

Small-scale farmers: The key to

The small farm sector is of tremendous importance for developing countries. It merits much more support than it has received in recent decades, especially in this time of growing economic and ecological crisis. Research, and the cases in this issue of LEISA Magazine, demonstrates the importance of ecological, economic and social diversity for the improvement of small-scale farming. There are different categories of small farmers, each with their own needs, opportunities and logic.

Different strategies are required when supporting them. Recommendations on how to do this have been formulated, but international “crisis managers” still do not listen.

Coen Reijntjes

“In many developing countries underinvestment in the agricultural sector, the dismantling of public support programs and the impacts of trade liberalization have undermined the small farm sector and national food production capacity, leaving these countries even more vulnerable to price volatility. Investment in the agricultural sector has focused largely on export crops to generate foreign exchange, forcing countries to rely on continued low international food prices to meet national food demand. That strategy has failed.” (IAASTD, 2009)

Last year’s soaring food prices and the food riots which followed have made it clear that long-term neglect of the agricultural sector is no longer an option. Statistics (Hazell, 2007; World Bank, 2008) show that of the 3 billion rural people in the developing world, 2.5 billion are in households involved in agriculture. Of these, 1.5 billion are producing on about 404 million small (less than 2 ha) and marginal (less than 1 ha) farms. In contrast, the number of larger mechanised market-orientated farms in developing countries is only 20 million.

Despite recurrent predictions that small farms will soon disappear, they prove to be remarkably persistent, and the total area of arable land occupied by small farms continues to grow. But small farmers live in relative poverty as most of them earn less than US\$ 2 per day, and 400 million live with the constant threat of hunger.

In the policy debate on agriculture, the future of small farms is being challenged. The conventional opinion is that small farms are backward and unproductive. Why should they be supported? History shows that in growing economies, many farmers, especially the youth, leave farming for better paying job opportunities. In many places there are no successors for the ageing farming population. By enhancing this process of economic transition, the rural poor can climb out of poverty and the larger farms get the opportunity to grow in size and income. In times of economic growth, this position may be attractive to governments. But is this the right approach in times of economic and ecological crisis as presently is the case?

Strengths of small farms

In times of economic decline, people stay on the farm or even return to the land as jobs outside agriculture evaporate. From the viewpoint of employment and poverty reduction alone it is important to support small farming. But there are many more reasons.

Besides being largely self-supplying in food, fuel, fibres, fodder, nutrients and herbal medicines, small farms also feed an important part of the urban population. For example, in Latin America, small farms produce 51% of the maize, 77% of the beans, and 61% of the potatoes for domestic consumption (Altieri, 2008).

Pretty and Hine (2001) report on the largest ever study of environmentally and socially responsible farming, covering projects involving 12.6 million farmers in 57 countries. It explores how small farmers can increase output using low-cost, diversity enhancing technologies. Results show that in the 286 sustainable agriculture projects studied, average crop yields have increased by 79% since the early-to-mid 1990s. The evaluation also found that relative yield increases are greatest in rainfed crops at lower yields, indicating greater benefits for poorer farmers. Maize, millet and sorghum, potatoes and legumes all showed yield increases of around 100%.

Several studies have shown that polyculture-based small farms can be more productive than monoculture-based large farms if total output is considered rather than yield from a single crop (Altieri, 2008). On most of the complex and fragile lands, which are remote from markets, only ecologically diverse, (traditional) low external input farming is possible (Jodha, 2001). Communities surrounded by populous small farms have healthier economies than communities surrounded by depopulated large mechanised farms. Strong rural economies based on efficient small farming also allow workers to remain with their families instead of migrating.

By depending more on family labour, recycling and ecological processes, instead of on modern external inputs, mechanisation and fossil energy, diversity-based small farms have fewer costs and are more resource-conserving than conventional large farms. For example, maize yields in traditional Mexican cropping systems are about 1950 kg per hectare. When agrochemicals and mechanisation are used, yields may increase to 8000 kg per hectare but for this higher production an energy equivalent of about 1000 litres fuel per hectare are needed (Pimentel *et al.*, 2007). Energy efficiency is an increasingly important argument in these times when fossil fuel energy will become scarcer and climate change is increasing (to which the use of fossil energy strongly contributes). The strong contribution of conventional agriculture to climate change is not only due to the high use of fossil energy but also to the enormous loss of biomass above and in the soil. By promoting diversity-based small farming, especially agroforestry, high amounts of carbon dioxide can be tied up in soil organic matter, mulch layer and trees. Besides, research in Central America (Holt-Gimenez, 2001) has shown that these farms are more resilient to climate-related hazards like drought, floods and storms, now occurring more often due to climate change. Hence, it can be concluded that supporting diversity-based small farming will strengthen the economic, social and ecological functions of agriculture.

preserving diversity

Different categories of small farmers

There are many categories of small-scale farmers. Small farmers, men and women, are working in all ecological conditions in agriculture-based, transforming and urbanised economies, as full- and part-time farmers, herders or gatherers. Of these, 10 - 15% are traditional farmers (Altieri and Koohafkan, 2008). These farmers have different visions on life and farming and use traditional practices to enhance productivity, resiliency and adaptability. Traditional subsistence agriculture provides promising models for sustainable small farming that promote biodiversity and thrive without agrochemicals.

