

Parviz Koohafkan is currently director of the Land and Water Division of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, FAO. His is a positive view: in spite of the difficulties that small-scale farmers face, they play a very important role in rural development, and this is increasingly being recognised. Their role will therefore become even more important – especially in the face of climate change. | Interview Jorge Chavez-Tafur

“The glass

You have been supporting small-scale farmers for a very long time. But many people say that small-scale farming is disappearing, and that it has to disappear if we are to feed

a growing population. What is your view on this? I don't agree. Even though there has been a lot of migration, the number of small-scale farmers remains the same over time: we are talking about one billion people. And small-scale farmers, particularly in developing countries, not only work for their own food security and that of their region and nation, they also contribute extensively to rural development. The problem is that these farmers have not benefited from governmental policies. Most developing countries have put a lot of emphasis on the urban sector and on

the development of services, and they have neglected agriculture and the rural sector. Any support to agriculture has gone to high potential areas, favouring large-scale infrastructures. Rural communities working on fragile lands in mountainous areas or drylands have not received much attention.

Are small-scale farmers less efficient and less productive than large enterprises or “modern” farmers? No, this is not true. There are some areas, of course, where small-scale farming is inefficient, just as some big enterprises are inefficient... When we think of efficiency, we have to consider the lack of investment. Governments tax small-scale farmers, but farmers see very little return in terms of investment. Without specific investments, and without access to markets or additional support,



is half full”

many farmers end up in a vicious circle: they don't have resources to invest, they mine the soil, the soil becomes poorer, and so do they.

But as you say, in spite of all these difficulties, there is still a large number of small-scale farmers, they continue producing, and they continue contributing... If we take a broader look at their production system, we see that small-scale farmers are often much more efficient, and much more sustainable than larger farmers. As the only resource base they have is their natural resources and their human capital, they do all they can to maintain it. Therefore they diversify their genetic resources, they diversify their production systems and their sources of income, and all this builds resilience. This contributes to food production, but also to envi-



Parviz Koohafkan. Photo: FAO



"Small-scale farmers are much more efficient."

Photo: FAO

ronmental health, to the sustainability of the natural resource base and thus to the sustainability of their livelihoods. If you look at the total productivity and compare a family farm with a business community, you have to include all externalities resulting from intensification, such as the emission of greenhouse gases and the contamination of soils and water. The whole picture shows that most family farmers and traditional farmers perform much better. And don't forget that maintaining the very large production systems,

that the engine of growth in developing countries is and should be agriculture. So there is already a paradigm shift. The second thing is the evidence that all countries which became developed in terms of income growth and wealth are the ones which invested in their agriculture sector and in small-scale family farming systems. In addition to that, it is evident that if we want to have a more sustainable planet, we need to take care of our environment, we need to invest in land, water, and genetic resources, and we should support the custodians of these systems, who are the farmers.

But apart from investments, is access to land not the real problem? Sure! This is one of the biggest messages currently being conveyed: access to resources and rural development are the two faces of the same coin. You cannot have rural development without land reform. But it is the same in terms of genetic resources, that is why I think it is important to talk about farmers' rights. Farmers have been custodians of the multiplication, production and maintenance of so many varieties. They, and not an outside company, should have the right to continue doing so.

If these ideas are so clear, what can an organisation like FAO do? Well, an intergovernmental organisation like FAO reflects its constituency. We are an intergovernmental organisation made up

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particularly in developed countries, costs an estimated 365 billion dollars per year in subsidies. One billion dollars per day of subsidies! How can any small-scale farmers compete within this system? This is a totally distorted system.

Considering this "distorted system", how do you see the future of small-scale farmers? Of course, the predominant value systems and policies are not favourable. But things are changing: it is now common to hear that the dominant ideas about agriculture and rural development do not fit, because they are not contributing to food security, they are not helping reduce poverty, and environmental degradation is getting more acute and more problematic...

