

Small farmers



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Small farmers produce most of the food that we consume globally. But North and South, smallholder producers are leaving the land and food production is becoming increasingly the concern of big business. Does it matter?

On 31 March fourteen international panelists considered the most salient issues confronting small farmers today in the IFAD-supported debate “Failing the farmer?” on BBC World.

1. How important is small scale farming? How can development of small scale farming contribute to poverty reduction?
2. Why should we care about small scale farming?
3. What problems are encountered in implementing effective policies that should support small scale farmers?
4. How important is global market access?

The global discussion about poverty reduction is usually strictly related with farmers with small land holdings because the majority of the world's poor belong to such households. Secondly, it has been estimated that about 70 percent of world's poor are concentrated in rural areas where two out of three billion rural people reside in about 450 million small farms.

Furthermore, the UN Millennium Project Task Force on Hunger estimates that in small scale farms reside about half of world's hungry people including three quarters of Africa's malnourished children (WDR, 2008). Improvement in the situation of the small scale farmers will likely result in a decreasing of the population living in poverty. Therefore in order to reduce rural poverty, policies are needed to support small-scale farming and have to be addressed in particular to women and children.

The concept of “ Food Sovereignty” provides an important framework for policy makers to design such measures. The association Via Campesina defines Food Sovereignty as “ the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers. Food sovereignty prioritizes local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just income to all peoples and the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social classes and generations ” (Via Campesina, 2008). The idea of “ Food Sovereignty” points out the fundamental right of the human being to be able to consume and produce food locally, according to the local environment conditions and cultures. The agro food industry and the rapid globalization of markets are the main drivers of these changes in the food-chain structure: the production strategies in the agro food business are defined mainly by

economic terms; moreover, a long-term view in food and agricultural systems is needed and has to keep in count the efficiency, quality and sustainability of the production. Nowadays the international society is aware of the damage caused by industrial farming system all over the planet: it is a major contributor to global warming through intensive use of fossil fuels for fertilizers, agrochemicals, production, transport, processing, refrigeration and retailing; crop and livestock genetic diversity has been lost through the spread of industrial monocultures reducing resilience in the face of climate; agrochemical nutrient pollution causes biological “dead zones” and other relevant environmental problems; human activity produces more nitrogen than all natural processes combined (FAO, 2008). According to the stated reasons the current model of industrialized food production appears to be not sustainable. It makes farmers increasingly dependent on external inputs (pesticides, fertilizers, veterinary support, hormones, etc.) and big amount of external capital. This industrialized production system is usually intensive and not linked to a correct soil management or conservation strategy. The export oriented production systems are not created to respect local ecological conditions or to meet local food needs and farmers lose control over production decisions.

The National Commission on Small Farms reported the following, “ Small farms contribute more than farm production to our society. Small farms embody a diversity of ownership, cropping systems, landscapes, biological organization, culture, and traditions. Since the majority of farmland is managed by a large number of small farm operators, the responsible management of soil, water, and wildlife encompassed by these farms

produce significant environmental benefits. Decentralized land ownership produces more equitable economic opportunity for people in rural communities, and offers self employment and business management opportunities ..." (National Commission on Small Farms, 1998). The survival of small scale farming it is a crucial issue because small farming system often permits an higher differentiation of the production, relies on a long historic experience with local resources (water, soil, climate, plant and animal varieties) and farmers are capable to produce the optimal quantity and quality of food with less external inputs. Products are mainly grown for their own families and consumers of the same region and tend to meet local food needs. This model, based on small scale farms, is also labour intensive, a resource that is available in abundance in most regions of the world, instead of capital intensive like the extensive farms production system. Moreover, the outputs of production are deeply linked to the soil and therefore its correct management in a long term perspective will be more likely pursued.

