



## **2011 Lecture Series: ‘Agriculture, Rural Employment and Inclusive Growth’**

Agriculture has risen to the top of national and international policy agendas. The 2007-2008 and current food crises have demonstrated the urgent need to address the desperate situation facing many of the world’s poorest people. With food production needing to increase by 70% to feed a projected world population of 9 billion in 2050, the call to action is resounding. In recognition of this, the Dutch government has singled out the issue of food security as one of the priorities of its international cooperation policy. The lecture series on agriculture, rural employment and inclusive growth therefore comes at a moment of critical importance.

### **Agriculture**

While agriculture is firmly on the agenda, competing visions of agricultural development abound. The framing of the debate within policy circles in terms of food security risks limiting the analysis to a pure technocratic focus on production gains. Increasing agricultural output is vitally important in order to keep step with a rising world population, but the shift to large-scale commercial agriculture cannot uncritically be proposed as the universal solution if this means that small holder farmers are displaced from their land and stripped of their livelihoods. Food security must be complemented by food sovereignty – the need to look not only at the certainty of sufficient food production but also by whom and how it is produced. Sustainable agricultural development will require the inclusion of these political and social dimensions in the debate.

### **Rural employment**

For this reason, the lecture series takes as its central theme the issue of rural employment. With 75% of the world’s poor living in rural areas and engaged in agriculture in one shape or another, the potential to enhance employment opportunities and contribute to the creation of sustainable livelihoods is great. Recentering labour within the debate on agriculture will however necessitate a re-evaluation of traditional development paradigms. The *World Development Report 2007-08: Agriculture for Development* for instance assumes that the agrarian transition of Europe in the nineteenth century will be repeated throughout the global South as populations move from country to city, agriculture to industry, and subsistence production to wage labour. The reality is however highly uneven. Within the countryside, some farmers navigate successful entry into the world of profitable agriculture, while others are displaced from access to rural livelihoods by high input costs, or lose their land to corporate agri-businesses, infrastructure projects, industrial parks and enclosures designed for conservation. The transition narrative argues that these people will find somewhere else to go, and something else to do, but the availability of an exit option cannot be assumed.

### **Inclusive growth**

In the absence of alternative employment opportunities, expulsion from agriculture represents a crisis of social reproduction, especially within states where neoliberal policy regimes steadily undercut the sparse social protection mechanisms that exist. The lecture series therefore takes the achievement of an inclusive growth strategy as another key concern. The Dutch government has indicated its preference for Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) as the way forward. This synergistic approach could potentially help to increase the financial inclusion of the rural poor. Critical attention however will need to be paid as to whether such partnerships advance the cause of social welfare or if they represent a collusive deal between government and business. Past precedent reflects a diversity of responses. In both China and India, there are hesitant movements towards increased welfare provisions for the (post) rural poor; in South Africa there is debate on the need for a Basic Income Grant. However, these more hopeful examples are counterbalanced by ruling regimes which have largely abandoned their rural populations or, together with private investors, have engaged in speculative land acquisitions.

Against the backdrop of long-term underinvestment and neglect of agriculture, insecurity of livelihoods and job precarity remain the unfortunate norm for the majority of rural workers in the global South. Fashioning a sustainable agricultural development strategy will therefore require a concerted effort to ally the drivers of economic growth with a spirit of social care. By inviting leading experts to speak on critical issues within the field of rural development, the lecture series “Agriculture, Rural Employment and Inclusive Growth” hopes to make a valuable contribution to such a strategy.



*This Lecture Series is part of 'Food First', a program supported by NCDO aiming to put the food and agriculture-issue at the heart of the political debate. For more information and other activities, visit: <http://www.foodfirst.eu>*