Family farming: a one hundred percent option

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In October 2024, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) convened a seminar to mark the "mid-point" of the UN Decade of Family Farming (2019-2028). The event featured a series of initiatives to ensure a memorable celebration, including the construction of a wooden farm barn in the FAO's front gardens in Rome. In addition, a special webpage was launched, bringing together materials prepared for the occasion. Among the "Key Facts" presented on the webpage was that "family farms produce more than 80% of the world's food in terms of value, confirming the central importance of family farming in global food security today and for future generations." This statement was repeated several times during the event by different stakeholders, including FAO Director-General Qu Dongyu.

What caught my attention was not only the magnitude of the number — here in Brazil, where some still consider themselves the largest in the world, they say it is 70%! — but also the accuracy of the reference to "world food in terms of value". I wrote to the organizers asking for more information, hoping that there would be some new "background paper" prepared by the organization to substantiate the data, which is usually the case at the FAO. However, this time, that was not the case: there is no new support to support this statement!

I share the response received to illustrate the limitations of this information:

> *"The primary source of this information on family farming is a background paper prepared for the 2014 State of Food and Agriculture report. The figures were included in the 2014 SOFA (pp. xi–9). And an updated version of the study was published in 2019, coinciding with the launch of the Decade of Family Farming (UNDFF). The figures remained unchanged and were also used in the UNDFF Global Action Plan (GAP).*
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> *The authors derived these figures based on evidence that family farms occupy about 70–80% of agricultural land.* ***The paper estimates the share of food production by family farms, regardless of size, using the share of land they operate as a proxy for their share of the value of food production.*** *Taking the value of food production in 2015 at the national level and multiplying it by the share of land operated by family farms, the study found that the weighted average across 53 countries was 77%. Based on this, it follows that family farmers produce about 80% of the world's food in terms of value. Therefore, we do not have precise data on the amount of food produced by family farms, only aggregated data at the national level on the value of food production in GDP, regardless of quantity."*

In the following text, I will try to show that the relevance of family farming should not be measured only by its contribution to food production in general. As mentioned many times in the past, family farmers were seen as a problem to be solved and as a target of social policies, with limited productive potential. This is the mentality that we need to change, even today.

Family farmers are not only part of the “problem” of rural poverty; in fact, they can also be part of the solution to food security and sustainable development, if supported by public policies. It is worth remembering that one of the main drivers of technological advancement at the beginning of the Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s was mechanization, which favored operations on larger scale units. At the time, the small size of family farms was perceived as a significant obstacle to their competitive survival. However, advances, particularly in digital technologies, have completely changed this perception today.

I would like to recall why we started all this at FAO. About 15 years ago, family farms were referred to by broad segments of academia and among organizations in the United Nations system as “small producers,” mainly because about 90 percent of them operated on areas smaller than 2 hectares, according to FAO’s own estimates. However, as we know, discussions about farm size ignore differences in land quality and the socioeconomic contexts in which they operate, while farm production varies significantly depending on these factors.

Recognizing the centrality of family farming required a change in narrative and perception, moving from the exclusive focus on the size of properties and their contribution to food production to highlighting the relevance of this group, not only for food security, but also for sustainable development in general and the preservation of biodiversity, in particular.

Furthermore, families that manage small farms have diversified sources of income, not only from agricultural production, but also from agricultural labor markets and non-agricultural activities. Recent studies indicate that this diversification of income sources has been growing and is likely to increase the share of non-agricultural income in the future, driven by the increasing urbanization of the rural world. This is another aspect that our "agrarian and agronomic heritage " continues to prevent us from thinking about new non-agricultural policies for the rural world.

In the early 1990s, seeking to establish their own identity, small farmers from different regions began to exchange experiences and coordinate efforts through regional organizations and international platforms. Many of today’s leading regional and international organizations were created during this period, including La Via Campesina (1993), the Confederation of Family Farmers’ Organizations of Mercosur (COPROFAM, 1994), the Network of Peasant and Producer Organizations of West Africa (ROPPA, 2000), and the Asian Farmers’ Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA, 2002).

One of the main drivers of this process was to bring the specific perspectives of what were then called “small producers” to the attention of national governments, with the aim of promoting specific public policies for this segment. Despite the considerable heterogeneity among them, one defining characteristic was always present: they were managed by families or by one or more family members.

That is why FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the World Food Programme (WFP) launched the International Year of Family Farming (2014) on 22 November 2013 at UN Headquarters in New York. This marked the beginning of a global effort to highlight the potential of family farmers to eradicate hunger, preserve natural resources and promote sustainable development. Speaking on behalf of FAO, I stated: "In choosing to celebrate this year, we recognize that family farmers are central figures in

responding to the dual urgency facing the world today: improving food security and preserving natural resources."

