

February 1, 2022

Dr. QU Dongyu,

Director-General

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Viale delle Terme di Caracalla

00153 Rome, Italy

Dear Dr. QU,

Re: [FAO confusion over the role of peasants in meeting the food needs of the world's peoples](#)

A [recent FAO report](#) exposes contradictions regarding the contribution of peasants to world food security making it unclear who FAO understands to be a peasant or small family farmer; what, if any, land size describes a small farm; the important distinction between production and consumption; the difference between market value and nutritional importance and the ongoing failures of the industrial food chain. FAO's definitional confusion, in combination with some other papers¹, are contributing to the public misperception that peasants may only produce a third of the world's food² whereas the findings of the undersigned conclude that peasants are the major food providers to at least 70% of the world's people.³

The data and policy assumptions in FAO's June 2021 publication ([Which farms feed the world and has farmland become more concentrated?](#)) expose important contradictions requiring clarification.

The 2021 report proposes to clean up confusion created by a 2014 FAO⁴ paper that suggests that family farms produce 80% of the world's food by applying a definition of small family farms at odds with that of the UN Decade of the Family Farm (2019 – 2028) as proposed by FAO and IFAD. The FAO–IFAD definition of family farms encompasses “models in agriculture, fishery forestry, pastoral and aquaculture, and include peasants, indigenous peoples, traditional communities, fisher folks, mountain farmers, forest users and pastoralists.”⁵ This definition is similar to what we would call peasant production although we also include urban and peri-urban food production. Surprisingly, FAO's 2021 publication confines small farms to crop production and some on farm livestock keeping.⁶ By unilaterally reducing the diversity of peasant production systems and insisting that peasant farms must be less than 2 ha, the 2021 study concludes that peasants grow 35% of the world's food on 12% of farmlands.⁷

The paper's arbitrary 2 ha limitation contradicts the conclusions of the FAO Chief Statistician who, on the basis of a 2018 consultation in which more than 50 states participated, rejected a universal landholding threshold and instead set out a number of relative metrics to define small

farms differently on a country by country basis.⁸ We affirm the right of peasants to self-identify and also note that nationally-defined descriptions of small farms appear to average 5 ha or in the range of 25% of all farmland⁹ and conclude – along with other studies cited in the 2021 FAO report¹⁰ – that the world’s peasant farms produce roughly half of the world’s food. This means that the peasant share of global food production rises to approximately 70% when the standard FAO-IFAD definition is applied (i.e. including artisanal fishers, urban producers, hunters and gatherers, and pastoralists).¹¹

Further, FAO’s 2021 paper measures productivity by “value” which, although left undefined, presumes market value.¹² This is unrealistic. Although peasants routinely sell to the market, they also feed their families and communities outside commercial markets. Then too, the value of “famine food” or “underutilized” food vital in the pre-harvest weeks (and still more so in our future climate) cannot be overemphasized. Peasant families also grow nutrient rich food beyond that available or affordable in the marketplace.¹³

Beyond its confusion around value, we disagree with the paper’s focus on production over consumption. The industrial sectors food loss and waste – including deliberate over-production¹⁴ (and over-consumption)¹⁵ are not discussed in the paper despite its market emphasis. We remain convinced that peasants not only grow a majority of the world’s food but are substantially more successful in meeting the nutritional requirements of food insecure populations.

We are surprised that this latest publication from FAO undermines its long-held view that small farms are more productive than large farms.¹⁶ Despite having only 12% of the land, the 2021 paper acknowledges that small (under 2 ha) farms produce 35% of the food – suggesting that small farms should be almost three times more productive. Despite this, the authors declare themselves neutral on small farm productivity.

The 2021 FAO paper also argues that large farms account for at least 70% of global farmland and receive disproportionately less attention from policymakers than small farms. The study urges that more attention be given to larger production systems in order to address future global food requirements.¹⁷ No data is offered to substantiate policy biases toward peasants. Nevertheless, the study has a point – just not the one it wishes to make. Policymakers need to understand why the industrial food chain produces so little food while consuming most of the world’s agricultural land and resources. Policy makers should ask themselves why they are investing huge commercial subsidies, land and other incentives on an industrial system that has so much power and profitability, and is so destructive to our environment and food security.¹⁸

As many studies acknowledge, gaps and reliable data and reliance on quarter-century-old data, makes everyone’s estimates approximate.¹⁹ Nevertheless, there is persuasive evidence that farm and off-farm peasant production is absolutely vital to at least 70% of the world population. The 2021 FAO paper challenges this 70% estimate by inference rather than by statistics but, again, risks misleading policymakers and distorting priorities. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss our policy and data differences in the near future.

In summary, the international community would benefit from less confusing and more collaborative research and clarity from FAO. There are few issues more important to get right

than which system – agribusiness that sucks up more than 70% of agricultural resources and only addresses 30% of the people – or Food Sovereignty that is already nourishing 70% of the people with less than one third of agricultural resources²⁰ – is best able to meet the enormous food system challenges of the 21st century.

