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viewpoint

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Down to earth:
Sustainable rural transformation

Enabling poor rural people to overcome poverty



Down to earth: Sustainable rural transformation

When food prices skyrocketed in 2007-2008, dozens of countries were shaken by civil unrest, rioting and violence. Such events graphically illustrate that food can be an explosive issue. Or more precisely, that the lack of affordable food can destabilize communities, governments, and even countries. The security implications have helped to put food security and agriculture high on the international development agenda.

It is important to understand, however, that the issue is not just about increasing food production for a global population that will surpass 9 billion by 2050. The problem of food insecurity today is primarily one of access. The world produces more than enough food to feed its population. But current food systems are unsustainable, and traditional development pathways have failed to reach more than 1 billion people, who remain in extreme poverty.

Today's world is full of paradoxes, some of them grotesque – none more so than the fact that while 870 million people go hungry every day, a third of all food is lost or wasted. We marvel at the growth rates of middle-income countries, yet some of those countries are home to tens of millions of very poor people. About 75 per cent of the world's poorest people live in rural areas and mainly derive their livelihoods from agriculture, while producing over 80 per cent of the food consumed in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. Yet many are themselves net buyers of food.

In an ideal world, higher demand for food and higher prices would translate into greater income and prosperity for the people who work the world's 500 million small farms. Instead, due to lack of access to markets, poor infrastructure and other causes, smallholder farmers are often unable to benefit from higher prices. Instead, they suffer from them. The 2012 edition of *The State of Food Insecurity in the World* found that as a result of income losses and higher food prices, in many countries poor people may have had to "compromise on the quality and diversity of the food they consumed by reverting to cheaper and less nutritious foods," or cut back on other basic needs such as health and education.

The world is becoming increasingly urban, yet cities are still fed by people working the land in rural areas. However, the gap between rural and urban areas has widened, creating a further threat to stability. Given the lack of resources and access to markets faced by many rural people – especially women, who make up nearly half of the developing world’s farmers – there is little incentive for them to improve yields and productivity. If farming is perceived as a back-breaking and unrewarding activity, it is hardly surprising that young people leave rural areas in search of opportunity, swelling already overcrowded cities.

But rural areas are changing, as higher returns from agriculture attract more investment and create new opportunities. We need to ensure that rural areas experience not just change, but development, and that rural people are at the centre of that development and benefit from it. Investment must respect the rights of local people and safeguard their access to land and other resources.

Neither global food security nor poverty eradication can be achieved without rural development. More and more, the development community is realizing that we cannot move forward if we continue to think of agriculture and rural areas as backward, or marginal. This transformation and change in our mindset needs to be embraced by leaders and decision makers of developing countries.

Inclusiveness, transformation, sustainability

As the number of days until 2015 dwindles and discussions of a post-2015 development agenda intensify, much of the talk is about not just a new set of goals, but a new, transformative way of reaching them.

The idea of transformation is not new. Almost 40 years ago, the Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition stated that “to remove the obstacles to food production and to provide proper incentives to agricultural producers” would require “effective measures of socio-economic

transformation,” including policy reform, “the reorganization of rural structures,” “the encouragement of producer and consumer co-operatives,” and “the mobilization of the full potential of human resources, both male and female,” in order to achieve “integrated rural development and the involvement of small farmers, fishermen and landless workers.”

That declaration was adopted in 1974 by the World Food Conference – the same conference that provided the initial impetus for the creation of IFAD. And those kinds of transformations and integrated actions to lift not just individuals but communities out of poverty are exactly what IFAD is about. IFAD has been a leader and innovator, especially through its work with rural people and their organizations. Empowerment for IFAD is not just a word. There really is strength in numbers, and when people organize and can advocate for themselves, we have seen them change the context of their lives.

It is a cliché of development discourse that it is better to teach people to fish than to give them fish to eat. But a transformative and sustainable development agenda sets the bar higher than this, addressing the whole context in which people fish, how they fish and what they fish for. It helps them fish today in a way that will also ensure that there will be fish to be caught tomorrow, and a thousand days in the future.

To take a very concrete example, in Mozambique, fishing communities in the Sofala Bank Artisanal Fisheries Promotion Project area were using mosquito nets to catch fish, because the minimum legal mesh size was still too large to catch the local species. Using mosquito nets meant that the bycatch included many small or juvenile fish, which posed a threat to their ability to mature and reproduce, and therefore endangered the ecosystem and the sustainability of the resource. The project started a dialogue with the government that led to modification of the legislation governing the mesh size – and eventually to the abandonment of the use of mosquito nets.

