

The Challenges Faced by Small Scale Farmers in the Developing World

Smallholder farmers are farmers that often farm less than two hectares of land, earn less than a dollar 25 per day, and are predominantly women. This group, and there are well over a billion of such people, are also amongst the most vulnerable to climate change and economic globalization.

Let's start with what these farmers need: first of all they need their farms to produce a stable quantity of food...

... they also need better incomes, and they need decent diets. But their incomes and also their diets are linked with food prices...

... which are generally determined by international markets.

To produce food, small-scale farmers need access to good-quality inputs

they need good-quality soil and they need a functioning and productive climate. They also need access to land.

But whatever strategy is embarked upon, two factors need to be considered. The first is that everything is connected. Developing new agricultural inputs in the absence of financial instruments that can provide low-cost loans or crop insurance is unlikely to result in meaningful development. As a result, policymakers activists and practitioners need to keep in mind the big picture of the context that smallholder farmers operate under.

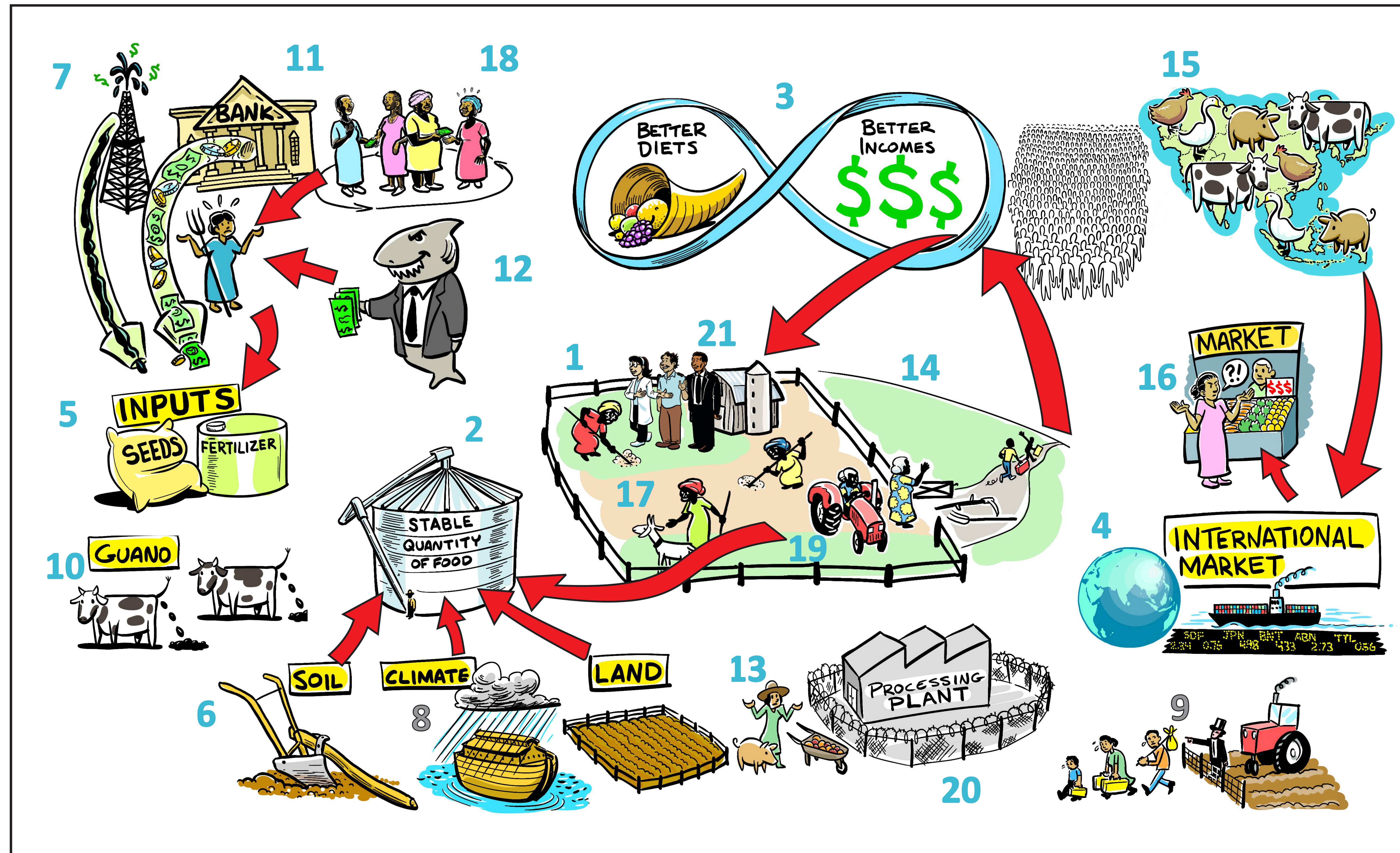
The second is that before we develop any new strategies or techniques to help smallholder farmers we need to include those same smallholder farmers in any decision-making process. This means that the tools and techniques of farming must be developed in a participatory way with the farmers who are likely to use them.

Developing labour saving techniques so that farmers can continue farming while members of their family immigrate in search of better paying jobs is another important strategy.

Working to set up storage and processing facilities so that food will last long enough to get to markets is another crucial piece of the puzzle that needs to be addressed.

Another strategy is to work with farmers to set up financial instruments such as co-ops and loaning circles to help farmers build up the capital they need to invest in their farms while not exposing them to horrendous financial risks.

So what can be done to help? One strategy is to help improve soil health by building up organic matter, recycling crop residues, or promoting mixed crop and livestock production together.



The price of inputs is often determined by the international price of energy because farm inputs like fertilizers are very energy intensive, many small-scale farmers simply can't afford expensive modern agricultural inputs. This is one of those factors that is beyond the ability of the farmer to control.

Similarly, the weather is something that farmers can't control and as we move forward in the 21st-century and into a world of more severe climate change the weather is likely to become less predictable.

Finally, access to land is another area that is completely outside of the control of the small-scale farmer. They need to have secure land tenure, which is very unlikely for some of the world's poorest and most marginal. What's more, as food prices rise international businesses are buying up productive land across the developing world displacing small-scale farmers in the process.

As a result, one of the few areas that smallholder farmers can control is that of soil health and in particular organic matter. By investing in manure or small-scale livestock, smallholder farmers can build up the organic matter in their soil and this helps boost crop productivity and also makes them more drought tolerant because organic matter acts like a sponge holding moisture in the soil.

Another problem smallholder farmers face when trying to increase productivity is where to get the capital to buy modern agricultural inputs. For instance, in parts of the world where there are no banks or credit unions, it is very difficult for farmers to obtain the capital they need to buy even fertilizer let alone herbicides pesticides and improved seeds.

This has driven up food prices and paradoxically this hurts smallholder farmers who typically sell very little of what they produce but still have to buy things they cannot make locally.

Next we have to think about global population change as well as the fact that people in Asia are eating a lot of meat.

Another critical factor that influences smallholder farmers is that of international labor migration. In many parts of the developing world, people have left small farms in search of better paying jobs in richer parts of the world. In some regards this can help by providing a source of income back to people on the farms. But such changes also make it harder to obtain decent harvests at home because there isn't labour available.

Similarly, smallholder farmers struggle with access to markets. They generally lack storage and processing facilities. And struggle to distribute and market their produce.

Farmers therefore sometimes go into debt at exorbitant rates of interest to loan sharks to buy inputs and if crops fail they have no way of paying back their loans. As a result, promoting modern agricultural inputs, in the absence of financial institutions, may result in worse income and greater volatility.