

Shaping the future of farming: the International Labour Organization and agricultural education, 1920s to 1950s*

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Abstract

In the interwar years agricultural education emerged as a pivotal issue in international debates about agricultural modernization and rural development. Against the backdrop of scientific and technological changes, reformers and experts viewed the professionalization of people working in agriculture as necessary for securing a viable rural economy whilst preserving its agricultural identity. International organizations and associations debated about practical versus theory-based education, the ruralization of the curriculum and the amount of knowledge that would be needed to create the modern farmer. As this article argues, the interwar international call for more widespread and systematic agricultural education catered for a variety of political, economic and social concerns. The article discusses international efforts to promote better agricultural education in the 1920s, the emergence of new organizations in the 1930s and how these efforts foreshadowed the rural development strategies of development agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization after the Second World War.

In the last twenty years or so, historians have described the period between the mid-nineteenth and the mid-twentieth century as one of greater internationalism, transnational cooperation and exchange that shaped and was shaped by nationalist ideas and politics.¹ Like many other social, economic and political issues, agriculture increasingly became the subject of international scientific and reformist attention.² From the late nineteenth century onwards, and against the backdrop of social and economic transformations of the rural countryside, scientific

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¹ See, for example, E. Rosenberg, 'Transnational currents in a shrinking world', in E. Rosenberg (ed.), *A world connecting, 1870–1945* (2012), pp. 815–995. G. Sluga, *Internationalism in the age of nationalism* (2013). M. Herren, 'Governmental internationalism and the beginning of a new world order in the late nineteenth century', in M. H. Geyer, J. Paulmann (eds), *The mechanics of internationalism. Culture, society, and*

politics from the 1840s to the First World War (Oxford 2001), pp. 121–44.

² J. L. Van Zanden, 'The first green revolution. The growth of production and productivity in European agriculture, 1870–1914', *ECHR* 44 (1991), pp. 215–39. G. Pecout and M. Pigenet (eds), *Campagnes et sociétés en Europe 1830–1930* (2005).

experts and agricultural interest groups regularly convened at international conferences and congresses to discuss subjects ranging from plant diseases and locust plagues, to questions of production and industrialization.³ As outlined by the editors in the introduction to these essays, with the creation of international associations and institutions such as the Commission Internationale d'Agriculture (CIA) in Paris in 1889, the International Institute of Agriculture (IIA) in Rome in 1905, and the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva in 1919, these international networks were further consolidated, underpinned by an increasing concern for the coordination of international trade and the economic viability and social welfare of rural populations.⁴

This trend towards greater internationalization and cooperation between agrarian interest groups continued after the First World War. The period following the war was both a time of crisis and innovation in agriculture. Widespread war damage and fluctuating agricultural prices due to food surpluses impacted upon the livelihoods of agricultural producers everywhere leading to greater government intervention.⁵ And as is well known, the interwar years saw the emergence of a number of nationalist agrarian social engineering schemes across Europe. Ideas about how to revalorize, modernize and control the 'peasantry', and to maximize output and achieve national autarchy ranged from collective measures such as the Soviet kolkhoz to the Italian battle for wheat.⁶ Great differences continued to persist across national boundaries and international landscapes with regard to agricultural practices, labour organization, farm sizes, crop cultivation, animal husbandry, and the adoption of scientific and technological innovations.⁷ But the war also brought to light how entangled agricultural markets were and how transnational solutions needed to be found for national problems. The war thus also gave new impetus to pre-war internationalist agrarian networks that had highlighted the common challenges and the need for greater agricultural cooperation, quantification and standardization.⁸ Thus, in spite of the protectionist and nationalist ruralist policies that are usually seen as dominating the interwar period, the 1920s and 1930s also saw an increase in international cooperation on social and economic questions, ranging from the standardization of agricultural statistics to discussions on improving social rights for people working in the agricultural sector.⁹

³ S. Castonguay, 'Creating an agricultural world order: regional plant protection problems and international phytopathology, 1878–1939', *Agricultural Hist.* 84 (2010), pp. 46–73.

⁴ Juan Pan-Montojo, 'International institutions and agriculture: from the IIA to the FAO', in C. Martiin, J. Pan-Montojo and P. Brassley (eds), *Agriculture in capitalist Europe: from food shortages to food surpluses* (2016), pp. 23–43. Also, on the issue of rural hygiene, I. Borowy, *Coming to terms with world health: The League of Nations Health Organization, 1921–1946* (2009). A. Nützenadel, 'A green international? Food markets and transnational politics, 1850–1914', in A. Nützenadel and F. Trentmann (eds), *Food and globalization: consumption, markets and politics in the modern world* (2008), pp. 153–73.

⁵ B. Ziemann, 'Agrarian society', in Jay Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge history of the First World War* (2 vols, 2014), pp. 382–407. M. Tracy, *Government and agriculture in Western Europe, 1880–1988* (1988).

⁶ J. Burchardt, 'Editorial: rurality, modernity and national identity between the Wars', *Rural Hist.* 21 (2010), pp. 143–50.

⁷ On differences within one country, see D. Fitzgerald, *Every farm a factory: the industrial ideal in American agriculture* (2003), pp. 17–18.

⁸ For more on agrarian internationalism see Georg von Grävenitz, *Argument Europa: internationalismus in der globalen agrarkrise der zwischenkriegszeit* (1927–1937) (2017).

⁹ A. Ribi Forclaz and L. van de Gucht (eds), *Governing the rural in interwar Europe* (2017). N. Vivier and

One crucial question that linked existing economic and social concerns with the future of rural populations was the question of education. From the early 1920s onwards, the term 'agricultural education' became a buzzword in international debates. All the major international organizations and conferences, from the CIA to the ILO, put the question of education on their agenda as something that needed to be both promoted and standardized. Education was seen by many interwar reformers and international civil servants as a means to diffuse new methods and technologies, turn un-skilled labourers into skilled workers, with the goal of improving agricultural practice and rural livelihoods whilst at the same time maximizing output, thus securing the future of the rural economy whilst preserving its agrarian identity. Reformers and agricultural experts, including new professional groups of agricultural economists and rural sociologists, all agreed that education was the linchpin of agricultural and rural development.

But what exactly did 'agricultural education' in internationalist parlance refer to and what were the motivations behind regulation and standardization? How far were discussions about agricultural education motivated by a reformist agenda of social progress with better working and living conditions or by a concern to exercise a tighter social control over the countryside?¹⁰ Was agricultural education a tool to reduce rural exodus, or on the contrary, a measure to replace masses of allegedly uneducated peasants by a new professional class of skilled agricultural workers? How far were these discussions limited to certain parts of Europe, or was there a more global vision for education as a means to agricultural development? And last, what role did international organizations play in these discussions, and what, if anything were the legacies of these interwar debates?

In this article we seek to answer these questions through the prism of the archives of international organizations and associations, using the latter as 'transnational sites of study' that illuminate the circulation of ideas and debates on agricultural education.¹¹ Based on records from the CIA, IIA and ILO, the article begins by contextualizing the changes happening in agriculture in the interwar years. It then goes on to discuss how agricultural education became a core theme in the discussions held in the headquarters of the ILO in Geneva. The article examines the views that existed on what agricultural education should do, on the appropriate balance between theoretical and practical knowledge and whether rural schools should have a specific curriculum tailored to future agricultural populations.

