



# Our ambition matches the size of the problem

The World Rural Forum is behind the campaign to get the United Nations to declare an International Year of Family Farming. This campaign is now supported by more than 300 civil society organisations from all over the world, and by the Ministries of Agriculture in Pakistan, Switzerland, Peru, El Salvador and Belize. Jose Antonio Osaba is the co-ordinator of this campaign.

Interview: Jorge Charez-Tafur

**J**osé Antonio Osaba was born in Cuba, and has worked with several development organisations there, in France and in Spain. For the last eight years he has been working with the World Rural Forum, a non-profit organisation which aims at building stronger linkages between all those working in rural areas.

### **Why start a campaign for an International Year of Family Farming?**

If we look at the world's agricultural sector, and at the environment, we see two major options: industrial agriculture, which nowadays employs 20 million people, or family farming, which if properly supported can support hundreds of millions of women and men farmers. We believe that family farming, which is rooted in the strong links between a piece of land and the family that owns and works it, can feed the world in a sustainable and ecological manner, and that it can be a very significant instrument to overcome hunger and poverty. But most countries give less than seven percent of their national budget to agriculture, even those where up to 70 percent of the population lives in the rural areas. As a result, millions of women and men smallholders are practically abandoned. So one of the main aims of this campaign is to promote national policies that will provide the necessary support and recognise that rural development and agriculture are keys to addressing the problems these countries face. At the World Rural Forum we have been working with regional issues, but a worldwide campaign fits our own identity better. As an international organisation we recognise that, all over the world, smallholders, and family farming, are in trouble. We have 300 organisations now supporting the campaign, which shows we are on the right track.

### **When do you expect that the year will be proclaimed? Which year will it be?**

Our aim is to try to get the declaration either at the end of 2010, or during 2011. This is something related to the way the UN and its General Assembly works, so we need to get the official support of many governments. Once the UN declares the year, it will not be immediately implemented, as the UN then has to ask a specialised agency like FAO to develop the programme. So we think that the International Year of Family Farming will be 2012, or perhaps 2013. We are working hard to get this approval. We have to be confident, even though it is really a challenge. That is why we rely on all our supporting organisations and on their efforts.

### **At the moment we are celebrating the year of biodiversity. Does declaring such a year really make a difference?**

This is a key question. We feel that if the year is declared from above, its impact won't be so meaningful, or won't go beyond some articles and some references. But we are working with 300 organisations in 56 countries, and that makes a big difference; so many rural organisations are getting mobilised that the campaign now has a real social dimension. And we aim at more than just having a year declared. Right now we are pushing for the declaration of the year. Once that happens it will give us the opportunity to discuss, to exchange opinions, and to organise dialogues and debates. That's when we'll really be busy; one year will provide many opportunities. Let us first get the year, and then we will try to push governments to implement better policies. That's where we will be very active, and that's what's going to make the difference.

### **So at the end of the day you expect governments to implement better policies, or policies that will better support small-scale farmers. Is this needed everywhere? Is there an example to follow?**

Well, the situation is certainly not the same everywhere, but as a rule, we see that very few countries have proper policies towards small-scale farmers and family farming. Even in Europe, in spite of the subsidies, farmers face many difficulties. But there are positive examples. There is the case of Malawi, a very small country where policies to support farmers have been introduced, and as result the country is even exporting food. Malawi is showing the way, providing more attention and more resources. This contrasts those countries which implemented the free-trade policies, and which now have to import almost 70 percent of the food they need. Not all countries are doing so badly, but there are problems virtually everywhere. There is a big controversy about the model of agriculture the world should follow and about the type of products are we getting. Should agriculture become more and more business-oriented, or should it aim at feeding the world? The declaration of the year will be a great asset in this controversy. Nowadays there is much criticism of family farming, with people saying that it belongs to the past. By declaring the year, the UN will give legitimacy to family farming.

