



A farmer's household in Senanga district, Zambia
Photo: PELUM field team.

Concern Worldwide commissioned a review of literature relating to policy constraints facing marginal farmers as part of its Unheard Voices campaign. Concern's aim was to review literature relating to marginal farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) and investigate policy options currently being discussed for moving these households out of poverty.

Development aid to agriculture has declined over the past 30 years. The current awareness by governments of the importance of food policy creates an important opportunity to direct attention to this group of producers with potential positive outcomes for rural poverty reduction and urban food supply.

Defining marginal farmers

We define marginal farmers as those who are 'farming yet hungry'. These are people for whom farming is a major livelihood activity, yet who have insufficient assets to produce a surplus from their agricultural activities and whose non-farm activities are insufficiently reliable or remunerative for them to rely on market purchases for adequate food intake. This group, distant from centres of power and influence, has long suffered neglect by policy makers.

Around half of the world's hungry are identified as 'food-poor small farmers'. These people live mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Within SSA the majority of marginal farmers are likely to be women and farmers in Less Favoured Areas (LFA).

Marginal farmers' role in contributing to growth in agriculture

Economists debate the potential of a number of growth drivers for African economies, including minerals, manufacturing, tourism, global services and agriculture. Even where the main driver of growth is located in urban or coastal zones, a major mechanism for the spread of wealth will be through growth in agriculture to supply domestic markets. The value of Africa's domestic food markets is estimated to be US\$50 billion per annum and projected to double by 2015, driven by urban population growth.

From the available literature on the development of agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa, four issues that are critical to the potential of marginal farmers to contribute to growth in agriculture and thereby move out of poverty have been identified:

- **access to land;**
- **improvement in staple crop productivity;**
- **investment in public goods (research and infrastructure);**
- **increased service provision to small holder farmers.**

There is clear evidence of a widespread decline in land holding size per household in the small farm sector for most African countries. The small area of cultivable land available to many rural households represents a significant hindrance to household welfare where livelihoods are highly dependent on agriculture.

Within this context women are frequently disadvantaged regarding access to land. Tenure security is widely considered to be important with respect to agricultural investment, however land titling as a means to increase tenure security is not always the best option especially with regard to access for women farmers. Woodland and other common property resources are also of great importance to poor households (especially those in areas of lower agricultural potential), in part compensating for their limited access to arable land, but also providing a safety net function in lean seasons and bad years. However, population growth (combined with new commercial opportunities) is putting pressure on common property resources just as it is reducing average land holding sizes. Poor households in general and women in particular often lack a voice in the institutions that manage remaining common property resources.

Staple crop production remains an important priority for marginal farmers. This is in part due to unreliable food markets. Interventions to improve food markets together with agricultural research and service provision for staple crop production are both important for the welfare of marginal farmers.

Investment in the provision of **agricultural support services** (input supply, technical advice, financial services, and output market linkages) is seen as essential for agricultural development in Sub-Saharan Africa in general. Unfortunately, where provision is limited the needs of marginal farmers are the least likely to be met unless they are specifically targeted (for example extension services for women farmers).

“Migration is considered to be a pathway out of poverty for the rural poor, but marginal farmers are amongst those least likely to benefit”

Marginal farmers' potential to move out of agriculture in order to secure a better livelihood

Policy makers and governments would like to see unproductive and unviable marginal farmers move out of agriculture and make a living either through migrating or depending on the rural non-farm economy. The literature review explored both these options.

The rural non-farm economy (RNFE) has received increasing attention from policy makers in light of data showing the extent to which rural households depend on non-farm sources of income for their livelihoods. The term RNFE encompasses a diverse set of activities, including formal employment, casual labour and small-scale enterprises. Many of the goods and services produced within the RNFE are non-tradables, serving local customers. However, supply of goods and services to urban centres and beyond also occurs. Available evidence suggests that: non-farm income sources are important for stabilising and augmenting the incomes of rural households; many activities within the RNFE are low return, with capital and/or education forming barriers to entry into higher return activities for many rural inhabitants; demand for many of the goods and services produced within the RNFE is heavily dependent on incomes generated within the farm sector – urban demand is likely to figure more prominently in more accessible areas. Thus, whilst the RNFE is important to marginal farmers, as long as agricultural growth remains slow they are more likely to take up low paid, low skill, non-farm activities as a survival mechanism than they are to escape poverty by diversifying out of agriculture into a more remunerative enterprise within the RNFE.

Migration is also considered to be a pathway out of poverty for the rural poor. Again however, the evidence suggests that marginal farmers are amongst those least likely to benefit from migration. Three reasons contribute to this, firstly the poor are less likely to be able to meet the costs associated with migration and they are also likely to be among the least educated (education is a key determinant of migration). Secondly, migration



is less likely to occur from remote areas. Thirdly, returns to migration depend in part on the strength of support networks in destination areas (as a way of finding good employment) and poorer households from remoter areas tend to have access to relatively weak networks. Migration of men from rural areas has important implications for the remaining household. In addition to loss of labour, the de facto female headed household that results may be disadvantaged in terms of access to inputs, services and markets, especially if the flow of remittances from her absent partner is low.

