

Can small-scale farmers feed the world?

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The world's food systems are being squeezed from all sides: rising populations and shifting diets are increasing the global demand for food, while food production is increasingly compromised by climate change and land degradation.

With nearly a billion people already going hungry, how will we manage to feed the world over the coming decades? There's a tendency to suppose that the job will fall to large-scale commercial farmers, who will need to find ways to produce more food, on less land.

But is that right? Are small-scale farmers there to feed themselves and large-scale farmers there to feed the world? At a ['provocation' seminar held in Stockholm, Sweden](#) last week (3 March 2011), Edith van Walsum from ILEIA asked this very question of a room of policymakers, academics and practitioners gathered to discuss how best to support the development of small-scale farmers.



Are small-scale farmers there to feed themselves and large-scale farmers there to feed the world?

Credit: Flickr/Peter Casier

Success stories

It is true that almost 500 million small-scale farmers, fishers and herders in the world are food insecure. But participants at the seminar were quick to provide a plethora of examples showing that many other small-scale farmers are not only successfully feeding themselves but also wider communities, regions and even whole countries.

P.V. Satheesh, founding member of the [Deccan Development Society](#) in India, described a network of 5,000 small-scale women farmers in India that is producing food beyond individual households. "Self-sufficiency ... starts at the farming household — once that household becomes self-sufficient, it starts spreading to the community, local area and then the larger, regional area," explained Satheesh.

In other countries, small-scale producers have been instrumental in supplying entire countries. Katarina Eriksson, from the Tetra Laval group, claimed that Kenya built its whole dairy industry with milk provided by smallholders for school meal programmes. And Kenya is not alone. "Last year, [Tetrapak's packages are used in school feeding programmes](#) in 54 countries and in most cases, the milk distributed in schools was locally produced and came from smallholders," said Eriksson.

A similar story can be seen in Brazil, where smallholders play a huge role in supplying food for vulnerable groups, under a food security policy known as [Zero Hunger \(Fome Zero\)](#). Within this programme, the government buys products directly from smallholders at a guaranteed price and distributes them to a network of day-care centres, hospitals and community associations. According to André Gonçalves, from the Centro Ecologico in Brazil, the programme so far involves just 2.5 per cent of the country's small-scale farmers — but their produce reaches a quarter of all food insecure households.

Added advantages

The fact that we already have evidence that small-scale farmers are productive and can contribute to food security is not the only reason for focusing our attention on them. The participants at the Stockholm seminar argued that small-scale farming also offers a number of other key social, economic and environmental advantages.

“Small-scale farming is creating employment and contributing to rural development... It is better at preserving ecosystems because ... farmers combine various plants, trees and animals on the same piece of land,” said speaker Olivier de Schutter, UN special rapporteur on the right to food. “And when the incomes of small farmers increase, it creates a market for services and goods in the country which benefits other sectors of the economy in ways that increased incomes for large landowners do not.”

“For all these reasons, it is important to support small-scale farming,” he concluded.



Andre Gonçalves: smallholders are more efficient and environmentally friendly than agribusiness

Gonçalves agreed, saying that, compared to agribusiness, small-scale farmers are both more efficient and more environmentally friendly. He described a network of more than 3,000 organic farmers in Brazil called the [Ecovida Agroecology Network](#), which exchanges products across regions within the country and is, according to Gonçalves, an ‘inspirational’ example of how small-scale farming can combine incomes for farmers with environmental services and food production.

Last week's report [Agroecology and the Right to Food](#), presented by de Schutter to the UN Human Rights Council, supports Gonçalves claim that small-scale farming is more efficient, claiming that [small-scale sustainable farming could double food production in less than a decade](#) in places where the world's most hungry people live.

In summing up learning from the Stockholm seminar, de Schutter said “there is a largely shared diagnosis at the level of discourse about what needs to be done — switch to supporting small-scale farmers and agroecological methods”.

But he added that there are huge obstacles in making this transition, including breaking through the general belief among policymakers that it's all about producing more using the

same agro-industrial practices, and ensuring that markets reward small-scale farming. To navigate these hurdles, we need a clearly defined strategy. “We know what the end vision should be but we don’t know the itinerary that can lead us there,” said de Schutter. He added that the [Committee on World Food Security](#) is developing a global strategic framework — “a plan of action for the international community” — over the coming year.