

# An increasing recognition of the role of family farming in achieving sustainable development

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The recently launched *Policy in Focus* special edition on Public Policies for Family Farming in the Global South<sup>1</sup> aims to follow up on the celebration of the United Nations International Year of Family Farming (IYFF 2014), as well as on the recent adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Both of these events have given unprecedented visibility and recognition to the real and potentially greater role of family farmers worldwide in contributing to poverty reduction, food and nutrition security and the sustainable management of natural resources.

As much a consequence of the return of food security issues to the international development policy agenda in the wake of the 2007-2008 food price crisis as of the gradual build-up of coalitions between social movements, non-governmental organisations, governments and international organisations aiming to shed light on the importance of investing in small- and medium-scale agriculture, the milestones set by such events as the IYFF and the recently approved SDGs are an invitation to reflect on the significant challenges that lie ahead in terms of formulating and implementing policies that may do justice to the greater recognition of this sector as a protagonist in development strategies across the Global South.

Family farmers—most of whose livelihoods combine on- and off-farm activities—are responsible for the production of the great bulk of the food consumed on the planet yet paradoxically also represent most of the world's hungry. An overwhelming majority of farms worldwide are managed and operated by families, and predominantly rely on family labour—which are the two main criteria used to define the family farming sector, notwithstanding its wide diversity, including pastoralists, artisanal fisherfolk and indigenous peoples, among others. Access to land and natural resources is highly unequal, with 475 million of the world's 570 million farms being only 2 hectares or less in size and accounting for a mere 12 per cent of total agricultural land (Lowder et al. 2014). Moreover, rural dwellers in developing countries represent around three quarters of the world's population living in extreme poverty, and are usually those hit hardest by environmental shocks (HLPE 2013).

Whereas narratives of industry-centred development strategies have largely predominated in developing and developed countries alike, investment in sustainable rural livelihoods as a worthwhile pillar of development in its own right has nonetheless made some headway on the development policy agenda. Whether at the global level, as the IYFF and the SDG framework but also the most recent State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA 2014 and 2015) reports from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) all illustrate, or at the national policymaking level, as revealed by some of the experiences reported in the new issue of *Policy in Focus*, small- and medium-scale agriculture is gradually demonstrating its capacity to be a part of the solution to many current global challenges, from the loss of biodiversity and land degradation, to food security and poverty eradication—if given the proper means to do so.

Moreover, policy dialogues on family farming have been steadily increasing, ranging from the national and regional-level gatherings of government delegations and rural social movements in Mercosur's Specialised Meeting on Family Farming (REAF) to the ongoing discussions inside most of the National Committees created as part of the IYFF 2014 campaign and celebrations. Deliberations have also increased at the global level among a wide variety of stakeholders—including peasant movements—inside the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), which have led to the approval of significant international frameworks such as the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT).

As a global consensus emerges on the necessity to invest in family farming as part of the solution to a more sustainable development paradigm, there is still a wide knowledge gap regarding the actual policies that should encompass the economic, social and environmental dimensions enshrined in the Rio+20 outcome document, The Future We Want, which form the conceptual basis of the SDGs.

Despite the huge challenges to formulating and implementing comprehensive policies in developing countries across an enormous variety of biomes and landscapes, institutional arrangements, budgetary and human resource constraints, scientific and traditional farming knowledge and practices, as well as the historically entrenched inequalities faced by rural women and young people, the renewed focus on family farming is at least contributing to bring more attention to some of the concrete implications and specificities of policymaking and rural development.

Issues such as access to land and natural resources, credit and insurance schemes, technical assistance and rural extension services, access to markets and provision of rural infrastructure—all of which have been well addressed in SDG target 2.3<sup>2</sup>—form part of a policy repertoire that must be specifically adapted to the needs of small-scale, labour-intensive and more environmentally sustainable farming. The new issue of *Policy in Focus* aims to make a hopefully useful contribution to this still incipient but growing global conversation on public policies for family farming in the Global South.

#### References:

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Lowder, Sarah K., Jakob Skoet, and Saumya Singh. 2014. "What do we really know about the number and distribution of farms and family farms worldwide? Background paper for The State of Food and Agriculture 2014." ESA Working Paper, No. 14-02. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. <<http://www.fao.org/docrep/019/i3729e/i3729e.pdf>>. Accessed 17 May 2016.

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#### Notes:

1. See <<http://www.ipc-undp.org/publication/27823>>.

2. See <<https://goo.gl/mMlqfc>>.