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“Resilience of agricultural systems against crises”

Return Migrants and Employment in Rural China

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Abstract

Through the national economic reform, China has achieved great progress toward economic growth and full employment since the 1970s. However, with rapid urbanisation and increasing income gap between rural and urban areas, more and more farm labour left the agricultural sector and shifted to off-farm sectors.

It is stated by the national statistical office that in 1952 approximately 84 % of China's workers were engaged in agriculture; in 1997 the figure had declined to 41 %. It is estimated that by 2030 farm employment may account for only 10 % of the total. Many scholars argue that the huge reduction in farm employment is to endanger China's food security. With increasing population, natural disasters, and decreasing arable land, the large withdrawal of labour from agriculture has become a significant factor leading to food crisis in China.

Since the global financial crisis in 2008, a large number of migrant workers lost their jobs in urban centres, they had to go back to their rural home villages. These returnees have different employment status after return. Based on the data from a field survey conducted in 2011, we find that many return migrants have given up their original agricultural work and entered non-agricultural employment, while many of them were unemployed.

This paper explores why return migrants chose non-farm work or unemployment, and what the major determinants of their employment status are. By this the study puts forward some policy recommendations to ensure food supply by promoting full employment in rural China.

Keywords: Employment, return migrants, rural development