



## UN's 'Decade of Family Farming' calls for a progressive and sustainable approach towards farmers

Against the backdrop of the success of the 2014's International Year of Family Farming, United Nations has declared the years 2019 - 2028 as the UN Decade of Family Farming, aiming to reduce hunger, strengthening food security and empowering family farmers. The decade is being measured as an extraordinary opportunity to gain momentum on the part of public policies that allow the development of family farming and make considerable progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals as defined by the United Nations. Speaking with Fariha Ahmed, Managing Editor of Agriculture Today, the Ambassador and permanent representative of the Dominican Republic to the Rome-based United Nations agencies, H.E. Mr. Mario Arvelo, highlighted certain key points regarding the significance of family farming.

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### **What is the importance of family farming today?**

Family farmers constitute a large and extremely diverse group of workers that produce about 80% of the world's food. As much as we talk about issues relating to industrial farming, family farming is the predominant form of agriculture in both rich and developing countries. Notwithstanding their considerable output, a paradox arises: about four in five persons in extreme poverty, suffering from chronic hunger and malnutrition, are family farmers and their children. Looking at family farmers from the perspective of the Committee on World Food Security, it becomes painfully obvious that the road to a world where every single individual is food secure —Sustainable Development Goal #2 calls for zero hunger— necessarily depends upon lifting all family farmers to a place where they can produce food, in a sustainable manner, for themselves their communities, and the world. The importance of family farms is therefore crucial not just for reaching this and other vital milestones, but also for the survival of humankind itself. Clearly, there can be no peace within or amongst nations as long as hunger and malnutrition prevail.

### **What role can family farmers play in sustainable development?**

Although many family farmers in developed countries struggle to make a living, they do enjoy structural advantages that their counterparts in other places can only dream of: access to credit at low —often subsidized rates, extensive plots protected by enforceable property rights, and modern machines and corresponding technology, readily available inputs (such as high quality seeds, fertilizers, pesticides and tools),

accessible infrastructure for irrigation and for connecting to markets, as well as first-rate extension services, including scientific and technical advice, among many other benefits that originate from development itself. Speaking, then, about small holding family farmers across the so-called Global South, we see enormous challenges, as they —on one hand— lack comprehensive support from established arrangements and, on the other hand, developing-country family farmers present extraordinary diversity in terms of size, access to markets and household characteristics. Their livelihoods are often complex, combining multiple natural-resource-based activities, such as raising crops and animals, fishing, or collecting forest products, as well as off-farm activities, including non-agricultural enterprises. Also, there is a role to play for family farmers as they dwell on the front-line in veritable battles for the eradication of poverty, hunger and malnutrition; for protecting the environment, its natural resources and the biodiversity therein; for adapting, mitigating and, crucially, reversing the impacts of climate change. Sustainable agriculture, which is also a building block of SDG-2, must be given particular attention from policy makers, in order to tackle the triple challenge of producing more food, creating more rural jobs of better quality, and preserving the natural resource base. We can say that, in all these endeavors, small family farmers reside —and toil— at the heart of all solutions.

### **How will climate change influence family farmers?**

Small-scale farmers' livelihoods are at an alarming risk due to their direct dependence on natural resources. In addressing the World

Rural Forum earlier this year, I put to the assembly the rhetorical question of who can know better than an actual farmer about the impact of climate change upon food production. Climate change is projected to increase temperatures and extreme weather events in all parts of the world, while augmenting and reducing precipitation to levels of floods and droughts not seen in millennia. Weather predictability, which is essential to farming, presents in ever more disparate patterns, making forecasts increasingly useless to farmers. To be sure, the scientific consensus has clearly established that there will be variations resulting in a general reduction of the production and productivity of both crops and livestock, with ruinous effects throughout farming systems worldwide. Some areas will likely be shifted out of productive zones, a slow-building devastation that will have an impact on agricultural investments and agricultural transformations; it does not take a community of experts to discern that increasing uncertainty deriving from climate change will pile on existing pressures for migration within countries as well as internationally, and will fuel conflict.

### **How can we institutionalize family farming? What kind of public policies are necessary to promote this agricultural model?**

To anyone discussing what policies work —given the tremendously complex issues surrounding this debate— several truths become self-evident. Firstly, political will is an indispensable precondition for any type of solution, as efforts must be brought together in order to produce action that is concerted, coherent and effective. Policies must take into account that women family farmers remain the weakest link in the structure; for a variety of reasons, including the persistence of conceptual barriers stemming from what are understood to be ‘traditional’ gender roles for women and girls, and others that are unique to specific cultures, countries and localities therein, women remain the largest latent —squandered— force in the fight against hunger and malnutrition. This is not advocating for pregnant or lactating women and girls to be subjected to field work; to the contrary, all members of the family farming unit, regardless of gender, must be placed at the center of education and capacity-building policies that can reduce the amount of hard work in food production in less intensive ways, taking full advantage of knowledge and technology, as well as expanding job opportunities in areas such as planning, supervision, accounting, research, partnering, quality control,

