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# Rural development and the future of small-scale family farms



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# Abstract

Renewed attention has recently been given to the importance (and the position) of small-scale family farms, such as by proclaiming 2014 as the International Year of Family Farms (IYFF). However, public policies are deficient, investments are lacking, and many of the 500 million smallholder farmers receive little to no support. Standard typologies that distinguish “commercial farmers”, “part-time farmers” (in transition, and on their way out) and “subsistence farmers” miss the point of the complexity of farming livelihoods, in which particularly the large group of latter category is actually active in various markets. Influential policy perspectives focus on the insertion of small-scale family farmers in (global) value chains as an important way to promote rural development, and consequently reducing rural poverty. This study argues that such “one-size-fits-all” approach should be looked at critically, as the results have been mixed, at best. Although the integration of smallholders into global value chains is promoted to enhance their competitiveness and market access, these value chains may not actually engage many of these rural producers, and may end up being exclusionary. As global value chains are largely dominated by large corporate agribusiness, the integration of small-scale family farmers under such circumstances creates complex challenges by exposing them to more risks and costs, in situations where bargaining power is rarely equally distributed, which therefore leads to exclusion rather than inclusion.

It is therefore very important to revisit the above used typology for family farms, to get a better understanding of how different types

of value chains actually work, as well as the associated risks in order to develop more robust policy interventions. A rural territorial approach is called for, which would recognize possible homogeneities in certain agro-ecological (and even sometimes livelihood) regions, but also an awareness of the heterogeneous character within such regions. Not only issues of production (and access to local markets) are crucial, but also social inclusiveness and the building (and strength) of rural institutions, as well as linkages with urban centres within or close to rural areas. Aspects of value chains are included, but these are primarily represented in the inclusion of small-scale family farmers in local and regional markets, and the terms under which this access is achieved. This broader approach should also address inequalities in land rights and empower poor rural people through strengthening their organizations. Meeting all these calls for the promotion of inclusive and sustainable rural development processes is needed through renewed forms of collaboration between the State, the market and civil society, and in particular by promoting rural poverty reduction through broader rural territorial development.





# Introduction

The United Nations has proclaimed 2014 as the “International Year of Family Farming” (IYFF). This article critically reviews the mainstream (and alternative) views on rural development and the future of peasants, smallholders and small farmers (small-scale family farms or SSFF) in particular in the context of developing countries, regarding their role in food production and rural poverty reduction. They are reported to produce an estimated 70 percent<sup>1</sup> of the world’s food supply, but it is exactly amongst these households where many of the poor of the world are also to be found. International organizations, such as the World Bank, FAO and IFAD, have in recent years pronounced a renewed interest in these SSFF, arguing that improving their productivity is the key to reduce rural poverty and to increase food production.<sup>2</sup> This will also contribute to household and global food security, although the latter issue is contested in the different answers to the question “who will feed the world?” (Oxfam, 2011).

In spite of this increased attention, the mechanisms through which effective support can be provided to them are not well developed, and current public policies fall short of their objective to improve the position of SSFF, in particular regarding the widely needed investments in the

sector (HLPE, 2013). These deficiencies partly occur for two reasons. Firstly, there is still a predominant and partly flawed view on how they operate and what their strategies are, limiting the spectrum to subsistence, transition and commercial producers (Hazell, 2013). This typology fits well with the strategy of including them into (global) value chains. However, it is argued here that many SSFF produce for and within markets, but that a “one-size-fits-all” insertion in (global) value chains will show to be exclusionary. Closely related to this is the predominant *mantra* to privatize property rights of resources, in particular agricultural land, through individual (private) land titling programmes, leading to more tenure security. The mainstream assumption is that this will improve incentives for more investment and will provide access to credit. We will critically discuss both influential ideas in the following two sections.

The second section of this paper discusses how small-scale family farmers are generally conceptualized, categorized and identified. SSFF<sup>3</sup> in developing countries have often limited resource endowments (such as land), relative to medium-sized and large-scale (and more commercial) farmers. This does not mean that

1 This impressive figure has been mentioned in many places (such as in the campaign to support the IFYY, see: <http://www.familyfarmingcampaign.net/en/home>, last accessed on 18 March 2014), but there seems to be no precise source. In IFAD/UNEP (2013) it is stated that smallholders “provide over 80 per cent of the food consumed in a large part of the developing world, contributing significantly to poverty reduction and food security”. This seems to be derived from earlier studies of IFAD, in which the estimate relates to Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. As less developed countries (including China) are reported to house 82.6 percent of the world population, the rough estimate of 70 percent of the world’s food supply, produced by around 5000 million family farms, might well be close to reality (see [http://www.prb.org/pdf13/2013-population-data-sheet\\_eng.pdf](http://www.prb.org/pdf13/2013-population-data-sheet_eng.pdf), last accessed 18 March 2014, for the 2013 population estimates) .

2 See for example: World Bank (2007), IFAD (2010) and FAO (2013).

3 SSFF are grouped in one single category, following the terminology in the IYFF initiative. Of course, amongst family farms there are also medium and large-scale ones in various parts of the developed world, but these are not included in this definition, as they are much more capitalized, and less land scarce.

support strategies towards them can be uniform, as they differ between countries and across cultural, socio-economic and agro-ecological contexts. They face multiple challenges in terms of access to land, inputs, credit, technology, and markets. Particularly for the often used category of “subsistence farmers”, this important aspect is mostly overlooked, as the term suggests that they work outside markets, and are just producing for own consumption. This is very often not the case and the challenge in this respect is categorizing them properly in order to allow better targeted interventions and supportive public policies.

