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**DEFINING SMALL SCALE
FOOD PRODUCERS TO
MONITOR TARGET 2.3.
OF THE 2030 AGENDA FOR
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

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Clara Aida Khalil, Piero Conforti, Ipek Ergin and Pietro Gennari

Abstract

Despite the central position occupied by smallholder¹ agriculture in the current development debate, a general and operational definition of small-scale food producers still does not exist. The question “what is a small scale producer?” keeps receiving different answers depending on the context in which is posed. Alternative ways of defining smallholders reflect heterogeneous historical, institutional, eco-systemic contexts and depend upon what is the role of small-scale agriculture in the rural economy. A harmonized and unique definition of smallholder agriculture still needs to be established and operationalized. This has become a pressing issue given the need to monitor the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which refers to the concept of smallholder in indicators 2.3.1 and 2.3.2.

Within this context, this present paper reviews different approaches adopted in the literature to define small-scale food producers, and highlights pros and cons associated with each alternative. It identifies criteria to be considered in a harmonized definition of this concept and reflects on the difference between absolute and relative approaches. Given the absence of a one-size-fits-all solution, the “right” definition will likely depend on the particular purposes of the analysis and the trade-off between completeness and feasibility.

¹ In this paper, we use the terms “smallholder” and “small scale farmers” interchangeably. However, we are aware that there is a difference between the two, as “smallholder” refers more to tenure, while “small-scale producer” or farmer refers more directly to production levels. Despite this nuance, we prefer to use the two as synonyms, as we believe that they factually point to very similar entities.

1. Introduction

In September 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was unanimously adopted by the 193 Member States of the United Nations. The Agenda, which includes 17 goals and 169 targets, is expected to guide policies and programmes of policy-makers, the civil society, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders in the next 15 years and beyond.

In March 2016, the UN Statistical Commission agreed on a list of 230 global indicators to track progress against the 169 SDG targets. FAO's strategic framework is closely aligned with the SDGs, and the Organization has been proposed as custodian for 21 SDG indicators. As a custodian agency, FAO will work towards ensuring that data collected at national level are comparable and aggregated at sub regional, regional and global levels. The organization will be responsible for collecting data from national sources, validating and harmonizing them, estimating regional and global aggregates and publishing them on FAOSTAT. The data will inform the annual SDG progress reports that feed into the High Level Political Forum's follow-up and review processes.

Among the 21 FAO-relevant SDG indicators, two are associated with target 2.3. This target envisages, in particular, doubling, by 2030, "the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment."

Indicators 2.3.1² and 2.3.2³, which measure labour productivity and income of smallholders, are classified in Tier III, among those indicators for which an agreed methodology is not yet developed. The main reason for this classification is the lack of a universally-accepted international definition of "smallholder". Indeed, despite the central position occupied in the debate on agricultural transformation and rural poverty, available definitions of "smallholder" vary significantly, depending on the farm characteristics taken into account, ranging from socio-economic features, to resource endowments and agro-ecological dimensions. The term "smallholder" often overlaps and may be used interchangeably with "small-scale agriculture", "family farm", "subsistence farm", "resource-poor farm", "low-income farm", "low-input farm" or "low-technology farm" (Heidhues and Brüntrup 2003).

This paper reviews criteria and approaches adopted to define smallholders in agriculture. It highlights pros and cons associated with each alternative measure. In particular, we reviewed definitions used at national and international level in roughly 60 papers or websites, in view of laying the ground to operationalize the "small scale food producers" concept embedded in SDG indicators 2.3.1 and 2.3.2.

² 2.3.1 Volume of production per labour unit by classes of farming/pastoral/forestry enterprise size

³ 2.3.2 Average income of small-scale food producers, by sex and indigenous status

The thread along which all the review is developed is the idea that, given the absence of one-size-fits-all solution, the “right” definition always depends on the specific purpose that it addresses. Moreover, the choice of the key definitional criteria will be informed by existing trade-offs between completeness and feasibility, and the limitations posed by data availability. Most definitions reviewed are reported in a glossary presented under Annex A.

