

Farming the land to fight poverty and hunger

Agriculture is still a neglected issue in development policy

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Overview

Agriculture has a number of functions to fulfil: it has to secure food supplies, generate income and help sustain natural resources. In order to meet these expectations farming has to be site-specific, i.e. methods have to be adapted to local environmental conditions and cultural contexts, and build upon available knowledge. In developing countries, site-specific farming is an important driving force behind rural development and poverty elimination. Helping poor smallholders become economically, ecologically and socially sustainable small-scale farmers is one of the most important ways of overcoming hunger and poverty. National agricultural policies and international development programmes contribute most significantly towards the realisation of the human right to food and to an appropriate standard of living in rural areas if they take into account the principles of site-specific farming.

Overcoming hunger despite scarce resources

925 million people in the world are hungry, the vast majority in developing countries (906 million, FAO 2010). Almost 80 percent of all hungry people live in rural regions, in the areas where food is produced. Most of these people belong to smallholding families who are unable to live on what they farm, harvest and sell. Although the number of hungry people in cities is increasing rapidly in many parts of the world as a result of urbanisation, the majority of hungry people will still be living in rural areas by the middle of this century.

Overcoming hunger, guaranteeing food security despite a growing world population and simultaneously enabling people to have a healthy and balanced diet to prevent malnutrition – all this means that we have to be more efficient in the way we produce and consume food. This is true, in particular, in view of the growing demand for animal-based foods (meat, eggs, dairy products) and "non-food" agricultural products (energy crops, natural fibres, etc.), and declining natural resources, such as land and water.

Up to 50% of agricultural products and food are wasted. In industrial countries, wastefulness and carelessness in processing and consumption lead to high levels of wasted food. In developing countries, on the other hand, inefficient technology and inadequate infrastructure are the causes of extensive post-harvest loss. Investing in the storage, transportation and

processing of agricultural produce could therefore make a significant contribution towards eliminating poverty and hunger.

Agricultural production is dependent on too few countries

Only a few surplus-producing countries are responsible for supplying the global market with important food staples. When crops in these countries fail as a result of environmental conditions or disasters, global supplies of grain are rapidly depleted and prices soar. Poor importing countries then face food shortages. The consequences of this "oligopolisation" of agricultural production underline the necessity of using agricultural potential in developing countries more intensively to combat hunger. This not only increases global production, it also reduces the dependency on the global market and disperses the risk of crop losses.

Smallholders are essential

The solution to the global food problem both today and in coming decades lies most crucially in the hands of small-scale farmers: 85% of 525 million farms around the globe cultivate less than two hectares of land. To expect a poverty-oriented structural shift towards larger, economically more efficient units in the foreseeable future is not only unrealistic, it is also undesirable. Project experience in respect to

up-grading small-scale farming shows that the capacities for improvements are still enormous. These farmers have considerable potential to boost food production, especially on the African continent. If they are properly promoted, small-holding units are also key to a climate-friendly and resource-saving agricultural development.

