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Written contribution by Innovations and Networks for Development (IREN)

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Building resilience to multiple shocks affecting people
and sustainable development

*This written contribution is made available in the language and form in which it was received. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNCTAD

Building resilience through productive employment in agriculture

A contribution by IRED (Innovations and Networks for Development)

Philippe Egger, President, IRED

UNCTAD Civil Society Hearing 24 May 2018

Resilience to multiple shocks is best built through a strong agricultural sector ensuring productive employment to smallholders. This time-worn lesson is fully relevant to the situation in Africa.

By 2050, Africa will have a quarter of the world's population, and will be the world's youngest region, with a median age under 25. Currently, 31 percent of Africa's youth is unemployed, 80 percent of those employed are in the informal sector, and the annual demand for jobs exceeds supply by 8 million. In low income sub-Saharan countries 60 per cent of the employed will in 2030 work in agriculture, down from over 70 per cent in 2015. Over 70 per cent of the poor work and live in rural areas.

Africa needs to produce more food to feed its growing population. It also needs to provide better employment for the large majority working in agriculture. Enabling Africa to combine these two objectives, produce more food and generate more productive employment, is a strategic issue for the region and for the world.

It is possible to grow more food without generating more employment. This trend is already happening. It is also possible to generate employment in urban manufacturing and services, but most countries in Sub-Saharan Africa have registered at best modest performances. Achieving a dynamic agricultural sector through smallholder agriculture is possible, as shown by the experience of several countries in Asia and a few in Africa. Notwithstanding, the broad picture is one of stagnating smallholder agriculture, rising urban underemployment and soaring food imports. This is not sustainable.

These trends are well documented in many reports, including successive UNCTAD LDC reports, reports on economic development in Africa, and in the 2015 report on smallholder agriculture.

Alternatives are possible and urgently required.

The future of productive employment in Africa rests largely on the performance of smallholder agriculture. Policy implementation is the weakest link, and hence well-meant support to implement better policies in close consultation and where possible cooperation with representative peasant organisations.

The UN Decade on Family Farming (2019-2028), the soon to be adopted Declaration on the Rights of Peasants, the Sustainable Development Goals, and other regional pronouncements provide relevant and broad policy frameworks.

Yet, much more work is required in order to put in place the kind of policies that will uplift smallholder agricultural, expand productive employment, combat poverty, and set the basis for broad-based development.

What more could UNCTAD contribute? Five areas are suggested:

- Monitor trends in agricultural output and employment by landholding size,
- Document successful cases where smallholder agriculture has set off broad-based development,
- Promote policy dialogues on investments in smallholder agriculture, including especially rural infrastructure,
- Engage in broad policy consultations with representatives of peasant organisations,
- Continue to examine the special situation of agriculture in global, regional and bilateral trade agreements, especially those that promote trade whilst uplifting, through WTO-compatible measures, smallholder agriculture. Between rejecting the WTO altogether and observing passively the stalemate of negotiations on agriculture, engaging critically is a mid-way defending trade as a necessary corollary of development but conditionally in order to make trade compatible with measures of support to smallholder agriculture.

In all these areas UNCTAD could expand its collaboration with other UN organisations as well as with the NGO community.

Our organization IRED (Innovations and Networks for Development) is making a range of contributions as it has done recently in a joint workshop with UNCTAD on agriculture and employment in Africa with funding from the Geneva development cooperation federation.

One of our members, Deogratias Niyonkuru of Burundi, has just published a book under the title in French "Pour la dignité paysanne" in which he reflects on his experience treading African smallholder agriculture and villages for over 30 years. It is a sobering account of what has gone wrong and how to right it.

We commend UNCTAD for the excellence of its analysis on topical issues. We encourage UNCTAD to expand its outreach and engage with all stakeholders in policy dialogues and consultations over the implementation of policies that can achieve both high levels of productive employment and high performance smallholder agriculture, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa.