

Aida Isinika: reflections on the eDialogue

In the first of a four-part blog series, Aida Isinika shares her experience of the third UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, Foresight4Food, IFAD & APRA eDialogue session, all about African regional perspectives on the future for small-scale farming.

Written by Aida Isinika

It was an honour to participate in the 'African Regional Perspectives' discussion at the [third eDialogue session](#); there were a number of valuable points raised and interesting conversations. First, it was evident from the discussion that, despite the many challenges facing smallholder farmers, their presence will remain important for some time to come because they still account for a significant share of the overall food production in many countries. Second, despite some studies showing a trend of increasing numbers of medium-scale farmers in some countries, agriculture in the form of smallholder farming and engagement in agricultural value chains remains the source of employment for over 70% of the households in many countries as it is in Tanzania.

These countries also typically have limited alternatives, such as service and industry, for agricultural labour to move into. This means there is a need to explore and support opportunity spaces which have presented some dividends for smallholder farmers. Some of these areas include; intensification, when consistently supported, and diversification of income sources, leading to increasing agricultural productivity, food and nutrition diversity and poverty reduction. These opportunities have been driven by population growth, regional integration through improved infrastructure and market access, and increasing irrigation. These areas require continued facilitation, with particular focus on supporting smallholder farmers who still produce the largest share of food in Africa.

The session also **turned** to areas that require further improvement, primarily in regards to equality and sustainability of African food systems. For example, population pressure and area expansion to meet the growing demand for food and fibre is putting more pressure on marginal areas, hence the need to address environmental concerns for the sustainability of ecosystems long term. Additionally, gender gaps in access to resources, productivity and benefits accruing from farming and participation in agricultural value chains need to be monitored and addressed for inclusive and sustainable development. Likewise, youths should be encouraged and supported to participate in agriculture, addressing their challenges related to access to land while capitalising on their competitive advantage through the use of ICT and technology (such as WhatsApp and YouTube) as niches, especially for market access. Experience from the APRA study in Tanzania shows that youths are actively engaged in the rice value chain (a high value and tradable crop), manoeuvring their way through the challenges they face. Their participation in rice commercialisation

ranges from engaging directly in farming to related services demanded by actors along the value chain, which included providing labour services from ploughing, weeding and spraying rice fields to applying pesticides and providing rental services for sprayers. Others provide mobile money services, and transport to and from the field. These activities, and many others, widen the scope for youth inclusion in the rice value chain.

Across multiple countries in Africa, there have been efforts to address the many challenges facing smallholder farmers. In Tanzania, for example, such efforts have included a stoppage on export bans, as well as continuing efforts to improve infrastructure (road, electricity, communication and irrigation). These endeavours need to continue and penetrate deeper into rural areas. However, many uncertainties also remain in commodity markets due to frequent reforms, some of which have worked against farmers due to inadequate analysis before they are implemented. Thus, moving forward, governments and policymakers need to ensure that reforms are well-thought out and properly implemented.

In sum, the session provided a valuable opportunity to discuss critical aspects of agriculture and smallholder farming in Africa, as well as to look to the future of this field to better understand all that can be done to support farmers and agriculture in order to benefit the continent as a whole.

To learn more about the eDialogue series, click [here](#)

Please note: During this time of uncertainty caused by the COVID19 pandemic, as for many at this time, some of our APRA work may well be affected but we aim to continue to post regular blogs and news updates on agricultural policy and research.