

# Repositioning family farming in global agriculture

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The United Nations (UN) has officially declared 2019 to 2028 as the decade of family farming. This follows the success of the International Year of Family Farming campaign (IYFF) which ran in 2014, aiming to reposition family farming at the centre of agricultural, environmental and social policies in the national agendas by identifying gaps and opportunities to promote a shift towards a more equal and balanced development.



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This campaign further aims to serve as a framework to promote better public policies on family farming and offers a unique opportunity to contribute to ending hunger and poverty as well as achieving the sustainable development goals (SDGs).

## What is family farming?

When the IYFF was declared, the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), which is a subsidiary of the UN and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) adopted the following definition of family farming: *Family farming (which includes all family-based agricultural activities) is a means of organising agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production which is managed and operated by a family and predominately reliant on family labour, both women's and men's. The family and the farm are linked, co-evolve and combine economic, environmental, reproductive, social and cultural functions.* (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations -FAO, 2013)

To date, there are more than 500 million family farms around the world. More than 90% of these farms are managed by an individual or family and depend primarily on family labour. This means that a large number of people depend on farming as a source of income to provide for their families, especially on a continent such as Africa where subsistence and medium-sized farming operations are common. Furthermore, family farms are the main producers of food in both developed and developing countries, placing them at the centre of a very important dialogue about global food security, poverty and climate change.

The objective of the Decade of Family Farming is for governments to adopt policies to create an enabling environment for smallholder and medium-sized farmers to survive in an era when agriculture is highly industrialised. It is imperative that global consensus on family farming is adopted to meet the demands of feeding a world population of nine billion by 2050.

On 14 May 2018, the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) and FAO renewed their partnership and signed a memorandum of understanding that will generate and promote knowledge and good practice examples of how cooperatives in the food and agriculture sectors can be sustainable and inclusive enterprises; support advancement of cooperatives as a business model that is well-performing, inclusive of small-scale producers and family farmers and responsive to members' needs; ensure participation of cooperatives and their members in regional and global policy consultation processes; and support the establishment of an enabling environment for co-operatives to develop and thrive.

### **By the end of the decade, the UN is expecting to see:**

- Results contributing to the implementation and scope of the 2030 Development Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- Design and implementation of laws and programmes focused on family farming, paying special attention to access to productive resources and to the improvement of infrastructure and services in rural areas.
- Progressive recognition of the equal status of rural women as well as the progressive increase in rural women's access to land and other productive resources, investment, credit, training and information.

As was the case during IYFF, the family farming decade will seek maximum cooperation and understanding between farmers' organisations, rural associations, research centres, governments and international institutions.

### **Custodians of biodiversity**

At a three-day meeting held during May 2018 in Rome to discuss the work of the FAO acting as a biodiversity mainstreaming platform, a group of 250 ministers, policymakers, experts, and private and civil society representatives provided a number of suggestions for the organisation's future work on biodiversity.

José Graziano da Silva, director-general of the FAO noted that the upcoming UN Decade of Family Farming will provide an opportunity to make the case to food producers regarding the importance of mainstreaming biodiversity concerns into their activities. "We must not forget that family farmers are the foremost custodians of agricultural biodiversity," said Graziano da Silva.

### **On home soil**

Nation in Conversation, held during Nampo 2018, held a panel discussion on the UN Decade of Family Farming and the topic in general. The discussion brought together thought leaders in the agricultural industry to give a better understanding on what this might mean for South African family farmers and how the Decade of Family Farming can help smallholders to compete in the formal market.

CEO of Agbiz, Dr John Purchase, kickstarted the conversation with facts and figures relating to the phenomenon of family farming. "The end of this decade should see smallholder farmers being able to compete and thrive in the market, wherever they are in the world. This is what the Decade of Family Farming is about, namely making sure that the small guys in the

industry also get a piece of the pie.”

A self-made family farmer, Pitso Sekhoto, who is also the chairman of Eastern Free State Apple Projects, highlighted how difficult it is to survive as a small or medium-sized farmer in the agricultural industry. “Without passion and self-drive, you will not achieve anything,” he said. “Smallholders in South Africa are blocked from competing fairly in the formal market because of compliance and competition, which are some of the policies that the UN needs to look at when devising good practice examples for government(s) to follow and implement.”

A massive hurdle for smallholders is that government has been complacent in helping farmers to grow and enter the market. “The government is supposed to make market access easy so that those who are prepared to work the land are given the opportunity to do so,” said Pitso.

## **Most important policy structures needed for family farms to succeed**

Dan Kriek, president of Agri SA mentioned the most important policy structures that need to be addressed in order for family farms to better succeed. These include:

- Property rights
- Finance models
- Market policies
- Disaster management policies
- Post-settlement support policies

The well-known Prof Johan Willemse added a dimension that is not often considered. He focussed on the fact that small farming families themselves need to have a plan that details who will play what role in the farm going forward. “As much as it is important to have a financial plan, it is also important to have a succession plan that will take the family business from one generation to the next,” he said.

## **Making sure that smallholder farms succeed**

The experts agreed that it is time that agriculture is not regarded as a stand-alone industry and that other departments such as water and sanitation, labour and more, need to come to the party so that South Africa has a cohesive plan in making sure that smallholder farms succeed. “Perhaps it’s time for South Africa to adopt a farm bill, just like in the United States, which cuts across all parties to ensure that the agricultural industry has enough structure to help support and sustain the lifeline of all smallholder farmers,” Purchase added.

It is clear that the stakeholders in the industry, including government, should come together and no longer work in silos, to ensure that the industry grows as a collective and that family farms are supported by the community, government and private sector to help them feed the nation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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