



viewpoint

Smallholders can feed the world

Enabling poor rural people to overcome poverty



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On previously barren land in the Egyptian desert, Ahmad Abdelmunem Al-Far and his fellow farmers are showing how market-oriented agriculture can transform lives and move people out of poverty.

Ahmad has a degree in agricultural engineering from Cairo University, but like many other Egyptian graduates, he was unable to find work in his profession after graduation. After years of being unemployed, except for occasional work in a garage or as a waiter, he responded to an announcement offering farming opportunities to unemployed graduates.

After joining an IFAD-supported project, Ahmad received a plot of 2.1 hectares of newly reclaimed desert. The project introduced a credit fund, systems for sewage and refuse disposal, and drip irrigation. It also trained the farmers in crop and livestock production and in sustainable water and land management techniques.

Ahmad began cultivating fava beans, onions, green peppers, tomatoes and potatoes. He and his wife also bought cows for meat, cheese, butter, ghee, yogurt and fresh milk. And they planted oranges, which have become a cash crop. In 2008, they produced 40,000 tons.

The project helped the farmers develop direct links with exporters and major buyers in the domestic market. The 36,000 participating farmers now supply fresh oranges and authentic mozzarella cheese to the resorts of Egypt's Sharm-el-Sheikh. They export sweet peppers and sun-dried tomatoes to Italy and the United States, peanuts to Germany and Switzerland, and raisins, artichokes, apricots, peaches and potatoes to a variety of European countries.

Perhaps their most impressive contract is with Heinz, which now buys more than 6,000 tons of tomatoes each year from 300 project farms. Heinz provides the farmers with seeds and guarantees to buy half their harvest at an agreed price. If the farmers cannot sell the remaining tomatoes in the domestic market, Heinz is committed to buying them, too.

With support comes success

This remarkable success story is proof that smallholder farmers can be part of the solution to global food security, helping to feed the world. But they cannot do it alone. What they need is that rich and poor countries alike invest in and support agricultural and rural development, creating the conditions to move poor rural people out of subsistence farming and into the marketplace.

There are some 500 million smallholder farms worldwide; more than 2 billion people depend on them for their livelihoods. These small farms produce about 80 per cent of the food consumed in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

In my many years of working in agriculture and rural development, two things have become increasingly evident. The first is that farming at any scale is a business, and smallholders and producers must be treated as entrepreneurs. The second is that businesses need clear linkages along the value chain, from production to processing, marketing and, ultimately, to consumption. When these links are in place, wonderful things begin to happen.

During my travels around the world, I have met dozens of people like Ahmad – people whose lives have been turned around with a little bit of help through various forms of empowerment. The story is the same everywhere. In country after country, through IFAD-supported projects, the lives of entire communities have been transformed.

For example, let us take the case of Elysée Nkundabagenzi of Rwanda. In her community, where people were extremely poor and malnourished, she and her neighbours received small loans, goats and cows, and training in establishing kitchen gardens.

And then there's Esther Siakanede in Zambia, where a smallholder irrigation scheme has enabled her to grow cabbages and tomatoes for the Livingstone and Kalomo markets.

There's also Pedro Tun, a smallholder farmer and president of a producers' association in Guatemala. With backing from an IFAD-supported project, association members began farming high-value crops – French beans and onions. They purchased irrigation equipment, built a new storage facility and worked with private-sector partners to get their produce to new markets.

Although the life stories and regions of the world are different in the examples mentioned, the end results are the same: increased production and productivity lead to increased income, more meals per day, new homes, and better education and health for families, and particularly for children.

In Rwanda, Elysée now produces enough vegetables and milk for her family's needs, with extra to sell at market. She can send her children to school and buy health insurance. And she has abandoned her grass hut to build a new house. In Zambia, Esther has managed to send her children to secondary school, bought four goats and a cellphone. She has also bought fertilizer for upland field crops and built a house with iron sheeting. In Guatemala, Pedro and his colleagues sell their produce to some of the biggest retailers in the world, including Walmart.

These stories, along with others I have witnessed – from smallholder coffee growers in the Dominican Republic to cassava producers in Ghana – demonstrate the power of market-oriented agriculture to generate incomes and sustainable economic growth.

But it cannot be done without the firm commitment of the many partners: governments, NGOs, civil society, the private sector, and smallholder farmers and their associations.

Smallholders and producers are not waiting for handouts. They can feed themselves, their communities and the world.

Today, let us reaffirm our commitment to these proud, resilient and productive members of society. Let's invest in rural areas to ensure that they are places where the youth of today want to live tomorrow. Places where they can build healthy and prosperous communities free from hunger and poverty. Places from which they can feed the world.

I have seen it and know it can be done. Let us put our words into action.

by **Kanayo F. Nwanze**

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