

Bringing CSD17 home... for the small producers

As a development advocate and practitioner from the Southeast Asian region, our policy advocacies have mostly been directed to regional intergovernmental bodies, food and agriculture agencies attached to the UN system, and national governments. CSD 16/17 cycle offered us an opportunity to engage the global UN system on themes which are core to our existence, thus our presence here. From CSD 16 till today, to the implement at the ground level the results of this process.

By: Marlene Ramirez, Secretary General, AsiaDHRRRA

In the first week of CSD17, amidst the rumble and tumble of words and statements from the official delegation to find the right language to suit content and form of the negotiating text, and witnessing how countries or political blocks (e.g. G77, EU, JUSCAN) really “behave” in favour of our ideals of sustainable development. I found the deliberation on creating access to markets for small scale producers a spark of light and, well, closer to home. It was an encouraging moment (and an antidote to jet lag and disappointment) as I followed the working group deliberating agriculture and rural development.

Other than the plenary and working group discussions, I managed to join a side event (farming first) which also tackled the challenges of linking small producers to market. There I had the chance of sharing to a small cluster of fellow major groups delegation (youth, farmers organizations) and some official delegation, our regional program on linking farmers to markets and the challenges that we face in the course of our work.

I hope that CSD 17 results will get concrete translation in terms of policy reform and more responsive programs at the national level, in FAO and IFAD, and global development cooperation in favour of the more vulnerable small scale producers. Again, not the large scale, but the small scale producers.



The means of implementation is wide and diverse to make CSD17 meaningful to the lives of the majority rural poor. Linking small farmers to markets is one.

Small Farmers/Small Holders access to Markets

In most Southeast Asian countries, small holder farming is important in terms of agriculture and food security. Its importance is derived from its prevalence and role in agricultural and economic development and the concentration of poverty in rural areas. The term ‘small holder’ refers to the limited resource endowments relative to other farmers and therefore the definition of small holders differs between countries and between agro-ecological zones. The distinction between small holders and larger farms based on their landholdings is not always

applicable. More useful is the one based on labour use. Small holder farms are usually family farms, with the labour (including management) needed on the farm being supplied by the household. Large farms commonly employ hired labour.

Most small farmers and small holders are vulnerable to economic and climatic shocks and spread their risk by diversifying their sources of livelihood, including significant off-farm income. In this respect, small holders also form a diverse group in terms of their allocation of resources to food, cash crops, livestock and off-farm activities, their use of external inputs and hired labour, the proportion of food crops which are sold, and their household expenditure pattern.

Complete subsistence or self-sufficiency does not really exist anymore because there is always some form of local market, in which small holders trade their surplus. But these markets are not very remunerative and offer limited opportunities for negotiation. Finding and entering markets that will provide better prospects can be extremely difficult, and small holders are often faced with a number of difficulties. Several studies have listed the constraints that small farmers encounter when they want to link to new markets or become more competitive in existing markets. The World Bank (2007) distinguished the following five issues: lack of access to these markets; weak technical capacity; difficulty in meeting quality standards; difficulty in meeting contract conditions; and exposure to additional risks.

Policies of privatization, liberalization and accession to the WTO or EU between 1980 and 2000's, was followed by a wave of investments by food manufacturers and retailers. Combined with rising urbanization and changes in consumer preferences and purchasing power, these have led to a growth of modern food processing and retailing, which often have requirements or industry standards for quality and safety built on traceability and certification. Conformity with labour and environmental standards may also be required, with compliance costs proportionately much higher for smallholders.

Experiences would show that most market channels are not inherently eager to engage small-scale farms due to issues of product quality and safety, pole-vaulting and the higher transaction costs involved in relating with many of them. Buyers generally prefer and seek out larger suppliers, aggregators and consolidators and also seek out areas that are already favoured by agribusiness, such as zones involved in export production.

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diversification it is not sufficient to encourage farmers to produce new crops by providing inputs, credit and some extension advice. Such approaches have been shown to be unsatisfactory because they fail to take into account the market demand for the products, the supply chain or marketing system through which the products will have to reach the consumers, processors or exporters, and the potential profitability of the recommended production. A majority of NGOs are now acting towards a "new paradigm" of encouraging farmers or rural enterprising communities to carry out market-led production and of being supply-chain facilitators, rather than the old "charitable/subsidized" approach which had little chance of sustainability.

It is in this context that we pursue a regional cooperation that help strengthen the entrepreneurial capacity of farmers organizations and NGOs towards establishing on-ground marketing links between small-scale farmers' groups and market players and to collaborate with policy makers at local, national, and regional levels to respond to agricultural marketing issues confronted by the small farmers. Currently, the project focuses on specific commodity lines in pilot countries in Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines, and Vietnam, with domestic and national formal markets as priority targets.

The challenges are plain and simple, at this juncture of project cooperation, in our southeast Asian experience: 1) Organizing of groups or cluster of small farmers based on a single agricultural product to able to consolidate production at economic scale;

2) Provision of specific agricultural extension and training to help small farmers produce better quality products; and 3) Planning to achieve synchronized production system to ensure that there is available supply and delivery of a specific commodity is ensured periodically and regularly.

The question is, are the government policies, including that of FAO and IFAD, attuned to this reality and challenges confronted by small farmer producers?

Good anchor to policy dialogue with the Ministers

This is why I believe that one of the question developed by fellow NGO delegates in preparation for the "Dialogue with Ministers on May 12", is very important. It is "In response to the continuing food crisis, governments are called upon to invest in sustainable agriculture and rural development - prioritizing local agricultural production over export crops. How can such investment be directed to the most vulnerable communities in developing countries, to feed the population and the access of women and men farmers to land, water, seeds and credit, while building new market infrastructure for local agriculture, truly supporting small family farmers, and not just benefiting large multinational food and agriculture businesses?"

If only we can hear good responses to this question in the upcoming dialogues, and more importantly, keep the appropriate language in the concluding text towards this end, then I am happy that there's something that we can hold on as we engage our governments beyond CSD 17.

Then we have something to bring home. That I guess explains why we are here. ❖