We look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

[Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa](#)
[A Growing Culture](#)
[ETC Group](#)
[GRAIN](#)
[Groundswell International](#)
[Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy](#)
[Landworkers Alliance](#)
[The Oakland Institute](#)

¹ Namely: [Ricciardi et al.](#) (2018), “How much of the world’s food do smallholders produce?”, *Global Food Security* 17, 64-72.

² [FAO 2021 report](#): Lowder *et al* (2021) « Which farms feed the world and has farmland become more concentrated?», *World Development*, 142, p.1.

³ ETC Group (2017), “With climate chaos: Who will feed us?”, 3rd Edition, p. 6. Available online at: <https://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/files/etc-whowillfeedus-english-webshare.pdf>

⁴ FAO (2014), *The State of Food and Agriculture*, p. xi, Rome. Available online at: <https://www.fao.org/3/i4040e/i4040e.pdf>

⁵ FAO and IFAD (2019), *The United Nations Decade of Family Farming 2019-2028. Global Action Plan*, p.8. Rome.

⁶ The FAO 2021 uses the definition for smallholder from [Ricciardi et al.](#) (2018), “How much of the world’s food do smallholders produce?”, *Global Food Security* 17, 64-72.

⁷ [FAO 2021 report](#): Lowder *et al* (2021) « Which farms feed the world and has farmland become more concentrated?», *World Development*, 142, p.1.

⁸ FAO (2018) “Proposed International Definition of Small-scale Food Producers -Monitoring the Sustainable Development Goal Indicators 2.3.1 and 2.3.2.”, Rome. Available online at: unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/49th-session/documents/BG-Item3j-small-scale-food-producers-definition-FAO-E.pdf

⁹ GRAIN, “Hungry for land: Small farmers feed the world with less than a quarter of all farmland”, May 2014. Available online at: <https://grain.org/article/entries/4929-hungry-for-land-small-farmers-feed-the->

[world-with-less-than-a-quarter-of-all-farmland](#)

¹⁰ FAO (2021), p.6 references:

[Graeub](#) (2016), The state of family farms in the world, World Development, 87, pp. 15.

[Ricciardi et al.](#) (2018), “How much of the world’s food do smallholders produce?”, *Global Food Security* 17, 64-72.

When the smallholder definition is increased to 5 ha as per some country definition, the Ricciardi *et al.* (2018) paper reaches the conclusion that small holder farmers provide 44 to 48% food calories.

¹¹ ETC Group (2017), “With climate chaos: Who will feed us?”, 3rd Edition, p. 6. Available online at: <https://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/files/etc-whowillfeedus-english-webshare.pdf>

¹³ Danny Hunter, Stefano Padulosi, E.D. Israel Oliver King, M. S. Swaminathan, *Orphan Crops for Sustainable Food and Nutrition Security*, Earthscan, 2022.

¹⁴ Chapter 2 “Loss and waste Are we really measuring a problem?” by Elise Golan, Travis Minor, and Suzanne Thornsbury in Suzanne Thornsbury, Ashok K. Mishra (editors), Travis Minor, *The Economics of Food Loss in the Produce Industry*, Routledge, 2020.

¹⁵ ETC Group (2017), “With climate chaos: Who will feed us?”, 3rd Edition, pp.16. Available online at: <https://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/files/etc-whowillfeedus-english-webshare.pdf>

¹⁶ “FAO’s analysis of the household survey data supports the inverse productivity hypothesis, as smaller farms appear to have higher yields for selected crops than larger family farms (Figure 6)”

FAO (2014), The State of Food and Agriculture, p. 17, *Fig.6.*, Rome. Available online at: <https://www.fao.org/3/i4040e/i4040e.pdf>

¹⁷ FAO 2021 report, Lowder et al. (2021), p.4:

“However, to the extent that international organizations focus on what is happening at the lower end of the distribution, their attention may be diverted away from the state of medium and large scale farms which represent the vast majority of agricultural land. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to have an unbiased picture of the state of large scale and corporate agriculture if international organizations focus only on smallholders and small farms.”

¹⁸ ETC Group (2017), “With climate chaos: Who will feed us?”, 3rd Edition, p. 17 (4. Who is using up our agricultural resources?). Available online at: <https://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/files/etc-whowillfeedus-english-webshare.pdf>

¹⁹ OECD, “Overcoming Evidence Gaps on Food Systems”, OECD-Food, Agriculture and Fisheries. July 2021, n°163.

²⁰ ETC Group (2017), “With climate chaos: Who will feed us?”, 3rd Edition, p. 17 (4. Who is using up our agricultural resources?). Available online at: <https://www.etcgroup.org/sites/www.etcgroup.org/files/files/etc-whowillfeedus-english-webshare.pdf>