

Supporting smallholders: markets, rights, or sovereignty?

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Development policymakers, academics and practitioners gathered at [a 'provocation' seminar in Stockholm, Sweden](#) last week (3 March 2011) to discuss whether their approaches to supporting small-scale farmers should be based on markets or rights.

But, according to one speaker at the event, smallholders aren't helped by either. What they need is the power to define their own 'rules of the game'. P.V. Satheesh, founding member of the grassroots organisation Deccan Development Society in India, gave an impassioned presentation arguing that the only way to support development for small-scale farmers is to empower them to set their own trade rules and values.

He claimed that trying to connect farmers to global markets doesn't work. "Almost 99 per cent of the more than quarter million farmer suicides in India over the past decade were small-scale farmers who dreamt of being entrepreneurs. They were asked by the market to grow a given crop and when they followed that advice, the market crashed unflinchingly."



Small-scale farmers should be able to set their own trade rules, said P.V. Satheesh.
Credit: Flickr/The AgriCultures Network

Focus on food sovereignty

Satheesh called for development policy to move beyond looking at connecting smallholders to value chains, to focus on food sovereignty. This means promoting autonomy for small-scale farmers over food production, consumption, seeds and markets. And it means focusing on locally controlled agroecological food systems that protect environment and biodiversity.

Can it work in practice? Satheesh said it can. He pointed to a successful autonomous market in the Medak district of India, set up 11 years ago and run by 3,000 female farmer shareholders. The market is based entirely on food crops grown on ecological principles. Each year, the farmers make democratic decisions on how much should be sold and where. And every year, every shareholder has earned a dividend of 35–110 per cent.

Satheesh's call was appreciated by some participants in the Stockholm seminar. IIED researcher Michel Pimbert, for example, echoed the need to focus on food sovereignty, arguing that more and more small-scale farmers want to distance themselves from markets.

Connecting to markets can work

But not everyone agreed. Anders Ekbohm, from the University of Gothenburg, challenged



East African farmers are growing fruit.
Credit: Fintrac

Pimbert's claim, saying that his own research suggests that farmers are increasingly engaging in global markets. He pointed to Kenya as an example: "40 years ago they grew cassava, sorghum, potatoes and coffee. Now they all produce fruits, nuts, cut flowers and are becoming more and more commercial".

Katarina Eriksson, from the Tetra Laval group, agreed, adding "our experience is that it is definitely possible to integrate smallholders into industrial value chains and this is what our customers do all over the world".

Ngolia Kimanzu of the Swedish Cooperative Centre gave another example of connecting farmers to regional value chains: one from Burkina Faso, where a farmers organisation — made up of 5,000 small-scale farmers across three regions — has been able to not only provide produce for the domestic market but also to capture big markets in Ghana and Nigeria.

What does all this discussion mean? Olivier de Schutter, UN special rapporteur on the right to food, said that markets definitely do have a role to play — but he suggested that we should focus on local and regional markets. At same time, said de Schutter, we must recognise that global supply chains will continue to exist and develop, and we must make them more inclusive and transparent. This means reshaping them to allow smallholders to benefit through cooperatives, help to comply with regulations and improved access to credit and information.