As will become clear, the interwar international call for more widespread and standardized agricultural education catered for a variety of political, economic and social concerns. Agricultural education meant different things to different people. For some, the establishment of farm education in primary schools was seen as a way of awakening an interest in agricultural

Note 9 *continued*

S. Petmezas, 'The state and rural societies', in N. Vivier (ed.), *The state and rural societies: policy and education in Europe 1750–2000* (2008), p. 25.

¹⁰ On education as a means of social control and regulation, see the editors' introduction in T. S. Popkewitz, B. M. Franklin, and M. A. Pereyra (eds), *Cultural history and education: critical essays on knowledge and schooling* (2001).

¹¹ I borrow this phrase from Glenda Sluga, 'Editorial: the transnational history of international institutions', *J. Global Hist.* 6 (2011), p. 219. For a similar approach that does not relate to agriculture, see Damiano Matasci, 'L'éducation, terrain d'action internationale. Le bureau international de l'enseignement technique dans les années 1930', *Relations internationales* 151 (2012), pp. 37–48.

work in rural children, where others believed in the dispatch of extension agents to teach adult farmers practical skills. A third point of view thought that progress would be best achieved through some form of vocational education (in French ‘enseignement professionnel’), that is technical education that would combine both theoretical knowledge with practical, hands-on experience and specifically prepare the student for work in agriculture. In one form or another, all these methods were concerned with improving the farmer’s mind and efficiency and with controlling the dissemination of new scientific knowledge, through which professionalization and modernization of agricultural producers could be achieved. By discussing these debates, the article highlights the shifts and continuities in international efforts to promote better agricultural education in the 1920s and 1930s. It describes how interwar efforts foreshadowed the rural development strategies of development agencies such as the Food and Agriculture Organization after the Second World War. Finally, by connecting the history of international organizations with that of agriculture, the article rethinks some of the major tenets and chronologies of rural development history and broadens our knowledge of interwar ‘proto-development’ policies, actors and institutions.¹²

I

For most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the transfer of agricultural knowledge and knowhow in Europe relied on an empiric transmittance from generation to generation, through participation and imitation. This situation changed during the eighteenth century, when Europe witnessed the emergence of a ‘science of agriculture’ which went hand-in-hand with the first attempts at organizing, and institutionalizing, specialized training and teaching, a process dubbed by Peter Jones as ‘agricultural enlightenment’.¹³ From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, agricultural academies became more widespread resulting in an increase in academic research and experimentation and in the circulation of theoretical and scientific knowledge. The tendency towards a ‘scientific’ approach to agriculture was further promoted by land grant colleges in the United States, and the research and teaching activities of philanthropic foundations and colonial experiment stations.¹⁴ Particularly in central Europe, vocational education and apprenticeship, which offered systematic technical training for agricultural work, became more common although still limited to only a very small portion of the rural population.¹⁵ But all in all, the number of farmers trained in agricultural institutions

¹² I borrow the term from Cyrus Shayegh who has recently made a similar argument but in a different context. Cyrus Schayegh, ‘The interwar germination of development and modernization theory and practice’, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 41 (2015), pp. 649–84.

¹³ On this see Peter Jones, *Agricultural enlightenment: knowledge, technology, and nature, 1750–1840* (2016). The phrase ‘science of agriculture’ is borrowed from id., ‘Making chemistry the “science” of agriculture, c.1760–1840’, *Hist. of Science* 54 (2016), pp. 169–94.

¹⁴ On the United States, D. B. Danbom, ‘The agricultural experiment station and professionalization:

scientists’ goals for agriculture’, *Agricultural Hist.* 60 (1986), pp. 246–55. Jonathan Harwood, *Technology’s dilemma: agricultural colleges between science and practice* (2005). J. M. Hodge, *Triumph of the expert: agrarian doctrines of development and the legacies of British colonialism* (2007), p. 208.

¹⁵ P. Brassley, ‘Agricultural science and education’, in E. J. T. Collins (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VII, 1815–1914 (2000), pp. 594–649. See also id., ‘Agricultural education, training and advice in the UK, 1850–2000’, in Vivier (ed.), *State and rural societies* and also id., ‘The professionalization of English

remained comparatively small. In fact, promoters of agricultural education confronted quite a few obstacles. As Richard Hoyle has pointed out for Britain, education was not necessary to gain access to land and although public health regulations increased in the early twentieth century, the great majority of farmers both in Europe and overseas did not need formal agricultural education, nor were they prepared to accept the cost and loss of labour that attending school necessarily entailed.¹⁶ The challenges posed by this dilemma to international educational reforms and policy-making was widely recognized. As an international observer put it:

The farmer, and especially the smallholder, asks why he should pay to send his son, whose services he can ill spare, to an institution in order to learn what, after all, he can be taught without cost on the home farm itself; and it is by no means easy to meet the double argument, that about expense and that about doing without the son's services, or the explain exactly in what consists the superiority of the institution teaching to what the father himself can impart.¹⁷

It was the very low numbers of 'professional' farmers that attracted the attention of the ILO, one of the main international organizations that contributed to debates on international social policy after the First World War. The ILO had been established in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles, primarily to address the social rights of industrial workers.¹⁸ Against the backdrop of what was perceived as a general radicalization of the rural countryside in Europe, its director, the French social reformer Albert Thomas, soon expanded the organization's mandate to include the working conditions of people in the agricultural sector.¹⁹ Thus, in 1921, the annual Conference of the ILO put a range of agricultural issues, ranging from working hours to the protection of women and children and social insurance on its agenda.²⁰ Also, a small permanent unit comprising three members of staff – the so-called Agricultural Service – was set up within the ILO's headquarters to collect and manage material on agricultural labour issues. It was headed by the Cambridge-educated German-British scholar and internationalist, Louise Matthaei (later Louise Howard), who, until her departure from the organization in 1932, continuously battled with the ILO's director to increase her staff, budget and the overall importance of her unit.²¹

Note 15 continued

agriculture', *Rural Hist.* 16 (2005), pp. 235–51. Caitlin Adams, 'Rural education and reform between the wars', in P. Brassley, J. Burchardt and L. Thompson (eds), *The English countryside between the wars: Regeneration or decline?* (2006), pp. 36–52. For France, see the work of M. Boulet et al. (eds), *Les enjeux de la formations des acteurs de l'agriculture, 1760–1945* (2000).

¹⁶ Richard W. Hoyle, 'Introduction', in Richard W. Hoyle (ed.), *The farmer in England, 1650–1980* (2013), pp. 12–13.

¹⁷ L. E. Howard (née Matthaei), *Labour in agriculture: an international survey* (1935), p. 162.

¹⁸ S. Kott and J. Droux (eds), *Globalizing social rights: The International Labour Organization and beyond* (2013).

¹⁹ International Labour Conference, *Report on the adaptation to agricultural labour of the Washington decisions concerning women and children* (1921). For the draft conventions and recommendations adopted by the conference, see International Labour Conference, *Third session: record of proceedings*, I (1921), pp. 832–52. A. Ribi Forclaz, 'A new target for international social reform: the International Labour Organization and working and living conditions in agriculture in the interwar years', *J. Contemporary European Hist.* 20 (2011), pp. 307–29.

