a high general level of development, inequalities are on the rise in all parts of the ECA region, manifested also in high levels of youth unemployment, exclusion and lack of access to social services, often leading to outmigration of rural youth (FAO, 2020a).

2. At the 32nd FAO Regional Conference for Europe (ERC 32) in November 2020, FAO presented a background paper *Solutions for Youth, Employment and Developing Rural Areas in relation to the United Nations Decade of Family Farming*.² Acknowledging the challenging situation of rural youth in Europe and Central Asia, the Members at the ERC 32 emphasized “the role of youth as key agents of change in the revitalization of rural areas and in the transformation towards sustainable food systems and suggested promoting the empowerment of youth through their participation in national and international governance and decision-making processes to improve their social and economic well-being,” addressing the adverse drivers of migration and maximizing the positive impacts of migration for rural communities and the use of remittances for investments in agriculture and rural development (FAO, 2020b). Among these aspects, interlinkages with gender equality and women’s empowerment, the rural-urban continuum, innovative practices and technologies, and knowledge-sharing platforms are particularly relevant.

3. There has been a growing recognition of the importance of youth participation in global development processes at all levels. The United Nations Youth Strategy 2030 represents a real opportunity for all United Nations agencies, including FAO, to coordinate combined efforts on youth issues (UN, 2018). In 2020, FAO, under the aegis of the Committee on Agriculture, developed the Rural Youth Action Plan (RYAP), a five-year plan (2021-2025) that addresses the importance of making rural areas more attractive for young women and men (FAO, 2020c). The FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 identifies youth as one of three cross-cutting issues (along with gender and inclusivity) to address in all of the Organization’s programmatic work (FAO, 2021b).

4. Youth-related issues also have been increasingly integrated with other global processes, such as the UN Decade of Family Farming 2019-2028 (UNDDFF). Pillar 2 of the UNDDFF Global Action Plan aims to support youth, including ensuring the generational sustainability of family farming through enabling access to land, information, education, infrastructure and financial services, markets, and policymaking processes relating to farming (FAO and IFAD, 2019).

5. The UN Food System Summit in 2021 also spotlighted the critical role of youth in ensuring good food for all in the Global Youth Summit Dialogue (UN, 2021). The UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) calls for the development of systems, policies and programmes that promote, protect and strengthen the engagement of youth in agriculture while recognizing their rights, equity and contributions as essential foundations for building the sustainable food systems of the future (HLPE, 2021). Similar efforts were made through the establishment of the World Food Forum (WFF),³ which was launched by the FAO Youth Committee in March 2021. WFF is an independent global network of partners, created for and led by youth, to spark a movement to transform our agrifood systems and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and in particular SDG 2, Zero Hunger. Aligning with the core principles of the Food Systems Summit, WFF aims to serve as

¹ In 1995, the United Nations General Assembly defined youth as those aged 15 to 24 but noted that the age range varies among countries and societies. However, for policy or programming purposes, “youth” can be defined differently, and usually FAO follows the Member definitions (at operational level). For instance, in Eurostat (2022), young people are defined as being between 15 and 29 years old, while farmers in the European Union younger than 40 are defined as “young farmers” (European Union, 2013).

² This paper is available at <https://www.fao.org/3/nc227e/nc227e.pdf>.

³ For more on the World Food Forum, visit <http://www.world-food-forum.org/>.

the premier platform to engage and harness the passion of youth, galvanizing action and identifying solutions to the growing challenges facing agrifood systems.

6. In Section II, this paper outlines the situation of rural young women and men in the region. It concludes in Section III with an overview of FAO's support focus and future actions related to rural youth, including those engaged in farming, such as further mainstreaming rural youth in the Organization's work programme and focusing on supporting them at both regional and country levels.

II. Overview of the situation of rural youth in Europe and Central Asia

7. In the ECA region, there are 112 million youth, with 29.1 percent of them living in rural areas (ILO, 2021). Many countries in the region face an ageing population and/or slowing population growth as a consequence of decreasing birth rates and the migration of young people. At the same time, the countries of Central Asia have recorded growth rates among the young population that are above the world average. From 2005 to 2015, the number of young people in the region decreased by 14.2 percent, with this decline being particularly pronounced in rural areas (18.1 percent). The depopulation of youth in rural areas of the region is not gender neutral, as the decline is higher among women (18.6 percent) than among men (17.5 percent) (ILO, 2021; FAO, forthcoming). The declining share of young people in the rural population is largely driven by migration to urban areas or abroad in search of better job opportunities, education, or a more dynamic quality of life (FAO, 2020a).

