Five Global Threats to the Survival of Family Farms in the International Year of Family Farming

By Tanya Kerssen*

"Peasant agriculture not only contributes positively to the carbon balance of the planet, it employs 2.8 billion people and remains the best way to combat malnutrition. We small farmers and indigenous peoples are in grave danger. We will disappear if things continue like this. Who will feed people then?"

—Josie Riffaud, French farmer and Via Campesina member

On November 22, 2013, the United Nations launched the International Year of Family Farming - IYFF (2014) with the goal of highlighting “the potential family farmers have to eradicate hunger, preserve natural resources and promote sustainable development.” The IYFF is a coup for the millions of family farmers, fishers and pastoralists worldwide who have struggled under anti-peasant policies for decades, and whose disappearance has been predicted, hoped-for and orchestrated time and time again in the name of “progress.” This victory is a testament to the resilience of small-scale, diversified food production. It also speaks to the capacity of small farmers and peasants to build strong social movements—locally, nationally and globally—and to wield unprecedented influence in the international development arena.

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have access to land. Despite the already acute state of land concentration in the world, a new surge of land grabs has been documented since the 2007/2008 food, fuel and financial crises. The “new” land grabs—estimated at 86 million hectares since 2007—involves a rush of largely speculative land purchases.

Newcomers to agricultural investing such as pension funds and financial companies are generally less interested in the value of the crops or animals that can be produced on the land. Indeed, they stand to benefit from (real or perceived) food scarcity, which can actually boost land values.

The new land grabs and processes of land concentration are occurring in both Global North and South, in the countryside and in cities. As St. Peter and Patel note, “just as in the Global South, poor people in the US still want and try to make a living off the land. While some farmers’ children want to head to the cities, many others are being kicked off the farm.” Similarly, a recent report indicates that in Europe, “tens of thousands of small farmers are being thrown out of farming every year, while large farms and agribusiness are expanding their scope widely and rapidly” leading to a rapid concentration of land “on par with the scale and character witnessed in Africa, Asia and Latin America.”

1. Land Grabs and Lack of Access to Land

Family farming cannot exist—much less thrive—unless farmers have access to land. Despite urban land is also under attack, posing a threat to the gardeners and urban farmers who play an increasingly important role in food security, job creation and community building. Indeed, the protection of and access to urban lands for food production is seen as an issue not only of food justice, but also of racial justice. Detroit activist Malik Yakini notes:

The IYFF is justifiably billed as a long-overdue “celebration” of family farming’s persistent contributions to development, food security and ecological resilience. Nonetheless, it comes at a time when family farmers worldwide face perhaps the steepest challenges ever to their very survival. If the IYFF is to be truly meaningful, it must highlight those challenges that most severely threaten to undermine or even decimate family farming and community-based food systems.

“Farmers have repeatedly proven that we have better solutions and methods for farming than can come from purchasing seed and chemical inputs from corporations. Peasant seeds are at the root of food sovereignty; they produce healthier food, sustainably. Also, in the face of climate change, diverse seeds systems are what we need to have resilient agriculture, but most of all, peasant seeds are part of a system of production which promotes justice instead of inequality and hunger.”

—Zimbabwean farmer Elizabeth Mpofu, General Coordinator of La Via Campesina
Therefore, all people seeking justice [have] a responsibility to assist, in a respectful way, black economic development.8

These land grabs are occurring at a time of absent or shrinking state mechanisms for making land available to landless or land-poor workers; people of color; urban neighborhoods; and young and aspiring farmers. In order to effectively support family farming, policies must be put in place that not only put a stop to land grabbing, but also facilitate the low-cost transfer of rural and urban land to those with a genuine interest in producing food as a vocation.

