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Why legal coverage does not guarantee social protection for agricultural workers

How seasonal earnings, contribution rules and administrative access shape effective protection, and why aggregate indicators can miss excluded workers.

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Eligibility and effective access

The ILO brief frames agricultural employment as structurally heterogeneous, spanning salaried workers, self-employed farmers and subsistence producers whose employment status, income, land tenure and production systems differ markedly. This heterogeneity, the brief argues, makes extension of social security particularly challenging because different groups are excluded through employment status, land arrangements and the nature of agricultural production itself. The brief's standard is that legal coverage absent explicit exclusion does not ensure effective inclusion.

Salient One analysis

The distinction between de jure eligibility and effective access is central. Even where statutes do not bar agricultural workers, qualifying thresholds on employment duration or hours can function as exclusionary filters. The mechanism is procedural: a worker who is technically within a scheme's scope may never accumulate sufficient covered employment to register, vest or claim. Whether this gap is large in a given country depends on the share of agricultural workers in casual or short-cycle jobs and on how thresholds are calculated—matters the brief identifies as empirical questions rather than universal rules.

Seasonal work and contribution rules

The ILO brief attributes effective exclusion to legal qualifying conditions—minimum employment-duration or working-hours thresholds—that can bar part-time, temporary, seasonal, day-labour and casual agricultural workers from contributory schemes. It further notes that agricultural workers often have irregular and low earnings, limiting contributory capacity, and that seasonal production produces income patterns poorly matched to standard monthly contribution requirements.

Salient One analysis

The mechanism here is a mismatch between contribution architecture and income seasonality. Monthly contribution schedules assume stable earnings; agricultural income arrives in concentrated harvest windows followed by lean periods. A worker may be able to pay only when cash flows, yet standard schedules demand payment when it does not. This can produce arrears, non-registration or dropout. The brief's framing implies that contribution frequency and threshold design are not technical details but determinants of whether seasonal workers can sustain participation.

Distance, administration and digital access

The ILO brief identifies the absence of local social-security offices in rural areas as a barrier to registration and benefit access, citing direct costs, opportunity costs and related expenses. It acknowledges that digitalisation can improve efficiency but warns it may not solve access problems where rural populations lack reliable internet, appropriate devices or digital literacy, thereby further constraining social protection access.

Salient One analysis

Distance operates as both a cost and an information barrier. Without local offices, workers face transport expenses and lost work time to register or claim, and may lack awareness of entitlements or procedures. Digital channels can reduce administrative burden but presuppose infrastructure and skills unevenly distributed across rural populations. The risk is that efficiency gains for administrators deepen exclusion for the least-connected workers. Whether digitalisation widens or narrows access is therefore contingent on device ownership, connectivity and literacy in the specific rural setting.

Flexible payments and their limits

The ILO brief offers two dated policy illustrations. In Costa Rica, during the harvest period, the public coffee-sector institution ICAFE coordinates collective enrolment of independent pickers into national health insurance through cooperatives and workers' organisations, easing administrative burdens for farms and workers, under a 2019 regulation. In the Republic of Korea, agricultural-sector workers may pay social-security contributions quarterly rather than monthly, and are exempt from contributions while receiving benefits under the Agricultural and Fishery Disaster Relief Acts, under article 60(2) of the National Pension Act of 1986 as amended in 2023.

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These examples illustrate design adaptations—collective enrolment to reduce per-worker administrative cost, and quarterly billing aligned to seasonal cash flow—rather than evaluated outcomes. The Costa Rica mechanism addresses registration friction by shifting it to cooperatives and employers during harvest; the Korean mechanism addresses contribution timing. Neither illustration establishes that coverage rates rose, that workers received benefits, or that the design is currently in force as described. They are dated brief examples of how rules can be adapted, not evidence of measured protection effects.

Complaint and appeal mechanisms

The ILO brief states that access to complaint and appeal mechanisms may be limited or absent in rural areas. Workers may not know where or how to file complaints, face long distances to offices, or encounter administrative delays and capacity constraints that undermine mechanism effectiveness. Filing costs—transportation, documentation fees, lost earnings and legal assistance—can further deter workers from seeking accountability.

Salient One analysis

The complaint mechanism is a procedural safeguard whose value depends on practical accessibility. If workers cannot reach offices, do not know procedures, or cannot afford the time and money to pursue a claim, the formal right to appeal does not function as an effective remedy. The brief's framing makes accountability a question of cost, information and administrative capacity rather than legal entitlement alone. Whether these barriers are severe in a given scheme is an empirical matter the brief does not resolve.