8. The life and career ambitions of rural youth are as high as those of urban youth, but their prospects are constrained by age- and gender-specific vulnerabilities, limited labour market opportunities, and exclusion from policy processes that affect their futures (OECD, 2018). Young rural women and men often face a range of access gaps that constrain their opportunities for decent livelihoods and fulfilling their aspirations. Among rural women and girls, the situation is particularly bleak, as social norms have a strong influence on young women's education and career choices, their age at marriage and their participation in public life, among other issues. In addition, low wages, poor infrastructure and a lack of social services all contribute to and serve as push factors for youth migration to urban areas or abroad (FAO, 2021a; Kabbani, 2019).

9. The socioeconomic profile of young people in the ECA region is, in most aspects, more favourable than the global average. However, these context indicators widely vary between and within countries. In general, educational and employment disparities between rural and urban areas are far greater in some of the countries in the eastern part of the region, and after COVID-19, they may further expand. Secondary school completion rates in rural areas are lower than in urban areas, with the largest urban/rural gaps being in the Republic of Moldova (75 percent in urban areas versus 39 percent in rural areas), followed by Armenia, Montenegro, Albania and Tajikistan (Kabbani, 2019). However, the average unemployment rate of rural youth in the ECA region (15.1 percent) is lower than among urban youth (17.9 percent).⁴ Among the countries with available data, the highest differences in unemployment rates between rural and urban youth are in Georgia (27 percent versus 52 percent), Armenia (24.3 versus 45 percent) and Tajikistan (10.6 versus 22.7 percent) (ILO, 2021). Data on the ages at which youth leave school and on unemployment rates suggest that rural youth are often pushed to join the labour market earlier than are their urban peers. However, this masks the differences in employment opportunities and jobs available in rural and urban labour markets, as well as the fact that, for rural youth, job opportunities are mainly to be found in the informal sector or in self-employment in agriculture (including as contributing family workers).

10. Youth engagement and employment in the various sectors of food systems are understudied (HLPE, 2021) and their contributions underestimated. However, rapid urbanization, growing demands

⁴ The proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in some countries/territories in the region is high (in average about 28 percent in Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, and even 33 percent in Kosovo*) (ILO, 2022). The data for European Union countries for 2020 show that the share of young people (aged 20–34) who were NEETs was lowest in cities (16.0 percent) and about the same level in towns and suburbs (18.9 percent) and rural areas (18.8 percent). Yet, the biggest differences in NEET rates between cities and rural areas among European Union countries were recorded in Greece, Romania and Bulgaria (15–21 percentage points) (EUROSTAT, 2020). *All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

for food and changes in dietary patterns are creating new employment opportunities for youth in the food-processing sector and related industries and services in rural areas (OECD, 2018). Positive impacts on rural youth employment throughout the region also can be expected from new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and from greening and diversifying the rural economy (OECD, 2018). To take full advantage of the new income-generation opportunities, rural youth need better access to formal and informal training and education, including in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) (European Parliament, 2021).

11. The technological divide among and within countries in the ECA region is nowhere more evident than in agriculture. However, the potential of technological innovation for the well-being of rural communities, including youth, is vast. It may attract the younger generation to farming, boost start-up agritech businesses, reduce production costs, increase productivity in agriculture, boost efficiencies in food systems, and increase the availability of rural services and the overall competitiveness of rural communities (World Bank and IFAD, 2017). However, despite all these potentials, the technology transfer can also destroy rural jobs and employment perspectives (HLPE, 2021) and bring new potential challenges for addressing youth equity.

12. Evidence collected through case studies shows that moving out of agriculture to the rural non-farm economy in secondary towns has a better impact on poverty and inequality reduction than exiting out of agriculture into urban centres (World Bank and IFAD, 2017). The age-related structural crisis in rural areas of many countries in the ECA region threatens to cause a range of problems in the agrifood sector related to farm productivity, market competitiveness, rural economic viability and food security. However, current policies and investments do not provide young people sufficient stimulus to seek agriculture-based livelihood options and are not well adapted to support the generational turnover of family farming and to attract young farmers with no family background in farming. Even in the European Union, regardless of the different support schemes available for young farmers through the common agricultural policy, it plays only a modest role in enabling young farmers to gain access to land, capital, training and skill development (European Parliament, 2017; Hélaïne, 2021).