2. Trade Liberalization and Financial Deregulation

The global threats to family farmers are closely interrelated and part of the same “regime” of rules and regulations that is ultimately stacked against family farmers. For instance, land grabbing is associated with international trade liberalization and the deregulation of investment and finance, which allows capital to flow freely across borders acquiring distant lands for production or speculation. Structural adjustment policies in the 1980s and 90s, combined with free trade agreements like NAFTA and the WTO, pushed countries to import food instead of producing it, and to devote resources to export crops instead. Meanwhile, northern countries deregulated their banking and financial sectors, relaxing limitations on the amount of speculative capital that could be invested in commodities. The result has been a dramatic expansion of foreign control of land.10

In addition, most Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) contain provisions on intellectual property rights that open the door for the patenting of hybrid and GMO seeds. The flip side of this is the criminalization of seed saving and sharing—vital activities through which family farmers maintain diverse and resilient farms. Under the US-Colombian FTA, for instance, the Colombian government is required to provide monopoly rights over seeds sold by US and European corporations. Farmers caught saving such seeds or selling native seeds that have not been formally registered face possible fines or jail time.11 Colombian farmers are also harmed by the “dumping” of cheap, taxpayer-subsidized US food into their domestic market: US agricultural exports to Colombia surged 62 percent in the first year of the FTA, while Colombian farm exports to the US decreased 15 percent.12

Unregulated global markets, land grabs, conflict, climate change and maldevelopment do not affect all family farmers equally. The degree of vulnerability to these threats is highest for people of color—notwithstanding the fact that they grow most of the world’s food, harvest most of the world’s fresh fruits and vegetables, process most of the world’s meat, cook and clean in most of the world’s restaurants, and serve as domestic workers in upper class homes around the world.

Proud, smiling faces of African, Asian, Latin American, indigenous and aboriginal farmers in lush fields accompany much of the celebratory media reports generated by the International Year of Family Farming. For Northern farmers, the inverse is often the case. Representations of farming in the US are often whitewashed, to the effect of invisibilizing the contributions of people of color to the nation’s food production. In other words, both the conditions that drive farmers off their land in the Global South and the existence of non-white farmers in the Global North seem to occupy a massive blind spot in conversations about food production. It’s no wonder then that immigrant food and farmworkers suffer some of the worst abuses in the US economy.

The destruction of smallholder agriculture in the Global South has sent millions of farmers on perilous migrations to the Global North in search of work. Often without papers, they enter low-paying jobs in the food system where labor abuses—including high rates of gender-based violence—are commonplace.9 They frequently live in low-income neighborhoods where unemployment, poor environmental conditions and high levels of violent crime are the norm. People of color in the United States also suffer from the highest indices of diet-related disease.

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Box 1.

“Seeing” Farmers of Color

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Both TAFTA and TPP would allow companies to attack any signatory country whose policies—including tariff and non-tariff protections for family farmers—undercut their ability to extract profits. As the advocacy group Public Citizen notes, TAFTA is a “trade deal in name only.” In reality, these treaties would allow corporations to defy national sovereignty and transcend national laws.

3. Militarism, Conflict and the Criminalization of Farmers’ Movements

Land and resource grabs and other developments that undermine the livelihoods of family farmers, peasants and indigenous people are usually met with some degree of—sometimes fierce—local resistance. The effectiveness of these resistance and land recovery efforts is influenced by many factors, including the degree to which land grabbers turn to private or state security forces to violently remove or repress local movements. In the Aguán Valley of Honduras, for instance, farmers engaged in peaceful protest to recover cooperative lands grabbed in the 1990s have been viciously repressed. According to a recent report, 92 members of Aguán farmers’ organizations were killed between 2009 and 2012—many linked to mercenaries hired by large landowners.17

Due to water scarcity, few Palestinians farm anymore, and those who do generally opt for rain-fed olive tree production. Palestinian trees, however, especially near settlement areas, are routinely vandalized or uprooted. The Applied Research Institute of Jerusalem estimates that about 2.5 million mostly fruit-bearing trees on Palestinian lands have been uprooted since 1967. The flood of low-cost Israeli food imports also undercuts Palestinian farmers in their local markets, and the high transaction costs of navigating Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks make accessing export markets exceedingly difficult. While the case of Palestine is unique in many respects, family farmers around the world similarly struggle for access to productive resources in the midst of highly repressive conditions and need our solidarity.

