Supporting the contribution of family farmers

Every day all over the world, millions of people rise with the morning sun and head into fields, forests and out to sea to tend the crops, rear the livestock and capture the seafood that end up on the tables of so many in their communities and countries. They are family farmers and the United Nations has declared 2014 the International Year of Family Farming - under the theme Feeding the World, Caring for the Earth - to shine a light on these unsung heroes of the global food production system.

For the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), family farming is understood to include crop, livestock, forestry, fishery and aquaculture producers who use predominantly family labour with the head of the household participating directly in the production process, and where the farm activity is the main source of income for the household.

By that definition, nearly 80% of the food supply in developing and developed countries is produced by an estimated 500 million family farms. The scale of this contribution is mirrored in Latin America and the Caribbean, where family farming accounts for more than 80% of agricultural production and generates more than 50% of agricultural employment.

A Regional Dialogue on Family Farming has identified five key thematic areas:

- public policy to support family technology development, extension, and investment;
- information and communication systems to facilitate the collection of data and preparation of analysis;
- succession planning to promote an increase of youth and women in family farming;
- business and economic planning and analysis for enterprise development; and
- sustainable development of family farms emphasizing building resilience and reducing risk.
In spite of this, family farmers often operate without the necessary support mechanisms, a situation which the International Year of Family Farming hopes to address through its four main activities:

- **Supporting the development of policies conducive to sustainable family farming**
- **Increasing knowledge, communication and public awareness**
- **Attaining a better understanding of family farming needs, potential and constraints and ensuring technical support**
- **Creating synergies for sustainability**

### The Caribbean family farmer

The term “family farming” has not traditionally been used in the Caribbean, but it is understood to be a significant sub-group of the small farming community. Most livestock farmers, fisherfolk and small farmers in the region fall under this subheading. A 2012 FAO study, Profile of the Small-Scale Farming in the Caribbean, as well as information provided by national and regional farmer organizations, give detailed insight into contemporary small/family farming.

**Farm/Household size:** Small-scale farmers are categorized on the basis of farm structure - crop and livestock farmers operating on under two hectares (five acres) of land, including landless farmers.

Together they constitute just under 90% of the total farming population under ten hectares and operate on just over 55% of the total area of land under production. It should be noted however that census data across the region has not yet expanded to include backyard farmers, so the number of family farmers is likely to be much higher. 50% of family farms contain five or more persons and 25% contain between 6 and 10 person.

**Land tenure:** 56% of farms are owned by the holder, 26% of land is family-owned, 10% acquired through lease agreements on either privately held land or crown lands. The remaining farms utilize unoccupied lands without permission and evidence suggests that the number of landless farmers is on the rise.

**Gender:** Men represent 70% of the farm holders. However national surveys do not recognize joint ownership so female co-holders may actually be under-reported. Males undertake the heavier tasks associated with animal rearing, fishing activities and crop cultivation, with women playing an important role in contributing to weeding, planting and harvesting duties and fish processing. Those involved in marketing of fresh produce are almost wholly women.

**Age:** The average age of male small farmers is 48 years old, while the average age of female farmers is 55 years. In a few countries young people are involved in farming as early as age 15 years, however in general, youth under the age of 25 years show little interest as holders. Women under 35 years of age are largely absent.

**Produce:** Family farmers are involved in a range of activities including rearing of all types of livestock, fishing and aquaculture, but food crop cultivation still dominates. Many family farms with acreages in excess of the average two acres, produce export crops such as bananas, sugar and rice. The smaller farms generally produce food crops, vegetables, root crops, fruits and herbs - with new crops being added to the mix over time. In some territories, small-scale farmers have branched out into the growing of ornamentals and have started to participate in agro-tourism and agro-forestry activities, but this is still quite minimal.

**Methods:** Traditional farming systems such as intercropping and mixed cropping dominate, though modern systems such as greenhouse technology and organic farming are increasingly being employed. Production methods can include sustainable practices such as integrated pest management, rainwater harvesting and micro irrigation. However many crop farmers still rely heavily on agri-chemicals, mainly fertilizers and pesticides, and livestock farmers use antibiotics.

**Markets:** Domestic outlets for small farmers include village and urban open fresh produce markets, green groceries, periurban roadside markets, supermarkets, higglers and other middlemen, hotels and restaurants and marketing boards. A few countries have experimented with farmers markets. The picture painted by this data is of an aging farming population, coupled with land scarcity issues, insecure markets, low productivity methods and declining...
incomes. All serving as a threat to the viability of family farming.

**FAO projects building capacity for family farmers**

Over the years, the beneficiaries of FAO’s projects have included family farmers. Armed with new knowledge and skills, they are able to create more viable enterprises and generate more sustainable livelihoods.