These policies need to be context-specific to become successful, in which the (revisited) role of the state is quite fundamental. Finally, this study also takes a critical look at the mainstream policy proposals to insert SSFF into value chains, in particular global ones (World Bank, 2007), and argue that this will most likely only benefit a relative small section of them (Vorley et al., 2012). A territorial (and more context specific) approach will likely be more effective (Berdegue and Escobar, 2002), while also more attention needs to be given to alternative movements (countering the very essence of global corporate food regimes) that promote “food sovereignty”, rather than only food security (Patel, 2009; McMichael, 2013), and the promotion of agroecological models of production, rather than further promoting unsustainable fossil fuel-led type agriculture (Altieri, 2002; 2009).

In the third section, issues of land tenure and rural institutions are addressed, reviewing the “privatization of resources” *mantra* (in particular of agricultural land) and individual titling that is assumed to lead to improved tenure security, an increase in investment and improved access to credit. However, this causal sequence is often much more complex (with cases of “reverse causality”, where farmers make investments in land in order to create higher tenure security). This section will also look at the need to reinforce empowerment of the poor in a context of growing inequality, as otherwise private property rights might well not lead to tenure security, and

even institutionalize insecurity or “modernize insecurity” (Jansen and Roquas, 1998). Empowerment of SSFF and a reinvigorated role of the State are both needed to counter (the impact of) the widespread dominance of corporate capital, global land grabs, and increasing control over global food-fibre-fuel-feed value chains. The final section is a concluding one.

# The framing of rural development strategies and farm typologies

FAO recently renewed strategy regarding of rural poverty reduction (FAO, 2013), uses a conceptual framework with a particular typology of small-scale farmers. This categorization was developed by Hazell (2013), who reviewed the various typologies, before formulating his own, slightly different one. His analysis was mainly focused on Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. In his review, he looked at Vorley (2002), who distinguished three categories of “rural worlds” with different access to markets, productive resources (land & capital), and the degree of income diversification. “Rural world 1” includes large farmers that are well connected to the global food and agricultural economy, and embedded in agribusiness (and corporate global agribusiness). Its production is generally cash-crop and export-oriented, and it can express economic and political power through lobby, or even by “capturing the state” (Amsden, DiCaprio and Robinson, 2012). “Rural world 2” is comprised of family farms whose production is locally-oriented and undercapitalized, with poor integration into agribusiness. “Rural world 3” houses subsistence-oriented farming households<sup>4</sup>, which also engage in off-farm activities and temporary migration in supplementing their

farming livelihoods. Hazell (2013) also reviewed the farm/rural household typology as proposed by World Bank (2007), which divided the world into “industrialized”, “transition” (meaning from agriculture-based toward industry-based) and “agricultural” countries. It also identified five types of rural households: market, subsistence, labor, and migration-oriented, with furthermore diversifying households that combine diverse sources of income.

Finally, Berdegué and Escobar (2002) have provided another typology, which looks at the rural assets of households and their agro-ecological potential in order to group them into three types. The first type includes those with good productive resources (such as land situated in high potential areas and market access). The second group comprised farmers that have relatively less productive assets and limited access to markets. The third category includes resource poor farmers who work on meagre landholdings of poor quality, often in remote and unproductive areas with few opportunities for off-farm wage employment. Hazell (2013) then suggested his typology of smallholders (incorporated in FAO 2013):<sup>5</sup> commercially-oriented, in transition (part-time), and those

<sup>4</sup> This category is normally conceptualized in the literature on agrarian studies as the peasantry.

<sup>5</sup> Hazell (2013) does not use the word “peasants”, but small farmers or smallholders. The latter is mostly used in a Sub-Saharan African context, while “peasant” is commonly used in Asia, and “campesino” in Latin America and the Caribbean. The neo-institutional economic (NEI) literature, in which tradition also Hazell (2013) can be placed, is mainly focused on the functioning of markets (transaction costs and market failures). It is quite different from the critical political economy literature, which focuses on class, power relations etc. (see Bernstein, 2010 and van der Ploeg, 2013, for opposing views on the peasantry), and the particular peasant mode of production.

who are subsistence-oriented. The first ones are farmers who derive most of their income from engaging in markets through the linkages to agricultural value-chains. Part-time smallholders do not generally view the need to stay in farming, often diversify into off-farm activities, and are likely to make the transition away from farming - either to other rural jobs or through migration. Subsistence-oriented farmers are seen as primarily producing for their own consumption (Hazell, 2013).

Although this typology can guide to some extent the understanding of the diverse realities of rural and agricultural livelihoods, questions arise in how far it actually corresponds to reality. We would argue that there are hardly any SSFF that only produce for their own consumption, as they participate in markets, in one way or another. Many of those “subsistence farmers” –who indeed have subsistence or below subsistence income levels– are actually producing within the context of local markets, as they need to sell at harvest time in order to obtain cash, pay debts and taxes, and buy consumers goods and inputs. They are also involved in off-farm and non-farm labor activities, in order to gain additional income. Clapp (2013) recently stated that these small producers are therefore involved in markets, but not necessarily adopt a “market logic”, which would include a mode of production largely based on profit maximization, rather than “coping with the market” (based on risk aversion). They might therefore be incorrectly seen as “subsistence farmers” (if this would suggest that they only produce food for own consumption, and not engage in markets), as they are operating in labor, input, and output markets in various ways. They sometimes produce enough food to guarantee the household’s food security (or more), but will still have to buy food at one point, as they have sold part (or most) of their harvest already. They should also not be considered as “part-time smallholders”, even though possibly 35-50 percent of the household

income is coming from non-farm labour (Haggblade et al., 2010: 1429), as agricultural production (and landholding) is still the basis of their existence. Tacoli (2004) even mentions for the non-farm income share an estimate of 60 percent for South Asia, and 40 percent for Latin America, while there are some specific countries where this is even higher.

Therefore, the use of this typology misses at least part of the increasing complexity of the livelihoods of many peasant and smallholder households. It seems also implicit that, in the end, only the first category (the commercial farmers) will remain in existence – thus, underestimating the productive capacity of SSFF.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to see that with the IYFF and the recent HPLE (2013) report, more attention is given to this productive capacity, in combination with the need for a more sustainable production, and the recognition that they are very often the “custodians of nature”. Finally, the suggested insertion of all these categories of SSFF into various value chains, with the expectation that only a small section will actually be able to accumulate assets, make profits and improve their livelihoods, also means implicitly that this strategy is promoting rural poverty reduction through large-scale rural-urban migration. Land concentration into larger commercial farms is seen as inevitable, rather than taking the many millions of SSFF as having a large productive potential, in particular based on sustainable agro-ecological forms of production (Altieri, 2002, 2009).

## Rural development and poverty reduction: a value-chain or territorial approach?

The “value chain” approach – by now very popular amongst governments, donors and non-governmental organizations – in which SSFF are supposed to integrate into domestic and global value chains, will not suffice to produce the

6 The IYFF, on the other hand, stresses the important current and future role of the small-scale family farms.

desired effects of increasing their incomes, and consequently reduce rural poverty. This “value chain” approach, strongly promoted by the World Bank (2007), seems to logically fit with the above discussed farm typology of Hazell (2013). It has been embraced as a new *mantra* by donors and NGOs alike, although for many the “value chain approach” means stimulating access to local and regional market systems. Integrating SSFF into global value chains, which are dominated by large corporate agribusiness, should be critically looked at – in particular since these value chains (as they are called in a nearly neutral and a-political manner) are based on highly unequal power relations. Such integration, if it takes place, needs state support and regulation of markets (HPLÉ, 2013: 17).

While it has been argued that the potential of agriculture for poverty reduction depends particularly on the productivity of SSFF, this mode of farming is faced with many challenges, particularly in terms of competitiveness (Torero, 2011). Given recent trends of increased demand for food and agricultural products, the access of SSFF to markets is seen to be of major importance in most developing countries (Gulati et al., 2007; IFAD, 2010). Consequently, integrating them into local, regional and global value chains has been promoted as a mechanism to enhance their competitiveness and market access (World Bank, 2007; Seville et al., 2011). While the concept of global value chains has been used since the 1990s (Gereffi, 1994), it gained growing interest more recently in the efforts to engage SSFF in more market-oriented activities. However, the rapid growth of global agribusiness value chains has created more complex challenges for them than were possibly expected.

In light of rapidly changing and increasingly complex (and financialized) markets, SSFF are not only required to enhance their productivity but also competitiveness. Some of the challenges that affect their engagement in agribusiness value

chains include changing systems of production and increased supply chain concentration, low prices, high food safety and quality standards, dynamic consumer requirements, supply reliability, and open markets with global competition (Hazell et al., 2010; Lie et al., 2012). This means that “small-scale, under-capitalized, and often under-educated farmers find it particularly difficult to meet the quantity, timeliness, traceability, and flexibility requirements of the new supply chains even if family labour is well suited to delivering quality products” (Hazell et al., 2010:1353; Seville et al., 2011).

The integration of smallholders<sup>7</sup> into value chains under such conditions may thus be problematic, as many of them may lack the capabilities to handle rapidly changing markets and comply with the high and stricter supply specifications and standards that are required (Hellin et al., 2009; Lie et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2012). Smallholders are positioned within the intersection of global and local agribusiness value chains, which causes higher levels of costs and risks, due to the inherent unequal bargaining positions assumed by the various actors along the value chain (Vorley et al., 2012: 41). In the context of increasing market concentration and deepening information asymmetries, bargaining power is often in the hands of the agro-processing companies or retailers, allowing them to “offload risks onto smallholder” producers (Ibid.). Smallholders exercise limited control over market activities along the value chain, as market power is often concentrated among one or few actors that are coordinating market activities (Lie et al. 2012). Market power asymmetries tend to become even more concentrated when smallholders depend on a single value chain or a specific firm. Peasants or farmers’ organizations and other civil society movements of groupings are therefore crucial to counter-balance this asymmetry, improve the terms of insertion in

7 The term smallholder is mostly used in IFAD and FAO publications as synonymous to SSFF.

value chain, or develop and govern alternatives (see section 3).

The literature examining the effect of insertion of smallholders in global agribusiness value chains, in spite of strong theoretical support, reports mixed empirical results (Reardon et al., 2009). To increase incomes depends on their ability to participate successfully in markets, but the globalized corporate value chains for food and agricultural products will likely not engage the vast majority of them (Vorley et al., 2012). Only a minority of SSFF may benefit – those who are more commercially-oriented, not resource-scarce and embedded in agribusinesses – while the vast majority are in fact excluded from these value chains (Seville et al., 2011; Vorley et al., 2012), or when they are included will lose their assets within a few years.

In light of the heterogeneity of SSFF (Vorley, 2002; Berdegúe and Escobar, 2002; World Bank, 2007; Torero, 2011; and Hazell, 2013), their market participation is also differentiated, with varying degrees of integration at various levels. It is essential to recognize this heterogeneity, as the growth in market opportunities will not necessarily mean increased incomes for each. Capabilities also differ in responding to rapidly changing and complex markets, and in accessing such markets (Proctor and Lucchesi, 2012). Within the more recent context of globalized and consumer driven markets where farmers are being directly exposed to global market forces, most SSFF experience poor market relations, although they produce and work –as was argued above within the context of various markets. To put it simply: “markets often do not work for the smallholders” (Torero, 2011: 4). If markets work, they work for a small group of more commercialized farmers who have the required assets, capital, infrastructure, information and organizational resources. The others generally “... risk being by-passed and marginalized by profound changes in the structure and governance of regional and global food chains” (Vorley and Fox, 2004: 4). Since the vast majority

of SSFF are not usually captured in the value chains, it may thus be inappropriate to tailor agricultural and rural development policies based on this (global) value chain approach. They do participate in markets, but not according to the “market logic” that is dictated by these global value chains. Therefore, in order to improve their position, local and regional market systems should be improved, and empowerment should be focused on community organizations, social movements and producers’ associations. Linking SSFF to these markets or directly to small and medium urban enterprises and consumers, can then be positive for income development (Tacoli, 2004; Herbel et al., 2012).

In this process of market integration, the state has an important role to play, more substantial than what was left to it after decades of deregulation, privatization and liberalization. Public policies to promote and incentivize agricultural and rural development are crucial (Chang, 2009; 2012), in particular in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) which has lagged behind in agricultural development and rural poverty reduction. Although there is an increasing non-farm share in the income of peasant, smallholder and small farmer’s households, inclusive and sustainable agricultural growth is essential for rural poverty reduction in developing countries by raising rural incomes, creating employment and increasing food availability. The agricultural sector is also “feeding” into the reciprocal linkages with the non-farm economy and important in the management of natural resources (such as land, water and forests).

Therefore, in public policy and rural institution building, following the emphasis given to them in the IYFF, there needs to be an explicit focus on SSFF, and a role of the State beyond a minimal role of “creating an enabling environment” which has been the *mantra* during structural adjustment in the 1980s and 1990s (Spoor, 2002). This redefined role of the State brings it back as a key driver of rural transformation and promoter of rural poverty reduction (HPLE, 2013),



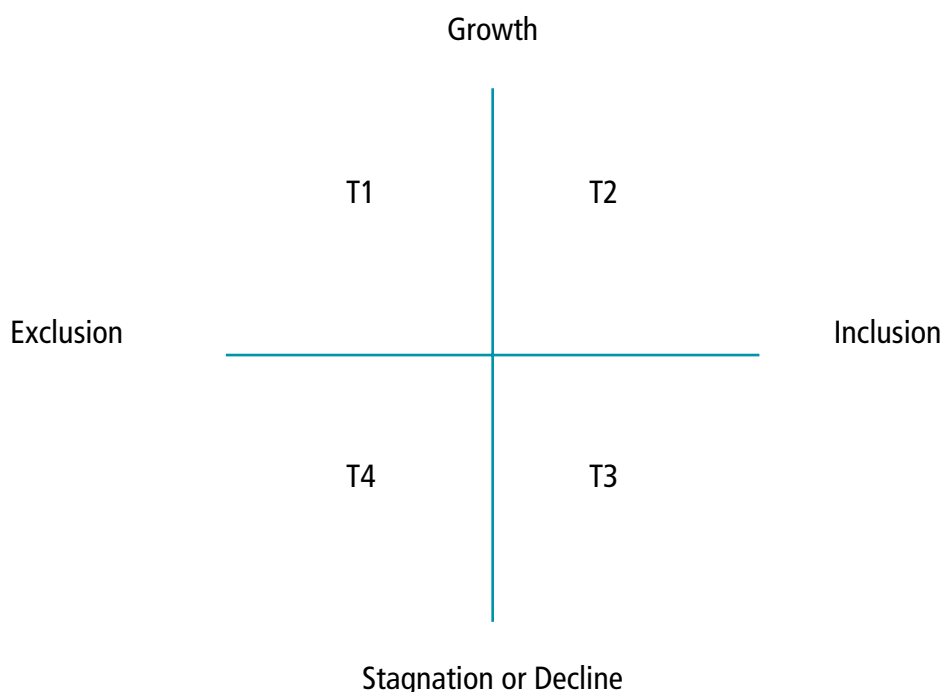
in an era where the private sector and market development are predominant, but have not shown to be very successful.

In light of the weakness of the “one-size-fits-all” (global) value chain approach, an alternative is discussed, which differentiates specific territories or zones, with a greater (and more activist role) of the State (Schejtman and Berdegué, 2008). Policy interventions and attempts for rural institution building can be more successfully directed through this approach, and it has a higher likelihood to realize the main objectives, namely rural and agricultural development with rural poverty reduction. This territorial approach brings “economic geography” back in (World Bank, 2008), and has more recently also put the so-called “space-based approach” on the development agenda, in particular regarding rural development (Charbit, 2013).

Schejtman and Berdegué (2008) proposed the concept of Rural Territorial Development (RTD), which follows a holistic approach in: (1) define territories beyond only agriculture;

(2) give attention to social inclusiveness; (3) give importance to both farm and non-farm employment as incomes sources; (4) look at links between agricultural production, services and processing sectors, including agro-industry and commerce; (5) include small and medium urban centres and their rural hinterland, to emphasize the importance of rural-urban linkages; and (6) focus on the importance of rural institutions. The authors in fact redefined what is rural by stating that a “rural territory is constituted by small and medium sized urban nucleus and its agricultural hinterland” (Ibid: 22). In their study, which is accompanied by empirical material from Guatemala and Mexico, they distinguished four different territories (Figure 1). These are: T1, showing growth, but institutionally weak and exhibiting widespread social exclusion; T2, dynamic, well-connected, developed, and socially inclusive; T3: having solid traditional institutions (such as in indigenous regions), but depressed economies; and T4: negative growth, in combination with societal breakdown (Ibid.: 24).

