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Statement submitted by Agewell Foundation, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/2012/100.



Statement

The right to work, assuring both income security and dignity, should be available to all who are capable of working. In 2012, India remains dominated by manual labour, with agricultural labour preponderant. This is a low-income occupation, and poverty persists for a majority of the people.

Changes in economic policy and shifts in both public and private sector demands challenge a workforce whose existing skills and capabilities may be losing value. The opportunity for retooling is not available to everyone; a change of work does not guarantee a “decent” work alternative. Many in India have to settle for whatever they can get.

Among those driven to compromise is the older generation of workers. Their foothold in inclusive, sustainable and equitable economic growth is precarious, with both age and outpaced skills going against them. Where the village shoemaker was valued for locally handmade leather footwear, the plastic or rubber sandal now prevails. What is the potential for retooling? The issue is not one of productive capacities per se, but of their market relevance, even in their home base.

Can mere employment raise productive capacity? India’s flagship employment assurance scheme under the Minimum National Rural Employment Guarantee Act targets the rural workforce, offering 100 days of low-skilled employment annually to people in their native location. This leaves 265 income-insecure days a year. It also does little to change or upgrade skills.

Pledged to inclusive social and economic justice for all, India has shifted towards liberalization, and the private sector, industry and commerce operate in a market they increasingly control. A large proportion of the people remain poor, with work and income security at a subsistence level. Despite 11 five-year national development plans, extensive unemployment and “underemployment” persist and the neediest lack the abilities that are now in demand. A shortage of “decent” work for the most vulnerable is a predictable fallout of this situation. India should be encouraged to revisit the aim of equitable job security.

Of millions in India working at demeaning tasks for poor returns, the worst off with the least bargaining capacity are child workers and ageing workers. Children who are underage for employment should be safeguarded against labour. The old are labelled as overage while they still have much to offer and contribute. They should be safeguarded against being discarded.

The current age profile of vulnerable workers in India needs investigation. Official estimates put child workers at 11 million; other projections are higher. Children, who represent 40 per cent of the population in India, vastly outnumber the old. Of India’s 100 million people over 60 years of age, 65 per cent have “no source of income”. Official data put the number of workers above 60 years of age at 28 million. Therefore, most of the old are without work and indigent, even if they are capable of working. They deserve a better deal.

In overlooking the continuing potential of older workers, nations may be losing an available resource. There is a need for both realism and creativity in national strategies for productive employment. India and other countries should be encouraged to consult the very generation that is silently witnessing a period it could enrich.