²⁰ Published as International Labour Organization, *A technical survey of agricultural questions* (1921).

²¹ ODNB, 'Howard, Louise Ernestine, Lady Howard (1880–1969)'; Also, Ribi Forclaz, 'A new target for international social reform'.

Most of the ILO's early work on agriculture targeted a narrow group of so-called agricultural (wage) workers in Europe. Even so, many of the issues that the ILO addressed for the agricultural sector such as the limitation of working hours and the protection of women and children, proved too contentious. Still, as a result of these early efforts, by 1921 the ILO Conference had issued a range of guidelines, so-called recommendations, that did not bind governments to take legislative action but still needed to be brought to their attention. This included one on the development of technical agricultural education in which it asked members of the ILO to 'endeavour to develop vocational agricultural education', and also to submit regular reports on the progress of these institutions.²² Whereas the impact of these recommendations remained modest, they signalled that for the first time a permanent international organization was attempting to tackle socio-economic questions that hitherto had only been sporadically addressed by international conferences, congresses and institutions. This rising focus on education, as has been shown for colonial contexts, also reflected the 'interwar faith in new modes of knowledge' and confidence in the abilities of scientists and experts 'to shape and manipulate nature'.²³

The 1921 enquiry had also brought to light, that, as was the case with many other agricultural subjects, ranging from social legislation to agricultural statistics, international organizations faced a lack of centralized data and it was thus impossible to draw comparisons between existing models and forms of agricultural education in different countries across the globe. In response to the lack of data, in 1923 a newly constituted agricultural expert commission, the so-called Mixed Advisory Agricultural Committee, launched a more elaborate survey. Comprising members of the ILO and the IIA, the goal of the Committee was to coordinate the efforts of the two institutions despite their differing agendas and approaches. As Niccolò Mignemi explains in his article, the IIA was born out of transnational reformist networks of agricultural economists who were more concerned with economic cooperation than social policy. As Federico D'Onofrio's contribution shows, the IIA shared with the ILO a commitment to knowledge-production and data-gathering. Indeed, the cooperation between the two institutions resulted in the dispatch to ILO member countries of a questionnaire asking for information on national legislation, institutions and the various categories of agricultural education ranging from lower-grade schools to evening classes, higher education, and extension programmes, as well as methods of teaching.²⁴

Such fact-finding surveys were very much *en vogue* in the interwar years, both as scientific tools and as a way to delineate issues that could be tackled through international cooperation, planning and policy development. The stated goal of the joint ILO-IIA enquiry on agricultural education was 'to set out the position of agricultural instruction throughout the world, and to show by a comparison of various methods of instruction the gaps which may exist and the improvements which may be effected'.²⁵ As the joint commission signals, agricultural

²² 'Recommendation concerning the development of technical agricultural education', third International Labour Conference (1921).

²³ P. Kallaway, 'Science and policy: Anthropology and education in British colonial Africa during the interwar years', *International J. Hist. of Education* 48 (2012).

²⁴ International Labour Organization, *Vocational education in agriculture* (Studies and Reports Series, no. 9, 1929).

²⁵ Report of the experts on vocational agricultural instruction submitted to the Agricultural Advisory Committee, Nov. 1925, Archives of the International

education was regarded as a hybrid question that combined social rights and welfare aspects that were the mandate of the ILO, with technical and economic issues such as farm household management, the marketing of agricultural products, the creation of allotments, and the prevention of animal disease that were the mandate of the IIA.²⁶

The most tangible result of the enquiry was a collection of national reports received from 31 countries in and outside Europe (but not from the US or USSR which, although solicited, did not reply). Some of these reports contained detailed information on institutions, numbers of pupils and courses offered but most highlighted that, as the ILO put it, 'a mere fraction of the agricultural populations are trained in a knowledge of the occupation which they pursue'.²⁷ The tone used by ILO officials to describe the general situation in agriculture smacked of age-old prejudice towards backward farmers and the rural-urban divide: everywhere, so the ILO report claimed, agricultural populations were 'shy', 'suspicious', 'diffident', and 'deficient in general culture'.²⁸ Much of this state of affairs was a result of 'inadequate general education in rural areas' which, along with inadequate housing, infrastructure and health provisions, produced a socially, politically, and economically inferior rural population that was vulnerable to change and to economic crisis.²⁹

The ILO report on vocational education identified 'a special need for raising [the] general level of [education]' in almost all of the 31 countries it reviewed. As was the case with most of the work of international organizations in the early 1920s, the report was not so much oriented towards formulating international policy instruments but rather its aim was to facilitate the collection and exchange of information, to draw comparisons between different countries and different educational models.³⁰ Thus it also highlighted the great variations that existed across national and regional contexts and between, for example, Western and Central Europe and places like Cuba, Haiti and Chile. It showed that, in some countries, the legal framework for agricultural teaching dated back to the early nineteenth century, whereas in other countries such a framework did not exist. It also highlighted variations within Europe, for example with regard to the spread of agricultural apprenticeship and vocational training. Above all, however, the ILO report emphasized common challenges that were faced across national boundaries.

Note 25 continued

Labour Organization, Geneva, Series Agriculture, file number 802 (hereafter ILO, AG followed by file number).

²⁶ ILO, AG 800/0/3, 'Report on the second session of the Agricultural Advisory Committee', Rome, 5–7 Nov. 1925, p. 4.

²⁷ ILO, *Vocational education in agriculture*, p. 38. The study contained an overview of technical agricultural education in 31 countries across the globe, ranging from Australia to Switzerland and covering countries such as Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Latvia, Estonia, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, Romania, Yugoslavia, Greece, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Irish Free State, Canada, South Africa,

Australia, Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Haiti, British India, China, Japan.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 30. On the general acceptance of such prejudice see also J. Handy, "Almost idiotic wretchedness": A long history of blaming peasants', *J. Peasant Studies* 36 (2009), pp. 325–44.

²⁹ ILO, *Vocational education in agriculture*, p. 45.

³⁰ Lately, historians of international organizations have shown this to be true for various international commissions such as the League of Nations' Permanent Mandates Commission and its Financial and Economic Commission. P. Clavin, *Securing the world economy: the reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (2013). S. Pedersen, *The guardians: the League of Nations and the crisis of empire* (2015).

