

## Commemorating the UN Decade of Family Farming (2019-2028): Striving for Local Sustainability at the Global Level

In 2014, the International Year of Family Farming raised global awareness of the importance of family farmers for the world's shared future. Building on the success of the Year, the adoption of the United Nations Decade on Family Farming – endorsed by over 100 Member States – represents global recognition of family farming being at the centre of efforts needed to deliver on the 2030 Agenda.

Globally, the vast majority of farms are small – an estimated 84 per cent are two hectares and under.<sup>1</sup> And virtually all small farms are owned and operated at the family level; so, generally speaking, the term "family farming" can be held to be largely synonymous with that of "smallholder agriculture."

Smallholder family farms are crucial for addressing the challenges food systems face the world over, in particular to providing local sustainable solutions to global problems. With global hunger on the rise for the last three years (reaching an estimated 821 million people in 2017<sup>2</sup>) at the same time that poor quality diets is contributing to growing levels of obesity<sup>3</sup> and food production systems contributing to unsustainable stresses on the climate and environment, it is clear that a conversation is needed on what kind of agriculture is needed to sustainably feed the world.

In order to promote food systems that are sustainable, there are particular advantages associated with enabling and supporting the role of smallholder family farmers:

1. Food systems that are dominated by smallholder family farms already produce most of the food in many regions of the world<sup>4</sup>, especially in the world's most populous, and food insecure regions. Equally important, smallholder family farms are key for maintaining nutritional diversity – in fact, shifts to larger-scale and industrial modes of farming being found to be associated with declines in the diversity of nutrient production.<sup>5</sup>
2. Productivity is often relatively higher on smallholder family farms, as posited by a vast literature. This is largely as a result of the relative efficiency and lower transaction costs associated with using family, as opposed to hired, labour. Other reasons that labour productivity may actually be higher on smallholder farms, include the flexibility, availability and motivation of household labour used on smallholder family farms.

---

<sup>1</sup> FAO. 2014. The state of food and agriculture: Innovation in family farming. Rome, FAO.

<sup>2</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2018. The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2018. Building climate resilience for food security and nutrition. Rome, FAO.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Estimates indicate that smallholder family farming dominated systems produce more than 70% of the food calories produced in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and South and East Asia (Samberg et al. 2016. Subnational distribution of average farm size and smallholder contributions to global food production. Environmental research letters Vol 11:12); and produce most of food in a variety of countries where data is available (Grain. 2014. Hungry for land. [Online] Available at: <http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4929-hungry-for-land-small-farmers-feed-the-world-with-less-than-a-quarter-of-all-farmland> (Accessed 10 January 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Herrero M, Thornton P K, Power B, Bogard J R, Remans R, Fritz S, Gerber J S, Nelson G, See L, Waha K and Watson R A. 2017. Farming and the geography of nutrient production for human use: A transdisciplinary analysis. The Lancet Planetary Health, 1:1: pp. e33-e42.

3. Smallholder family farms are better at promoting social equity and community well-being. One of the key rationale for promoting smallholder family farms is the acknowledgement that these farms – over and above their contribution to food security and nutrition - contribute to addressing key challenges related to equity, poverty, and employment. In this respect, it is not surprising that communities dominated by smallholder family farms have been found to offer better opportunities for civic and social engagement, more attachment to local culture and landscapes, as well as higher levels of trust in within communities.<sup>6</sup>
4. Smallholder family farms have advantages in terms of environmental sustainability. This in part derives from their greater attachment to local communities and landscapes, which foster a higher level of interest and care for the natural environment upon which they are reliant for agricultural production. In addition, smallholder family farms tend to be, by their very nature, more receptive to adopting sustainable approaches that rely upon intricate knowledge of family labour on farmland and local ecosystems: for example, agroecology, organic agriculture, and permaculture.

Consequently, smallholder family farming is key to achieve not only the UN's Sustainable Development Goal of zero hunger but also to address a range of challenges across the agenda. The Declaration on the Decade of Family Farming represents a global endorsement of this reality. And it shows us that political will exists to create the conditions that smallholder family farmers need to help us all to address the challenges we are facing, especially related to food security and nutrition, environment sustainability, and promoting inclusive and equitable societies.

But smallholder family farmers can only fulfil their potential contribution to our shared global vision if the obstacles they face are addressed. Specifically, policies need to be geared towards smallholder family farmers in areas such as investment promotion, tenure rights over land and natural resources, provision of services in rural areas, climate change adaptation, social protection, participation in political processes, and addressing gender inequalities in agriculture and rural areas. Equally, investment in policy implementation, including capacity development of public authorities as well as smallholder family farmers and their organizations, is needed to ensure expected outcomes are achieved.

The Decade offers an opportunity to build on progress made and focus the efforts of the international community on working with smallholder family farmers to ensure the required mechanisms are place to strengthen their roles at local level in contributing to our shared global vision of sustainable development enshrined in the 2030 Agenda.

---

<sup>6</sup> Inter alia: Pretty J and Z P Bharucha. 2014. Sustainable intensification in agricultural systems. *Annals of Botany*, 114: 1: pp. 1571–1596.