

The importance of smallholder farming versus the unimportance of smallholder farmers

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Economic development is a complex process replete with paradoxes. One prominent paradox is witnessed in the area of agriculture. According to IFAD's 2013 report on 'Smallholders, Food Security and the Environment', an estimated 2.5 billion people who manage 500 million smallholder farm households provide 80 percent of the food consumed in much of the developing world, particularly South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Further, agriculture constitutes the main source of livelihood for nearly two-thirds of the African population and smallholder farmers account for more than 90 percent of Africa's agricultural production.

Given the above facts and figures, it is reasonable to assume that economic growth and development is contingent on the growth of agriculture which in turn is contingent on the growth of the small farmer¹. Yet, smallholder agriculture has largely suffered decades of policy neglect and consequently, small farmers have been among the poorest and hungriest sections of the world's population. In Zambia for instance, as is perhaps the case in many other countries of sub-Saharan Africa, smallholders have constituted the largest poverty group and the group with the largest percentage of the population in poverty has been the smallholders. And herein lies the paradox. The people who make food available to feed most of the world's population are themselves unable to access food and consequently go hungry! If most developing countries especially in sub-Saharan Africa will not achieve the foremost Millennium Development Goal of halving extreme poverty and hungry by end 2015, it is because of this plight of the smallholder farmer. The key message here is that unless availability of food translates into accessibility, small farmers will continue to suffer food insecurity, hunger and extreme poverty. And accessibility is possible only if there is a rise in farm incomes.

What factors have contributed to this dire situation prevalent in the smallholder

¹ One must take cognizance here of a counterpoint brought out by Gollin (2014). The sheer size of the smallholder sector does not necessarily imply that it must play an important part in growth and poverty reduction and hence there cannot be a categorical case for sizeable investments in this sector. This is because the sector is highly heterogeneous and includes farms that are quite commercial in orientation as well as those that are rooted in quasi-subsistence livelihoods. Hence, according to Gollin, much more evidence is required about the relative social benefits – appropriately measured – of investing in smallholder agriculture in comparison to other possible investments.

agricultural sector which have rendered smallholders today even less capable of escaping poverty than before? The 2004 IFPRI report identified the following in the case of sub-Saharan Africa: low land productivity, inadequate rural infrastructure, vulnerability to natural disasters, and high burden of diseases notably HIV and AIDS which decreases labour productivity, erodes assets and blocks the transfer of knowledge from one generation to the next.

So where does one go from here? Two scenarios are possible: one, smallholders can continue to be marginalized resulting in continued and even rising levels of poverty and distress among large sections of the population. Even if growth takes place, it will not be inclusive and there will be an increasing hiatus between economic growth and human development, bearing the seeds of potential social and political instability. Two, as UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner stated, efforts can be made to make the smallholder sector a catalysing factor for the transformation of a country's agricultural - and national - growth and development.

IFAD's Director of Environment and Climate Change Elwyn Grainger-Jones advocates the second route: "Smallholder farmers hold a massive collective store of experience and local knowledge that can provide the practical solutions needed to put agriculture on a more sustainable and equitable footing. To place these smallholders at the forefront of a transformation in world agriculture they need appropriate support to overcome the many challenges they face". (See report on the release of IFAD's document "Smallholders, Food Security and Environment" in Mongolia, 4 June 2013). We simply cannot throw the baby away with the bathwater.

It is not as though national governments and the global community have not made any efforts to improve the lot of the small farmers. Indeed, small farmers have been assisted in a variety of ways - with new technologies, extension programmes, inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and agrochemicals, new varieties of crops and farming methodologies, linkage to markets, provision of credit services and ability to cope with climate change.

If the foregoing wide array of traditional measures have not significantly produced the desired effects, it is because, as Joy Selasi Afenyo of IFAD argues, there is need for new strategies and investments in smallholder farming. Afenyo quotes approvingly De Janvry and Sadoulet from their 2008 paper: "Farmers and small and medium enterprises need to have the ability to deal with the complexity of these new technologies, new institutions, new market opportunities, and the far reaches of globalization. But where are the rural business schools to provide training in entrepreneurship for smallholders and SMEs?"

The critical point being underscored here is that in the modern knowledge-driven

society, it is not enough for any people to be equipped with new technologies and opportunities; they also need to be equipped commensurately with the new skills required to respond to their evolving circumstances emanating from shifts in technology, markets, climate and the global environment. Then only can one see real improvements in their growth and welfare. Smallholder farmers cannot be an exception to this rule.

References

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The divide between a conventional and a critical/alternative approach

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The four essays published in the n.1/20015 of the e-JE&C provide a useful overview about the topic "Smallholder agriculture" certainly useful for researchers. They reflect mainly the approach adopted by international organizations on these matters, and in this rely the strengths and weaknesses of their contributions.

The today "conventional thinking" is strongly evoked, while alternative and non-mainstream contributions are scarcely represented, and find place only in the contribution of Marina S. D. Guyot about Brazil.

What is, in my opinion, the divide between a conventional and a critical/alternative approach?

1. Agriculture, and particularly smallholder agriculture, is not a matter of size, but of people who live and depend on it. Their living conditions and their incomes are what really matters, rather than abstract statistical measures about productivity, export, etc.
2. The specificity of this sector, family and local market oriented, has to be reflected in the choice of policies and technologies that cannot be derived and measured from the commercial large scale agriculture and the interests of foreign corporations before those of local communities.
3. Today, the main risk of smallholder agriculture is not to be neglected but to be incorporated in the plans of international organizations, foundations (for example, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation) and international NOGs. They talk about food security without wondering where and for whom. In the next 20 years the world will need greatly increased high quality food products for the growing cities, where the rich part of world population is concentrated, to ensure their food security (let's say 1 billion people). On the other side we should worry about the need to provide food and market for the majority of the world population (let's say 8 billions people) living in the country side, minor cities and slums.

Nothing is being done to reconcile these two needs. The war is going on.