

## Healthy Lives from Sustainable Food Systems October 2022

### Zero Hunger: Is Smallholder Farming the Solution?

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#### Background

A large proportion of the food consumed around the world is produced by smallholder farmers. At the same time, people engaging in smallholder farming are often poorer and more food insecure than the respective national averages. Transforming smallholder farming into more industrialized or intensive forms of agriculture is often emphasized as a solution for providing more economic returns, boosting rural economic development, as well as increasing food security and reducing poverty.

The online workshop “Zero hunger: Is smallholder farming the solution?” discussed this food security paradox and the future of smallholder farming. Three speakers inspired 28 participants to consider different perspectives on the future of smallholder farming. Participants represented the global south and north and the academic, governmental, civil society and cooperative sectors. A plenary session was followed by break-out group discussions on topics ranging from whether sustainable small-scale agriculture can be achieved to whether sustainable industrialization is possible, or even desirable. Based on the workshop, we reach out to policymakers in agriculture and development demanding action within three areas:

- increased support for smallholder farmers in their local context
- better inclusion of smallholder voices and priorities in policy and research
- improved access to the market for smallholder farmers

#### How can we create the political will and attention to support smallholder farmers in their local context, based on their circumstances?

Smallholder farming improves food and nutrition security directly by improving access to diverse sources of food, and indirectly by increasing incomes and, thus, spending on more and better food. However, agricultural policy remains mainly focused on large-scale commercially oriented farms

specializing in a handful of key commodities. The focus on large-scale farming undermines diversity and stimulates increased inequality in an already highly unequal global food system. Creating political will for supporting smallholder farming requires awareness-raising activities with national and local decision-makers concerning their understanding of the contribution, role and impact of smallholders as well as increasing respect for and willingness to engage with smallholders. Common perceptions of smallholder farming that need to be questioned and nuanced include the connection of poverty with being technology averse and lacking relevant knowledge. Such perceptions have little to do with reality and present an obstacle to effectively supporting smallholders. Accumulated evidence has established that smallholders are innovative and interested in improving their own situations; but they are often constrained by a range of challenges related to their resource disadvantages, low financial capacity, and lack of access to farm inputs, extension services, and preventive and curative veterinary care. Therefore, it is essential to better understand the different realities of smallholder farming across the world if we are to design relevant interventions to enhance their contribution to sustainable development and food security.

#### How can we better include smallholder voices and priorities in policy and research?

To better understand smallholders’ realities, priorities and challenges across the world, it is important to recognize that smallholders are not a homogenous group, and thus more context-specific solutions are needed to identify, monitor, and assess the complex and multidimensional challenges that smallholder farming systems face in different contexts. We need more and better studies exploring smallholders’ farms and their production to understand their different dynamics within the food systems as well as their needs. To understand the realities of smallholders, we need inter-disciplinary research that takes a holistic view of smallholder livelihoods. In this regard, social science research has shed light on the social and economic factors that prevent smallholder farmers from



**FIGURE CAPTION:** RURAL MILK COLLECTION CENTRES SUPPORT SMALLHOLDER FARMERS BY INTRODUCING STANDARDS TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THE PRODUCT BY GIVING ACCESS TO NEW TECHNIQUES, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND MARKETS AS WELL AS BY GIVING INDIVIDUAL FARMERS A STRONGER VOICE BY WORKING TOGETHER.

thriving and increasing productivity, while additionally taking climatic, ecological and socio-economic issues into account. One example highlighting the fact that access to technologies is only part of the solution is the control of East Coast Fever, a very important cattle disease that infects calves and results in high mortality. New technologies to prevent the disease exist, but they are not adopted on a broader scale. A study involving female livestock keepers revealed that increased survival rates in calves would result in more work for women, who were the primary caretakers of the young cattle in the studied community. Once the calves grow into young animals and bulls, they will belong to the men and contribute to their income, but not necessarily benefit the women. This example shows that we need to consider the fact that women and men have different needs, access to and control of resources. Hence, gender issues need to be embedded in development work, and not an add-on or a side-line. Another important consideration is local language; to enable smallholders to be engaged and have their voices heard, communication in local languages is important. In this regard, extension officers who both speak the local language and understand the local context can be valuable and serve as an important link between politicians and smallholders. Social media and participatory action research have been successfully used for the same purpose in some parts of the world. In the same way, connecting smallholders through cooperatives and other farmer organizations enables a stronger voice and access to the political agenda. Smallholder farmers are a key solution to food security, but they need to be supported in working together and strengthening their organizations.

### How can smallholder farmers' access to markets be improved in a sustainable, equitable and fair way?

Smallholders often lack access to profitable, value-added markets. In the absence of critical supporting functions such as infrastructure and service provision, smallholders struggle to shift from subsistence to more productive forms of exchange. In particular, smallholders face serious difficulties in accessing markets on which to sell their produce. They are constrained by their physical remoteness to markets, high transportation costs, and the lack of business skills and an organization that could improve their bargaining power to interact on equal terms with other market intermediaries. It is not easy to connect smallholders to markets, nor to ensure that their produce meets market standards. Unequal distributions of power also mean that small producers may earn significantly less than other actors, such as larger retailers and exporters. Increasing smallholders' access to markets must be a top priority for policymakers and development actors. Reliable market access boosts productivity, increases incomes and strengthens food security. It can contribute to reducing poverty and hunger among producing smallholders and their communities, if appropriate measures are taken to reduce market risks and unequal market power. This in turn encourages farmers to invest in their own businesses and increase the quantity, quality and diversity of the goods they produce.

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