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# The State of Family Farms in the World

BENJAMIN E. GRAEUB<sup>a</sup>, M. JAHİ CHAPPELL<sup>b,c</sup>, HANNAH WITTMAN<sup>d</sup>,  
 SAMUEL LEDERMANN<sup>e</sup>, RACHEL BEZNER KERR<sup>f</sup> and BARBARA GEMMILL-HERREN<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Rome, Italy

<sup>b</sup> Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), Minneapolis, USA

<sup>c</sup> Washington State University, Vancouver, USA

<sup>d</sup> The University of British Columbia (UBC), Vancouver, Canada

<sup>e</sup> Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development, Zurich, Switzerland

<sup>f</sup> Cornell University, Ithaca, USA

**Summary.** — 2014 was the United Nations' International Year of Family Farming, yet the importance of family farming for global food security is still surprisingly poorly documented. In a review of agricultural census data, we find that globally family farms constitute over 98% of all farms, and work on 53% of agricultural land. Across distinct contexts, family farming plays a critical role for global food production. We present two examples of policy approaches toward family farmers—Brazil and Malawi—to provide insight into some of the complexities and challenges behind the global numbers.

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**Key words** — family farming, smallholder agriculture, Brazil, Malawi, food and nutrition security, sustainable development

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations' (UN) 2014 International Year of Family Farming provided an opportunity to reflect on the status of family-based agriculture throughout the world in relation to food security, socio-ecological sustainability, and equitable economic development. However, the diversity within this global sector in terms of farm characteristics and position within the global food system creates significant challenges for systematic policy design and development aimed at maximizing global food and nutrition security, secure livelihoods, environmental sustainability, and socioeconomic development (FAO, 2014a; Smith & Haddad, 2015). Recent policy debates at the international and regional levels have seen a shift in how smallholders and family farmers are viewed: from being a part of the hunger problem, to now being central to its solution (HLPE., 2013; McIntyre, Herren, Wakhungu, & Watson, 2009; Silva, 2014).

Within the global food system, the contribution of family farmers to food security and local and regional development is surprisingly poorly documented. FAO's SOFA report (2014a) estimated, based on an analysis of just 30 countries using the 2000 round of agricultural census data, that there are approximately 500 million family farmers in the world who produce 80% of the world's food, thus highlighting the need for more accurate accounting and relevant policy analyses. In this paper, we review the policy environment for enabling family farming contributions to food production, food security, and sustainable agricultural development. We then analyze a larger range of international agricultural census data for 105 countries and territories, including newer data from the 2010 round of agricultural census data that together encompass a majority (85%) of the world's food production. We use regional and country-level contextual definitions for family farms to make the best available estimates to date of the percentage of family farms, percentage of land area under family farming per country as well as the calories produced by family farmers in the sampled countries. We find that family

farms constitute 98% of all farms and at least 53% of agricultural land, thus producing at least 53% of the world's food. Our work identified 475 million family farms out of 483 million farms in our sample, supporting the SOFA estimate on the existence of at least 500 million family farms (out of a total of 570 million farms) in the world (FAO, 2014a). While we arrive at similar numbers regarding the proportion of farms in the world that are family farms, our larger and newer dataset and more conservative approach to the definition of family farms produces an estimate of 53% for the percentage of agricultural land held by family farmers, a considerable difference from SOFA's 75%.

Our findings further demonstrate the tremendous diversity of family farms around the world, calling for context-specific policies to support family farmers. Thus, to illustrate the regional diversity and complex challenges facing the family farming sector, we profile the evolving policy environment in two countries that present both very different contexts for family farming, and who have taken distinctly different approaches to providing support for family farmers and smallholders: Brazil and Malawi. In keeping with the understanding that detailed knowledge of local context is necessary to reasonably design and assess policies affecting family farms, these two case studies deal with countries where several of the authors have extensive on the ground research experience. Regarding their contexts, Brazil is a relatively industrialized middle-income country that maintains a significant family farm sector oriented to the domestic market, while also

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playing a key role in the global agri-food sector as a dominant agricultural exporter. In contrast, Malawi is an example of a low-income country, with a majority rural agrarian population, the vast majority of whom are family farming households, experiencing high rates of poverty, chronic food insecurity, and child undernutrition. In composing these profiles, we use best practices for family farming policies derived from existing literature to evaluate the approaches taken in both countries, alongside our own extensive experience and research in each country. We suggest that a much improved measurement, and understanding, of the role of family farmers is needed to inform policies related to food security and sustainable development.

An initial challenge within any review of family farming is that the term itself is not a clearly defined statistical entity at the global or often even national level. The FAO, as part of its strategic planning for the International Year of Family Farming in 2014, defined family farming as:

“a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production which is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labor, including both women’s and men’s. The family and the farm are linked, co-evolve and combine economic, environmental, social and cultural functions.”