standards compliance, labeling, marketing, and other low-impact tasks that add enormous value along the production and distribution chains. Sound policies are also needed in a wide range of fronts, including motivators for not only persuading the youth not to leave the countryside, but to attract urban dwellers to food production; the only possible way to accomplish this is through an enabling environment where actual, future and prospective farmers can see a clear way forward —and upward— in agriculture, livestock, fisheries and related occupations. The economic incentive is critical. For these and other policy initiatives to succeed, both in design and implementation, national governments must be in sync with local authorities, target populations in the field, civil society —with emphasis on action-oriented entities and not just social movements— and the private sector. International organizations have a lot to offer because of their wide-ranging work and wealth of good practices, including in resource mobilization and knowledge dissemination. Financial institutions have an important role to play, as well as research centers, academia, philanthropies, legislators, social protection nets, influencers and other opinion shapers, as well as citizens from all walks of life: everyone has to eat, and the ethical choices we make as individuals going about our daily life —especially as taxpayers and as voters— must also be a part of the equation: the more and better everyone knows about the difficulties of family farmers, the closer we will be to enacting comprehensive and useful policies for their benefit.

### **How can we improve the accessibility of markets for the family farmers?**

Smallholders engage in many interrelated markets, but also face challenges in securing market access and eliciting benefits to support healthy livelihoods. Again, governments at all levels have an essential role to play in addressing specific constraints and maximizing potential for beneficial access to reliable and remunerative markets. The Committee on World Food Security has developed policy recommendations aimed at boosting access of small-scale family farmers to markets. These recommendations include improving data collection for better evidence-based policies; providing fair and transparent prices that adequately remunerate smallholders’ work and investments; supporting affordable mechanisms for smallholders’ access to useful, timely and transparent market and price information; promoting and expanding institutional procurement programs for public institutions,

food assistance and school feeding; integrating family farmers into the food value chains and participating in local food systems; improving access to inclusive financial systems and insurance; investing in infrastructure, including irrigation, small-scale centers for processing and packaging, and roads; recognizing the environmental, social, and economic value of food produced by family farmers, and their sustainable use and management of natural resources; preserving traditional practices and knowledge; increasing resilience to climate change, natural disasters and price shocks; capacity building, including adoption of innovative technologies; promoting food safety standards; boosting production, managerial, and entrepreneurial capacities; and facilitating smallholders' capacity to increase their bargaining power and control over their economic environment, among many others accessible at [www.fao.org/cfs](http://www.fao.org/cfs)

### How can family farming hold up to the pressure of urbanization?

Urbanization and rural transformation present both challenges and opportunities for family farming. The transformation of rural areas stimulated by interactions with urban centers can deliver positive impacts in terms of sustainability, as well as in terms of access to services and higher incomes. Such transformation, however, can also result in certain areas being left behind and in creating pockets of poverty, where people are forced by circumstances to escape from their localities of origin in search of better living conditions. This exodus should also be studied in light of the need for policies to facilitate socio-economic development in the rural areas. At the same time, an interesting phenomenon of peri-urban agricultural production is taking place without regulatory approaches catching up with the trend at the speed needed to enable proper development of these emerging opportunities. Policy makers need to move beyond the outdated dichotomy between urban and rural areas, moving towards a new social pact that is based on rural-urban inter-linkages. Both the countryside and the cities need each other, and they must be connected, not least in the realm of food production, in order to thrive. Family farming can and must provide a bridge in the context of fast urbanization and changing food systems.

### What are your expectations from this

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### Decade of Family Farming?

The UN General Assembly adopted the Decade of Family Farming on 20 December 2017; it covers the years from 2019 until 2028 to serve as a framework for countries to develop public policies and target investments in support of family farmers. The Decade is our collective opportunity to craft more and better actions, boosting the implementation of existing structures, making sure family farming is understood and recognized for its enormous worth, and putting rural people at the center of the global debate on how to eradicate hunger and malnutrition. The International Steering Committee of the UN Decade is proposing an Action Plan based upon seven pillars, (i) Developing an enabling social, economic and political environment as a prerequisite for family farmers to lead the transformation towards zero hunger and poverty, sustainable and healthy food systems, and an inclusive and resilient society; (ii) Supporting youth to ensure the generational sustainability of family farming; (iii) Promoting gender equality in family farming and rural women's leadership role; (iv) Strengthening family farmers' organizations and capacities to generate knowledge, represent farmers and provide inclusive services in the urban-rural continuum; (v) Improving socio-economic inclusion, resilience and wellbeing of family farmers, rural household and communities; (vi) Promoting sustainability of family farming for climate-resilient food systems; and (vii) Strengthening the multi-dimensionality of family farming for social innovations contributing to territorial development and food systems that safeguard biodiversity, environment and culture. Reaching these goals will put the world on a firmer route to zero hunger by 2030!