The International Year of Family Farming gave us the opportunity to begin revitalizing this crucial sector. Years later, we managed to approve the UN Decade of Family Farming (2019–2028) at the General Assembly, where we reaffirmed that family farmers must be at the center of addressing the dual challenges the world currently faces: improving food security while preserving the natural resources crucial to our very survival.

And here we are in 2024: five years after the launch of the Decade of Family Farming, FAO and IFAD hosted the Global Family Farming Forum in Rome, with the theme “Good food for all, today and tomorrow”. The event highlighted the role of family farmers as central to providing nutritious and diverse food for all. It is important to note that we are no longer talking just about food in general, but about “nutritious and diverse food”, which implicitly recognizes their role in preserving biodiversity.

Thus, while acknowledging the crucial role of smallholder farmers in feeding the world, especially in low- and middle-income countries, we believe that their value should not be limited to food production in general. This is also the view of Dion et al. (2023), who emphasize that “many debates about the future of smallholder farms focus solely on agricultural production, rather than considering the full context of farm household livelihoods, which include off-farm activities or the agri-food system on which they rely to buy inputs and sell products. The future of smallholder farms should instead be assessed from a holistic livelihoods and agri-food system perspective.”

It must be said that the widely cited estimate that family farmers produce over 80% of the world’s food, based on 2014 data, can be challenged by several recent studies. For example, a background paper also prepared for SOFI 2024 estimated that family farms of less than 2 hectares globally produce around 30–34% of the food supply (Ricciardi et al., 2018). But, as the authors themselves acknowledge, this estimate too has been questioned, starting with the definition of what constitutes the list of “foods we consume”. More importantly, regardless of whether the correct estimate is 80% or 30–34% of the total food we consume (simply 3/4 or 1/3), the most recent statistical evidence suggests that this contribution has been declining over the last decade, especially in more developed countries, but also in less developed countries.

The case of Brazil, one of the world’s largest food producers, exemplifies this trend well. In the early 1980s, for example, it was widely accepted that family farms contributed about 70% of food production. This figure came from a supposed “average” to simplify the long list of product tabulations from the agricultural censuses from the 1960s to the 1990s of the relative production of “small producers” stratified by the size of their establishments. Hoffmann (2015) showed the difficulties associated with this 70% figure, arguing that “it is practically impossible to assess, with reasonable precision, what proportion of the raw material used in the production of food consumed in Brazil originates from family farming production”. Furthermore, it is very difficult to separate what food is consumed by humans from other uses.

Mauro del Grossi's careful work, based on the current legal definition of the category "family farming", showed that, despite a small reduction in the number and total area occupied by the category, its share in the value of production fell sharply, falling from 35% to 23% between the 2006 and 2017 agricultural censuses. This sharp drop reflects a

drastic reduction in the share of staple food crops, such as rice, which fell from 34% to 11% between 2006 and 2017; beans (all varieties), which fell from 72% to 23%; and corn, from 46% to 12%. Smaller but still significant declines occurred in the value of family farming production in cassava, which fell from 85% to 70%, and even in horticulture, which fell from 65% to 60% between 2006 and 2017. Judging by the information available on the expansion of agribusiness in recent years, this decline in family farming production must have become even more pronounced in the current decade.

But does the reduction in the participation of family units in food production mean that their contribution to future sustainable development is less significant? I argue the opposite: the importance of family farming has increased for at least three reasons.

First, they contribute to the sustainability of agri-food systems by preserving the genetic diversity of crops and livestock and supporting ecosystem services. As highlighted by Dion et al. (2023), small farms grow a greater diversity of crops and harbor more non-agricultural biodiversity, both at the farm and landscape scales, compared to larger farms. They also grow a greater variety of traditional crops and preserve genetic resources by cultivating local varieties. In addition, small farms often have more tree cover than larger farms, contributing to above- and below-ground carbon storage, which has global benefits for climate change mitigation. Trees also improve water infiltration, benefiting other water users in the landscape and in downstream regions.

Second, according to the World Bank (2016), two-thirds of the extreme poor live in rural areas, and the livelihoods of two to three billion rural people – often the most food insecure and vulnerable – still depend mainly on small family farms. However, households on these farms themselves often cannot afford to eat a nutritious diet, especially in the poorest regions. As the FAO has repeatedly stressed, being a smallholder does not guarantee that they will be well fed!

Third, family farms produce a significant portion of the most nutritious foods that the world needs most today, such as fruits, vegetables and legumes (FV). It is important to note that global FV production is still insufficient to ensure a healthy diet in many regions, with the exception of parts of Asia, according to SOFI 2024, considering the basic requirement of 400g per day recommended by the WHO. This gap represents a great opportunity to promote policies to strengthen family farming with the aim of increasing FV production, a particularly labor-intensive segment.

In summary, I agree with Diao et al (2023) that climate change and current economic transformations will create challenges and opportunities for family farmers in the next decade.

