

**Working Group on a United Nations Declaration on the rights of peasants and other  
people working in rural areas.**



**Opening statement of  
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Excellencies,

Distinguished delegates,

Ladies and gentlemen,

(I am pleased to have the honour to address the second session of the Working Group on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas.)

The concept of dignity is at the heart of the modern international human rights movement.

Food, in turn, is a cornerstone of human dignity – in addition to being a human right itself.

But what happens, when those at the very base of our food system are themselves denied dignity? What happens when they are abused, exploited, dispossessed, deprived? What of the human rights of the more than one Billion rural workers, small, farmers, fishers and herders, indigenous peoples, and others from their communities? They, distinguished delegates, are the urgent business of this working group.

Since the first working group session was held the world has faced a number of critical human rights challenges. 2014 was a year of conflict, mass migration and emergencies, not the least of which was the outbreak of Ebola.

These crises pose questions on how the life and livelihood of people living and working in rural areas can be protected against such shocks and against the concomitant violation of their human rights.

The human rights of this group have long been referred to in the work of the United Nations treaty bodies and special procedures mechanisms. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural rights, as far back as 2001 recommended to a Member States to ‘take steps to improve living conditions of peasants and members of country's indigenous and afro-Colombian communities.’

The Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in Haiti recommended in his 2010 report that ‘civil society organizations, in particular those representing women, peasants and vulnerable groups, should be involved systematically in the reconstruction effort.’

Small scale farmers and other people working in rural areas have not escaped the political and economic shocks of these events.

The war in Syria has devastated traditional food systems, including food processing facilities, agricultural land, irrigation, livestock and other food sources in that country. The influx of Syrian refugees to neighboring countries, most of whom have gone from rural areas in Syria to rural areas of host countries, has in turn increased the pressure on the economy and livelihoods of rural communities in the host countries.

Before the conflict, Syria managed to ensure a level of food security for most of the population, even despite a series of droughts.

By 2014 the conflict had made half of the country's population food insecure, stripping away the important gains made in the past.

This means that now more than ever, long term re-investment will be needed to recover the livelihoods and a dignified life for people living in rural areas there.

At the same time, the Ebola outbreak has not only brought the collapse of health systems in affected countries, but it has also destroyed the livelihoods of many people, the majority of whom live in rural areas. Quarantines and other restrictions such as the closure of local markets and trade bans have prevented people from producing, food or from getting their produce to market.

Survivors and orphans face stigmatization and discrimination and are often denied access to housing, work, water and health services.

The Ebola outbreak has also demonstrated the way in which the neglect of human rights, including the rights of people living and working in rural areas, leads to broader, often devastating consequences.

A long term failure to invest in health and education, in particular in rural areas, has rendered many people defenseless against the disease.

In rural areas, life-saving health services, goods and personnel were often neither available nor accessible.

Lack of accountability and of participation in health systems, as well as lack of access to accurate information, has resulted in distrust of government and public health services and have thus undermined the prevention of transmission, especially in rural and marginalized communities.

Then too, natural disasters often have particular impacts on people working in rural areas. When Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines, the government was faced with the daunting challenge of ensuring the safety of those affected through evacuation, while securing their housing, land and property rights.

Issues surrounding governance of land, such as the lack of formal recognition of land titles or the loss of documentation, were brought to the fore, as was the need to secure the free, active and meaningful participation of those affected in the recovery efforts, the majority of whom were in rural areas.

Furthermore, retrogressive policies of austerity, instituted by some countries, in response to the global financial crisis, have exacerbated challenges to rural communities.

While the crisis itself has had a major impact on the enjoyment of human rights, subsequent austerity measures have often deepened the negative human rights impacts of the crisis, while also stalling recovery and worsening existing structural inequalities. These policies have affected small scale farmers, fishers and pastoralists by limiting their access to information and reducing credit and public support through designated policies and programmes.

States have also indirectly limited small scale farmers' abilities to protect agricultural values, determine prices and market access for agricultural production, as well as to facilitate biological diversity.

Rural and marginalised groups have simply had to accept the worsening conditions and to focus on basic survival in order for their families and communities.

Of course structural challenges will remain; environmental challenges, such as a loss of biodiversity, and the negative impact of climate change, as well as the negative impacts of globalization pursued through unfair financial market practices or human rights insensitive free trade agreements, are undermining rural people's autonomy over their lives.