Two new far-reaching multilateral agreements threaten to further undermine family farmers worldwide: the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) due to be adopted by twelve Pacific Rim states, and the Transatlantic Free Trade Agreement (TAFTA) between the US and the European Union. The potential impacts of these agreements are multiple and complex. For instance, as the world’s largest importer of liquefied natural gas, Japan’s entry into the TPP could promote the expansion of “fracking” in the US and Europe, threatening land and water resources. For Japan, the flood of cheap imports from industrialized countries like the US and Australia could rob millions of small farmers of their domestic food markets, forcing them out of agriculture. Through TAFTA, the EU’s more stringent food safety and environmental laws—such as those regulating GMOs—could be forcibly dismantled. Those who stand to benefit the most are large industrial farmers and corporate seed, feed and trading giants like Monsanto, Cargill and ADM.15

Box 2.

Solidarity with Palestinian Farmers

In addition to the International Year of Family Farming, 2014 is also the International Year of Solidarity with the Palestinian People as declared by the UN General Assembly (resolution A/68/12) on November 26, 2013. There is perhaps no better case with which to examine the assault on family farmers’ livelihoods due to military occupation and deteriorating access to land and resources. Once the backbone of the Palestinian economy, farming has dropped from 28 percent of GDP in 1993 to only 5.8 percent today. Between 1967 and 2012, the percentage of Palestinians employed in agriculture fell from 46 percent of the workforce to 11.4 percent. Access to water is central to this precipitous decline. With almost complete control of the aquifers in the occupied Palestinian territories, Israel has drilled deep wells to supply its settlements, causing water tables to drop dramatically, especially in the West Bank.

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In places where farmers are displaced by armed conflict, they may lose their lands and be unable to regain them. In the southern Senegalese region of Casamance, 10 to 40 thousand farmers have been displaced by conflict, most taking refuge in the largest nearby city of Ziguinchor. For those who have returned to their farms, the lack of infrastructure and the presence of landmines make farming next to impossible. In Northern Mali, an estimated 500,000 people out of a population of 1.3 million were displaced by conflict following the March 2012 coup. Women’s groups in the Malian village of Gao have been working to grow vegetables for self-sufficiency in the midst of chaos and food shortages. For farmers in conflict or post-conflict areas around the world, the environmental damage to soil and water resources can be devastating. In Iraq, over 40 sites—concentrated in agricultural regions such as Basra—have been identified as contaminated with high levels of radiation, dioxins and depleted uranium.

Many farmers around the world face violent or militarized conditions—including the War on Drugs and the War on Terror—that prevent them from asserting their rights to land, water and other necessities for a dignified livelihood. Whether directly or indirectly implicated in conflicts, peasants and family farmers suffer from the human and ecological toll of war, with devastating impacts on local and national food security.

4. Climate Change and Vulnerability

The impact of climate change on agriculture, especially in the tropics of the Global South, is already being felt through extreme weather events and effects such as hailstorms, droughts and floods; soil and wind erosion; declining crop yields; the intensification of cyclone activity; the salinization of coastal aquifers; and the increased presence of pests and diseases. Family farmers, fishers and pastoralists are on the frontlines of this climate chaos.

Nonetheless, it is difficult to separate climate change from the numerous other threats that family farmers face. For instance, while small farmers in the Andes are among the most vulnerable to climate change, the region is also experiencing a rapid expansion of extractive industries due to high global mineral prices. Ironically, poor highland farmers often leave their farms to work in the very mines that contaminate their lands and make them more vulnerable to climate change. Indeed, to be a peasant or small farmer today dealing with multiple and simultaneous threats—including climate change—often means having few, and mostly undesirable, options. In some cases it means adopting short-term survival strategies that undermine long-term resilience.