> *"Some small commercial farms will continue to focus on traditional export crops – for example, cocoa in Ghana, cotton in Mali and coffee in Ethiopia – while a growing number will turn to products that serve the diverse diets of growing domestic urban markets. These include fruits, vegetables, fish, poultry, edible oils, milk and grains such as soybeans. Non-cereal crops are particularly labour-intensive and often lack economies of scale, allowing small farms to remain competitive. Over time, we expect greater specialisation in growing high-value crops and a move away from a mix of cash and subsistence crops, similar to what is seen among specialist vegetable farmers (...) or specialist poultry and pig farmers."*

In preparation for the Family Farming Conference in 2024, FAO and IFAD presented a basic guidance document highlighting the potential of family farming as follows:

> *"There are over 550 million family farms worldwide, accounting for over 90% of the total 608 million farms. Ninety-four percent of these farms are smaller than 5 hectares, collectively accounting for only 17% of the total agricultural area, with 98% smaller than 50 hectares (Lowder, Sánchez, and Bertini, 2021). The prevalence of small farms is most pronounced in low- and lower-middle-income countries (mainly in East Asia, the Pacific, South Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa). In these regions, around 80% of farms are smaller than 2 hectares, operating around 30–40% of the land, a much higher proportion than in other regions (High-Level Panel of Experts [HLPE], 2013).*
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> *"Average farm sizes vary by region and country income level. In low-income countries, a significant trend of increasing numbers of units and decreasing average farm sizes has been observed. Small and medium-sized family farmers are not disappearing, but rather adapting and transforming to cope with instability and unpredictability (e.g., slow-moving events, natural disasters, and conflicts) (Giller and Andersson, 2024). This persistence can be attributed to several factors that impact the effectiveness of traditional policy solutions. These factors include increasing multiactivity, particularly among small family farmers, to reduce their exclusive dependence on agriculture by diversifying income sources with off-farm employment; cultural aspects; and land-use elements, such as the use of land as a safety net in the absence of rural pensions or due to the precariousness of off-farm employment (Rigg, Salamanca, and Thompson, 2016).*
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> *"Collectively, smallholder farmers produce 80% of the world's food in terms of value (FAO and IFAD, 2019). In low- and middle-income countries, smallholder farmers, with less than 20 hectares, produce 70% of the food. These small farms have greater crop diversity. Globally, there is an inverse relationship between farm size and the number of crop species present, with smaller farms supporting greater non-agricultural biodiversity (Herrero et al., 2017; Ricciardi et al., 2021).*
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> *"Evidence shows that family farmers play a significant role in contributing to food security and enabling more diverse, nutritious and healthy diets. They also enhance biodiversity while promoting the efficient and sustainable use and management of natural resources. The multifunctionality of family farming also encompasses the preservation and transmission of knowledge and culture (FAO and IFAD, 2019).*
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> *"Family farming is characterized by a unique relationship between the family and the farm, encompassing dimensions that go beyond production, including diverse non-agricultural activities. The family and the farm are an integral part of the rural economy, and their practices – which include production, processing, marketing, consumption and social reproduction – are deeply rooted in local territories.*
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> *These practices continuously interact, combine and transform each other, renewing ecological, economic and social resources (FAO and IFAD, 2019)."*
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> Let me conclude by quoting from the FAO and IFAD (2019) Global Plan of Action for the UN Decade of Family Farming, 2019–2028:

"Family farmers have demonstrated their ability to develop new strategies and innovative responses to emerging social, environmental and economic challenges. They do more than produce food – they simultaneously fulfill environmental, social and cultural functions and act as guardians of biodiversity by preserving landscapes and conserving community and cultural heritage. In addition, they have the knowledge to produce nutritious and culturally appropriate food within the framework of indigenous traditions.

"Indeed, nothing comes closer to the paradigm of sustainable food production than family farming. When supported by supportive policies and programs, family farmers have a unique ability to reverse the failures of a global food system that, while producing enough food for everyone, wastes one-third of the food produced, does not provide enough nutritious food for healthy and affordable diets, fails to reduce hunger, and generates social inequalities."

Finally, I would like to say that the approval by the World Council on Food Security (WFC) of the Second World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development, to be held in Colombia in early 2026, provides a unique opportunity to develop a proposal to revitalize family production to fill the gap in fruit, vegetables and legumes throughout the world – and thus allow access to healthier food for everyone, while ensuring a less unequal distribution of property than we currently have.

More equitable access to land is a prerequisite for the empowerment of family farmers. Family farming plays a central role in ensuring household food security and strengthening the resilience of food systems in the face of climate change. In addition, traditional agricultural practices are evolving into locally adapted and climate-resilient systems, such as family farming, home gardens and urban agriculture. These models not only promote environmental sustainability, but also create economic and social opportunities for vulnerable communities.

For this, there is no doubt that family farming is a 100% option!

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