Guaranteeing long-term support of agriculture

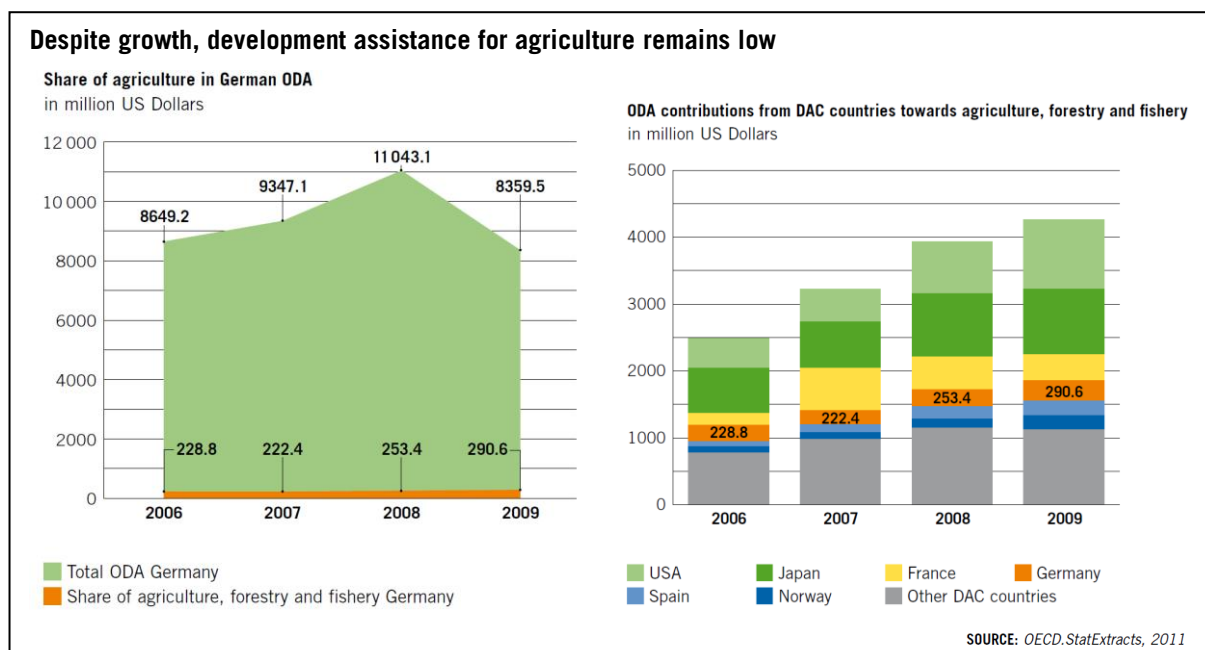
Although agriculture – especially small-scale farming in developing countries – has gained recognition in the last decade as being the most important sector for national poverty elimination and food security strategies, *de facto* it is rarely a political priority. Agriculture in developing countries has been neglected for many years because it was assumed that global, deregulated markets would be a sufficient stimulus for local agricultural production. The emphasis was placed on macroeconomic development rather than investments being made to improve the production conditions of small-scale farms. This was not only the failure of national governments. The international community has also paid too little attention to agriculture and rural development for many decades.

In the last few years, an increasing number of private – but also state – investors from threshold and industrial countries have acquired farm land in developing countries. The aim is to achieve large-scale production for export. Small-scale farmers rarely benefit from these investments, and are often driven off their land (see In Brief No. 8, Land Grabbing). The support of small-scale farmers depends largely on public funds. The assessment of public devel-

opment aid (Official Development Assistance - ODA) for agriculture in the last few years shows that a trend reversal towards more support for agriculture has still not taken place despite the many promises that have been made. The effective implementation of agricultural concepts may take between 10 and 15 years. Needed is long-term support which takes into account the development stages of smallholders.

Aiming at multifunctional and economical small-scale farming

The development of impoverished small-scale subsistence farms to an economically viable and socially and ecologically sustainable form of small-scale farming is one of the most important strategies to overcome hunger and poverty. The agricultural sector's potential in rural development lies in increasing productivity through appropriate modernisation of the production techniques, but above all in diversification strategies, the processing of products, the development of local and regional markets and the delivery of environmental services. The multi-functionality of agriculture can only be exhausted if site-specific strategies are developed and implemented. However, there is no globally valid solution for this, nor is there a blueprint that details how local requirements can be taken into consideration. Environmental conditions, development levels and cultural orientation in the different locations confront agriculture everywhere with different ecological and socio-economic requirements.



Taking advantage of the opportunities of ecological agriculture

It is not possible to meet growing food demand without making massive investments in agriculture. However, investments have to be planned in such a way that they ensure a sustainable way out of the hunger crisis. This cannot be achieved if we insist on pursuing energy and chemical-intensive industrial agriculture (IAASTD 2009). Only large enterprises and foreign investors benefit from large-scale, usually monoculture-based forms of farming. Small-scale farmers with little capital to invest in expensive technology are unable to compete.

Sustainability in agriculture is most likely to be achieved through ecological farming. In contrast to conventional agriculture, ecological farming renounces the use of green genetic engineering, pesticides, chemical and largely mineral-based fertilizers, growth accelerators (antibiotics, hormones), and enforces high animal protection standards. At the same time, there is evidence that even modern ecological farming can significantly increase output. Nevertheless, relying solely on ecological farming

would be as questionable as a general preference for conventional agriculture. Decisions have to be made locally or regionally about which mix of methods corresponds best with the requirements of site-specific farming and contributes most effectively to eliminating poverty and hunger. What is important here is that the farming methods ensure sustainable use of natural resources such as soil, water, air and biodiversity.