[FAO, 2013a, p. 2]

A relatively small scale of agricultural operations has often been used as a proxy for family farm ownership. Many organizations, such as the World Bank in its Rural Development Strategy (World Bank, 2003), use landholding size to identify smallholder farmers—the most common being under 2 hectares (Conway, 2011; Salami, Kamara, & Brixiova, 2010; World Bank, 2003). Yet, the Committee on World Food Security’s (CFS) High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) defines smallholder agriculture as

“practised by families (including one or more households) using only or mostly family labour and deriving from that work a large but variable share of their income, in kind or in cash. Agriculture includes crop raising, animal husbandry, forestry and artisanal fisheries. The holdings are run by family groups, a large proportion of which are headed by women, and women play important roles in production, processing and marketing activities.”

[HLPE, 2013, p. 10]

Both the FAO and the HLPE are clear that the family and smallholder sector cannot be defined solely based on the size of landholdings. The size of an economically viable family farm holding varies by region, production strategy, level of market integration, family structure, access to inputs, technology, and infrastructure, and off-farm labor opportunities. Yet, gaining a better understanding of the family farm sector—beyond the smallholder <2 ha class—is critically needed to better understand its role in global agricultural production for food security and rural development. Indeed, there is a large diversity within this sector, which is largely distinct from the needs of the global agri-business sector with its easier access to infrastructure, capital, and information. Echoing Berdegue and Fuentealba (2011) and subsequent research building on their analysis—e.g., Chappell *et al.*, 2013; Vorley, Cotula, & Chan, 2012—the broad term “family farming” can be divided into at least three groups with differing needs: those that are well-endowed and well-integrated into markets (“Group A”); those with significant assets and favorable conditions but lacking critical elements (like sufficient credit or effective collective action) and who may not qualify for social safety nets (“Group B”); and land-poor farmers, who are primarily characterized by family subsistence/non-market activities and who require significant investment in social safety nets (“Group

C”). Our understanding of family farming includes all three groups, as explained in our methodology section. Following Berdegue and Fuentealba (2011) we suggest that such multi-dimensional characterization of family farmers is useful and necessary, and aligns with the definitions used by the relevant international actors i.e., FAO, CFS HLPE, and represents a significant improvement on the <2 ha cut-off.

One of the main issues impeding efforts to strengthen family and smallholder farmers on the policy and field level, however, has been the effective lack of data on such basic issues as their number or their specific contribution to agricultural production. FAO (2014a) based its analysis on landholding status, counting as family farms those farms that are owned by an individual or a household. Based on Lowder, Skoet, and Singh (2014), FAO (2014a, 2014b) estimated the number of overall agricultural holdings in the world; this analysis of the data in 167 countries from agricultural censuses, estimates that there are 570 million farms. In a separate, smaller sample of 52 countries, Lowder *et al.* (2014), using the land holding status as criteria, found that in all but four countries, more than 90% of farm holdings are family farms. Based on this work, the SOFA Report (FAO, 2014a) thus assumes that at least 90% of the 570 million farms—approximately 500 million farms—are family farms. In a further step, based on the land holding status of farms from 30 countries’ censuses—all farms that are owned by individuals or families count as family farms—they estimate that family farms hold 75% of agricultural land and contribute at least 80% of the world’s food production, following an assumption that small-scale farms are more productive on a per-hectare basis than larger farms. The SOFA report builds on previous efforts in both academic and civil society literature to develop rough estimates—so-called ‘guestimates’. For example, one of the previously most commonly cited statistics is that globally smallholder or peasant farmers produce 50% of the human food supply, and an additional 20% are produced by hunters and gatherers, as well as smallholder fishers (ETC Group, 2009). Our review of the primary sources underlying these earlier guestimates that have been circulated widely in civil society and government reports found little empirical basis for most of the major claims for the role of the family farming sector in global food security and landscape management (e.g., Bailey, 2011; IFAD, 2010; ILO, 2008; Mazoyer, 2001; Naranjo, 2012; Vorley, 2002).

In response, we developed and report here on a new methodology to more accurately assess the global scale and scope of family farmer holdings and their use of land. Our approach to identify family farms in the world more explicitly takes into account regional and country-level differences, while widening the sample size and including newer data from the 2010 round of world agricultural censi. This paper thus identifies key metrics on family farms and their contribution to global agricultural production.

In this paper, we start by summarizing main challenges faced across a diversity of local and national contexts by family farmers, and presenting a range of ‘policy best practices’ aimed to address these challenges. We then report on our analysis of available agricultural census data from 105 units—98 countries and seven territories—to suggest that family farmers are the predominant actors in the global agricultural system, significantly contributing to the world’s agricultural production. Within our sample, they comprised 98% of all agricultural landholdings, manage 53% of total agricultural land, and provide at least 53% of global agricultural production. We conclude by illustrating the importance of effective and appropriately tailored policies and institutions in achieving

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