



DISRUPTIVE DIALOGUE OUTCOME DOCUMENT

Smallholders and Powerholders: Transforming Food Systems from the Ground Up

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Introduction

In order to achieve several of the Sustainable Development Goals (including SDG 1: no poverty, SDG 2: zero hunger, SDG 3: good health and well-being, and SDG 15: life on land) the global food system needs to be transformed in ways that significantly improve the situation of the rural poor, who often lack infrastructure, social safety nets and decision-making power.

This has important implications for smallholder farmers who control up to 75 percent of agricultural land and contribute up to 80 percent of global food. Although small farms are economically efficient, especially when land is scarce and labor abundant, the current yields are significantly below their potential, and farmers have inadequate access to nutritious food.

The Disruptive Dialogue “Smallholders and Powerholders: Transforming Food Systems from the Ground Up” aimed to provide a platform for open dialogue between smallholder farmers and key stakeholders, including universities, the private sector, civil society, policymakers, and researchers. The group discussed different relevant aspects of the question: What is a desirable transformation of the food system from the smallholder perspective, and how do we get there?

The dialogue was underpinned by the need for smallholder farmers to be involved in conversations about their role in the food system transformation. The first part of the conversation was dedicated to the situation and role of smallholders in the current global food system, including reflections of two smallholder farmers on their lived experiences. This was followed by discussions around what a food system that is desirable and beneficial for smallholders would look like, and what actions could take us in that direction.

Current status and lived experiences of smallholder farmers

- Smallholders often produce one or few types of crops, with limited nutritional benefits to their diets.
- Women, who are critical for household nutrition, often do not have rights to own land and to use it as they want, and they need to consult their husbands or family members to make decisions on farming.
- The best crops are often sold, leaving lower quality produce for the farmer families to consume.
- Smallholders have limited access to farming technologies that enable the testing of for instance soil properties and nutrients or weather information and forecasts.
- Many smallholders are abandoning farming to move to urban areas in search of scarce job opportunities. Agriculture is largely seen as unattractive, without opportunities for job creation.
- Increasing productivity is not currently linked with access to markets.
- As much as 33% of the food produced globally is wasted.
- Farmer knowledge and capacity (e.g. indigenous and local knowledge systems) are not being harnessed to respond to key challenges.
- Unpredictability of weather and increased environmental uncertainty caused by climate change is common in many countries, imposing on smallholders a myriad of challenges that are often forgotten by the international community, including droughts, salinization and sea-level rise.

A transformed food system – how do we get there?

The group highlighted that measures to support smallholders should not come in isolation, they should rather be integrated, including for instance climate change mitigation and adaptation, access to markets, technological and financial solutions, and improved infrastructures and value chains.

The following points were highlighted as critical to consider in the pursuit of moving away from the current state towards a food system that provides healthy food sustainably, *and* is desirable and beneficial for smallholder farmers:

- Smallholders should be empowered and gain stronger voices, greater visibility and more recognition in the global food system discourse.
- Farmers' organizations are an important mechanism and can support farmers in a variety of ways including: i) building and enhancing farmers' advocacy capacities; ii) increasing negotiation capacity in relation to other actors in the food supply chain as well as in other sectors; iii) providing access to much needed credit and financial services; iv) improving access to contextually relevant technologies; v) improving access to efficient agricultural advisory services.
- While it is critical to keep regional differences in mind, smallholders do share commonalities, for instance in their pursuit of well-being and of creating a good life for themselves and their children.
- There is a need to invest more in open-source market information systems that can be accessed and used by different stakeholders, and to reduce duplication of data collection and storage efforts across the globe.
- Farmers need ICT capacity-building and better opportunities to share information, for instance about climate change-related events.
- Water is a key issue for farmers around the world and needs to be prioritized.
- Issues concerning smallholder farmers require greater involvement of governments to ensure impactful solutions.
- Other important points discussed included the need for:
 - Access to predictable and profitable markets
 - Affordable/renewable energy
 - Decent farmer incomes and fair shares of the market price
 - Investing in farmers' education

Recommendations

1. The context-specific nature of farming and its challenges makes this type of inclusive multi-stakeholder dialogues particularly suitable for regional meetings and forums.
2. If we are to succeed with profoundly transforming the food system in ways that support the positive contributions of smallholder farmers and significantly improve their situation, it is crucial to meaningfully engage farmer views and voices in every step of the process. We need good models for involving farmers in decision-making dialogues and for conducting much needed 'reality checks' – engagements that can and should extend beyond meetings.