



Reflections on Family Farming in Latin America¹

Author: Alexander Schejtman

Executive Summary

Over 60 million people are directly linked to family farming (FF)

In Latin America, many terms are used indistinctly to refer to small food and livestock producers, including campesina agriculture, family farming and even campesina family farming. Rough estimates suggest that this activity involves over 14 million units and represents between 30% (Chile) and over 60% (Nicaragua) of agricultural and livestock production and between 60% and 80% of employment. Some 60 million people are linked to this activity.

FF covers a very heterogeneous group of small-scale producers

Since the 1970s, numerous attempts have been made to construct typologies of this sector of producers in order to establish the high level of heterogeneity that characterizes them. Apart from their breadth and variety, all of them identify, in one extreme, a level of subsistence (loss-making units that mainly produce for their own consumption) and, on the other, a segment that generates varying surpluses that can be sold.

Estimates based on a recent FAO/IDB study and other sources establish that over 60% of the family units correspond to the subsistence category and only 12% would be considered well-established or surplus-producing. The rest are in the middle, and their situations will improve or worsen in response to various conditions.

¹ This working paper has been originally published in Spanish: Schejtman, A. “Alcances sobre la agricultura familiar”. Diálogo Rural Iberoamericano, San Salvador, Septiembre 2008. Documento de Trabajo N°21. Programa Dinámicas Territoriales Rurales. Rimisp, Santiago, Chile. This document can be accessed through the following link www.rimisp.org/dtr/documentos.

In spite of the fact that they are important food producers, only a small minority of family farmers could benefit from the recent crisis.

In spite of the reduced availability of assets and relatively low levels of productivity, family farming is an important provider of many of the basic foods that are commonly consumed in Latin America. In Brazil, family farms produce 67% of the beans, 84% of the yucca, 49% of the corn and 52% of the milk that is consumed in the country. In Colombia, they are responsible for over 30% of annual agricultural production. In Ecuador they are responsible for 64% of the potatoes, 85% of the onions, 70% of the maize, 85% of the corn and 83% of the lamb produced internally. In Bolivia, 70% of the corn and rice and almost all of the potatoes and yucca are produced by these units.

In Chile, 45% of vegetables for internal consumption, 43% of corn, wheat and rice and 40% of meat and milk are produced by family farms, as are other products. In view of all of this, one would think that FF would be one of the major beneficiaries of the recent crisis of rising food prices. However, even engaging in an abstraction of their subordinate situation to modern food distribution chains we find that in most countries over 80% of small-scale producers are net food buyers. Furthermore, recent data for 15 countries in the region indicates that in 11 of them the incidence of poverty was greater among family farmers than among the country's overall rural population.

The territorial approach to development of FF is a promising area of Ibero-American collaboration

We know that the strategies of rural households to overcome poverty (making abstraction of the transfers) move through various combinations of three routes: agriculture, rural non-agricultural employment and migration. The agricultural route, as an exclusive option, is undoubtedly reduced to well-established FF. Multi-employment is the most frequent situation in the other types of units.

The recent World Bank report "Agriculture for Development" puts forth a rural agenda for countries such as those in the region that present a high level of urbanization and bi-modal agrarian structures. In other words, these are countries that have a segment of modern businesses and a vast and heterogeneous rural sector that is summarized in the below diagram, which is self-explanatory.

In Latin America there is a growing demand for the adoption of the territorial focus for rural development, but there is very little substantive experience. As a result, the collaboration of countries such as Spain and Portugal, which have a significant history in this area, is extraordinarily promising.