II

Generally speaking, international experts in the late 1920s agreed that the two main challenges agricultural education faced were firstly how to keep farmers up to date with the rising body of theoretical and scientific knowledge concerning agricultural methods and secondly, how to inculcate a progressive mindset amongst the rural population as a whole. In the eyes of international officials and experts associated with the ILO, agricultural education was a means to mould farmers' minds and render them open to scientific knowledge. It thus had a 'social purpose' that went beyond mere teaching, namely to turn out 'a sufficient number of ... educated farmer(s) whose pores are open to all forms of new scientific knowledge' and who would spearhead progress in rural societies.³¹

The increased 'scientization' of agricultural debates, a phenomenon that had started in the early nineteenth century, strongly featured in international expert meetings such as, for example, the first post-war gathering of the CIA in France in 1923. Under a new section titled 'agronomy', members of the commission discussed technical and scientific matters such as new methods of soil disinfection, the latest advances in plant science, the use of fertilizers, new machinery, and the potential of seed selection.³² The rise of related scientific disciplines such as rural sociology with its focus on farm life, social structure and rural culture, and agricultural economics, which outlined the rules governing production, distribution, and commercialization of agriculture, influenced the way plans for agricultural modernization were conceived by national governments and international organizations.³³ This further strengthened the call for greater coordination and cooperation within international agrarian associations and institutions. At the international congress of the CIA in Warsaw in 1927, members of agrarian networks discussed the coordination of agricultural experimentation across Europe, as well as the standardization of nomenclature for agricultural products.³⁴

Against the backdrop of this scientific revolution, many feared that the so-called 'traditional' peasantry, with its reliance on empiric and vernacular knowledge did not have much of a future. The perceived lack of education and professionalization of the agricultural workforce was seen as contributing to a vicious circle in which uneducated and therefore backward agriculturalists increased the cleavage between urban and rural people, ultimately jeopardizing the latter's economic survival. The chief of the Agricultural Service of the ILO, Louise Matthaei, spoke for many international experts when stating that:

The intellectual opportunities of rural peoples are ... on the whole, deficient even in countries where compulsory education has been in force for many years. There is bred a great

³¹ ILO, *Vocational education in agriculture*, p. 46.

³² ILO AG 1000/13/1, Eleventh international agricultural congress of the CIA, Paris 1923. On the rise of agronomy, see Nathalie Jas, 'Déqualifier le paysan, introniser l'agronome, France 1840–1914', *Ecologie et politique* 31 (2005), pp. 45–55.

³³ On rural sociology, see Raluca Mușat, 'Prototypes for modern living: Planning, sociology and the model

village in interwar Romania', *Social Hist.* 39 (2014), pp. 157–84. On the role of agricultural economists, Federico d'Onofrio, *Observing agriculture in early twentieth century Italy: agricultural economists and statistics* (2016).

³⁴ ILO, AG 1000/13/2, Twelfth international agricultural congress of the CIA, Warsaw 1925.

dependence on, and belief in, traditional experience and traditional forms of management among agricultural populations. Such experience is usually wholly empiric.³⁵

A change of such empiric knowledge was advocated not only for methods of production but also for the running of the farm household more generally. Both men and women were targeted as recipients of educational measures. This was also fostered by an emerging international understanding of the economic and social role of women in rural and agricultural life, particularly as homemakers and family managers and to a lesser extent as agricultural producers. A new 'section féminine' of the CIA concerned itself with the dissemination of knowledge about home economics and household rationalization.³⁶ Women were seen as key actors in planning and managing the economy of the household, improving the utilization of the resources of the farm as well as providing better nutrition for the farm household. Women, international experts often asserted, were key to preventing rural exodus and it was therefore necessary to teach them skills and the use of labour-saving devices that would decrease the drudgery that came with many of their daily tasks. As Elizabeth Jones has shown for the Weimar Republic, views on agricultural education were 'gendered' in that it was commonly agreed upon that women should enrol in agricultural schools to receive practical education including courses on dairying, gardening, and the breeding of small livestock but not in botany or agronomy.³⁷

However, as became clear from the reports collected by the ILO in Geneva, there was a delicate balance to be struck when educating rural people. Too much knowledge, it was feared, would further erode the ties that bound people to their land and encourage them to seek employment in the more attractive urban areas. This particularly mattered for another issue discussed by the ILO-IIA Mixed Advisory Agricultural Committee in the late 1920s, one that concerned many European countries at the time, namely the problem of rural exodus.³⁸ Rural exodus was a vague term, generally understood by international organizations to denote a 'migration with harmful consequences' affecting 'rural areas and agriculture' and leading to overcrowding in the cities.³⁹ As the author of an ILO case study on rural exodus in Germany affirmed, 'all recognise that a higher level of education would develop in the population a greater attachment to the soil'.⁴⁰ Yet whereas many agreed that all forms of technical education 'should foster a sense of the dignity of their calling among the rural population' and thus help to improve their economic situation, the form and content of agricultural education was widely debated.⁴¹

In this context, one controversial question that stirred debate both nationally and internationally was the question of 'rural bias'; in other words, whether to include some form of agricultural education in elementary school so as to influence the future professional choices of young children. By the 1920s, compulsory attendance of seven or eight years at elementary

³⁵ Howard, *Labour in agriculture*, p. 164.

³⁶ ILO, AG 1000/13/3, thirteenth international agricultural congress of the CIA, Rome 1927.

³⁷ E. Jones, *Gender and rural modernity: Farm women and the politics of labour in Germany, 1871–1933* (2009), pp. 150–3. N. Verdon, 'Agricultural labour and the contested nature of women's rural work in interwar England and Wales', *Historical J.* 52 (2009), pp. 123–4.

³⁸ ILO, AG 804/1, Fourth session of the Mixed Advisory Agricultural Committee, Rome 1929.

³⁹ International Labour Organization, *Rural exodus in Germany* (Studies and Reports series K, 9, 1933), p. 5. Another such investigation was carried out in Czechoslovakia in 1935.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

school for children aged between seven and fourteen years was legally established in most countries. Some reformers argued that by giving 'country children' the 'chance of knowing about agricultural things before choosing their occupation in life' improved the likelihood that they would 'take up agriculture'.⁴² The introduction of a 'rural bias' was contested, not least amongst ILO member countries. Whereas in a majority of countries some general form of 'ruralization of the curriculum' (also understood as an adaptation to the local environment of the students) existed, the great majority of countries that answered the ILO survey were against the introduction of vocational instruction in primary schools calling it 'undesirable', 'doubtful' and 'scarcely advisable'.⁴³ This excluded colonies and protectorates, which had not been included in the survey and in which, because of the preponderance of the rural sector, ruralized curricula were the norm.⁴⁴

Amongst those who opposed the introduction of a ruralized curriculum in the countryside, many questioned its economic rationale and whether the shrinking agricultural sector was actually able to absorb surplus rural population, whereas others objected for social reasons, either arguing that children were too young to absorb technical knowledge or that it was unfair to create such determinism. Some agricultural interest groups such as the National Union of Agricultural Workers in England and Wales were 'utterly opposed to directing education of village boys and girls consciously towards providing future workers on the land'.⁴⁵ The ILO's opinion on this was rather clear: introducing a rural bias was 'an improper attempt to force certain groups of the population into certain occupations'.⁴⁶ As Matthaei pointed out, rural bias was 'sentimental' and 'against the laws of economics'. Not only was it unrealistic to 'keep everyone on the land', Matthaei also argued that an agricultural bias in rural schools 'would breed up divided populations and would re-fix the gulf between urban and rural life which it was one of the principal achievements of the nineteenth century to sweep way'.⁴⁷

Thus, from the perspective of the ILO, primary schools were not the place to introduce agricultural teaching. Rather, the organization promoted the standardization of vocational agricultural education or an apprenticeship system in agriculture as a specific and systematic form of 'higher technical education' in which pupils would enrol after finishing compulsory primary education. As already mentioned, ILO officials were well aware of the many financial, social and practical obstacles to taking year-long degrees. Therefore, the ILO survey took a rather encompassing approach, arguing that vocational education could be transmitted through different types of formal and less formal teaching, ranging from agricultural colleges in which students earned a degree over several years to shorter winter schools and extension courses.

