

Martin Muchero's perspective: The challenges facing small-scale farming and how to address them

The second instalment of a four-part blog series highlights the experiences and takeaways of expert panellist Martin Muchero, from the Africa Regional Perspectives session of the third UN Sustainable Development Solutions Networks, Foresight4Food, IFAD and APRA eDialogue, regarding the future for small-scale farming.

Written by Martin Muchero

The [eDialogue session](#) focusing on Africa regional perspectives regarding the future of small-scale agriculture was not only very informative but brought about a shift in the traditional thinking of the importance, significance and value of smallholder farming. I found it very interesting, thought provoking and most valuable to even the broader debate about poverty reduction. During the discussion, I highlighted three critical changes impacting small-scale farming from a food security perspective: climate change, macro-economic conditions and, lastly, COVID-19 and similar such pandemics. Thus, it became important to ask, 'what are the pathways of impact of these changes on smallholder farming?' In addition, we need to consider the implications of these changes on public policy. More specifically, what should we be promoting to ensure small-scale farming remains an important element and is better improved for the future?

Mitigation of critical impacts

Climate-induced shocks and hazards are linked to reduced agricultural production, displacement of people and damage to homes and critical infrastructure. Food production is affected by access to arable land with suitably fertile soils, adequate water resources, adequate inputs, including high quality seeds, fertilisers and agro-chemicals, and conducive climatic conditions. Therefore, the availability of food and the purchasing power of households, as influenced by the amount of household resources a family has and the affordability (prices) of food commodities being offered, lead to reduced food security as a result of climate change.

Next, **macro-economic conditions**, such as poor governance and accountability, political instability and conflicts dynamics impact food security in numerous ways. High levels of inflation and rising unemployment both lead to increased poverty levels and eroded household purchasing power which, again, result in heightened food insecurity, particularly for rural households. Additionally, the continued multiple and large-scale complex crises, such as protracted insecurity and mass displacements, have taken a toll on small-scale farming through a loss of income and livelihoods and thus increased levels of poverty, inequalities and food insecurity.

Lastly, considering that local food markets are the backbone of the informal economy and particularly small-scale farming for most countries on the African continent, the restrictions in movement to prevent the **spread of COVID-19** have led to serious impacts on economic activities, health, wellbeing and social protection and gender and other inequalities. Hundreds of thousands of informal traders, including those servicing small-scale farming, cannot undertake their normal business operations, the

health systems of most countries at least in the SADC region have been highly compromised with inadequate investment into health facilities and services, which is more felt in small-scale farming, and a rise in cases of domestic violence by upwards of 30% in reported cases have deepened pre-existing inequalities in the largest labour force in the agricultural sector; women.

Effect on policy

COVID is giving some of the countries in the southern Africa region reason for insight. Botswana is now looking at upscaling its horticultural strategies, as restrictions on travel and movement, and therefore imports, have highlighted the importance of smallholder production. We've also seen a policy shift towards focus on the smallholder producers and the key question policymakers are grappling with is "can the smallholder farmers do more, and what can be done to help them achieve more?"

On reflection, we also need to think more holistically and broadly towards rural development, a key area that needs to be promoted. Although we are not short of rural development strategies, we are lacking effective implementation of, and the necessary investment in, those strategies. I believe that provides a much broader response to the various issues we're talking about and the importance of smallholder farmers.

So, one of the key changes from a policy perspective is now a shift away from the standard trickle-down effect theory of economic benefits rising or affecting rural poverty, in favour of a more active way of addressing rural poverty, or smallholder difficulties, with more robust non-farm activity taking place. There are various means of achieving the assurance of small-scale farming from a public policy perspective, including areas such as agroecology and non-farm enterprise systems, and their growth and promotion. This is in addition to the other key elements of rural development that require effective approaches, effective resourcing, enhanced commitment, improved income and non-income related factors, and social innovativeness (decentralisation of power and enhanced collaborative competences) as well as the full participation of the smallholder farmers in various policy formulations and implementation.

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