**Figure 1. Typology of territories (growth and social inclusion)**



Source: Schejtman and Berdegué (2008: 24)



The usefulness of this framework is derived from its integration of rural-urban, farm and non-farm, and productive transformation with social inclusiveness. Schejtman and Berdegué (2008) argue that a positive transition can take place through policy interventions and institution building (T1►T2, T3►T2), but in absence of these, also negative transitions are possible such from T2►T3 and T1►T3 (Ibid.: 25). Also a T1►T4 transition can occur, in situations of failed states and the aftermath of a civil war. The territorial approach recognizes social heterogeneity and regional specificities (World Bank, 2008). Using this typology of rural territories provides a more realistic and useful approach for targeted policy interventions and institution building, rather than focusing only on agricultural production (and marketing) of SSFF and their inclusion in (global) value chains. It can also be combined with the use of “livelihood zones” (Santini et al., 2012; Ruben et al., 2007) and “agro-ecological zones”, in identifying territorial boundaries. Using livelihood zones within which similar livelihood patterns exist can lead to a better understanding of the diverse rural and agricultural livelihoods and their dynamics, which in turn helps to respond with appropriate policies (Santini et al., 2012). Rural households develop their livelihood strategies according to the opportunities and constraints in the areas where they live, such as the agro-ecological contexts or access to markets (Tittonell et al., 2010). Therefore, tailored interventions based on livelihood zones can be an effective way to reach specific groups (Bigman and Srinivasan, 2002).

By critically addressing the rather broad-stroke (global) value chain approach and the more locally specific territorial approaches, while also emphasizing linkages to local market systems, it is clear there is a need for greater emphasis on local empowerment, and the terms under which access to markets and value chains is achieved or gained. This argument will be further developed

in section three. We would like to stress here that that the (global) value-chain approach – which proposes a rapid integration of SSFF, without considering the terms of inclusion, and primarily emphasizing its positive effects on income generation and poverty reduction – is currently confronted by a world-wide counter-movement to empower local producers through “food sovereignty” (Patel, 2009; Wittman et al., 2010).<sup>8</sup>

The “food sovereignty” movement is more than just hype. This is confirmed by the strong involvement of global social movements (such as *La Via Campesina*), the huge amount and the depth of the studies presented. Food sovereignty is also different from simply striving to food security, which is largely “trade-based”, meaning that food should be imported when food availability is insufficient in a country or a region. However, this abstracts completely from unequal income distributions and the lack of purchasing power to buy food by the poor of this world. Food sovereignty (at national and local level) is emphasizing in particular the return to controlling food systems, rather than to be controlled by the growing powers of global agro-industry (or value-chains).

8 Food sovereignty does not only limit itself to small-scale producers, but also to consumers regaining power over food products, food quality, and safety, and to direct linkages between producers and consumers.

# Rural institutions, land tenure security and empowerment

## Rural institutions

Rural institutions in developing countries are often inefficient, ineffective, or even dysfunctional, as was shown by Bardhan (1989). There are many types of rural institutions that are crucial for economic and social development in rural areas. In the legal sphere, they need to relate to legal contract enforcement, forms of third party arbitration (for example in land conflicts), protection of citizens against violence, and discrimination (in particular from a gender perspective); in the social and economic spheres, prioritized institutions are those which minimize risks, such as collective rural insurance schemes (both in health as well as against possible natural disasters). These need to form an institutional framework of the State, civil society, and the private sector. However, in reality many of these institutions are “missing”, or are functioning exclusively in favour of the powerful. Local governance is often weak in developing countries, and decentralization brought more duties than funds to fulfil them, human capital is under-developed, and salaries are miserable. During the period of structural adjustment, which brought the idea of the minimal state that needs only to facilitate the working of market forces, this debilitating process of governance actually started.

Non-governmental organizations that operate in the social sphere in rural areas have sometimes complemented the gaps left by the withdrawal of

the state, but in spite of their growing influence they have only been partly successful. In the economic sphere, we have seen the emergence of micro-credit organizations, and other institutions facilitating financial intermediation (and savings options). Finally, social movements which have sprung up in the past decades, particularly peasant and farmers’ organizations, have gained strength. Nevertheless, there is a great need to focus on institutions and organizations, which will in particular empower the rural population in developing countries. Nevertheless, most public policies are directed the improvement of the working of markets, promoting access to them, and related to this, the formalization of property rights over important assets, such as land, water and forest resources, often without strengthening governing institutions. In the following part we will discuss this in greater detail.

## Land, property rights and land tenure security

In many developing countries, access to land is still critical to people living (and producing) in rural areas, which partly or largely depend on crop farming, livestock and the use of forest resources for their livelihoods. In such a context, rural poverty is also closely relates to access and control over land. Being critically important to rural livelihoods, inequalities in the distribution and productivity of land are among the key

factors impeding rural growth and ensuring food (and nutritional) security. However, land is much more than an economic resource and thus, has a broader significance; this is particularly true for SSFF, for which land signifies a way of life and also holds cultural significance.<sup>9</sup> It is also an important political resource that establishes or challenges power relations between and among individuals, households, and communities (Borras and Franco, 2010: 3; Lund and Boone, 2013).