Smallholders face significant challenges that obstacle their participation in new marketing opportunities. Markets in the developing world are characterized by imperfections such as lack of information on prices and technologies, high transaction costs, and credit constraints. Moreover, the modern production systems often expect larger supply volumes, favoring larger farmers. With the increasing number of free trade agreements affecting both national and international commodity markets, smallholder farmers are forced to compete not only with their local producers, but also with farmers from other countries as well as domestic and international

agribusinesses. Sharpen marketing skills are also needed by small scale farmers: the opportunity for smallholders to raise their incomes from agricultural production, natural resource management, and related rural enterprises increasingly depends on their ability to sell their goods not just at local, but also regional and even international markets. Nowadays, technological advances require investments in human and physical capital, as well as advanced relationships with a wide network of suppliers and traders of inputs and services. In this environment, small scale farmers are difficult to locate the required financial resources and integrate.

Seems to be hard to point out the reasons why effective policies are not being implemented: many economic interests are involved and usually in the society small scale farmers are stakeholders with limited power. One possible solution could come from changes in the demand in the agro food market: we assist in a raise of the demand of high quality local product from the consumers, in particular in Europe; secondly, the value for rural services (rural tourism, social farming and other activities) is rapidly increasing, bringing more opportunities for small scale farmers. These changes can be the drivers for the implementation of sound policies directed in particular to rural areas and to small scale farmers.

List of participants in the debate

- Kevin Cleaver Assistant President, IFAD – and farmer Working to enable small farmers, we can ‘slow down’ the migration from rural to urban areas.

- Pedro Sanchez Director of Tropical Agriculture, Earth Institute, Columbia University The crucial factor is to fertilize the soil and manage water supplies. GM is a political issue, with no proven risk.
- Paul Nicholson European co-coordinator, La Via Campesina Via Campesina coined the expression and is working to promote ' food sovereignty' (national food security).
- Makanjuola Olaseinde Arigbede Union of Small and Medium Scale Farmers of Nigeria - and farmer Smallholder farmers labour on their farms, not merely to feed their beleaguered families but entire nations, despite the great obstacles placed in their way at all levels.
- Simeon Greene Relationship Director, Windward Banana Development Without Fair Trade, the Windward Islands would be out of the banana market. They're able to survive because consumers in the UK have taken the decision to buy Fair Trade Produce.
- Esther Penunia Secretary General, Asian Farmers Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA) Farmers tend to be poorly organized - only 10 per cent are organized into farmers' groups. So, although they represent a large constituency, they have little influence politically. This must change!
- Peter Robbins Ex-commodities trader, author and activist Liberalization and the collapse of international commodity agreements has led to the impoverishment of farmers in producing countries. We need to reinstate international commodity agreements.
- Duncan Green Head of Policy, Oxfam Oxfam is now looking to develop policy on the wider agricultural debate - not just on trade. Specifically we're looking at how to support and empower farmers.

- Norah Olembo Executive Director, Africa Biotech Stakeholders Forum
The big issue is acceptance. Worldwide this type of science has been seen as humans tampering with God's work. Science becomes hard for ordinary people to comprehend, but one can move a gene from one plant to the other. It's all about education. We have not seen any harm to humans.
- Andrew Bennett Biotechnology Marketing Lead, Europe-Africa, Monsanto Each year the global population grows by more than 70 million and agriculture is required to produce more food with limited land and water resources. But biotechnology can help. Over the next decade biotechnology promises to deliver products that address land and resource limitations, with qualities such as drought tolerance, as well as deliver products with direct consumer benefits.
- Crawford Falconer Agriculture Chairman, World Trade Organization (WTO) International trade works if you have the right social and economic policies in place within countries already. Countries can't isolate themselves forever.
- Louise Fresco Professor, Sustainable Development, University of Amsterdam Small farmers around the world are leaving the land because life is too hard and they need other sources of income as well. Globalization brings opportunities for the developing world, but markets will not take care of poor people.
- Catherine Kainja Kaluluma Minister for Education, Government of Malawi
- Anthony Gooch Head, Media and Public Diplomacy, European Commission