Traditional farming methods are often no longer viable in the face of growing production pressure and changing environmental conditions. Site-specific agriculture is characterized by the fact that production techniques build upon traditional know-how, innovative approaches are taken into consideration and changes are continually made to adapt to environmental and market conditions. A market-oriented and diversified form of small-scale farming is less vulnerable than large-scale, input intensive agriculture. It can usually react more flexibly to changing environmental conditions (climate change) and market requirements.

Food security also means economic development in rural regions

Only an economically viable agriculture can reduce poverty. Yields not only have to cover production costs, they must also produce surpluses so that income and jobs can be created and secured. Subsidization of agricultural services may be appropriate for clearly limited measures (e.g. environmental services, food security, social security), but this has to be transparent and fairly distributed.

Nevertheless: land and water are limited. In many countries, such resources are already too scarce to enable all subsistence and small-scale farmers to secure a decent livelihood. For millions of smallholders and their families, agriculture as a single source of income is a hunger and poverty trap. Only in isolated cases

(e.g. among certain indigenous peoples) the requirements of social and economic sustainability are met. It is therefore essential that new sources of income are generated for the social and economic development of rural regions. In the medium term, site-specific farming must go beyond pure self-sufficiency or local supply. This

presupposes that farmers diversify their output and wherever possible a poverty-oriented structural change takes place (e.g. reduction in the number of people working in agriculture if off-farm employment opportunities are available).

More agricultural research in developing countries

To be able to cover the increasing demand for agricultural products, crop yields must be higher and more reliable. Agricultural research and extension is the key to poverty elimination if they incorporate local and indigenous knowledge and research focuses on smallholder and sustainable farming methods in developing countries. Only a locally self-determined intensification of agriculture serves for self-reliant regional food security.

For centuries, breeding results were public property and available for all farmers. The last few years have seen a rapid privatisation in agricultural research, including research into seed breeding. This means that to an increas-



Madagascar: School children learn how to grow vegetables children in the village of Anosikely. (Photo: Welthungerhilfe)

ing extent farmer loose control over their seeds. Traditional stockpiling and free exchange with other smallholders are prevented by patenting and hybridisation. Green genetic engineering has not yet produced seed that has resulted in any significant improvement in the income of smallholders. In future, public agricultural research in developing countries should be promoted more intensively, and the knowledge of farmers included more systematically. One focus should be on the preservation and expansion of seed diversity in breeding and cultivation.

Commitment to site-specific farming

Welthungerhilfe is committed to promote site-specific farming in developing countries in a variety of ways:

- Small-scale farming is supported in such a way that local production and incomes are increased by practising site-specific, ecological farming methods based on modern, innovative and efficiency-based approaches.
- Cultivation techniques are based on using a diversity of plants. The focus is on the eco-friendly use of natural resources (soil, water, biodiversity, energy): Integrated pest management, sustainable forest management and agroforestry are key elements.
- Species-appropriate forms of animal husbandry and feeding are supported, supplemented whenever possible by veterinary measures.
- Marketing activities (local, regional and those aimed at export) and the processing of agricultural commodities are promoted to increase local revenues. If possible, cooperation with the private sector is pursued so that available know-how, capital and logistics structures can be used for pro-poor development.

Countries affected by hunger, but also **Germany** and the **international community, must contribute actively** towards eliminating hunger by promoting site-specific farming:

- The funding of rural development activities focusing specifically on food farming has to be secured (according to FAO 44 billion US\$/year). Achievement of the 0.7% goal has to be linked to a substantial increase in funds for investment in the agricultural sector.
- In countries affected by hunger, national agricultural policies aimed at eliminating poverty and achieving food security should be given greater priority and implemented

more energetically. This means securing land rights, providing access to resources and advice, supporting cooperatives and marketing structures.

- In international development cooperation, hunger elimination should focus on agriculture and rural development. Long-term concepts (10 to 15 years) to promote site-specific farming are an important means of realizing the right to food.
- Development projects and private industry should not use technologies or make investments that are not in line with conservation of natural resources and realisation of the right to an appropriate standard of living in recipient countries.

Sources

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