Perhaps like no other issue, climate change highlights the link between the survival of family farms and the survival of all of humanity. Because while they may be vulnerable, family farmers are also our best hope for adapting to, and even curbing, climate change. The biodiversity, native seed varieties, sustainable practices and local and traditional knowledge that peasants and indigenous peoples maintain—even under embattled conditions—are the key to rebuilding global ecological resilience. Studies have show that diversified, sustainable small farms can withstand the variability of climate change far better than industrial monocultures. The expansion of industrial agriculture over the last century has led to the loss of an estimated 75 percent of the world’s plant genetic diversity as farmers have been induced to abandon local varieties in favor of genetically uniform, high-yielding or GMO varieties. In the Philippines, for instance, a genetic base of 1,400 rice varieties was reduced to only four in just a few decades because farm credit was conditioned on growing only Green Revolution hybrids. The loss to local nutrition; livelihoods; productivity and resilience of farming system; and global food security has been immeasurable.

It is crucial, therefore, that small farmers receive the support they need to farm sustainably—including maintaining and enhancing locally-adapted seed varieties and landraces—as part of an integrated approach that also includes land reform, protections from land and resource grabbing, access to markets, health and culturally-appropriate education.
5. Top-Down Development and False Solutions

Most governments and aid agencies favor large-scale, industrial production for export as a means of generating foreign exchange, paying off external debts, appeasing landed elites, and boosting GDP. Nonetheless, peasants and family farmers have proven to be a difficult demographic to ignore—both because of their still significant populations (especially in the Global South) and their contributions to food production and rural employment. As a result, family farmers—and especially women—are increasingly included as a target of agricultural development policies and projects. Yet these initiatives tend to focus on incorporating farmers into commercial markets and global value chains which move decision-making away from the farm, and into the hands of fertilizer dealers, banks, intermediaries and large corporations.

Family farmers, however, are rejecting this kind of top-down approach. For instance, the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) financed by the Gates Foundation and the “New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition” advanced by G8 countries have been met with great resistance by African farmers who view these initiatives as “false solutions” to the problems of hunger and poverty on the continent. Ben Guri, chair of the African Food Sovereignty Alliance, stated:

Never before has there been a more coordinated and better-funded attempt to transform Africa’s peasant based agriculture into a commercial enterprise. These initiatives are taking place without any consultation with farmers in Africa. Indeed, they pointedly ignore the millions of smallholder farmers in Africa with the vast majority using farm-saved seed to ensure their food security. The combined effect of these initiatives is to hand over Africa’s food and seed sovereignty to foreign corporations, reducing the availability of local plant varieties, weakening Africa’s rich biodiversity, and denying millions of farmers the right to breed and share crops needed to feed their families.31

Growing concerns about climate change are also generating schemes that purport to solve the environmental crisis while creating new market opportunities for “green” products such as agrofuels, so-called drought-tolerant GMO crops, ecotourism, carbon offsets and ecosystem services. Farmers have voiced strong objections to these developments as a form of “green grabbing” in which lands and resources used to sustain livelihoods are appropriated by capital in the name of the environment.32 Luis Gomes de Maura of the Brazilian landless workers’ movement (MST) notes, “Capitalism caused climate change and now it wants to make new business from it. They want to turn the air into a commodity. They want to put a price tag on everything. These are false solutions to climate change.”33

Peasants and Women Feed the World

In a statement read on the day of the IYFF launch, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon noted that family farmers, fishers and pastoralists play an important role in meeting the global demand for food, which is “predicted to increase by 50 percent by the year 2030.”34 Indeed, it is estimated that, taken together, these peasants already produce 70 percent of the world’s food.35 What’s more, they do so on less land, using less energy and employing more people than large-scale industrial agriculture.36 In the words of global peasant movement Via Campesina, “Peasants and family farmers have a food producing vocation. Agribusiness has an export vocation.”37

Women figure prominently in...
peasant food production—and in many parts of the world, increasingly so. In most countries of the Global South, women farmers produce 60 to 80 percent of the food consumed. They also carry out most of the work related to childcare, food preparation and other household responsibilities such as collecting fuel and water. Additionally, women increasingly make up the majority of wageworkers in export-oriented agribusiness value chains—in jobs that tend to be temporary, poorly paid and highly discriminatory. The predominantly male out-migration from the countryside spurred by neoliberal policies combined with the slashing of government social services has increased this burden on women’s unpaid agricultural and caregiving work.