One example of such a project was implemented in Jamaica over two years by FAO using a two year European Union funding. The project’s overall objective was to reduce poverty and enhance food security for vulnerable groups through the improved availability of safe, affordable, and nutritious food for the rural population and urban poor.

Under the project, FAO and the Government of Jamaica focused on creating a market-driven strategy for increased small ruminant production while targeting family farms. The project sought to enhance small ruminant production among clusters of farmers in selected communities through the demonstration and adoption of best practices and innovation in husbandry, breeding, housing, and nutrition of goats.

Working closely with the Jamaica Goat Farmers’ Association (JGFA), farmers were assigned to clusters, in which they received training. The project’s specific activities included:

- Providing training in leadership and group dynamics for the executive members of the Association
- Setting up of clusters of small ruminant family farmers
- Establishing of nine small ruminant demonstration units at strategic locations across the country
- Training of farmers in improved small ruminant management practices
- Establishing fodder banks, pastures, and forage delivery systems
- Establishing model goat breeding units
- Setting up of livestock waste management systems including the use of on-farm vermi-compost units
- Introducing and training of extension officers and selected farmers in artificial insemination techniques for goats
- Introducing record keeping to support improved

On the project’s successful completion, the advantages of the cluster concepts were clear. By bringing communities of farmers together, family farmers could develop a pool of labour outside their own immediate family units but still within close proximity. Fostering these types of relationships could be instructive for future projects of this kind.

Another project in St Vincent and the Grenadines was able to have an impact on the small rural community of Georgetown.

FAO assisted the Georgetown Craft Makers Association in changing its status from that of informal local community development group to a registered non-profit organization. Once that process was completed, the group was able to access funding for a proposed project to revive the traditional bamboo weaving craft to generate income opportunities for interested local youth.

The funding provided two trainers including an 80 year old elder in the community who well known and respected as a master bamboo weaver. A facilitator was contracted to organize the selection of the trainees and schedule the training. The training sessions were based at a community centre provided free of charge, that was affiliated with the local church. The staff of the forestry department on the island help to identify, allocate and transport the bamboo used in the weaving.

Training took place in 44 sessions over 15 weeks. Trainees were given a small stipend, to offset the loss of a day’s agricultural labour. By the end of the project, 15 persons – mainly young women - were trained in harvesting and processing bamboo and weaving of different types of bamboo baskets and items. They also were advised on how to set prices and market their wares, with a view to tapping into both local as well as a growing tourism market.

**FAO promotion of an enabling environment for Family Farming**

FAO is keen to utilize the occasion of International Year of Family Farming to design specific and targeted interventions. In this regard, The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in collaboration with the World Rural Forum (WRF), the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and the World Farmers’
Organisation (WFO), held the first Regional Dialogue on Family Farming in Latin America and the Caribbean in Santiago, Chile, on October 30-31, 2013.

The objective of the forum was to improve the understanding of the role of family farming in each country and sub-region, as well as to define the main regional issues that should be addressed during the IYFF. Eight agriculturists from the Caribbean were in attendance and reported that the challenges faced by family farms across the region are very similar. They cited four critical areas that need to be addressed:

a. lack of an institutional framework designed to guide the development of family farming;

b. lack of appreciation and undervaluing of the contribution of family farming by society and government;

c. weak and uncoordinated economic, technological, social and environmental policies supporting family farm development, and;

d. lack of public policies to encourage youth and women to remain and work in rural areas.

Out of this regional dialogue, a Caribbean Family Farming Working Group has been formed to serve as a catalyst to develop and implement an agenda to promote increased recognition and development of family farms in the Caribbean region. The institutional membership of the working group is: FAO, Caribbean Farmers Network (CAFAN), Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), Caribbean Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI), The University of the West Indies (UWI), Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation ACP-EU (CTA), and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

After two recent meetings of the Working Group it has been agreed to initiate work in the following five thematic areas:

1. public policy to support family farming technology development, extension, and investment;

2. information and communication systems to facilitate the collection of data and preparation of analysis and publications on family farming;

3. succession planning to promote an increase of youth and women in family farming;

4. business and economic planning and analysis for enterprise development; and

5. sustainable development of family farms emphasising building resilience and reducing risk.

The Caribbean Family Farming Working Group is committed to the promotion of family farm development, through the implementation of actions that enable family farms to increase their adoption of improved systems of production and to have increased access to markets.

Conclusion
As the Caribbean region seeks to reduce its food import bill and build a thriving agricultural system capable of feeding its population, it is crucial that the contribution of family farmers is quantified, recognized and facilitated. FAO stands ready to increase its support to this vital segment of the farming community.

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