



# How can land governance and support to small-scale family farming work together to strengthen food security and reduce poverty?

Findings of an ILC global research project

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There are at least 1.5 billion small-scale family farmers across the world. They depend largely on their own production for food and livelihoods, while making huge contributions to local and global food markets and to food security. Nevertheless, a large proportion of those who live in extreme poverty are family farmers. In the context of a wider commitment to promote the *2014 International Year of Family Farming*, the International Land Coalition has supported a global research project on "*Family Farming and People-Centred Land Governance: exploring linkages, sharing experience, and identifying gaps*", in which seven civil society and research organisations participated, selected through an open call. The project investigates linkages between family farming and land governance, and in specific cases explores recommendations for both land and agricultural policies, and the roles of different actors in enabling family farmers to upscale their contributions to development and food security.

Land governance – the mechanisms and processes by which society determines how land is used, for what purpose, and with what distribution of rights and benefits – is central to development and to public concerns with food security, social inclusion, the future of rural regions and the quest for environmental sustainability. Yet the control and ownership of land is a principal source of social, economic and political power in human society. Due to unequal patterns of land distribution, and poor recognition of family farmers' importance, they occupy only small proportions of agricultural land in most countries, frequently under insecure and uncertain forms of tenure.

Family farmers are a diverse group, including not only arable farmers but other groups largely dependent on renewable natural resources, including mobile pastoralists and hunter gatherers fisher-folk, urban farmers and a variety of indigenous groups. Small numbers of family farmers are well integrated into agricultural markets, able to grow and profit from farming; a majority survive by combining subsistence and market production with part-time employment and other sources of income, but with no clear route to prosperity. Many more are unable to make ends meet and are coming under pressure to abandon the land, yet without good alternatives. Agricultural development policies often fail to address the livelihood needs of this diverse array of small scale producers, or mobilise their potential contributions to food security and economic development.

Ongoing dynamics of global market integration, high population growth, urbanisation, and climate and environmental changes have significant impacts on small family farmers, who also face limitations in access to land, labour, markets, skills, appropriate technologies and sources of credit, and recurrent cost / price squeezes due to the rising costs of external farm inputs and fluctuating market prices. In some countries, land concentration increased significantly, reducing the space for basic food production, forcing the poorest and younger generations out of farming, and undermining food security both for farm families themselves and at the national scale. Since 2008, large scale land acquisitions by private investors for bio-fuels, and food and fibre production have expanded, especially in Africa. Together these trends have led to increasing levels of dispute over access to land and social conflicts over agricultural development models. Other land governance problems and trends impacting on family farmers identified by ILC's research includes a lack of secure tenure or property rights for small farmers, limited access to development support, diminishing opportunities

for women to secure access to land and to produce sufficient food, lack of recognition and erosion of functional customary tenure and land management systems, increasing fragmentation of farm plots and landlessness, all of which are taking place against a backdrop of demographic pressure and competition for land resources.

At the same time, ILC's research clearly demonstrates that land governance improvements are within reach, and practical solutions to food security and development challenges are quite possible:

- » In some cases, governments have been actively learning how improved land governance can assist small farmers. Land rights can be secured under a diverse range of forms of tenure, and low cost methods can be used to provide formal recognition of land rights both to individual households and to groups managing and utilising land and natural resources in common. In some countries, efforts are underway to build land governance institutions and processes capable of fair allocation of land rights, land conflict resolution and inclusive, appropriate land use and development planning. As shown by research in *China*, if tenure rights are registered and market rules are clear, land rental markets can work in favour of small farmers, enabling them to rent land both in and out as needed.
- » Where women have secure land rights, household nutrition, food security and incomes can all improve. Although women's access to land can be placed at risk by both individual and collective land titling processes, due to gender biases in customary practice and at policy level, experience in *Nicaragua* and elsewhere shows that proactive efforts combining education, productive support and credit or assistance to acquire even small plots of land can strengthen women's voices, capacity and influence to the benefit of all community members.
- » A study in *Kerala, India* showed that functional indigenous land tenure and farming systems still persist, and have prevented land fragmentation and alienation through communal land and labour sharing, sustainable natural resource use and food and nutritional security, adapting successfully to changing conditions over hundreds of years.
- » Family farmers have huge potential to care for the environment and improve adaptation to climate change. In practice, environmental conservation can reduce land access for farmers and cattle herders, leading to radical changes in livelihoods. However, there is also unrealised potential for subsidies for small farmers to sustain environmental services and protect agro-biodiversity.
- » Decentralization is necessary to bring land services closer to the people, but is not a panacea due to the vested private interests of local government officials. The different case studies argue for the establishment of territorial platforms through which farmers' organisations and indigenous groups can actively engage directly with local government and with other actors to craft responsive local policies and plans.

The research shows that the *Voluntary Guidelines on the Governance of Tenure* and the African Union's Land Policy Initiative *Framework and Guidelines* are becoming real instruments for effective dialogue, in moving towards more effective and people-centred land governance, and promoting policy change for more inclusive and sustainable agricultural development. Continuing difficulties to be addressed include: incoherent institutional frameworks for land governance and in state administrative and legal systems as a whole; lack of formal recognition and practical support for functional customary tenure and land management systems; and agricultural development strategies that are poorly aligned with improving land policies, skewed towards the needs of external investors and a minority of more prosperous small farmers.

## Recommendations

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The research findings point towards practical actions that merit increased attention and support from international agencies, governments and a broad range of rural development actors:

- » Develop institutional arrangements for land governance and land use planning and participatory rural development planning that are locally and regionally responsive.
- » Improve the inclusiveness of agricultural development strategies and harmonisation of agriculture land policies, so that together they respond to the full range of types of farmers and other land users, and maximise the contribution of family farmers to food security.
- » Apply more demand-driven, low cost and participatory approaches to land registration, with fuller dialogues and preparation with potential beneficiaries, including women and men, and both farm households and customary groups.
- » Increased investment in improving the capacity and reach of land administration services.
- » Extend small farmers' capabilities and farmer organisations' capacities by increased global public investment in rural extension and agricultural services that take account of the full diversity of family farmers.
- » More effective territorial planning and sustainable agricultural programmes that enable soil and water conservation farming at landscape scale in which farmers have a clear voice.
- » Build broader social coalitions and link them to platforms and networks to facilitate institutional and policy change in the direction of more effective and people-centred land governance.