Historically, issues of land contestation (revolving around multiple uses and users) are often complicated by the claims of powerful vested interests and inequalities in access to and control over the resource, particularly along class and gender lines (Bernstein, 2010; Razavi, 2003). Over the past decade, there has been a growing and renewed interest in land resources related to expanding food demand (and the “meatification” of the diet, causing rapid growth of the animal husbandry sector; see Weis, 2013), high food prices, the growing demand for biofuels and animal feeds (White and Dasgupta, 2010), climate change, and the drive towards diversification of financial portfolios towards less risky destinations (Borras et al., 2011; Borras and Franco, 2012; HLPE, 2011; Toulmin, 2008; Visser and Spoor, 2011; White and Dasgupta, 2010; Zoomers, 2010). This has elevated pressures on its availability, suggesting an increased competition between different interests and claims, with those most threatened being poor rural people who in fact need the land the most, including, among others, ethnic minorities and indigenous people, pastoralists, fisher folk, and peasants or smallholders (Borras and Franco, 2012).

In line with the mainstream typology of SSFF, discussed critically in the previous section, and the accompanying “one-size-fits-all” strategy to link them to (global) value chains, the issue of tenure security has come high on the development agenda. Tenure security focuses on private land titling, which would facilitate

the insertion of smallholders in value chains (or their transition out of farming), as land becomes fully commoditized. It has long been argued that providing poor rural people with tenure security over the land they depend on for their livelihood is central to reduce poverty. The World Bank has been the front-runner in advocating tenure security (based on individual and private land titles) as a necessary and critical condition for rural poverty reduction (Deininger, 2003), and enhance agricultural productivity (Bromley, 1989; Platteau, 1992). The argument is that private property rights, while providing tenure security, encourage the transfer of productive resources from less efficient to more efficient farmers and promote increased investments in land conservation and productivity, and access to credit (Feder et al., 1988; Barrows and Roth, 1990; Deininger, 2003). De Soto (2000), who initially influenced the World Bank’s stand on land policies, argued that land held by the poor without enforceable private property rights is simply “dead capital”, because it cannot be traded and it only becomes tradable when it is recognized by formal legal systems (see also Deininger, 2003). To put it another way, De Soto argued that through the formalization of property rights, the assets held (or used) by the poor (including land and houses) can be transformed into “living capital”, enabling them to have access to credit and thus invest in their productive activities. This position, which was widely accepted in the following decade, only promotes tenure security (through private land titling), within the context of a legal statutory framework, and excludes forms of community tenure and user rights. It also abstracts from the fact that same poor person, now with “living capital” has to operate in a highly insecure market environment, confronting a very unequal power distribution.

More recently one perceives an acceptance that more forms of property rights can actually

9 This is even more so in case of indigenous communities.

lead to increased tenure security, in particular *perceived*, rather than *legal* tenure security. Furthermore, HPLE (2013: 15) sees an important role for the State in terms of improving tenure security, through public policies, improved institutional frameworks and expanding investments.

Land titling has been widely advocated for Sub-Saharan African countries as an essential condition in order to fuel agricultural development across the continent. Statutory land tenure reform promoted changes in customary tenure systems towards private property regimes (Maxwell and Wiebe, 1998). Traditional customary tenure systems were seen as not offering sufficient land tenure security to encourage investments in land and thereby improve agricultural productivity (Bruce and Migot-Adholla, 1994). This assumption has been the basis of land reforms in many Sub-Saharan African countries (Toulmin and Quan, 2000; Toulmin, 2008). However, there are also studies which show that these perceived benefits of the land policy reforms did not materialize (Atwood, 1990; Okoth-Ogendo, 1993; Roth, 1993; Mackenzie, 1993; Lastarria-Cornhiel, 1997; Lund, 2000; Shipton, 1994; Cotula et al., 2004; Peters and Kambewa, 2007). According to Bromley (2008: 20) this underscores the fact that “formalization offers little assurance that beneficial outcomes are inevitable” (Bromley, 2008: 20).

The negative effects of past land titling programs in Africa have by now also been (reluctantly) acknowledged by the proponents of the World Bank’s approach, namely that (private) land titling may not be always be the most appropriate one (Deininger and Binswanger, 1999; Deininger, 2003; Deininger and Feder, 2009), where “more simple measures to enhance tenure security can make a big difference at much lower cost than formal titles” (Deininger, 2003: 39). Deininger and Feder (2009: 233) make a concluding point that the “formalization of land rights should not be viewed as a panacea

and that interventions should be decided only after a careful diagnosis of the policy, social, and governance environment.” This in fact undermines the “one-size-fits-all” policy of land privatization.

More generally, research in the past two decades has challenged the perceptions of tenure insecurity (particularly in the customary tenure systems of Sub-Saharan Africa), asserting that the absence of property rights “formalization” does not necessarily imply tenure insecurity (Mafeje, 1993; Place and Hazell, 1993; Bruce and Migot-Adholla, 1994; Platteau, 1996; Quan, 2000). In another context, namely Central America, Jansen and Roquas (1998) even argued that land reform can also mean “modernizing insecurity”. Ho and Spoor (2006: 582) noted furthermore that, although ensuring tenure security lies at the core of most land tenure reforms, this goal can be “accomplished through formal, as well as informal institutions.” They argued that it is an oversimplification to link tenure security with a particular form of land tenure. Earlier, Shipton (1994: 364) had already stressed that “the concept of secure tenure in individual titles is treacherously misleading”, while arguing that “untitled lands are by no means necessarily insecure, and such titling more often than not seems to heighten insecurity of tenure”.

