

# Making Small Scale Farming Work in Sub-Saharan Africa

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*“Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach him how to fish and you will feed him for a lifetime. But teach him the philosophy behind fishing and he will learn not only to fish, but to hunt and to farm as well” - Anonymous*

## Abstract

Small scale farmers are among the poorest and the hungriest in the world and yet small scale farming is supposed to pave the way to ending poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. It even appears as if efforts by governments and the development community at large to support small scale farming in sub-Saharan Africa are not yielding significant results. Poverty is deepening and the number of the hungry is going up not down. In the light of the global commitments to agriculture, calls are being made wherever possible to invest in small scale agriculture but different results cannot be expected if the same strategies are used.

This article reiterates and proposes some ideas to make agriculture work for development in sub-Saharan Africa. New strategies and investments in small scale farming must take cognizance of some key facts, that market access is key to small scale food production systems as such efforts to increase agricultural productivity can only be effective if they are linked to an appreciation of market potential. As much as small farmers require assistance to be able to produce more food, they equally require assistance to be able to sell Africa's food and this requires serious reconsideration of post-production systems in sub-Saharan Africa. Also, that there is a need for strategies that will seek to end the way interventions in the agricultural sector are de-linked from each other and promote an integrated approach of supporting the full continuum of production, processing and marketing of food.

**Keywords:** Small scale farming, poverty, sub-Sahara Africa, food insecurity, human capabilities, food processing.

## Introduction

Small farmers in sub-Saharan Africa have been recipients of various forms of agricultural support over the years notwithstanding their situation does not appear to have improved very much. Careful examination reveals certain challenges that have contributed to the poor performance of small scale farming and the lack of improvement in farmers' situations. First the supports they have received and continue to receive does not address the totality of their needs. For instance farmers have been supported with productive inputs and technology, with infrastructural support, with credit and market information or with support with processing and storage. All these projects and programmes however may be scattered in different geographic locations in any one country at a point in time, totally de-linked from each other thus denying farmers the synergies that different levels of support could offer. The lack of continuity in the chain of support, with production level support being subsequently complemented with support with processing and then with marketing has contributed to denying small farmers the benefits they should derive from their farming activities.

Secondly, there seems to be an exclusive emphasis on food production to the neglect of more market oriented production systems. Prevailing thinking on addressing food insecurity and indeed poverty using agriculture still leans largely on the understanding of food insecurity as an availability problem thus support for food production attracts disproportionately more of the support that agriculture should receive. Addressing availability alone is not sufficient and it has not demonstrated to be sufficient and adequate in ending hunger and poverty. Food insecurity today is also an access problem, which denies even farmers the economic entitlements necessary to access food so that supporting intensified production or diversification must be complemented with market access in order to raise rural people's incomes. Producers also need access to markets because markets provide avenues for them to sell their products in order to fully benefit from investments in increased productivity. For agriculture to effectively serve the purpose of tackling food insecurity and rural poverty, small scale farmers will have to orient farming towards producing to meet basic family food needs and also towards the attainment of economic wellbeing.

A third challenge for small farmers is the issue of deprivations in new skills and knowledge to respond to their ever evolving circumstances. The area of land they cultivate is relatively small and they farm lands that are far from roads and extension services. They lack adequate and reliable access to external inputs, their lands are increasing being degraded, and they are challenged by the adverse effects of climate change. HIV/AIDS is taking a serious toll on the agricultural labour force. Most importantly, small scale farmers are not benefiting from food markets especially urban food markets and they appear to be losing these markets. In recognition of these challenges, using various tools, they are being assisted with new technologies, extension programmes, inputs such as seeds, fertilizer and agrochemicals, they are being introduced to new varieties of crops and farming methodologies, attempts are being made to link them to markets and credit services and they are being equipped to respond to climate change. These developments are positive indeed but do not seem to adequately address an underlying issue, the need of farmers for new abilities and capabilities.

Captured in the words of De Janvry and Sadoulet (2008), farmers and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) need to have the ability to deal with the complexities of these new technologies, new institutions, new market opportunities, and the far reaches of globalization. But where are the rural business schools to provide training in entrepreneurship for smallholders and SMEs?