There are also many small farmers who operate more or less successfully in the market as simple commodity producers or small entrepreneurs. Market-orientated farming has a different logic than traditional farming. Instead of depending on internal ecological mechanisms, farmers producing for markets use external inputs for nutrient, pest and water management, to gain maximum benefit from the advantages of modern fossil energy based technology. On the market they have to compete with other farmers, by increasing efficiency or providing better quality, for example. If unsuccessful they will be marginalised.

More and more farmers producing for markets try to benefit from the growing demand for organic and speciality products to get higher prices. In and around cities many people find employment in urban agriculture based on waste recycling.

The majority of small farmers are “peasants” who also have to gain income from other on- or off-farm activities to satisfy family needs year round. The word “peasant” is not liked by many people because of its negative connotation. But, presently it is increasingly being used as a name of honour by the network of *La Via Campesina*, among others. Peasant farming can be subsistence or be combined with selling products, both in space or time. Low-cost practices are typically used which can be traditional as well as modern, depending on what is best in their circumstances. In many places, modern technology is not available, too expensive or culturally not acceptable for peasants. Resilience and autonomy are highly valued to reduce risk and vulnerability. Flexible strategies make it possible for peasant farmers to benefit from the market economy in good times and to fall back on subsistence production in bad times.

A differentiated approach is needed

It cannot be assumed, notwithstanding all development efforts, that subsistence, peasant and traditional agriculture soon will belong to the past. As also stated by Madeley *et al.* (2007), a differentiated approach is needed to support small farmers: “The objective to halve hunger by 2015 will not be achieved unless the needs of the people who live in hunger are recognized and they will receive the right kind of support. A new, comprehensive approach is needed to combat poverty and hunger, which includes subsistence agriculture. Academic studies and donor policies towards small farmers often fail to differentiate between marginal farmers and those who produce regularly for the market. Yet these are two groups of people with very different lives, circumstances and needs. A one-size-fits-all policy for small farmers marginalizes the poorest. Understanding the vulnerabilities and constraints faced by small farmers will help better address their needs”.



Photo: Karen Hampson

Many subsistence farmers, like this man in Yunnan province, China, also make the most of surrounding natural resources. During the mushroom season he goes into the forests to collect many types of wild mushrooms to sell in urban areas.

But what would such a differentiated approach look like? *La Via Campesina* and the recent IAASTD report have both formulated recommendations on how to support small farmers.

The vision of a peasant organisation

The international peasant movement *La Via Campesina*, which claims to represent millions of small farmers, formulated its vision on the future of agriculture in 2002. Food sovereignty is the central theme in this vision. The approach is now being supported by many NGOs and CSOs.

By food sovereignty, *La Via Campesina* means the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods, while respecting cultural and productive diversity. The organisation believes that being able to produce food in their own territories, is farmers' right. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security. Peasants and small farmers should also have direct input into formulating agricultural policies at all levels, they say. Rural women, in particular, must be granted direct and active decision-making on food and rural issues.

When it comes to food prices in domestic and international markets, *La Via Campesina* is of the opinion that these must be regulated and reflect the true costs of sustainably producing that food. This would ensure that farmer families have adequate incomes.

In general, agricultural research should be resource-oriented and not input-oriented. This research should be farmer- and consumer-driven as opposed to the current industry-driven



Photo: Rik Thijssen

While many households in Tanzania have one or two goats, some farmers have made goat-rearing into a small business, successfully raising animals to sell the young, or the meat in local markets.

model. It should start from the local production system, trying to improve it, respecting the objectives of the people that depend on it. When it comes to training and educational programmes, *La Via Campesina* feels they are nearly exclusively focused on the promotion of industrial agriculture, and do not respect the knowledge of farmers themselves. Education often does not support efforts to maintain or improve the sustainability of family farm based production models.

The vision of 400 experts

Last year, an unprecedented study was finalised to assess what kind of agricultural science, technologies and policies are needed to address the issues of hunger, poverty and livelihoods in the light of the breakdown of the global ecological system. This study was sponsored by the United Nations, the World Bank and the Global Environmental Facility.

Two of the many issues raised in this report are particularly relevant to mention here. First, to improve food security, the 400 experts who carried out the study suggest to strengthen the small farm sector. Second, to enhance sustainability, development of multifunctional agriculture is seen as a key strategy. The concept of multifunctionality recognises the social, environmental and economic functions of agriculture that is producing not only commodities, but also non-commodities such as environmental services, landscape and cultural heritage. For this, integrated approaches are needed, such as agroecology, integrated natural resource management, organic agriculture, conservation agriculture and agroforestry.

Winds of change, genuine solutions far away

There seem to be important points of agreement between peasant farmers and experts. Does this mean that diversity-based small farming will now be embraced generally? Clearly winds of change are blowing. But, in the vision of *La Via Campesina* “the major impediment to achieving sustainable ways of producing food is not the lack of appropriate technologies or the lack of knowledge of people working the land. The biggest obstacle is the way in which international and national policies, as well as the agro-industry, are interfering in the food production system. This is forcing farmers to adopt

unsustainable methods of production through a model of competition and ongoing industrialisation”.

La Via Campesina delegates at the High Level Meeting on Food Security in Madrid, on 26th and 27th of January 2009, observed that this meeting was dominated by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organisation, as well as by transnational companies such as Monsanto. In their opinion, the meeting did not sufficiently tackle the crucial question of how to solve the dramatic food crisis, but rather focused on how to spend the money. The small farmers only got a few minutes on the floor to give their position. The results: “business as usual”, more fertilizer, more hybrid seeds and more agrochemicals for those farmers who can afford to buy. ■

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