One of the major challenges when trying to reform technical education in agriculture, the ILO conceded, was how to balance 'practical experience' with 'useful knowledge'. After all, as rural reformers in North America recognized, there was a fine line between awakening the farmer's mind and risking him leaving the rural countryside.⁴⁸ With regard to practical

⁴² ILO, *Vocational education in agriculture*, p. 48.

⁴³ For a summary of the government reports, see *ibid.*, pp. 54–5.

⁴⁴ ILO, *Vocational education in agriculture*, p. 55.

⁴⁵ *The Landworker*, Dec. 1926, p. 52.

⁴⁶ ILO, *Vocational education in agriculture*, p. 51.

⁴⁷ L. E. Matthaei, 'Education in agriculture', *International Labour Rev.* 20 (1929), p. 683.

⁴⁸ D. T. Rodgers, *Atlantic crossings: social politics in a progressive age* (1998), p. 354.

knowledge the challenge was 'not to waste precious hours of instruction in teaching farm-bred boys and girls what they have already learnt at home'.⁴⁹ With regard to scientific knowledge the farmers had to adapt 'to advance in science' but this did not mean that agricultural education had to be 'properly speaking scientific'.⁵⁰ Defining the 'right' amount of knowledge thus posed all sorts of issues as the example of teaching on the usage of chemical fertilizers shows. As ILO officials pointed out, 'it is not enough to be taught that fertilizers have a great effect on crops ... Unless the student can also be taught how to judge the quantity and quality of fertilizers needed ..., he has learned less than he ought'. For the ILO, the dilemma of defining the content of agricultural teaching had even wider social and economic ramifications, mostly due to the rapid progress of scientific discovery and constantly shifting knowledge requirements.

The future farmer will very likely know more in general, for example, about fertilisers than his father, but he will not be able to act without the expert's advice as (his father) did, owing to the extraordinary complexity which knowledge of this subject has assumed.⁵¹

Thus ILO officials concluded, agricultural teaching needed to be constantly adapted, in tune with scientific advances and growing dissemination of knowledge. Also, instruction and guidance through experts needed to be made available which posed all sorts of logistical and financial challenges. Many international reformers stressed the importance of extra-mural education for the 'diffusion of progress in the countryside'. In this context, agricultural extension, an approach that combined local interventions of agricultural experts with self-help programmes and rural adult education, was seen as the most affordable and 'modern' way to bring scientific knowledge to the farming population without creating too much disruption.⁵² Extension had its origins in late nineteenth century America where 'people's colleges', experimental and demonstration farms established near land grant institutions made efforts to disseminate the results of research in agriculture to improve standards of living and productivity in rural communities.⁵³

In the eyes of ILO officials extension teaching had various benefits: it was informal, did not take much time or require much effort on the part of students. It was cheap and free to the farmer, and appealed to all ages. Based on the idea that new scientific methods were brought directly to the farmers' attention by means of 'demonstration', extension was practice-oriented and encompassed farm and field. As one agricultural expert put it, extension's 'easy approach, does not outrage the shyness or diffidence so characteristic of rural populations, nor does it evoke their distrust and suspicion'. Also, because extension combined 'instruction' with a 'certain amount of pleasure' and 'a little mild excitement', it had achieved great success across Europe.⁵⁴ The impact of this type of practical and punctual teaching could be increased through all sorts of publicity measures including the organization of rural weeks and days, the staging of competitions, shows, and exhibitions, the use of travelling libraries and cinema projections, and the organization of visits to model and experimental farms, and demonstration

⁴⁹ ILO, *Vocational education in agriculture*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁵³ B. F. Stanton, 'Agriculture, crops, livestock, and farmers', in R. W. Bulliet (ed.), *The Columbia history of the twentieth century* (1998), pp. 345–79.

⁵⁴ ILO, *Vocational education in agriculture*, pp. 29–30.

plots. The agenda behind all these publicity measures was to secure what international experts termed an 'easy approach to knowledge'.⁵⁵ For much of the interwar years, however, the ILO's endorsement of agricultural extension methods as a way to solving the problem of education in rural areas remained purely theoretical as the organization had neither the finances nor the ambition to further develop this field of activity.

III

By the early 1930s, against the backdrop of the Great Depression, international experts increasingly linked questions of production efficiency and international trade in agricultural goods, falling export prices and growing unemployment rates to more general concerns about the development of a class of technically and scientifically versed agricultural producers and labourers. As the chief of the agricultural service of the ILO observed, the accelerated globalization of agricultural markets and its recurrent crises warranted a 'minimum measure of reorganization of the agricultural industry, reorganization which will tend to demand more skilled and more highly organised labour ... but rather less in quantity'.⁵⁶ Stretching from continental Europe to the United States, countries witnessed greater state intervention, protectionism and the rise of social engineering projects. At the same time, international cooperation on rural and agricultural development between Geneva and Rome increased and new platforms and meetings emerged that addressed social, scientific and economic issues.⁵⁷

Thus, in 1930, the League of Nations Health Committee together with the IIA and the ILO set out to organize a European conference on 'rural hygiene' to be held in Geneva in the summer of 1931.⁵⁸ The preparatory work for the conference generated an unprecedented volume of reports and interdisciplinary exchanges on social and technical questions, ranging from public health, medical services and sanitation in rural areas to questions of rural housing, sewage disposal, and water supply. The ILO cooperated by sending two reports, one that dealt with the poor accommodation of agricultural workers and the other with the employment of children in agriculture.⁵⁹ By integrating questions that had rarely been discussed before in international fora, the conference opened up the discussion on rural welfare more generally, bringing together international expertise and knowledge on social and economic dimensions, and showcasing what was viewed as an integral backwardness of rural areas.

Whereas by the early 1930s international diplomatic relations were starting to deteriorate, the period saw a marked increase in transnational agricultural cooperation, meetings and congresses that dealt with specific aspects of scientific agriculture, ranging from fertilizers to technical education. Internationalization efforts particularly emanated from Fascist Italy where the government had embarked on wide-reaching scientific agricultural research and

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ L. E. Matthaei, 'Some effects of the agricultural depression on agricultural labour', *International Labour Rev.* 23 (1931), pp. 453–75, here p. 475.

⁵⁷ K. K. Patel, 'The green heart of governance: rural Europe during the interwar years in a global perspective', in Ribi Forclaz and van de Grift (eds), *Governing*

the rural.

⁵⁸ J. L. Barona and S. Cherry (eds), *Health and medicine in rural Europe (1850–1945)* (2005), pp. 130–4. Also, Borowy, *World health*, pp. 325–30.

⁵⁹ ILO, AG 1000/44/1, correspondence between Matthaei and Frank Boudreau, League of Nations Health Section.

ruralization programmes.⁶⁰ Thus, in 1930 a new organization, the Fédération Internationale des Techniciens Agricoles (FITA), was set up in Rome by Franco Angelini, an Italian agricultural engineer who also created various other international institutions such the International Centre for Chemical Fertilizers (established in 1933) and the International Centre for Rural Broadcasting (1936).⁶¹ FITA was a federation set up to 'defend' the interests of a rising professional group of academically trained agronomists but the organization declared the promotion of agricultural education more generally as one of its main goals. Indeed, it considered itself as a successor to the older Commission internationale pour l'enseignement agricole founded in 1905 in Liège and headed by the Belgian agronomist and internationalist Paul de Vuyst, an early promoter of ideas of farm rationalization and scientific management.⁶² In line with earlier statements by the ILO, the FITA maintained that agricultural education needed to be improved 'to elevate the level of civilization of agriculturists as high as possible'.⁶³ The diffusion of specialized technical education was seen as conducive to greater mechanization and rationalization of production, improvement of equipment and better organization of farm management.