So while, as the FAO states, “all kind of evidence shows that poor family farmers can quickly deploy their productivity potential when the appropriate policy environment is put in place” such environments are currently all but non-existent. Instead, farmer organizations find themselves “swimming against the tide” of public policies that overwhelmingly favor export commodity sectors and transnational corporations over local food economies and small farmers. What’s more, peasants, family farmers and women enjoy few protections against the violent advance of capital accumulation on their lands, resources, seeds and bodies. For Kathy Ozer, Executive Director of the US National Family Farm Coalition, changing this policy environment is at the heart of the struggle for food sovereignty:

It’s enabling farmers to get paid a fair price for what they produce so that they can recover their costs of production; be paid fairly themselves to be able to pay their own workers fairly; and be in a system that values their production instead of the system we have now [in which] farmers and fishers are being forced out of production and forced off the land.

Conclusion

The IYFF rightly points to the need to “highlight” the role of smallholders and carve out greater policy spaces for supporting family-based food production. While this is both important and necessary, it is simply not enough. Corporate monopolies have become deft at quashing democratic reforms and legal demands for the right to food, land, water and basic human dignity. This concentration of power in the food system must be dismantled, and to be dismantled it must be challenged.

There is little doubt that re-centering family farming as a development priority is a position that invites conflict. Now as always, the peasantry poses a threat to the continued dominance of a small class of inordinately wealthy and powerful people—the oligarchs of the corporate food regime. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that FAO Director José Graziano Da Silva would seek to avoid provoking the surly giant of industrial agriculture, stating that “support to family farming need not be done in opposition to large-scale, specialized farming, which also plays an important role to ensure global food supply.” This “we need all solutions” position seeks to reconcile two essentially irreconcilable development models: family farming and community-based food production on one hand and corporate, industrial agriculture dominated by global monopolies on the other. In reality, the latter is annihilating the former, and family farms don’t stand a chance—that is, unless we genuinely stand with them.

But Da Silva is a diplomat, and campaigns like the IYFF come and go. Movement-building, however, is what effects real change. So while it is right and good to celebrate the women and men who produce our food, they cannot be adequately supported unless the root causes of their immiseration are addressed. And it is urgent that we do so, for the challenges facing the world’s family farmers are the very challenges threatening the survival of humanity and of the planet.
3. e.g. Idle No More, La Via Campesina, the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and the “We Are the Solution” campaign of West Africa
7. TNI. “Land Concentration, Land Grabbing and People’s Struggles in October 18, 2013. http://civileats.com/2013/10/18/this-land-is-
11. “Colombia farmers’ uprising puts the spotlight on seeds” GRAIN, September 4, 2013. www.grain.org/article/entries/4779-colombia-farmers-uprising-puts-the-spotlight-on-seeds
12. GRAIN 2013, Op Cit., n. 2
18. IDMC. “New displacement and challenges to durable solutions in Casamance” Internally Displaced Monitoring Center, June 18 2010.
19. Please consider helping the women of Gao grow food for their communities in these desperate times through Food First’s online Global Giving campaign: http://www.globalgiving.org/projects/seeds-and-pumps-for-villagers-to-grow-food-in-gao-mali/
34. “Secretary-General’s message for launch of International Year of Family Farming 2014 [delivered by Mr. Thomas Gass, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs]” New York, 22 November 2013. www.un.org/sg/statements/?nid=7300
44. Food First Interview with Kathy Ozer, National Family Farm Coalition, January 19, 2014. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GRN_xCY0w