### **But we are supposed to get better policies and, as you say, there are very few examples to follow. How are we going to get there?**

This is why it is important to be very active during the year. We are preparing a plan, based on the

establishment of national committees. And in each case, civil society is to push for more resources, for improving roads, markets, access to irrigation or inputs. We really have to look at many different aspects. The issues will not be the same in every country, although there are some issues which are especially important and which all committees will consider. One of these issues is land. We have to get clear laws respecting the right of farmers to own land. Another issue is getting equal rights for men and women. These are two of the main aspects on which we will focus. We know it is going to be difficult and we don't pretend that we are going to solve all

This is a serious challenge, but our starting point is clear: we need food security. The first commitment of a government should be to feed its own people. We believe in national production and national markets. International markets get too much attention, while we think that national or regional markets should be encouraged as a way of supporting rural areas and tackling issues such as hunger and poverty.

**With so many platforms, or networks trying to support family farmers, don't you think that there is some sort of duplication of efforts, or that you can be less efficient?**



**"Huge international conferences are fine, but our strategy is different."** Photo: WRF

problems forever, but we can make a difference by working with the media, strengthening the links between urban and rural people, or by reaching out to consumers' associations. There's a lot to be done, but we are motivated to do it.

**Talking about consumers, many efforts aim to link family farmers with global markets, but if we listen to the IAASTD report, for example, we should take a completely different approach. Isn't there a contradiction?**

We would like to be seen as an umbrella, under which everybody can have some space. We are just establishing the instrument, or the mechanism that will allow the most important issues to be at the top of the international agenda. Of course, working with 300 organisations can be difficult. But we are in touch with them all the time, sharing documents, sharing experiences and receiving suggestions. And we have established an intermediary level for every continent. We have just had a continental meeting in Asia, with all the organisations supporting the campaign, and are planning similar meetings in

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Africa, America and Europe. Every continental meeting is also an opportunity to get to know each other, establish new links. Many organisations have got in touch with each other through the campaign, so it is already serving as a meeting point.

**I ask you this because of what we saw not so long ago in Copenhagen. Having so many countries and organisations represented, with their own interests and agendas, led to a declaration that does not say very much. Are you not afraid of something similar?**

information, proposals or ideas quite easily. Still, yes, it is ambitious, but our ambition matches the size of the problem. The problems in rural areas are huge, so our ambition should also be huge. Our challenge is to be effective, to be able to mobilise resources and to be heard by the international organisations we are in touch with. But we are proud of the results so far. The meeting in Asia was a big success, and now we are preparing the other ones. By the end of 2010, when the four continents are ready with the continental meetings, we will set up the World Consultative Committee, which will help us guide all the activities to take place during the year.



**A regional meeting point: participants of the continental meeting held in Delhi.** Photo: WRF

This has been seen many times. Three or four days, with everybody there, all raising their issues, bringing their questions, but at the end you go home with empty hands. We are not promoting a particular event, we are promoting a full year. It is not just one extraordinary meeting for one day in Rome or Nairobi, but 365 days to promote farmers' issues, justice and better policies. Huge international conferences are fine, but our strategy is different. We are hoping for a full year, in which civil society can work at the national level. Let us say that there are 200 countries, so we have 200 opportunities, 200 different situations. We are not talking about one global declaration, but rather helping national organisations to confront the challenges they face and articulate their aspirations. These will differ from Burkina Faso to El Salvador, from Thailand to Canada, and Argentina to Mali. We are only co-ordinating the campaign.

**Is it not very ambitious?**

Well, with e-mail and the Internet we can address 600 or 700 organisations in a few minutes, and share

**So if the campaign is on track, and is going on quite well, how can the readers of our magazine contribute?**

The many good practices and experiences shared in all issues of your magazine represent a very significant contribution to family farming. But readers can also contribute in many ways. Their associations can join the campaign, they can also send their articles, their experiences or their opinions to us, and we can share them with all those involved in this campaign. And once the year is proclaimed, or declared, they should join efforts with the organisations involved at a national level. These are all very ambitious efforts, so we would not just like people to say, "ok, go ahead". We prefer them instead to say "ok, let us go ahead together".

### **More information**

Visit the site of the International Year of Family Farming Campaign at [www.familyfarmingcampaign.net](http://www.familyfarmingcampaign.net). Readers are also invited to contact Jose Osaba and the World Rural Forum, and to share their opinions and ideas at [wrfsecretary@ruralforum.net](mailto:wrfsecretary@ruralforum.net).