The FITA managed to take the lead in the organization of various international events in 1931 and 1932, including a series of international congresses on agricultural education. The first of these events was purposely scheduled to take part at the same time as the fifteenth congress of the CIA in Prague in June 1931, which focused on the 'diffusion of progress in the countryside' more generally.⁶⁴ In line with other CIA congress, the gathering was concerned with technical, and economic questions, such as animal production, mechanization and industrialization and the better organization of international trade, but equally important were social welfare questions such as methods of agricultural teaching and measures to improve production, health and work in agriculture through such means as the radio, films, and agricultural fairs and exhibitions.⁶⁵ A range of illustrious agrarian experts emphasized in their speeches how agricultural education had been neglected, painting it as the gateway to progress and greater agricultural output. The Yugoslav delegate, Ljudevit Prohaska, underlined how Denmark and Switzerland – often cited as models of agricultural modernization – had succeeded in overcoming the agricultural crisis by promoting educational measures. Interestingly, however, the Swiss agronomist Benninger cautioned conference participants against a blind belief in the superiority of the agricultural technician ('*technicien agronome*') over those he called the empirical agriculturists ('*agriculteurs empiriques*'). Benninger stressed that improvements were delicate: they could have negative effects on farmers and needed to be made in full knowledge of local conditions 'because sometimes in the past improvements had been made that had resulted in more harm than good'.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ T. Saraiva, 'Fascist labscapes: geneticists, wheat, and the landscapes of Fascism in Italy and Portugal', *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 40 (2010), pp. 457–98.

⁶¹ ILO, AG 1000/46/1, Première conférence internationale des techniciens agronomes, 9–14 Nov. 1930.

⁶² On De Vuyst see E. Gubin (ed.), *Dictionnaire des femmes belges* (2006), pp. 201–02.

⁶³ ILO, AG 1000/46/0/4, Congrès international de l'enseignement agricole, Rome, Nov. 1932.

⁶⁴ ILO, AG 1000/46/2, Commission internationale de l'enseignement agricole, July 1931, Brussels; ILO, AG 1000/46/2, Deuxième conférence internationale des techniciens agricoles, Prague, June 1931.

⁶⁵ ILO, AG 1000/13/5, Bulletin officiel, congrès international d'agriculture, Prague, 5–8 June 1931.

⁶⁶ ILO, AG 1000/46/2, speech by Swiss agricultural engineer Benning at the Deuxième conférence internationale des techniciens agricoles, Prague, June 1931 (author's translation).

A year later, another congress on agricultural education was organized by the FITA. Despite its evident nationalist efforts to showcase Fascist programmes of social, economic, and environmental agricultural engineering such as the 'battaglia del grano' and the clearance of the Pontine swamps, delegations were present from Europe, and the United States, but also Argentina, South Africa, Algeria, Colombia, Cuba, Egypt, Mexico, Uruguay, Venezuela. Participants discussed various categories of agricultural education as well as more general questions concerning rural psychology and sociology, and the beautification of rural life.⁶⁷ For all their propagandistic intentions, these events show the importance attributed internationally to higher education in agronomy and the creation of a professional elite of agricultural experts in the 1930s. The participation of countries from the South in these international gatherings reflected an increasing concern with agriculture in the tropics.

Indeed, while in the 1920s, institutional debates on improving agricultural education had focused on European countries, by the mid-1930s, reflecting rising tensions within colonies, it was openly acknowledged that the lack of technical education was hampering economic progress on a global level. This also showed in the publication of new surveys on scientific research, experimentation and education in the tropics. Already in the late 1920s, the IIA had set up a commission focusing on the neglected particularities of 'tropical' agriculture, arguing for the latter's growing importance in solving issues of an international character.⁶⁸ In 1934, the IIA published an international directory of agricultural engineering institutions as well as a survey of tropical agricultural experiment stations.⁶⁹ In 1935, under the title 'The World Agricultural Institutions' it released a global inventory of educational establishments including detailed information on the latter's history, finances, buildings, laboratories, experimental farms, composition of teaching staff, curriculum, and body of students.⁷⁰ Although the usage and practical impact of such reference works remains difficult to assess, their publication nevertheless indicate a tendency towards thinking about rural populations and scientific and educational development in more global terms.

This tendency towards more globalized information gathering and less Eurocentric conceptualizations of agricultural and rural problems further increased in the late 1930s through a range of international events, such as the League of Nations' second rural hygiene conference in Bandoeng in 1937. South Asian and East Asian countries such as India, China and Japan which had attended the 1931 conference as mere observers, sent formal delegations to debate questions of public health including access to medical care, health education, and the expansion of health services in rural areas, but also more generally on economic development and educational reform.⁷¹ The global approach to rural welfare, which increasingly emphasized the similarities

⁶⁷ ILO, AG 1000/46/o/4, Congrès international de l'enseignement agricole, Rome, Nov. 1932.

⁶⁸ A. Chevalier, 'L'agriculture tropicale et subtropicale au conseil international scientifique de l'institut international d'agriculture de Rome (7–14 Novembre 1927)', *Revue de botanique appliquée et d'agriculture coloniale* 8.77 (1928), p. 12.

⁶⁹ International Institute of Agriculture, *Les institutions de génie rural dans le monde/International*

directory of agricultural engineering institutions (1934).

⁷⁰ International Institute of Agriculture, *L'enseignement agricole dans le monde/Agricultural education in the world* (1935).

⁷¹ S. Amrith, *Decolonizing international health. India and Southeast Asia, 1930–1965* (2006). Also, T. M. Brown and E. Fee, 'The Bandoeng conference of 1937: A milestone in health and development', *Am. J. Public Health* 98 (2008), pp. 42–3.

and interdependencies between socio-economic issues in Europe's rural countryside and the wider world, also showed in the continuing cooperation between the IIA and the ILO. In 1938, a newly constituted joint commission of IIA and ILO experts, the so-called Permanent Agricultural Committee, came together for its first session. The meetings of this committee stood out both for their inclusion of extra-European expertise, especially from Asia, but also with regard to their wider conceptualization of so-called 'peasants', which included waged laborers, sharecroppers, farm servants, small farmers and landlords.⁷² Once again, the ILO collected a wide range of information, asking experts to submit preliminary reports outlining the socio-economic conditions in the agricultural sector in their respective countries.⁷³ Ranging from Switzerland to Japan, national reports emphasized similar shortcomings, such as low wages, excessive hours of work and lack of protection against unemployment and sickness. Education was generally mentioned in the reports as a way to remedy many of the social ills arising from living conditions in the countryside. As the Indian scientist, principal of Punjab Agricultural College, Muhammad Afzal Husain asserted, it was education of the rural population that would 'lead to intelligent work, alertness, better physique, better quality of work and higher output'.⁷⁴ In many respects, the discussions held in the Permanent Agricultural Committee were unprecedented in their integrative approach to agricultural questions and they resulted in a published report on 'social problems in agriculture' that offered an unprecedented survey and a guideline for the ILO's future work.⁷⁵ The increase of international meetings in the 1930s and a rising awareness of the global challenges amongst international actors, however, did not result in new legislative instruments. Just as the work of the Permanent Agricultural Committee had begun, it was cut short because of the outbreak of international hostilities. A second meeting of the committee, planned for 1939, was indefinitely postponed and for a few years at least the war would severely hamper the ILO's work.

