

CFS 40 - Side Event Friday 11 October

The role of family farming in providing a sustainable response to food security needs

Key note by Pedro Arias, Economist at the Trade and Markets Division of FAO

Good morning everyone, and thank you Marcela for inviting me to introduce the debate.

I will start my presentation with a few definitions. Then, I will try to answer three questions. Next, I will make the case that a future for family farming depends on the provision of social services. And I will finish with a personal note.

I want to look at three questions:

1. Is family farming today essential for food security?
2. Is it under threat?
3. What about the future of family farming?

But before I can answer those questions, we need to agree on what family farming is. On Tuesday, we witnessed a presentation by the HLPE on investments and smallholder agriculture. The experts make no distinction between smallholder agriculture and family farming. They call for “a new deal”, where family farming is no longer seen as a neglected backward element of the economy, one that stubbornly persists in modern times, but a vital player for today’s food security that needs to be recognised, and supported.

The experts, however, qualify further their definition by saying, and **I QUOTE**:“A smallholding is “small” because resources are scarce and it is consequently difficult to use it to generate a level of income that fulfills basic needs.” **UNQUOTE**

This means, the report makes a substantial contribution to the campaign on family farming, but only as long as it is ring-fenced around a particular type of family farming which is poor and constrained by resource scarcity. It is perfectly legitimate to say that our support should be given to family farms that live in poverty.

But in this debate, we want to have a long term view of family farming. And to do that we must be inclusive. We must include all types of family farms. We need to step back from the tree and look at the woods. I will argue that if we take a few steps back from the tree, we can see that the woods are at risk of extinction for reasons than are somewhat alien to the current debate on productivity.

Question 1. Does FF provide sustainable responses to today’s food security needs? The answer is a clear yes. Anybody who attended the debate on Tuesday at the CFS, or who has read the report by the HLPE, is left with no doubt about this.

Question 2. What are the threats to family farming? Note that we are talking about **family farming**, and not about **family farms**. That is, we are talking about a mode of production that depends on families actually living and working on the farm, as opposed to farms that are owned by a family. Therefore, we are speaking of the threat that families will move out of

rural areas, either because they are forced to, or because they want to. Nobody can blame families for moving out of rural areas. This is important, because people-centred development is, after all, about people having the **freedom to choose** what to do next.

Many **threats to** smallholder family farming have been mentioned elsewhere. Threats include escalating production costs, large scale land acquisitions, jobs in non-agricultural sectors. Should we add to this list **profitable farming**? Most people no doubt abandon agriculture, and move to urban areas, in search of a better life. But others, especially some of those families who can afford to choose where to live, do not necessarily choose to remain in the countryside.

Now let us arrive at the third and final question of this debate:

Question 3. What about the future of family farming? Let us look 2 or 3 generations ahead.

We often hear people say that family farming persists today despite all adversities. But this doesn't sound right to me. To say this, is equivalent to putting the cart before the horse. I would rather think that as long as we have rural areas that are marginalised, we will find there smallholder family farms living in poverty.

Why is this? Well, it's because smallholder family farms populate marginal areas of the countryside; they "nest in the gaps" so to speak. This happened in the past, it happens today, and unless we do something about it, it will happen in the future. Therefore, if we want to see a reduction in the numbers of smallholder family farms, that is, of those living in poverty, we must ensure that the gaps are narrowed.

The title of this Side Event mentions "sustainable responses to food security". This is consistent with a long term vision of family farming. To me, the debates on sustainability take me back to a time when sustainability was all about caring for future generations. Then I look at the larger picture, and at the long run, and I say to myself: If I limit my efforts to solving a "productivist" or "business" like set of problems today, and fail to acknowledge the context in which families live: something is missing.

Unless we provide rural families with social services of a quality that is comparable to those in urban areas, families will move out, and with them goes family farming. Family farming is a way of living.

But if we all agree that family farming is essential to food security, we must ensure that adequate services are available in rural areas now and in the future. This debate is not new, in fact it is rather old, but all my knowledge, training and experience tells me that it needs to be reassessed in light of current debates on globalisation.

Let me conclude on a personal note. My home is a farm of 7 hectares in the Italian countryside. Three of us live there now, where 10 people used to live 50 years ago. 20 years ago the place was renovated, they put in a bathroom. It didn't have one before. I walk around the area and all I see are abandoned stone houses, and modern villas where urban people can relax at the weekends.

We have a daughter. Emilia. I look at her and I ask myself whether I am doing the right thing, especially when I compare the schools she could attend in Rome. Are we being selfish in relation to our daughter? We work the land at a loss, which is another good reason for selling the place. But I also happen to have a hard-headed woman next to me who asks me: Pedro, si nos vamos, qué pasa con los animales? If we go, who would take care of the animals? I could ask one of my neighbours to look after them, but would he take care of them the way we do, as a family?

And with that, I thank you all for your attention, and I hand over to Marcela.