

Partnership-based Solutions are Key for Sustainable Family Farming in Asia

Prof Kazuhiko Takeuchi, Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Hayama, Japan

Family Farming has been defined as *“a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production which is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labor, including both women’s and men’s. The family and the farm are linked, co-evolve and combine economic, environmental, reproductive, social and cultural functions.”* (FAO, 2014). 99% of the Asia’s farmers are family farmers and they constitute 70% of the global family farmers.¹ In addition, family farmers also constitute 80-90% of the aquaculture in Asia. Consequently, family farmers produce about 80% of the total food in Asia.² Their sheer numbers alone signifies that family farmers are the backbone of agriculture economy in Asia and the World. They not only contribute to producing food for all, but they also preserve agro-ecological diversity, sustain local cultures and traditions, and strengthen local economies while supplying global goods.

However, family farming is at great risk today than ever before. Important risk factors are reduced farm profits, rampant use of chemical inputs, soil degradation, biodiversity loss, climate change, food-energy-water nexus, land grabbing, urbanization, environmental degradation, corporatization of agriculture, and changing lifestyles that are attracting young generation towards urban-centric occupations.³ As a result, there is a raising concern of farming succession among farming families both in the developed and developing economies. Degradation of natural ecosystems is negatively affecting the resilience of agricultural production systems and hence the livelihoods of farmers.

Climate change is the biggest threat multiplier of all. Climate change has not only been negatively affecting the crop productivity, but is also posing threat to the natural ecosystems that are necessary for sustainable agricultural production. The unholy alliance between climate change, environmental degradation, and changing lifestyles is driving more and more farmers out of farming. Breaking this cycle is the need of the hour and rightfully various international and national initiatives have been introduced to help address the issue. Recognizing the importance of safeguarding the family farming and the sustainable development gains possible through strengthening it, the UN has unanimously declared the year 2019-2028 as UN Decade of Family Farming. The decade will provide policy makers and other relevant stakeholders to put in place policies, institutions, and technologies to strengthen the family farming.

One of the major threat factors for family farming is the dwindling farm profits, which is a result of ever-increasing cost of farming and unfavourable market prices for farmers. Combined to this pressure is the risk of crop failure from natural variability such as droughts, floods, untimely rainfall, and unfavourable temperatures, exacerbated by the climate change.

¹ <http://www.familyfarmingcampaign.org/en/family-farming/concept>

² <http://www.fao.org/3/CA1465EN/ca1465en.pdf>

³ <http://www.fao.org/family-farming/detail/en/c/284114/>

Corporate farming is on the rise and is competing with the family farmers with their financial, technical, and market power.

There is a growing evidence that the partnership-based solutions can effectively help family farming. These solutions include organic agriculture, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs), International Satoyama Initiative (ISI) and Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS).

Organic agriculture has proven to provide economic, environmental and climate change resilience. Organic farms are much more resilient to natural stresses than conventional farms while also providing farmers with higher farm profits. Various national and local governments are promoting organic agriculture in Asia and the Indian state of Sikkim has been declared as fully organic in 2016.⁴ With the impetus given by the national government, many state governments are able to promote similar schemes and during the recent years, the Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF) scheme of the Government of Andhra Pradesh has been internationally recognized.⁵ There is a need to promote more of such schemes so that more and more agricultural land can be successfully brought under some form of natural farming techniques. A significant part of the success with organic agriculture is to do with the networks and partnerships between producers, supply chain, and consumers resulting in trust building that is necessary to drive demand for more area under organic agriculture.

Farmer producer organizations (FPOs): Family farmers also suffer from limitations such as lack of access to improved technologies (both soft and hard), credit, markets, and fair trade. Globally and in Asia, approaches such as Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) have proven to provide collective bargaining power to farmers and help address many of these issues and compete with corporations in the market.⁶ There is an ongoing revolution of connecting farmers with farmer producer organizations (FPOs) throughout Asia and India is among the forefront today. The number of farmers linked with FPOs have increased by 300% in less than a decade in India.⁷ As of today, 0.9 million farmers out of nearly 119 million farmers have been connected to FPOs in India. Even though the number of organized farmers are increasing globally and in Asia, the current levels are far from satisfactory. There is a need to hasten the process through application of innovative approaches such as use of information and communication technologies and direct government support to FPOs.

International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative (IPSI): From the sustainability point of view, the family farming can immensely benefit from initiatives such as International Partnership for the Satoyama Initiative (IPSI) as it promotes landscape approach and enhances biodiversity while providing humans with necessary goods and services for their wellbeing.⁸ Jointly launched by the Ministry of the Environment, Japan and UNU, the Satoyama Initiative epitomizes the conservation and sustainable use of socio-ecological production landscapes and seascapes (SEPLS) outside the protected areas. The principles of IPSI are compatible with the traditional family farming functions and can promote the

⁴ <http://www.fao.org/india/news/detail-events/en/c/1157760/>

⁵ <http://www.fao.org/3/a-bl990e.pdf>

⁶ <http://www.fao.org/myanmar/news/detail-events/en/c/1068459/>

⁷ <http://sfacindia.com/FPOS.aspx>

⁸ <https://satoyama-initiative.org/about/#1>

resilience of family farming through strengthening the support functions of socio-ecological production landscapes.

Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS): GIAHS are being designated by FAO with an objective of safeguarding the globally important agricultural heritage systems and associated landscapes, biodiversity, and knowledge systems. 57 GIAHS sites have been designated globally out of which 36 sites are in Asia alone.⁹ These GIAHS sites provide a unique insight into sustainable management of agricultural systems that can help develop sustainability solutions for small and marginal farmers beyond GIAHS sites. Partnerships between different stakeholders were found to have played a major role in sustaining the GIAHS sites such as Kuttanad Below Sea Level Farming System in India, for example in realizing the benefits such as livelihoods, environmental protection, flood management and cultural support.¹⁰

The afore-discussed successes such as organic agriculture movement, farmer producer organizations, SI, and GIAHS all have one thing in common i.e. partnerships. Partnerships have been able to sustain these initiatives and have provided sufficient evidence to policy makers a reason to promote partnerships in all forms. Through partnerships, these initiatives have been able to gather wide range of expertise and resources, involve multiple stakeholders, enhance connections, foster cooperation and understanding, ensure commitment, and expand opportunities. This proves that partnership-based solutions are the key for sustaining family farming in Asia and beyond.

⁹ <http://www.fao.org/giahs/giahsaroundtheworld/en/>

¹⁰ <http://www.fao.org/giahs/giahsaroundtheworld/designated-sites/asia-and-the-pacific/kuttanad-below-sea-level-farming-system/partners/en/>