In FAO (2013), when it discusses equitable access to land, only forest land is considered in a possible framework of community-based resource management. However, in sub-Saharan Africa various forms of communal resource tenure are of course very important, such as in the management of pastoral and fishery resources. In most of rural sub-Saharan Africa, common property resources such as forests, grazing lands, fisheries, and water bodies are actually vital for the livelihoods of many social groups. This emphasizes the importance of access to different types of land resources for a diversified source of livelihood to poor rural women and men (Meinzen-Dick and Mwangi, 2008). Communal grazing lands, for instance, are critical resources

for pastoral and agro-pastoral populations for whom livestock production constitutes the main source of livelihood. These lands have been under pressure for alternative use, including the conversion into wildlife reserves and game parks, and the continuous expansion of agricultural lands (Hagmann and Speranza, 2010). Increased demand for land in many parts of the developing world has been affecting the rural poor's access to these resources – and these pressures are likely to intensify further. Previous interventions to address land access and tenure issues often promoted the formalization of these common resources, creating more exclusive forms of rights over them (Shipton, 1988; Meinzen-Dick and Mwangi, 2008), which “negated the distinct multiple claims by women, youths, and seasonal users” (with pastoralists, for example) as well as environmental interests (Meinzen-Dick and Mwangi, 2008: 36). This has led to exclusions through “cutting the web of overlapping interests” in land areas.

The preceding discussion on property rights is part of the crucial architecture of rural institutions, but using an “overly simplistic view” (Ostrom, 2001: 143) has been among the main reasons for the failure of previous efforts to restructure governance and property rights systems successfully. McKean (2000: 43-48) suggests a set of attributes for dealing with common property resources, including self-organized user groups, well-defined boundaries for the resources in question, cooperation among users, clearly defined and easily enforceable rules, the ability to enforce rules and modify them over time, “fair” distribution of decision-making rights, local conflict resolution mechanisms, and the devolution of authority to lower levels. For realizing the potential of commonly held or managed land resources, Ostrom (2002) emphasized the need to understand the key attributes of the resources in question, as well as those of the users – through

which local communities can successfully govern the resources they depend on.

## The empowerment and participation of the rural population

The political and legal empowerment of the rural poor and their organizations is critical to improve and strengthen their capacity to continue accessing and managing land and other productive resources efficiently and sustainably. This will more likely strengthen their ability to negotiate, claim, and retain their rights on land resources, and to practice effective control over them, but this is not usually easy and automatic. Although “empowerment” is now promoted as a key element in this process, which forms of interventions actually lead to empowerment are often vague and contested. The rural poor's participation in local decision-making has been viewed as the main channel through which empowerment could be achieved. However, rural communities are highly differentiated (Borras and Franco, 2012), which means that with “participation” not all social groups may be involved, while power relations and existing practices expressing them tend to “shape the dynamics of who participates” (Gaventa 2002: 10). Without changes in the existing asymmetrical power structures, just being involved may not necessarily lead to empowerment (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). There need to be changes in power relationships “within society, within the state and between state and society” (Fox, 2007: 335).

In recent years, many developing countries have introduced land policies that can potentially remove existing inequalities in rights, but ensuring the implementation of such policies often remains problematic and politically contingent (Franco, 2008; IFAD, 2010). This implies that even in countries where progressive land laws and policies have been passed, not necessarily poor people's land rights are better assured or can be exercised in practice. Moreover, rights



and empowerment are in fact distinct (Fox, 2007: 335), and more emphasis needs to be placed on ensuring links between land rights (not limited to the legal sphere, but moving towards actual and in particular perceived land tenure security) and empowerment.

In order to do this, it is necessary to support the expansion and strengthening of civil society organizations, such as peasant associations, women's credit groups, women's producers organizations (Elbehri and Lee, 2011), community-based organizations, self-help groups of peasants and smallholders, farmer field schools, etc.; not only to improve access to land but also the terms of land use and access to local and regional markets (Herbel et al., 2012). Their advocacy role is critical to challenge existing practices, as well as the power relations through which powerful actors seek to assert rights and claims over the rights and interests of the poor. This involves the interactions between societal actors and the State in a direction of forming a partnership to ensure poor people's land rights, such as between the government and civil society organizations. In the light of recent and on-going global land grabbing (Deininger and Byerlee, 2010) the sustained 'political will' of the government is indeed of critical importance in the process of empowering those people who are under threat.<sup>10</sup> This acknowledgment is also based on our observation that the role of the State needs to be redefined, above and beyond a mere "facilitating" role that promotes an "enabling environment" (FAO, 2013).

Most redistributive land reforms that included a land titling process have shown that this is not enough to provoke a real wealth distribution.<sup>11</sup> Such land or agrarian reforms need to be accompanied by active support for SSFF beneficiaries (via improved infrastructure,

technical services, information, education, access to local markets and the building of rural institutions). It is also incorrect to suggest that "transparent" land markets will do the job. They will function in the end, but very likely not in favour of the rural poor – who need active State (and civil society) interventions to guarantee equitable outcomes. The State's regulatory role (e.g. avoiding the land's forced expulsion as in current "land grabs", providing adequate compensations when appropriate, intervening in markets that are actually working against the poor, etc.) needs therefore to be redefined, re-evaluated, and of course, tailored according to specific situations, in order to make them as effective as possible.

10 In the executive summary of HLPE (2013) it states: "Governments must guarantee tenure security for smallholder farmers over land and natural resources, by implementing the Voluntary guidelines on responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries, and forests." Practice has shown in recent years that the guidelines remain voluntary, and such "guarantee" is difficult to enforce.