Additional challenges faced by marginal farmers living in Less Favoured Areas

Marginal farmers in Less Favoured Areas face challenges to agricultural growth in addition to improved services and access to markets. Improved agricultural productivity in LFA frequently requires improvements in the resources base. However, the poverty of smallholders in these areas means that these investments are unlikely to be made. Growth in agriculture in LFA calls for public investment in research to address the challenges of intensification in these production systems.

Social protection's role in protecting and promoting the livelihoods of marginal farmers

Risk mitigation by the poorest farming households and those in marginal agro ecological zones (for example through crop choices and diversification) may occur at the expense of yield or income maximisation. Thus it is increasingly seen that reducing risk for poor households can be considered growth promoting where it enables households and individuals to invest in productive activities. Social protection can therefore have a potentially positive effect on agricultural growth. The converse is also considered to be true: supporting agriculture can help households achieve their consumption needs and therefore meet social welfare goals i.e. supporting households in their productive

“Supporting agriculture can help households achieve their consumption needs and therefore meet social welfare goals”

activities may be a better strategy than implementing 'ex-post risk management' activities such as food or cash transfers.

In practice in Sub-Saharan Africa social protection activities are normally restricted to the poorest (destitute) households, although there are recent exceptions that are attracting interest. Nonetheless, the social protection agenda could play an important role in raising the profile of agriculture to the benefit of marginal farmers.

Farmers' organisations: a support and voice for marginal farmers?

The potential role of farmer organisations is frequently raised as a means to overcome some of the challenges facing smallholders. However, the potential for producer organisations to fulfil this role for marginal farmers is challenged by the very nature of this group, who are the type of producer who is less likely to participate in and benefit from these groups.

Nonetheless, even where the potential for participation by marginal farmers in marketing groups appears low, farmers' organisations may play an important role in providing fora for collective action, increasing the political voice of this group. Some gains to smallholder farmers in general, including infrastructure investment and improvements in service provision, may also benefit marginal farmers.



Left to right:
Shalimwene Dondole,
Tanzania; Mariam Omari,
Tanzania; Simon Obaoba
with his wife, Catherine,
Makefu village, Tanzania.

Photos: Mike Goldwater



Philipo Mkuye, Tanzania
Photo: Mike Goldwater

Conclusions

Can marginal farmers benefit from current policy to support agricultural development and become viable farmers?

The literature review suggests that for marginal farmers, and particularly women farmers, to benefit from programmes to improve access to land, interventions must take into account of the challenges involved in strengthening women's claims on land. The creation of privatised land holding systems may be to women's disadvantage in some cases.

Agricultural research has not always recognised the needs of marginal farmers; increased funding will need to target the farming systems and crops important to marginal farmers. These areas are unlikely to be considered by the private sector and therefore require an investment in public research which is currently operates under extreme resource constraints in most of SSA.

Similarly, private sector service providers are unlikely to target marginalized farmers. Therefore, reaching this group requires a commitment to public investment in service provision and a reorienting of services to reach poorer and women farmers.

Support to farmer organisations, although increasingly seen as a route to improved services and marketing for smallholders, is also less likely to impact on this group unless barriers to their taking part are addressed. Policy advocating investment in rural infrastructure needs to focus on LFAs in order to have a positive impact on those farmers marginalised by their location.

Will marginal farmers benefit from opportunities outside farming (in the RNFE, or migration)?

The literature review suggests that marginal farmers may only obtain limited benefits from participation in the RNFE, as poorer households with limited capital and education are more likely to be confined to low-entry, low-return activities. Similarly, marginal farmers may be among those least likely to benefit from migration since poorer households are less likely to take part (fewer resources, less educated) and migration is lower from remote areas. Marginal farmers may, however, benefit indirectly from migration either as pressure on resources in rural areas is relieved or as remittances benefit the local economy.

What prospects exist for social protection for marginal farmers?

Immediate prospects for increased social protection to support marginal farm households are low. However, the potential synergies between support to agriculture and social protection may increase the arguments in favour of support to marginal farmers.

In conclusion, this review suggests agricultural production is likely to remain an important livelihood activity for marginal farmers due to a lack of alternative rural livelihoods and fewer opportunities for migration in this group. In addition, self-provision of food crops persists as an important goal for rural households. Increased attention to policy to support smallholder agriculture should therefore be welcome news for marginal farmers. However, there is a strong risk that support for agriculture will miss this group unless they are specifically targeted.

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Full review of literature can be found at :
<http://www.concern.net/site-links/resources/index.php>

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