This paper discusses the existing options and propose a feasible approach for establishing an international definition of smallholders, with the objective of monitoring SDG indicators 2.3.1 and 2.3.2. We also consider the merits of absolute and relative approaches, where the term “relative” refers to definitions that classify smallholders with reference to the area or the country in which (s)he operates. It is important to highlight that any internationally agreed definition is not intended to replace country-specific definitions which are meant to reflect national policy priorities.

2. The challenge of defining smallholder agriculture

While the Monitoring Framework of the SDGs refers to the concept of small scale “food producers”, most of the literature refers to small farms. Farmers are in fact a sub-set of food producers, as they constitute the first part of a production chain that may include traders, processors, retailers and other agents depending of the specific product and context. They seem to be, however, the main target of SDG2. For this reason, indicators 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 must be operationalized first and foremost with reference to agricultural producers.

The concept of “smallholder farmer” can be approached from various perspectives, which are linked to the objective of the analysis. From a general standpoint, smallholders are farmers operating under structural constraints such as access to sub-optimal amounts of resources, technology and markets. Dixon et al. (2004) summarize this idea when they say that “the term smallholders refers to the limited resource endowment of farmers compared to those of other farmers in the sector”. In the same vein, Brooks et al (2009) define smallholders as “farm households which struggle to be competitive, either because their endowments of assets compare unfavourably with those of more efficient producers in the economy or because they confront missing or under-developed markets”. Similarly, in Murphy (2010), smallholder farmers are “..characterized by marginalization, in terms of accessibility, resources, information, technology, capital and assets...”. Finally, according to the World Bank Rural Development Strategy (2003) smallholdings are those farms “*with a low asset base and operating in less than 2 hectares of cropland*”.

A more articulated and comprehensive definition is presented in the Report of the High Level panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition according (CFS HLPE, 2013) to which a small farm is

“..an agricultural holding run by a family using mostly (or only) their own labour and deriving from that work a large but variable share of its income, in kind or in cash. The family relies on its agricultural activities for at least part of the food consumed – be it through self-provision, non-monetary exchanges or market exchanges. The family members also engage in activities other than farming, locally or through migration. The holding relies on family labour with limited reliance on temporary hired labour, but may be engaged in labour exchanges within the neighbourhood or a wider kinship framework”.

As stated by Nagayets (2005), one of the reasons why the sole consensus around the concept of small farms may be the lack of an agreed definition, is the wide variety of farm structure and characteristics across different contexts and geographical areas⁴. Much literature mentions the absence of such agreement, but few papers venture proposing definitions. One is the EU Agricultural Economic Brief of 2011 entitled “What is a small farm?”.

Additional reports and literature reviews that offered useful entry points for our research are those produced in the framework of the World Agricultural Watch (WAW) initiative (see, for example, Even and Saravia-Matus, 2014; Even et. al. , 2016; Saravia-Matus et. al. 2013). Although not directly focused on the definition of smallholders, the WAW worked towards elaborating an international typology of agricultural holdings and is preparing country level guidelines for the identification of farm typologies. These harmonized groups are used to monitor rural transformation and to support policy dialogue.

In the policy debate, the notion of “small farms” goes hand in hand with the idea of disadvantage, risk of poverty, lack of opportunities, and need of support (EU Agricultural Economic Briefs, 2011). Hence an ideal definition should be consistent with the concepts of absolute poverty and severe food insecurity, which are at the basis of the SDGs policy agenda. At the same time, an operational definition needs to balance completeness, relevance and practical feasibility; and must be based on a criterion that does not depend upon the outcomes that have to be measured (Offutt, 2016). For SDG indicator 2.3.1 and 2.3.2, this means that the criterion chosen to identify smallholders must be independent

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