IV

The devastation of peoples and landscapes and the social, economic and demographic chaos brought about by the Second World War, as well as the challenges posed by widespread hunger and the need for agricultural reconstruction brought the creation of a host of specialized agricultural committees and regional agencies focusing on trade and economic cooperation as well as on technical aid and development.⁷⁶

In Europe, against the backdrop of emerging Cold War tensions, the Marshall Plan's recovery programme provided American financial aid to help with agricultural rehabilitation and industrialization schemes. In addition to the range of United Nations organizations that came into force after 1945, international commissions such as the European Productivity

⁷² Ribi Forclaz, 'A new target', p. 326.

⁷³ International Labour Organization, *Social problems in agriculture* (Studies and reports series K, 14) (1939), pp. 96–7.

⁷⁴ ILO, AG 1003/1/101/33, Report presented to the Permanent Agricultural Committee by Mr. Mian Afzal Husain, principal of Punjab Agricultural College,

India.

⁷⁵ ILO, *Social problems in agriculture*.

⁷⁶ Amalia Ribi Forclaz, 'From reconstruction to development: The early years of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the conceptualization of rural welfare, 1945–1955', *International Hist. Rev.* (forthcoming spring 2018).

Agency and later the Food and Agriculture Directorate were set up with the goal of better coordinating agricultural policies and increasing productivity.⁷⁷ Having spent the war in exile in Montreal, the ILO faced the challenge of asserting its global presence and its role in agricultural cooperation in this new context.⁷⁸

In 1947, as India and Pakistan were ringing in a new era of decolonization, the ILO returned to Geneva and resumed its work on agriculture with a surprising degree of continuity. Although the IIA in Rome had not survived the war but was instead 'replaced' by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 1945, the joint expert meeting on agricultural issues was immediately reconstituted. In July and August 1947, nearly a decade after its first meeting, experts in the Permanent Agricultural Committee met to discuss 'the increasing importance attached by the ILO to the social concerns in agriculture'.⁷⁹ Picking up the threads of interwar international debates, the meeting identified a range of problems such as extension of social security to farmers, employment, housing, and last but not least education. In the same year, an Asian regional conference in New Delhi, and a regional meeting for the Near and Middle East in Istanbul both addressed the working conditions of agricultural workers, signalling that ILO's widening geographical responsibilities in this field.⁸⁰ The meetings, however, also highlighted how, in the light of decolonization and the increase of non-European member countries, the ILO would have to rethink its 'classic' interwar standard-setting activities that were predominantly geared towards European and American workers.⁸¹

Following the recommendations of the Permanent Agricultural Committee further meetings were scheduled and by 1949, Matthaei's successor, the chief of the ILO's agricultural service, Turkish economist Mukdim Osmay, spoke of an 'intensification' of his organization's work on agriculture.⁸² Indeed, having decided to place the question of agricultural labour and related matters on the agenda of the 1950 International Labour Conference, the ILO was preparing a wide-ranging report dealing with conditions of life and work in agriculture, underlining how little legislative progress had been achieved since the 1920s on such questions as hours of work, minimal salary, paid holidays, but also education.⁸³

Alongside these technical discussions, the 1950s also brought more practical and interventionist development policies under the banner of 'technical assistance' and 'rural development'.⁸⁴

⁷⁷ J. Pan-Montojo, 'International institutions and agriculture: from the IIA to the FAO', pp. 32–33.

⁷⁸ On the ILO's wartime exile see Sandrine Kott, 'Fighting the War or Preparing for Peace? The ILO during the Second World War', *J. Modern European Hist.* 12 (2014), pp. 359–376.

⁷⁹ International Labour Organization, Permanent Agricultural Committee, 2nd Session (1947).

⁸⁰ 'International Labour Organization', *International Organization* 2 (1948), pp. 127–8.

⁸¹ This argument is made in the editors' introduction to Jill M. Jensen and Nelson Lichtenstein (eds), *The ILO from Geneva to the Pacific Rim: West meets east* (2016), p. 4.

⁸² ILO, AG 1003/100, Osmay to Bouchard, 24 Mar.

1949. For an internal appraisal of the ILO's work in the field of agriculture, see A. Johnston, *The International Labour Organization: its work for social and economic justice* (1970).

⁸³ 'Labour problems in agriculture: general report', International Labour Conference, thirty-third session, Geneva 1950.

⁸⁴ Daniel Maul, *Human rights, development and decolonization: the International Labor Organization, 1940–1970* (2012). See also V. Plata-Stenger, 'Une voie sociale pour le développement. Le Bureau international du travail et les débuts de la coopération technique (1919–1949)' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Geneva, 2016).

Thus, by the early 1950s, both the ILO and FAO shifted their focus away from data gathering and report writing onto operational activities, especially the transfer and circulation of expertise through technical assistance missions in the context of the United Nations Expanded Technical Assistance Program (ETAP).⁸⁵ Out of the nine international organizations engaged in this programme, FAO received the biggest share of funds for its development work, putting the organization into a leading position with regard to agricultural development and food production in the post-war international order.⁸⁶ By the early 1950s, FAO dominated operational activities in agriculture, deploying hundreds of agricultural experts of all nationalities who were engaged in practical education through so-called 'demonstrations' of scientific methods and tools all over the planet.⁸⁷ Given that technical assistance cooperation could only be undertaken at the request of a government and many governments identified the FAO as responsible for agricultural issues, hardly any requests for assistance in agriculture reached the ILO in the early post-war years.⁸⁸ Rather, through its so-called Manpower programme developed under the directorship of the American David Morse, the organization focused on training industrial workers through vocational training with the aim of helping developing countries achieve economic growth.⁸⁹

Yet, despite existing overlaps with FAO (and to a much lesser extent with the newly created United Nations Educational and Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO), the ILO succeeded in retaining its role as the leading organization concerned with agricultural education.⁹⁰ Thus, in 1953, based on recommendations of the Permanent Agricultural Committee, the Governing Body of the ILO decided that the question of how to improve the education of farmers should be placed on the agenda of the 38th session of the International Labour Conference in 1955.⁹¹ In preparation for the conference, the ILO asked member governments whether they would support international legislation on vocational education in agriculture. The replies showed that the majority were sceptical about the possibilities of finding a 'common' approach to agricultural education at an international level. Some, forgetting the interwar efforts of the organization, also questioned whether the ILO was the appropriate organization to deal with this issue. Most governments, however, were still favourable to international legislation although the great majority did not support a convention but agreed to a recommendation.⁹²

With the resulting 1956 recommendation on agricultural education the ILO once again asserted its voice with regard to social reforms in the field of agriculture. Although the

⁸⁵ D. Maul, 'Help them move the ILO way: The International Labour Organization and the modernisation discourse in the era of decolonisation and the Cold War', *Diplomatic Hist.* 33, (2009), pp. 387–404.