13. Rural youth in the ECA region are diverse and face challenges and opportunities that differ depending on specific national and local contexts. Given this, more dialogue and evidence are needed for the formulation of effective policies and interventions to support youth in building their livelihoods, empowering them and ensuring the generational renewal and sustainability of family farming. There are still gaps in understanding the specific economic, social and cultural issues that affect their aspirations, livelihoods and well-being, especially at the country level and particularly at the local level. Therefore, strengthening rural-urban linkages by directing investments⁵ towards the development of social, physical and market infrastructure would contribute to better employment opportunities and to reducing the risks of social exclusion among rural youth (CFS, 2014). Linking rural and urban development using a territorial approach is another avenue that can increase economic activity and create opportunities for young people in rural areas (FAO, 2022a). Holistic and territorial approaches complemented by inclusive policy dialogue processes and governance structures need to be promoted to enhance youth participation in rural development, so as not to leave them behind. In addition, the establishment of inclusive multisectoral platforms, networks and associations should be encouraged at all levels; this would give youth better access to information and enhance their engagement in decision-making processes, thus allowing the voices and needs of youth to be heard.

III. FAO processes and actions in Europe and Central Asia

14. Youth development and youth engagement are central to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,⁶ which acknowledges that young people play an important and positive role in the realization of sustainable development (UN, 2018). However, achieving the multidimensional and

⁵ Investment schemes should comply with the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems. Principle 4 specifies that investments should advance youth's access to land, training, decent work, new technologies, finance and inputs and support youth inclusion in decision-making.

⁶ Youth-related targets are under several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and are interrelated.

inclusive rural development envisaged by the 2030 Agenda requires a paradigm shift to ensure transformational change.

15. The FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31 aims at directly supporting the 2030 Agenda through the transformation to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems for *better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life*, leaving no one behind (FAO, 2021b). As noted, youth is one of the cross-cutting themes in the Strategic Framework; these themes are embedded across all of FAO's work to operationalize the principle of leaving no one behind.

16. In Europe and Central Asia, in consultation with its Members, FAO identified four key regional priorities,⁷ which are addressed by the three Regional Initiatives (RIs)⁸. As with gender and inclusion, the goal is to promote more systematic mainstreaming across all the work of the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia to develop an enabling environment for youth.

17. In addition, it also is important to express the visibility of youth in the FAO regional programme of work. In this regard, support for youth is embedded and explicitly visible in Regional Initiative 1 on empowering smallholders, family farms and youth through inclusive rural transformation, digitalization and innovation. One of the main preconditions to keep agriculture viable in rural areas is to enhance the generational renewal of family farms. To achieve this, the empowerment of rural young women and men is key, including defining their priorities, supporting their social and economic well-being and enabling their participation in governance and decision-making through the creation of platforms through which they can amplify their voices and engage in dialogues.

18. Furthermore, it is essential to raise awareness on key challenges facing agrifood systems and engage young people in these issues to find new solutions. Therefore, it was a priority for the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia to contribute to the flagship event of the WFF, organized in October 2021 in Rome following the UN Food Systems Summit. Efforts have been made to reach out to as many youth organizations and stakeholders as possible to increase the synergy and impact of this important global event. Tens of thousands of young people from all regions were mobilized, bringing together youth leaders, young farmers, agricultural workers, politicians, indigenous leaders, tech innovators, performers, chefs, CEOs, musicians, artists, dignitaries, influencers, public figures and many more (WFF, 2021). The WFF flagship event hosted a two-day Youth Action Assembly, which provided a space for youth from all backgrounds and regions to come together to discuss priorities for agrifood systems transformation. Due to additional focus on youth in the forefront of agrifood systems issues, the Young Farmers Roundtable and Indigenous Youth Forum were also organized and conducted. These discussions are captured as youth priority actions in the Youth Action Compendium (WFF, forthcoming).