Who aggregate measures can miss

The World Bank Atlas argues that traditional indicators such as the Gini index and income growth of the poorest 40 percent only partially capture benefit distribution. It notes that a reduction in the Gini index can reflect the poorest experiencing proportionally smaller income losses than the wealthy rather than genuine progress, as occurred in some cases during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Prosperity Gap is presented as a measure giving the most emphasis to income changes of the poorest.

Salient One analysis

Aggregate distributional measures can mask the situation of specific subgroups. A national Gini improvement may coexist with stagnant or falling incomes for seasonal agricultural workers if their losses are smaller in relative terms than those of higher-income groups. The poorest-40-percent growth comparison requires comparable surveys across two years; the Atlas reports growth for 88 economies using data around 2016 and 2021, noting insufficient comparable surveys beyond 2021. This data constraint means that recent shocks or policy changes affecting agricultural workers may not yet be reflected in cross-country growth comparisons.

What the evidence establishes

The ILO brief calls for detailed assessments of different agricultural-worker groups and their employers to understand contributory capacity, employment patterns, land and production realities and available infrastructure, with participation of social partners and relevant stakeholders. The World Bank Atlas defines the Prosperity Gap as the average factor by which individuals' incomes must be multiplied to reach a global prosperity standard, and frames comparing poorest-40-percent growth with average growth as one way to assess progress of the poor.

Salient One analysis

The evidence establishes mechanisms by which legal coverage fails to translate into effective protection—threshold exclusion, contribution mismatch, distance, digital barriers and complaint-access costs—and the limitations of aggregate indicators in detecting these failures. It does not establish the prevalence of each barrier, the current legal status of the Costa Rican and Korean examples, or measured outcomes of any specific scheme. The brief's call for participatory group-specific assessments and the Atlas's emphasis on distribution-sensitive measurement both point toward evidence requirements—covered employment rates, benefit receipt, complaint outcomes and subgroup income trajectories—that neither source claims are yet met.

Implications for protection design

Salient One analysis

Protection design for agricultural workers must address the gap between eligibility and effective receipt. Thresholds keyed to stable employment, monthly contributions, office-based administration and formal complaint routes may systematically exclude those whose work is seasonal, low-paid, remote or casual. Adaptations such as collective enrolment, flexible contribution schedules and digital alternatives are design responses, but their protective value depends on implementation conditions—employer cooperation, cooperative capacity, connectivity, digital literacy and administrative responsiveness—that the brief identifies as requiring participatory assessment rather than assumption.

Salient One analysis

Measurement design must complement scheme design. If national indicators register Gini improvements or average income growth without disaggregating by employment status, sector or rural location, they can obscure whether agricultural workers are actually receiving benefits. The Atlas's Prosperity Gap and poorest-40-percent comparisons are more sensitive to distribution but still aggregate; they cannot substitute for scheme-level data on registration, contribution continuity, benefit receipt and complaint resolution among agricultural subgroups. Distinguishing design intent from measured protection requires evidence that the selected extracts do not provide and that the brief explicitly calls for through stakeholder-participatory assessment.

Sources and attribution

1. Extending social protection coverage to workers in the agricultural sector and their families: Lessons from international experience
   28 April 2026 · Retrieved 6 November 2026

   Used for: Eligibility and effective access, paragraphs 1, 2; Seasonal work and contribution rules, paragraphs 1, 2; Distance, administration and digital access, paragraphs 1, 2; Flexible payments and their limits, paragraphs 1, 2; Complaint and appeal mechanisms, paragraphs 1, 2; What the evidence establishes, paragraphs 1, 2; Implications for protection design, paragraphs 1, 2.

   International Labour Organization. 2026. Extending social protection coverage to workers in the agricultural sector and their families: Lessons from international experience. Social Protection Spotlight Brief. Geneva: ILO. https://doi.org/10.54394/00034206. Licensed under CC BY 4.0. CC BY 4.0

   ILO-authored narrative in the selected passages only. Excludes photographs, logos, figures, credits, references and third-party material. National examples report the ILO description, not current legal advice or demonstrated outcomes.

   Adapted from ILO material; changes have been made. This adaptation was not prepared, reviewed or endorsed by the ILO.

2. Combining income growth with inequality reduction benefits everyone
   Atlas of Global Development, May 2026 · Retrieved 6 November 2026

   Used for: Who aggregate measures can miss, paragraphs 1, 2; What the evidence establishes, paragraphs 1, 2; Implications for protection design, paragraph 2.

   Lønborg, J. H., M. Lambrechts, and N. Yonzan. 2026. “Combining income growth with inequality reduction benefits everyone.” In Atlas of Global Development 2026. Washington, DC: World Bank. CC BY 3.0 IGO. CC BY 3.0 IGO

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