

# Towards stronger family farms

## Recommendations from the International Year of Family Farming

**Janneke Bruil**

Improving the situation of family farmers is a burning need, and as they produce an estimated 70% of the world's food, it is an issue that affects us all. The 2014 International Year of Family Farming aimed to create a better understanding of family farming and support the development of pro-family farming policies. This article highlights some of the key proposals made during the year.

When 2014 was proclaimed the International Year of Family Farming (IYFF), the United Nations shone a spotlight on the essential contributions of family farmers to food security, community well being, the economy, conservation, biodiversity, sustainable resource use, and climate resilience.

However, the trend in recent decades has been for governments to focus on agricultural commodities and free markets, while the majority of the world's 500 million farming families lack the investments and policies that would allow them to grow. Family farmers and their organisations are often excluded from decision making processes, and they are finding it increasingly difficult to access land to farm and the resources to be able to so, including local seeds and breeds. Combined with climate change, this leads to increased rural poverty, chronic hunger, resource degradation, and an unprecedented outflow of people to urban area, especially the young.

Throughout the International Year of Family Farming, specific policy recommendations and best practices were proposed, collated

*"Africa can feed itself because we have enough arable land and fresh water. What is lacking is the commitment of our governments to work hand-in-hand with all stakeholders. The voices of food producers are crucial." Elisabeth Atangana of the Pan African Farmer Organization, 2014*

from many rich debates into nine highlighted areas that indicate the major issues affecting family farmers.

### 1. Cross-sectoral approaches

Discussions on family farming should also address urbanisation, rural infrastructure, traditional and indigenous knowledge and culture, education and support services, and youth development. A cross-sectoral and territorial approach was emphasised, such as in integrated rural development programmes. Diversified agroecological practices that use local knowledge should be promoted as the basis for climate resilience, and the importance of expanding income opportunities in rural areas were also highlighted, including off farm income and agritourism.

### 2. Agrarian reform

Repeated demands were made for genuine agrarian, aquatic, forestry and pastureland reform, to reduce urban migration and incorporate the right of access to land, water and irrigation, infrastructure, education, health and marketing, including for women. This included the exemption of small scale family farmers from policies designed for larger industrial farms. FAO was requested to ensure that the Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment protect the rights of small food producers because of their central role in food production and because together, they invest more in agricultural development than any multinational. Promoting food sovereignty was raised as a means to strengthen family farming and eradicate hunger and poverty, and FAO was asked to promote a broad, inclusive and dynamic analysis of the concept of food sovereignty.

### 3. Access to natural resources and implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines

Improving access to land and water should be prioritised through special land use and water management programmes. The right of farmers to produce, reproduce, exchange and sell their seeds must be protected, because "without land, water and seeds, no peasant family farming is possible". Land grabbing was condemned, and there was a call for a moratorium on industrial agrofuel production. Overwhelming worldwide support was expressed for governments to implement the Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests, considered as the best way to guarantee access to natural resources for small scale family farmers, especially women, youth and indigenous peoples.

#### 4. Improving trade and building markets

Trade agreements and trade policies should be reformed or reconsidered, in order to better serve family farmers. Governments and other actors must guarantee the human, economic, social and cultural rights of small scale family farmers and food workers, and strengthen their access to markets and ensure fair prices, for example through the promotion of local markets, public purchasing from family farmers, and improved storage and transport. The value of food from family farming can be enhanced by establishing rules of origin, creating specific family farming labels, and providing information on its nutritional and health value.

#### 5. Access to credit and finance

All regions recommended improving access of family farmers to reliable and stable financing, such as simplified lending procedures, insurance facilities to reduce risks, and the development of farmer-centred financial institutions.

#### 6. Gender equity

Specific programmes are needed to empower women farmers, facilitating their participation in decision making and their equitable participation in flexible rural labour markets. Positive discrimination for women is essential, especially regarding access to natural resources and capital.

#### 7. Stronger farmer organisations

The importance of producer organisations was emphasised, to balance the economic and political power of other actors, and to consolidate the voice of family farmers in policy making processes. Key areas were the need for governments to include farmer organisations in dialogue and decision making, capacity building programmes that are *'family farmer-centred, owned and led'*, climate change adaptation and value addition. Proposed activities included education and training programmes, and sharing experiences between organisations.

#### 8. Farmer-led research and extension

Innovative research and extension must put farmers at the centre and strengthen their own efforts, particularly as they are being most affected by, and are actively adapting to, impacts of climate change.

*"We want to uplift the conditions of family farmers so that they can have real dignity and be proud to be family farmers... and that the young generation will continue to go to family farming, and thereby reduce poverty and increase food security and nutrition."*

Esther Penunia of the Asian Farmers Association, 2014

#### A synthesis of recommendations

Throughout 2014, regional dialogues, civil society consultations, regional conferences and other events explored issues related to family farming. Many of these were (co-)organised by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the lead agency for the International Year of Family Farming. Across the regions, a set of key, common building blocks were identified to better support family farmers, raised by representatives of farmer organisations, governments, academia, international institutions and NGOs, amongst others. These are summarised in this article, adapted from 'Towards stronger family farms' (ILEIA/FAO, 2014).

#### 9. Attracting youth

The participation of youth in agriculture should be enhanced in all possible ways, as *"the generation and gender gaps are the biggest threats to family farming."* Vocational training should be better geared towards agriculture and the needs of rural youth. Policies could support youth access to productive resources, especially land and finance. A holistic view of young people's needs is required, and policies must ensure the right of young people to live their lives in their own territory.

#### ... and after the International Year of Family Farming?

It is clear that the visibility and recognition of family farmers has taken a leap forward this year, including many signs of greater political commitment to support family farmers and to create pro-family farming policies. The farmers themselves, women, men and youth, have been able to articulate their perspectives and their aspirations, but there remain areas of great concern, so these empowering processes must continue.

We can only truly celebrate the power of family farmers when we can also guarantee their rights, and when the political, economic and cultural space is created for them to use their strength and choose their own development pathways. For this, the IYFF has generated many solid, proven approaches. As stated in one civil society declaration: *"the IYFF should be the beginning of a longer process that strengthens non-patriarchal, indigenous and peasant family farming. We are part of the solution"*.

*This article is based on the publication 'Towards stronger family farms. Voices in the International Year of Family Farming' published by ILEIA, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (October 2014).*

#### Janneke Bruil

Learnign and Advocacy Coordinator,  
ILEIA, The Netherlands.  
E-mail: j.bruil@ileia.org