⁸⁶ Amy Staples, *The birth of development: How the World Bank, Food and Agriculture Organization and World Health Organization changed the world, 1945–1965* (2005), p. 99. Also D. Webster, 'Development advisors in a time of Cold War and decolonization: The United Nations Technical Assistance Administration, 1950–1959', *J. Global Hist.* 6 (2011), pp. 253.

⁸⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization, Report on the activities of FAO under the technical assistance

program (1951), p. 110.

⁸⁸ On this see Johnston, *International labour organization*, pp. 119, 257.

⁸⁹ On manpower programme, see Maul, *Human rights*, p. 132.

⁹⁰ On overlaps, see FAO, 10 DIR 346, Herbert Broadley (FAO) to Wilfred Jenks (ILO), 21 Aug. 1953.

⁹¹ ILO, AG 1004/100, Fourth session of the Permanent Agricultural Committee, 1953.

⁹² See replies of governments in International Labour Conference, 38th session, Report VII, 'Vocational education in agriculture' (1955), pp. 5–6.

recommendation remained a non-binding guideline with no direct impact on national law or practice, it encouraged member countries to expand programmes of training to:

impart to farm men and women of different categories (unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled workers, managers, operators and farm housewives) the skills and knowledge necessary for their profession, instilling in them a sense of the social importance of the work they are doing.'

In more explicit terms, education in agriculture was to lead to 'more effective use of land, labour and capital', 'increase of production and yields', and 'improvement of income, and standard of living'.⁹³

Apart from their title and general objective, the 1921 and 1956 recommendations had little in common. Whereas the 1921 recommendation was limited to two vague articles that contained no details about the scope and forms of agricultural education, the 1956 recommendation contained 37 articles outlining the multiple reasons for and ways in which people in agriculture should be instructed. As had already appeared during the 1929 enquiry, vocational education needed to be conceived in broad terms, comprising both formal education such as apprenticeship as well as informal ways in which knowledge was brought to the farmer through on-farm training and extension services. Whereas in the early 1920s, the ILO's concern had been mainly to improve the conditions of agricultural wage labourers in Europe, however, in the mid-1950s the recommendation did not limit itself to waged agricultural workers but it included 'the whole agricultural population' 'whatever their legal relationship to the land'.⁹⁴

This expanded conceptualization of people working in agriculture reflected the knowledge gained by the ILO on this issue in the previous three decades as well as the expansion of its horizons produced by globalization. The ILO's interwar efforts to apply the same labour standards that existed for industrial workers to agriculture had been challenged from the beginning by the heterogeneity of agricultural conditions, and the lack of a cohesive and identifiable population group and its needs. From the late 1940s onwards, newly independent member countries, especially India, criticized the Eurocentricity of pre-war conventions, and forced the ILO to reconsider its aims of achieving universal standards in widely different contexts.⁹⁵ In the years to come, the ILO would further abandon its standard-setting activities, to embrace a more integrated and practical approach to development, and many of the reflections on how to impart education to the seemingly uneducated farmer would find their way into development practices, thus by-passing governmental legislation to be applied directly at the farm and village level.

⁹³ ILO, AG 18, 'Vocational education in agriculture', report VI, 39th session of the International Labour Conference, 1956 (1955), pp. 5–6.

⁹⁴ Recommendation issued by the International Labour Organization, R 101, Vocational Training

Agriculture, 1956, 3.1.

⁹⁵ On this see Daniel Maul, 'The ILO, Asia and the beginning of technical assistance, 1945–1960' in Lichtenstein and Jensen (eds), *ILO from Geneva to the Pacific Rim*, p. 125.

V

This article has approached interwar cooperation in the field of agricultural education through the archives of the international organizations. As has been shown, beginning in the early 1920s, discussions in the ILO reflected the profound changes that were anticipated for the countryside, particularly the social and economic repercussions of modernization and the rising importance of scientific knowledge on agricultural production. There was a concern amongst international officials that the transformation and the industrialization process that agriculture was undergoing in the 1920s would 'bring about a crisis' similar to the one the 'Industrial Revolution had had on other industries'.⁹⁶ Raising the general educational level of rural populations was seen as a 'public responsibility' and as a 'pre-requisite to any real progress'.⁹⁷ Drawing on modest resources, the ILO's Agricultural Service worked to collect information about national case studies, tried to facilitate international exchanges between national experts and to bring the issues to the notice of governments through reports and surveys. Other institutions, such as the IIA, the CIA and later FITA further contributed to an international debate on agricultural education. In fact, by the second half of the 1930s there were so many different actors involved in questions of agricultural education that the ILO and IIA called for greater coordination.⁹⁸ We have to admit however that most of the activities of these institutions remained limited in scope and outreach, never resulted in a binding convention and rarely reached beyond government offices and expert eyes.

It would be wrong to assume that by using the archives of international organizations we can automatically achieve a global perspective on a subject that varied greatly not only across national boundaries but also across villages and regions. Nevertheless, there are a few observations that can be made. One, of course, is to highlight the efforts of international institutions to tackle the problem of agricultural education decades before 'development' came to dominate international policy-making. These efforts led to the exchange of expert opinions from different countries and the production of surveys that created a resource of knowledge on which governments, bureaucrats, civil servants but also farmers' organizations could draw. Another point that emerges from this approach is the continuity in institutional conceptualizations of international agricultural improvements and reforms. This continuity was reflected in the recurring debates on agricultural education as well as in the ILO's legislative efforts and the two recommendations issued on this subject in the 1920s and 1950s. Forty years before rural development programmes took off on an international level, ILO officials had formulated goals for agricultural improvements, brought together expertise, drafted reports and consistently faced the challenges posed by highly complex and heterogeneous socio-economic conditions in agriculture. Throughout this process it was first and foremost national experience, opinion and desire that determined both the form and the contents of international instruments. But the governing bodies and expert meetings

⁹⁶ ILO, *Vocational education in agriculture*, p. 76.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁹⁸ ILO, AG 1004, Commission préparatoire pour

coordonner l'activité des organisations internationales dans le domaine de l'enseignement agricole, 30 Apr.

1936.

of organizations such as the ILO steered the discussions and debates by launching specific inquiries and by deciding about which items to put on the agenda of their meetings.

Too often we equal rural development with the so-called 'Third World', whereas in the interwar years and continuing well into the post-war age, rural development was not targeting the Global South but was focused on agricultural progress in Europe. The encompassing debates and activities in organizations such as the ILO, IIA, and CIA document not only the discussions of an arguably narrow group of international experts, technocrats, and civil servants. Through the compilation and comparison of national experiences they offer glimpses of the intellectual reflections that accompanied the transformation of agriculture from pre-industrial forms in the 1920s and '30s to more specialized, technical and commercial forms of agricultural production in the 1960s. They also enable us to trace the changing geographical mindmaps that informed international debates over this period. Further research will be needed to demonstrate how international experts and 'local' farmers interacted in specific geographical and historical contexts, and to what extent local agricultural knowledge and local development actors shaped and contested the implementation of educational schemes.