

Opinion » Lead

Published: November 13, 2011 23:15 IST | Updated: November 13, 2011 23:15 IST

Let's make climate change talks inclusive

M. S. Swaminathan

Kanayo F. Nwanze



The Hindu Climate-resilient sustainable agriculture requires knowledge. Successful projects such as these can provide a model for others to follow. Knowledge transfer that brings the benefits of research from the laboratory to the farm is essential.

Price volatility and the persistence of widespread and hidden hunger underline the need for enhancing the productivity and profitability of smallholder agriculture in an environmentally sustainable manner.

When world leaders sit down again to discuss climate change, we hope that the people who live and work on the world's 500 million small farms will be with them, at least in spirit. Their voice — and the issue of agriculture as a whole — has, for too long, been missing from the conversation. But without increased support to smallholder farmers now, the number of hungry people will grow, and future food security will be placed in jeopardy.

The upcoming 17th Conference of the Parties (COP17) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012 — marking the twentieth anniversary of the landmark Earth Summit that produced Agenda 21, “a roadmap” for sustainable development — will both need to ensure that agriculture and the world's smallholder farmers are high on the agenda if we are to overcome the many challenges we face in achieving the Millennium Development Goal 1.

The front line

In the last 20 years the global population has risen from about 5.3 billion to seven billion; the reality of climate change has been accepted beyond doubt; and the number of hungry people in the world has remained stubbornly around the one billion mark. Meanwhile, aid to agriculture has only just recently begun to pick up after decades of stagnation. More needs to be done — a lot more — and supporting smallholder farmers must be at the heart of any agenda.

The rural poor across the world, including India, have contributed little to human-induced climate change, yet they are on the front line in coping with its effects. Farmers can no longer rely on historical averages for rainfall and temperature, and the more frequent and extreme weather events, such as droughts and floods, can spell disaster. And there are new threats, such as sea level rise and the impact of melting glaciers on water supply.

How significant are small farms? As many as two billion people worldwide depend on them for their food and livelihood. Smallholder farmers in India produce 41 per cent of the country's food grains, and other food items that contribute to local and national food security. Small farmers cannot be ignored, and special attention must be given to the most vulnerable groups — particularly women, who make up a large percentage of farmers in the developing world.

Small farms also add up to big business: In the world's 50 least developed countries, agriculture is the backbone of the economy, accounting for 30 to 60 per cent of Gross Domestic Product and employing as much as 70 per cent or more of the workforce. Addressing the plight of smallholders isn't just a matter of equity, it's a necessity if we are going to be able to feed ourselves in the future. Smallholders farm 80 per cent of the total farmland in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. If we don't help them to adapt to climate change, their achievements — feeding a large portion of humanity — will be endangered.

With appropriate support, smallholders can play a key role in protecting our environment, for example through actions that contribute to carbon sequestration and limit carbon emissions (planting and maintaining forests, engaging in agro-forestry activities, managing rangelands and rice lands, and watershed protection that limits deforestation and soil erosion).

To continue farming in a sustainable way in the face of climate change, rural women and men need to be given the resources to cope with the challenges. Smallholder farmers need support such as resilience-building technologies (including drought- and salt-tolerant seed varieties and new methods of rainwater harvesting), and training in sustainable practices of conservation agriculture, such as minimum-till farming to reduce erosion and moisture loss. Investing in adaptation measures now will be far less costly than in the future.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the M.S. Swaminathan Foundation, together with the government of India and other partners, have undertaken a range of projects to do just that.

For example, in Tamil Nadu, we have been supporting rural communities to produce and market nutri-cereals like millet, which can easily grow in dry and arid environments. We worked with smallholder farmers to use simple techniques to increase their yields, while also helping rural women create and market modern recipes — for example, a millet malt drink now being sold in major health food stores in India. The result has been not only increased food for the community, but also increased income and non-farm employment opportunities.

To help farmers adapt to increasingly dry conditions, a programme in Chhattisgarh has expanded cultivation of traditionally produced Niger seed oil, which grows well in areas that receive little rain. Land and forest regeneration were promoted to improve soil structure and moisture levels, and solar energy technology and biogas digesters have been introduced, which reduce greenhouse gas emissions as well as the need for fuelwood. Another project in the northeast has helped restore degraded *jhum*land and has benefited almost 40,000 households in 860 villages.

Climate-resilient sustainable agriculture requires knowledge. Successful projects such as these can provide a model for others to follow. Knowledge transfer that brings the benefits of research from the laboratory to the farm is essential.

Programmes targeted at vulnerable groups such as women and tribal communities are particularly important. IFAD-supported programmes and projects in India promote tribal development by building and strengthening grassroots institutions that enable vulnerable people to plan and manage their own development, negotiate improved entitlements, and broaden their livelihood opportunities. Conferences and talks among world leaders can do many things but they don't feed people. We hope that leaders will keep in mind those who do: the smallholder farmers. Price volatility and the persistence of widespread, endemic and hidden hunger underline the need for urgent attention to enhancing the productivity and profitability of smallholder agriculture in an environmentally sustainable manner. This is the pathway to increasing agriculture's contribution to climate change mitigation as well as to sustainable food security.

(Prof. M.S. Swaminathan is Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha, and Chairman, M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation. Kanayo F. Nwanze is President, International Fund for Agricultural Development, a U.N. agency and international financial institution dedicated to helping poor, rural people overcome poverty.)

Keywords: [climate change](#), [17th Conference of the Parties, COP17](#), [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#), [United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development](#)

[Ads by Google](#)

[Car Insurance Online](#)

Best Rates on Car Insurance. Quote in 30 Seconds. Call 1800-200-2200.

www.berkshireinsurance.com

Printable version | Nov 14, 2011 4:38:25 PM | <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/article2624715.ece>

© The Hindu