19. As a regional follow-up to the successful event of the WFF youth-led movement and based on the request of Members at the FAO Regional Conference for Europe in 2020, the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia launched a series of youth consultations in December 2021. The main objectives of these consultations are to better understand the situation of young rural women and men in the region, and to facilitate the exchange of views and the sharing of good practices that address the constraints they face in accessing decent work and dignified livelihoods throughout the region. In coordination with the efforts of the WFF, the youth consultations also aim at establishing a regional platform for youth and other stakeholders to promote inclusive agrifood system transformation by highlighting the importance of young people in family farming and sharing with them locally adaptable, innovative solutions to facilitate generational turnover in the agriculture and

⁷ Priorities of the region: (i) formulating effective policies, promoting digital innovation and facilitating rural livelihoods, with emphasis on smallholders, women and youth; (ii) food system transformation promoting nutrition-sensitive value chains and healthy diets through the alignment of trade, food safety, sanitary and phytosanitary policies, facilitating One Health; (iii) promoting sustainable natural resource management and facilitating resilience in agriculture, forestry and other land-use sectors, including mitigating and adapting to climate change; and (iv) addressing food insecurity and reducing all forms of malnutrition. For more, see <https://www.fao.org/3/nc229en/nc229en.pdf>.

⁸ RI-1: Empowering smallholders, family farms and youth through inclusive rural transformation, digitalization and innovation. RI-2: Transforming food systems and facilitating market access and integration. RI-3: Managing natural resources sustainably and preserving biodiversity in a changing climate.

food sector. These consultations also serve as a basis to plan the work of FAO in Europe and Central Asia, further enhancing the support provided for rural youth through highlighting the importance of context-specific interventions, supporting synergies, creating necessary intergenerational linkages and facilitating knowledge transfer. The regional youth consultations will also contribute to the Regional Youth Action Compendium, in listing the key priority areas of youth in Europe and Central Asia, and to the consultations of the WFF young farmers' roundtable, in close collaboration with FAO and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) Joint Secretariat of the UN Decade of Family Farming.

20. The first consultation session was conducted in December 2021, with participation from youth representatives and with stakeholders from policy, civil society, academia and private sector who are active in the fields of food, agriculture and rural development in the region. The online consultation aimed at providing an overview of the challenges and opportunities for rural young women and men. The next consultations will each have a more specific technical focus.

21. It is important to mention that in the past biennium, efforts have also been made at the country level to directly support youth employment and to further promote the mainstreaming of youth support across FAO's work in the region. For example, in Azerbaijan, the access of rural young women and men to employment and entrepreneurship opportunities was facilitated in the agricultural sector through the development of capacity and the provision of internship opportunities, access to soft loans and subsidies, and new technologies for better livelihoods. Raising awareness on the role of youth and women in agriculture and cooperatives was undertaken in Turkey, while capacities of rural youth on income diversification were enhanced in Albania and the quality of life of rural youth was improved through small-scale investments in Azerbaijan, Georgia and North Macedonia.

22. During 2022-2025, rural youth will remain a main priority for FAO in the region, with support for the implementation of the work programme related to the empowerment and employment of young women and men in rural areas (FAO, 2022b). Therefore, following the request of the Members at ERC 32 and in line with the four regional priorities, the FAO Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia intends to further mainstream rural youth in its work programme and will specifically focus on supporting rural youth both at regional and country levels in the following activities:

- promote such processes as the development of public policies, investments and inclusive, multi-actor platforms that are explicitly relevant to empowering youth and ensuring the generational sustainability of family farming. In this context, under the UNDF, support is being provided for the development of national action plans for family farming in Albania, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and the Republic of Moldova, including dedicated activities related to and relevant for young family farmers;
- enhance youth participation in rural development through the promotion of territorial/integrated community development approaches that place central importance on recognizing the needs and constraints of youth as a heterogeneous population and the creation of decent job opportunities for them. This includes ongoing and future work at the country level in Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia and Kazakhstan;
- to contribute to the informal global network of the World Food Forum, continue the organization of youth consultations at regional and local levels in order to understand the challenges and the needs of rural youth, exchange generation-specific knowledge (e.g. digitalization), success stories and good practices in the region, and support building a platform through which they can learn from each other. In addition, the 2022 cycle of the WFF focuses on access to healthy diets and addressing the climate crisis in transforming our agrifood systems; the flagship event will take place from 3 to 5 October 2022;
- analyse the situation of young rural women and men in the region, starting with the Western Balkan countries, to provide insights into possible solutions for more informed decision-making at the policy level.

23. Taking into account these upcoming activities, strengthening partnerships with relevant development partners and empowering youth to be partners in this process are both essential elements

and can provide considerable opportunities at regional, country and grassroots levels to upscale and strengthen advocacy efforts to create perspectives for rural youth and to reframe the wider society's perception of agriculture as a dynamic sector with constant renewal capacity.

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