

Success factors for vital family farms

Input at the National Conference on the International Year of Family Farming

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Summary

Family farms are diverse. They differ in size, production methods and focus, market integration, access to resources, and context, amongst others. Hence, there is no formula of success that is appropriate for all family farms and their household members. Still, family farms share commonalities, especially a high integration of the economic and social sphere: A significant proportion of family farms' capital, management, labour, and at times food comes from within the household and its agricultural activities. The bulk of family farms is small and rich in traditional knowledge. Three main factors for success of vital family farms can be highlighted: A supportive economic, social, and learning environment.

A supportive **economic environment** for family farmers comprises access to natural and physical assets, including land, water and infrastructure, finance, information, and capacities. Coherent agricultural policies, integration into value chains, and links to partners are conditions for access to markets and economic success. From a household perspective, family farms' well-being depends on a supportive **social environment** that includes access to infrastructure, such as basic education and healthcare. The role of women, men, and youth in the household, farm succession by the younger generation, and the social perception of farming are issues that call for reflection and discussion. Context-adapted public strategies on rural development, poverty reduction and food security that consider these aspects contribute to good conditions for family farms.

Changing contexts, such as urbanisation and new social values, climate change, and open markets require constant adaptation of household strategies. **Learning and enhanced capacities** at individual, organisational, and system level are thus a critical factor for family farmers' longer-term success. Active participation in agricultural innovation systems (AIS¹), where actors such as agribusiness, education, research, financial institutes, policy makers, and others interact, play thereby a key role. Rural advisory services (RAS²) provided by public, civil society, and the private sector should act as brokers and facilitators within AIS to support family farmers and enhance their capacities at three levels:

¹ An AIS can be defined as a set of interrelated agents, their interactions, and the institutions that condition their behaviour with regard to innovations in agriculture.

² RAS are about strengthening capacities, empowering rural people, and promoting innovations. RAS support people to obtain skills and information about technologies, markets, inputs, and financial matters, and assist farmers to develop their agricultural and management skills. RAS also broker interactions between farmers and other rural people, the private sector, research, education, and government. They coach different actors to improve market access, deal with changing patterns of risk, and protect the environment.

- At *individual* level, farmer families need access to a quality agricultural education system that includes vocational training and continuous education. Demand-oriented RAS foster family farmers' learning by coaching, facilitating peer-exchange, promoting testing and reflection of farming and household aspects, and brokering contacts. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are increasingly important tools for family farmers to access information from different sources.
- At *organisational* level, farmer organisations, cooperatives, and federations link family farmers to input suppliers, buyers, and other actors in market and innovation systems. They have the responsibility to organise and articulate demands of family farmers to service providers and represent their positions in political processes. Farmer organisations provide own economic and advisory services to their members and contribute thereby to an improved access to markets, knowledge, and innovation. In order to better serve their clientele, farmer organisations need capacities.
- At the *system* level, an enabling political and legal environment is fundamental for the economic and social success of family farms. Regulations related to land and other natural resources, property and inheritance, trade, financial markets, food and social security, amongst others affect family farmers considerably. Participatory political and legal processes should be in place to allow family farmers and their organisations to bring their requests and demands into consideration. As such, family farmers and their representatives need system-level capacities to engage in useful dialogue.

The Global Forum for Rural Advisory Services (GFRAS) fosters the listed success factors by providing advocacy and leadership on pluralistic RAS that respond to the demands of family farmers, their organisations, and other rural people. GFRAS fosters interaction and learning within RAS and between RAS and other AIS actors. Its affiliates from farmer organisations reflect and discuss their role in RAS in order to provide better representation and service provision to their members. Other GFRAS groups work on gender, education and training, policies, ICTs, and evaluation on RAS.

Participants in the National Conference on the International Year of Family Farming can contribute to the success of vital family farms by focusing their actions on family farmers' demands, strengthening their capacities at all levels, integrating family farmers in exchange and networking, fostering an enabling economic and social environment, and supporting AIS actors in their efforts to partner with family farmers.

Resources:

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