Excessive protection of patents over seeds and other resources by large multinational corporations has been limiting the ability of small scale farmers to use or exchange their own seeds, thus often indebting them by forcing them to purchase patented seeds.

These pressures have led peasant farmers to file for bankruptcy and in some cases even commit suicide. It has also contributed to a significant loss of biodiversity.

Distinguished Delegates,

We should also appreciate the positive developments that did occur in 2014.

The United States and The People's Republic of China, entered into a historic agreement to both cut and cap emissions.

The European Union endorsed a binding 40% greenhouse gas emissions reduction target by 2030.

The international community can come together for the greater good of the planet, and of rural communities in particular. These agreements are a step in the right direction.

At the meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Lima, Peru, over 190 Member States used the opportunity to forge the way for a new universal climate agreement that will be further discussed in Paris in 2015.

Along with the efforts to produce a new universal climate agreement on climate change, more countries accepted the Kyoto Protocol and the Doha Amendment, agreed upon actions to finance the response to climate change, as well as providing technology to developing countries and raising awareness through education.

They also agreed to the Lima Work Programme on Gender to advance gender balance and to promote gender sensitivity in climate policy.

Of course, given the scope of the climate change threat, these are modest developments at best.

And, if we are to avoid the worst consequences of climate change, a rapid and significant scaling up of ambition will be essential.

The year also saw the adoption of international standards relevant to the rights of peasants and people working in rural areas.

The Voluntary Guidelines on Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries were adopted last year by the FAO Member States.

They focus on the needs of developing countries, and are relevant to small-scale fisheries in marine and inland waters covering fishing as well as related post-harvest and upstream activities.

The voluntary guidelines build on the guiding principles which include a number of human rights principles, and which are particularly relevant to the life and livelihood of small scale fishers and fish workers.

In October, at the 41st annual meeting of the Committee on World Food Security of FAO we also saw the adoption of the Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment.

The Principles address all types of investment in agriculture and food systems - public, private, large, small - and in the production and processing spheres.

They provide a framework that all stakeholders can use when developing national policies, programmes, regulatory frameworks, corporate social responsibility programmes, individual agreements and contracts.



The principles endorse a conceptual framework in part based on the promotion and protection of human rights, and integrate existing international human rights instruments, such as the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

The Principles address issues relevant to the discussion of this working group, such as the rights of smallholders to save, use, exchange and sell genetic resources as well as the respect for traditional knowledge.

These instruments were developed building on FAO instruments adopted earlier, such as the Voluntary Guidelines on the Right to Food and the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests.

They are good examples of the integration of human right considerations in the issues relevant to the livelihood of people working in rural areas, although there is still space for further aligning them with existing international human rights standards.

Not least, this is true with regard to the reference made in some of these instruments to the free, prior and informed consent for indigenous peoples, a standard that must be respected, in our view.

The working group may wish to inform its debate with these instruments.

Finally, following the United Nations International Year of Family Farming, 2015 will be the United Nations year of *The International Year of Soils*.

In September 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals which will succeed the MDGs will be adopted.

Each of these will be relevant to the mandate of this Working Group and to its efforts to elaborate further on the rights relevant to people living and working in rural areas. Distinguished delegates,

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights is frequently asked by Member States to provide technical advice and cooperation on land issues and on land management.

Land management and land tenure have become areas of growing concern for Governments and people throughout the developing and developed world alike.

Growing concerns about food security, climate change, unsustainable use of natural resources, and rapid urbanization have brought renewed attention to how land is used, controlled and managed.

In this context, the High Commissioner's report to the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 2014 focused on human rights and land.

The report provides a human rights analysis of land-related issues, in particular on land management States' obligations and the responsibilities of private actors.

This analysis will provide another useful input to the discussion of the working group in relation to the access to land.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This Working Group can guide the international community on these pressing issues by examining the existing level of protection of the human rights of people working in rural areas and identifying protection gaps.

Their dignity, and their rights, have grown ever-more precarious under the pressures I have described.

We look to this Group to provide a roadmap to respond to those pressures. In this, you can be assured of the full support of OHCHR.

I thank you for your attention and wish you a fruitful debate.