

# Family farming first

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**W**ith the World Food Summit in Rome in November 2009 and the conference on climate change in Copenhagen in early December, climate change and hunger are once again hot topics. Agriculture is at the heart of both. Official delegations, civil society, businesses and farmers are asking: what types of agriculture do we need? Can any kind of farming feed everyone, or should we decide which is best?

Since the 1950s, industrialized nations, and more recently developing countries as well, have pushed their farmers to specialize and grow. Some 20 million farms in developing countries have expanded into large, mechanized, market-oriented businesses. Yet there are still over a billion rural people running small-scale multi-functional family farms of less than two hectares – and their numbers are growing.

Family farming, commonly considered old-fashioned and unable to respond effectively to market opportunities, is gaining recognition as a viable model for the future of agriculture. Yet, many maintain that only large-scale farming can sustain agricultural productivity in a global market and that a reliance on small-scale production will prevent farming communities from growing their way out of poverty. Politicians prefer land concentration and agriculture for export to achieve economies of scale.

Governments and donors need to recognize the potential of family farming and support its development. But what type of support do farmers need?

Family farmers produce for home consumption and for markets. Public policies support trade, investment and globalization and a growing number of small farmers are now included in global value chains. But there are growing concerns about this approach. Value chains exclude small producers, notably women, who cannot meet the rising scale and quality requirements; neither can they manage the risks involved.

Chain empowerment aims to help small farmers cope with the inherent challenges of global value chains, including questions of power and governance. But because the gap between farm-gate and supermarket prices is continually widening, farmers are frequently squeezed out of the system. There is a need to widen the perspective and explore other solutions.

## Forgotten farmers

Poverty reduction strategies often jump from one extreme to the other, from commercial agricultural production for global markets, to safety nets for the most needy. In between, small farmers, many of them women, have their own flexible strategies. They have been adapting their cropping patterns and diversifying food supply in response to growing demands from urban areas for decades. They have creative and innovative ideas, some more successful than others. Their potential as farmers, as well as their farming logic, deserve far more recognition.

Family farming has evolved into a wide range of location-specific forms, as farmers have responded to different agro-ecological, socio-economic and political conditions. Even with climate change and shaky economic and policy environments, crop production is stable and exports have increased in several West African states. Over 80% of total agricultural production in Africa is consumed locally. 📍 In Brazil, family farmers work on 25% of the agricultural land yet produce 65% of the country's food. In Peru, smallholders control around 90% of farms and produce 60% of total food. Family farming also helps safeguard biodiversity and retain cultural identities. It is hugely beneficial to a country struggling to rebuild itself once war has ended and can serve as a buffer during economic crises.

## Boosting policy support

Given the current global interest in agriculture, now is the time to boost

support for family farming. Political acknowledgement is essential, as are secure access to land, credit, inputs and appropriate mechanization, for example. Where such rights and services are in place, family farmers will develop their own mix of strategies. They can produce with internal and external inputs – for their own consumption, for regional markets and even for international markets – with limited carbon footprints, boosting rather than destroying ecosystem functions.

In Africa and elsewhere, governments need to be confident that small farmers can drive agricultural transformation. National governments need to acknowledge that, with the right conditions, family farmers can boost agricultural development. Neglecting family farming will erode societies and aggravate food and environmental crises.

The future of family farming is about re-humanizing agriculture and about creating more equitable relations between producers, processors, scientists, institutions and consumers. A world where one form of agriculture out-competes others is not sustainable. Any future needs family farming! ■

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