11 This was also the critique on the Market-Led Agrarian Reform (MLAR) as was promoted by Deininger (2003), in which land was distributed, but those who acquired it had to do so by contracting a loan, and often received the worst quality land in return (Borras, 2003).





# Conclusion

Renewed attention has recently been given to the importance (and the position) of SSFF, such as by proclaiming 2014 as the International Year of Family Farms (IYFF). However, public policies are deficient, investments are lacking, and many of the 500 million SSFF receive little to no support. This study looked first at how in mainstream thought they are conceptualized in a typology of “commercial farmers”, “part-time farmers” (in transition, and on their way out) and “subsistence farmers”. This typology misses the complexity of farming livelihoods, in which particularly the large group of latter category is actually active in various markets (Spoor, 1995). Since the influential World Bank (2008) report, which brought agriculture back on the development agenda, the main focus is on the insertion of small-scale family farmers in (global) value chains, seen as an important way to promote rural development, and consequently reducing rural poverty.

However, it is argued here that this “one-size-fits-all” approach should be looked at more critically as the results have been at best mixed. Although the integration of smallholders into global value chains is promoted to enhance their competitiveness and market access, these value chains may not actually engage many of these rural producers, and in the end will show to be exclusionary. As global value chains are largely dominated by large corporate agribusiness, the integration of SSFF under such circumstances creates complex challenges by exposing them to more risks and costs, in situations where bargaining power is rarely equally distributed,

which therefore leads to exclusion rather than inclusion.

It is therefore very important to revisit the above used typology for SSFF, to get a better understanding of how different types of value chains actually work, as well as the associated risks in order to develop more robust policy interventions. Instead of this approach, a more rural territorial one is called for, which would recognize possible homogeneities in certain agro-ecological (and even sometimes livelihood) regions, but also an awareness of the heterogeneous character within such regions. Not only issues of production (and access to local markets) are crucial, but also social inclusiveness and the building (and strength) of rural institutions, as well as linkages with urban centres within or close to rural areas. Aspects of value chains are included, but these are primarily represented in the inclusion of SSFF in local and regional markets, and the terms under which this access is achieved.

We showed furthermore that in particular private land titling neatly fits with the insertion into global value chains, although tenure security is certainly not guaranteed through these statutory reforms and legal approach. In view of insecurities in many markets, and the existence of highly unequal power relations in rural areas of developing countries, land titling might quite well not lead to tenure security (in particular not perceived security), and also the often assumed causal relation with increased investment and access to credit is debatable. Access to land has become a hot issue in the current global rush for land, while it continues

to be a crucial element in rural incomes – in spite of the growing importance of non-farm income for rural households – and therefore in rural poverty reduction. The expansion of corporate investments in farmland and farming (already since the early 2000s and, more pronounced, with the recent food price crisis of 2007-08) has raised particular concerns, as this trend continued to cause increased competition over land and high pressures on existing tenure systems.

The privatization of land and the issuing of land titles have long been seen as the “panacea” for land tenure security, positively influencing the land owner’s investment behaviour. There is increasing evidence that, in highly insecure markets, this has not led to improved investments and access to credit. The commoditization of land resources (through private land titling) fits with the proposed insertion of SSFF in (global) value chains, but exposes them to markets with highly unequal power relations, and a plea is made to promote empowerment of SSFF, in combination with a revisiting of the role and a strengthening of the State (HPLC, 2013). There is a need to consider a broader approach towards ensuring land tenure security, and that focusing on one particular (private) form of land tenure would be misleading in that respect. What is more important – and needs more emphasis – is the linking of land rights (not limited to the legal sphere, but moving towards actual and perceived land tenure security, rather than only legal) and the empowerment of particular poor rural people and their organizations. Meeting all these calls for the promotion of inclusive and sustainable rural development processes is needed through renewed forms of collaboration between the State, the market and civil society, and in particular by promoting a new role of the State in the sphere of rural and agricultural development, and promoting rural poverty reduction.

To design such policies, one needs to have proper typologies and a greater understanding of the real working of (global) value chains. As we have shown above, the category of so-called

“subsistence farmers” does produce for (or at least embedded into) markets, but possibly does not follow a “market logic”. Instead, these SSFF are included in local value chains, excluded from globalized ones or included under very unequal and sometimes detrimental terms. The struggle for them, therefore, is partly to promote better terms of inclusion, through cooperation, improved negotiation power, and legal protection (for example in land conflicts), which can be particularly induced through supportive public policies, but also to promote and implement alternative strategies, such as are put forward by proponents of food sovereignty and agroecology, and supported by increasingly stronger social movements.

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Renewed attention has recently been given to the importance (and the position) of small-scale family farms through the International Year of Family Farms (IYFF). However, public policies are deficient, investments are lacking, and many of the 500 million smallholder farmers receive little to no support. Standard typologies that distinguish “commercial farmers”, “part-time farmers” (in transition, and on their way out) and “subsistence farmers” miss the point of the complexity of farming livelihoods, in which particularly the large group of latter category is actually active in various markets. Influential policy perspectives focus on the insertion of small-scale family farmers in (global) value chains as an important way to promote rural development, and consequently reducing rural poverty.

This study argues that such “one-size-fits-all” approach should be looked at critically, as the results have been mixed, at best. Although the integration of smallholders into global value chains is promoted to enhance their competitiveness and market access, these value chains may not actually engage many of these rural producers, and may end up being exclusionary.

A broader approach is needed to also address inequalities in land rights and empower poor rural people through strengthening their organizations and meeting the calls for the promotion of inclusive and sustainable rural development processes through renewed forms of collaboration between the State, the market and civil society, and in particular by promoting rural poverty reduction through broader rural territorial development.