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### Family Farming in Africa and the Role of Universities and Research Institutions

In this Thought Piece, I highlight a few key points about family farmers, the impact of the COVID-19 on their farming activities, and some issues that should be addressed, including enhancing the role of universities and research institutions, to provide support to family farmers in Africa.

Family farming is a mode of agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production that is managed and operated by a family and is primarily reliant on the family labour of both women and men<sup>1</sup>. Family farms accounts for 90 percent of the 608

million farms in the world. Ninety-five (95) percent of existing family farm units are less than 5 hectares<sup>2</sup> and are found in the rural areas of the developing world. On average,

women-operated family farms are only one half to two-thirds the size of those operated by men. Overall, Family farmers produce about 80 percent of the world's food value but, paradoxically, are often poor and food insecure themselves. They complement their farm income by additional non-agricultural wages or self-employment, including small businesses or occasional formal or informal employment, and in some regions, with public or private cash transfers.

In sub-Saharan Africa, family farming is a major component of the agriculture sector, providing livelihoods for over 70 per cent of the population. For example, in Ethiopia about 74 percent of the countries' farmers are small family farmers; in Malawi it is 75 percent, 88 percent in Nigerian, 83 percent in Tanzania and 89 percent of all Ugandan farmers. In the Sahel region and eastern part of sub-Saharan Africa most family farmers are agro-pastoralists. In aggregate terms, 85 percent of the investments in agriculture in Africa, in terms of monetary savings and the labour value, are made by family farmers. Family farmers feed most of the urban populations through diverse formal and informal markets. However, many of them are poor and food insecure. In Malawi (59%), Ethiopia (67%) and Nigeria (72%) of the smallholder farmers live below the national poverty line.

<sup>1</sup> FAO & IFAD. (2019). Putting family farmers at the centre to achieve the SDGs [online]. Rome, FAO. <<http://www.fao.org/3/ca4532en/ca4532en.pdf>>

<sup>2</sup> FAO. (2020). Coronavirus disease 2019(COVID-19) and family farming. <http://www.fao.org/3/cb0417en/CB0417EN.pdf>

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In addition to current challenges faced by the agricultural sector, the COVID-19 Pandemic has brought in additional challenges which require collective attention. For example,

- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to reinforce the resilience of rural and urban agricultural livelihoods and food systems against multiple interconnected and mutually aggravating risks.
- Physical isolation and various levels of restrictions on people's movement to control the spread of the COVID-19 are hindering family farmers' access to markets and slaughterhouses to sell their products and to buy agricultural inputs.
- Considering the nexus between the family and the farm, reduced economic activities in their areas is impacting on the means to supplement farm income, and thus capacity to further invest in their farms.
- The *2020 Global Food Crises Report* shows that due to conflict, weather extremes and economic turbulence, 135 million people across 55 countries and territories were estimated to be experiencing crisis levels of acute food insecurity and more than half of them were in Africa by end 2019<sup>3</sup>. This has been exacerbated by COVID-19. Therefore, supporting family farmers during and post-pandemic requires permanent solutions towards more resilient and sustainable food systems than just the immediate interventions to the current pandemic situation.

In addition to the issues outlined above, there is need for permanent solutions to the following, among several other issues:

- a) Marginalization of women: Women grow 70 percent of Africa's food<sup>4</sup> yet they are marginalized in the ownership of and access to other means of production limiting their control over and access to the products and incomes from family farming.
- b) Access to financial support: small family farms have difficulties in accessing financial support ranging below 5% of families that have access to credit in some countries. It is important to put in place mechanisms to address this.

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<sup>3</sup> FSIN, GRFC 2020 (p.2) <<https://www.fsinplatform.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/GRFC%20ONLINE%20FINAL%202020.pdf>>

- c) Access to markets: local, often informal, markets offering only low prices are the main selling channel for most smallholders, and in some cases, they account for 100 percent of the sales directly to the public.
- d) Access to technologies: farmers have limited access to agriculture best practices and tools for mechanization impacting on productivity in many countries. Agricultural extension services in form of knowledge and information transfer is weak, and in some countries, very few family farmers have access to motorized equipment. Farmer farmers also have inadequate access to digital technologies.

### **Role of Universities and Research Institutions in responding to current and post COVID-19 Pandemic**

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic is global. However, the pandemic has shown that addressing some of its impacts will require local solutions that can better serve the family farmers.

- Universities and research institutions are well placed to play a key role in generating knowledge and technologies to support agricultural production by family farmers and generating data for evidence-based agricultural development policies to address local challenges brought about by the pandemic.
- The role of the academia in ensuring that food systems are sustainable and in strengthening capacities and resilience of the farming communities to shocks is crucial.

### **UNDF as Framework for Addressing Challenges Faced by Family Farmers**

- The United Nations Decade of Family Farming 2019-2028 (UNDF) provides a comprehensive framework that can be adapted into context-specific National Action Plans, for actions to be undertaken in a collective and coherent manner to support family farmers.
- The UNDF serves as a framework for countries to develop public policies and investments to support family farming from a holistic perspective, unleashing the transformative potential of family farmers to contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's Agenda 2063.
- The UNDF aims at bridging innovations and family farmers' traditional knowledge to reshape not only the way we work in agriculture but also our food systems, and the way we will eat in the future.

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- The Global Action Plan of the UNDFP specifically focuses on strengthening the multidimensionality of family farming to promote social innovations contributing to territorial development and food systems that safeguard biodiversity, the environment and culture.
- To support these processes, the creation of an innovation system which links various actors (public sector, academia, private sector, civil society and farmers and their organizations) and which fosters the capacity of farmers and provides incentives for them to innovate is key.
- Inclusive research systems, advisory services, producer organizations and cooperatives, multi-stakeholders' platforms are essential to foster the process of creation/adaptation of innovations, and to improve the flow of information and communication between and among researchers, extension agents and farmers.

### Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic needs multi-stakeholder approaches, and universities and research institutions have an important role to play. The pandemic has exposed inadequacies in food systems and support provided to vulnerable groups, including family farmers. This calls for a review by all actors on how family farmers in Africa should be supported. Family farmers should therefore be part of the process to identify the measures to mitigate the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on their livelihoods and the strategies to strengthen their capacities to cope with the current and future shocks.

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### About the Author

**Dr. Villarreal** has a PhD in Rural Sociology from Cornell University and a BA/MA in Systems and Computing Engineering from the University of Los Andes in Bogotá. She is responsible for the implementation of FAO's innovative strategies on partnerships with the private sector, civil society, academia and research institutions. She coordinates the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT), FAO's policy on Indigenous Peoples, the Parliamentary Fronts against Hunger initiative and the Decade of Family Farming, among others.