But do you think that change is possible? I think it is possible in several ways. We now recognise that our policies have been wrong. The World Development Report of the World Bank last year said

of many sovereign governments. When we try to take decisions, there are sometimes confrontations and disagreements, or we only get a minimum common denominator. Besides, FAO has many tracks of work. It is not easy to prioritise, because priorities are different in different countries and in different locations. This is one of the greatest problems, but also the strength of the UN system: the plurality and the diversity found within it.

But when we talk about a paradigm shift, we refer to one global problem, and countries should not follow different paths ... Of course there are compromises to be made, because industrial farming is there. It is part of the agricultural production system and it has to be accommodated. But we aim to have at least the same attention and the same amount of resources for small-scale farmers as for big farmers. And we will succeed: many governments and scientists are already changing their

opinion on the possibilities of small-scale farming. In some cases a compromise is not possible, as we saw with the IAASTD report. But even this had some positive outcomes: we are using all the materials and all the ideas coming from those discussions, and we are also trying to create new avenues for using this material and these ideas in other places.

Have you seen changes in recent years? Is there more recognition for the importance of small-scale farming? Absolutely! I think there are changes, definitely. The biggest shift was the recognition by the world community, back in 1992, of the fact that the Green Revolution recipes were creating a lot of problems, both in social and in environmental terms. The thirty years of Green Revolution were helpful to feed a lot of people at a very difficult time. But at the same time, we've depleted resources and polluted soils and water. The problem is that the mechanisms, the institutions and the policies taking advantage of the Green Revolution thinking, are still dominant. Fortunately, now those ideas are changing. To some extent, the financial crisis has been good for the agriculture sector: there is less money, but more reflection about the path to follow.

What are the main difficulties you face within FAO? Perhaps one of the main difficulties is that "western" and "productivist" values dominate. Most of our managers have been educated in Western universities, and do not recognise the importance of safety nets, social values and diversity. And there seems to be a bias to put more resources on the type of agriculture systems found in developed countries. So we are replicating them and we want to transfer the technologies that have proved to be good in the west to the south. We continue thinking that if this is good here, then it should be good there. Fortunately, things

are gradually changing, even if these changes are very slow.

What would make these changes go a little bit faster? We need to recognise that the bottlenecks and the problems are still there, that there is food insecurity, that poverty is increasing, that there are more conflicts... So understanding that something is not working, this is the first thing. The second thing is increasing the exchange of information, and the way we interact with the rural population. The development of communication means, such as mobile phones, has been great in this sense. And the third thing is, again, working at the policy level, realising that we need to do things differently. And we are starting to do so. Maybe I am idealistic, but I think that there has been good progress. Of course, we have weaknesses and the resources are fewer and fewer, the UN system has been questioned, but nevertheless there has been progress.

Things are difficult, but is the glass half full or half empty? I think it is half full. We are moving forward. Not only is there a wider recognition of the role of small-scale farmers, there is also a growing participation of the civil society. We have programmes, for example, on indigenous peoples or rural women. We also have the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) initiative, which I believe is extremely important for flagging the importance of these indigenous systems [see Box]. In collaboration with the World Rural Forum, we are even trying to get a year declared as "international year for family farming". This will help us highlight the role of family farming even more. If we would have talked about this three or four years ago, probably you would have perceived it as utopia; now it is becoming a reality. So there are many positive changes, the glass is definitely half full. ■

Cherishing the past for the future

Mr. Koohafkan was born in Iran, studied in Tehran and Montpellier, France, and has been working with FAO for 24 years. He has been director of the Rural Development Division and is currently also co-ordinating the Global Partnership on Dynamic Conservation of the Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS).

This initiative is meant to showcase the best examples of traditional farming systems and communities in the field. It will make people realize how important small-scale and traditional farming

is for present and future generations. The initiative works at global, at a national, and also at the local level where it strives to empower farmer communities by helping them to realise the importance of these systems.

To gain recognition of the concept and sustain the impact of GIAHS, this programme works with national governments, international organisations, civil society organisations and local NGOs, and also with other partners and allies within and outside FAO.