This small example shows why IFAD is placing increasing emphasis on policy dialogue, and how it relates to scaling up and sustainability. Understanding people’s needs and the constraints that drive their behaviour, and getting a rule changed that was forcing poor people to undercut their own resource base may seem simple, but it is not yet standard practice, and many top-down development approaches have failed. For IFAD, this is a large part

of what our interest in the policy environment is all about: ensuring at the national level the preconditions and incentives for rural people to invest more, and more effectively, in agricultural production and their microenterprises.

Transformation means not just changing the outcome, but changing the context. Sustainability implies transformation because it must be both ameliorative and preventive at the same time – changing the present, and opening the door to a better and more secure future.

To put it another way, you know that a change is transformational when it lasts. Twenty years ago, the fields around the village of Batodi in Niger were almost barren. Building on local initiatives, an IFAD-supported project worked with farmers to revive and improve traditional use of planting pits and half-moons to collect and store rainfall and run-off on degraded land, “re-greening” the area. Today, the fields around Batodi have higher on-farm tree densities than they did 20 years ago. The soil is more fertile and the trees provide fodder for livestock. There is evidence that the water harvesting techniques have recharged the groundwater with increases in well water levels. As a result, villagers have been able to diversify household food production by cultivating vegetable gardens around the wells and they are better able to cope with drought years, improving family nutrition. And yet, the project itself actually ended in 1996.

To transform rural spaces and rural lives will require imaginative projects, partnerships and technologies. A good example is the biogas digester, whose benefits are so many that they profoundly alter the lives of families and communities. More than a decade ago, IFAD and the Government of China collaborated in pioneering the use of biogas methane produced by human and animal waste to produce energy. The availability of biogas provides access to energy in areas not served by power grids and opens up many opportunities, from providing light for children to study by, to making possible new economic activities. The use of clean-burning gas instead of wood reduces the health damage caused by inhalation of smoke, while simultaneously reducing pressure on forest resources. And given that women in rural areas often spend long hours collecting firewood, it provides the most valuable resource of all: time, which could be devoted to learning, developing a livelihood, or many other life-enhancing activities.

We know that transforming the lives of women will also transform the lives of others, because when women are given greater control over resources they direct them in ways that improve family nutrition and education. Women are increasingly the farmers of the developing world, and they are the backbone of rural communities. Yet women are also usually the most disadvantaged members of rural societies. It is estimated that leveling the playing field and giving women equal access to resources would reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 100 to 150 million people. That leveling must be part of any transformative agenda.

Maintaining the future

Poverty is not just a problem for individuals, it is a problem for societies. And since it is systemic, it requires systematic solutions. It is important to stress again that lack of food security is principally about lack of access. Hunger and poverty don't just happen; they are created, by inequality, lack of opportunity, neglect and discrimination. This is why a key emerging message from the many consultations and reports on the post-2015 agenda is the call for an integrated approach to poverty, hunger and food insecurity, one that addresses issues of rights, equality, inclusion and good governance, alongside an economic and an environmental agenda.

Inequality is unsustainable for the human race; it produces hunger, poverty and conflict. It also hinders development, and insofar as it contributes to the continuation of unsustainable ways of living, it ultimately leads to the exhaustion of productive resources upon which human life depends. A world with over 9 billion people in which unsustainable modes of food production and consumption have left hundreds of millions undernourished and poor and have done nothing to mitigate risks from unchecked climate change is not the future we want.

Yet we must be realistic. The future we want isn't free, and it isn't enough just to want it. It will have to be paid for – not just with greater investment in sustainable agriculture and rural development to ensure adequate safe and nutritious food for all; not just by tearing down the barriers to access to food, access to inputs, access to finance, and myriad other obstacles. It will cost us not just money but time, and a higher level of care and attention. What use

are voluntary guidelines unless we pay attention to whether they are followed, and add our voices to calls for accountability? How will responsible consumption be achieved unless by our own exercise of it, first of all?

The final paradox is that if we succeed in our efforts, we will leave behind an unfinished agenda – that of maintaining, and sustaining, the more equitable and environmentally viable food systems that we are striving to put in place.

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