### **The way forward**

To address some of these challenges, key steps must be taken in the design and implementation of development programmes and projects targeted at small farmers. If the wider objective of alleviating rural poverty and food insecurity is to be realized, practical actions must be taken to ensure that farmers receive the full package of support they need to benefit from agriculture. This calls for a more effective assessment of needs and targeting of assistance so that in one respect, assistance gets to those who need it the most and also to ensure that targeted farmers receive all the support they require to produce, process and store, and market their produce in continuum. Mechanisms must also be sought to ensure that increased food availability translates into food security implying linking small farmers to markets – local, urban and regional especially. As echoed by the FAO High-Level Expert Forum 2009, population growth and urbanization point to domestic and intra-African markets as the most promising areas for stimulating medium- to long-term agricultural growth. Small scale farmers must be more actively assisted to take advantage of markets not necessarily international markets but especially national and intra-African food markets.

Global food production is increasingly being organized into chains and these chains are being transformed into knowledge based chains which have high on their agenda issues of food prices, assuring food quality and safety and meeting general consumer demands. Because of trends towards a globalization of markets, it means these issues directly impact food production and indeed small holder farming in sub-Saharan Africa where small farmers are already losing their share of food markets. Because markets do not respond to needs but to demands, small scale farmers must necessarily produce to meet market demands and these demands are getting tougher and meeting them will increasingly require new knowledge and skill which small farmers do not readily possess. “Rural Schools” or such facilities are required to offer poor rural farmers functional education and to strengthen the capacities of adults and the young men and women involved in agriculture, with basic literacy to be able to adopt technologies, participate more effectively in institutions and be able to make more informed business decisions that affect not only their farming practices but their lives.

Quite obviously addressing rural poverty and food insecurity using agriculture requires investments in off-farm agricultural activities to complement primary production. Issues of seasonal glut of food in local markets, the very high levels of post-harvest losses, the low capacities for food processing and value addition and low market participation by small farmers are serious challenges. A very significant amount of food that is produced in Africa for instance is lost each year, negatively impacting food availability and access.

In west Africa for instance, Aworh (2008) puts production losses at around 50% for perishable food commodities including fruits, vegetables, roots and tubers and about 30% for food grains including maize, sorghum, millet, rice and cowpeas. A small scale farmer who already does not produce enough, and yet loses this much of seasonal harvest cannot possible profit from farming. Rural food processing enterprises are needed to process seasonal surpluses for the markets – especially urban markets to improve on the incomes of poor farmers. In the words of Rottger 2002, small farmers cannot remain only producers of foodstuffs but have to take on the additional role of entrepreneurs in order to improve their livelihoods and move beyond subsistence farming.

National governments must promote and actively support food processing especially first stage processing of primary agricultural products and market avenues will have to be created for indigenous food commodities which are most often what small food growers produce. Farmers will have to be assisted to produce to meet basic market standards of quality and safety and to effectively package their produce. In addition, policy instruments are needed by national governments in Sub-Saharan Africa to strengthen the position of locally produced foods in national markets especially urban markets. Governments must create the enabling environment for the private sector to invest in such strategic areas as agro processing. Agro based small and medium scale enterprises (SMEs) are needed to add value to the primary produce of small farmers and these SMEs require the conducive space to trade their value added products within national and regional borders. Governments must endeavor to overcome such obstacles to intra-regional trade as structural and policy obstacles including, tariff barriers and trade restrictions, non-tariff barriers such as differing standards and inspection systems and bureaucratic bottlenecks.

## **Conclusion**

Agriculture is the backbone of overall growth for the majority of countries in sub-Saharan Africa and is essential for poverty reduction and food security but poverty alleviation cannot be sustained without economic growth and economic growth cannot be sustained in non-competitive industries implying that agriculture must become competitive for small scale farming to succeed in addressing poverty and food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa. As pointed out by the 2008 World Development Report, the failure to exploit the potentials of agriculture has significantly compromised the role agriculture could play in reducing poverty.

To effectively exploit agriculture for development, efforts must be made to link-up interventions in the sector so that the synergies of various levels and stages of support could complement each other. Support especially in post-production activities must be increased; storage, processing and marketing issues will have to be holistically addressed. Small farmers must be assisted to take advantage of urban and other regional markets with their produce. This will require re-tooling on the part of farmers. They will have to be assisted with new skills and knowledge needed to produce to market standards and in farming entrepreneurship.

National governments and the development community at large will have to work more seriously to overcome the barriers that prevent private investments in agriculture and the obstacles to domestic and intra-regional trade in food. Only when small farming becomes a business in practice can agriculture assume that role as a tool for development in sub-Saharan Africa.

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