

Richmond Review Article – Great Expectations, the small farm version

By Stephen C. Mullins

Small-scale farming is the key to world food security. There you go folks, that debate is done, the tale is told.

Or is it? Almost every day there is a news article that proclaims that the key to world food security has been found. The list ranges from well-known candidates, like genetically modified crops (GMOs), to very specific things, like micro irrigation systems or crops like Australian wild rice.

So why is small-scale farming the true key, and not these others? Well, pull up a chair, relax, have a coffee, because I've got a story to tell.

People like adversaries in stories, but in the real world, things are more complex. Saying small-scale farming is the key factor doesn't mean that all the other approaches are wrong. Are we going to get rid of all medium- and large-scale farms in favor of smaller ones? Of course not. If you were building a house, you'd need more than just a hammer and nails. To build real food security, we will need all the tools in the box, but if you lack the key tool, it's difficult to make something solid and resilient.

According to UN researchers and Oxfam, our first, best tool will be small-scale farms. In much of the world, that means farms that are 4 hectares (ha) or less in size. In Richmond, all our farms are small farms by Canadian standards, being on average 12.2 ha, and tiny compared to some large-scale industrial farms, which can be over 2000 ha.

Right now, across the globe, many small farms are subsistence farms, meaning they are usually attended by one family and only produce enough food to feed themselves and little else. Yet despite this, small farms already feed almost 70% of the world's population, and they have the potential to do much more. With the right support, small-scale farms could see their production increase to almost double current levels by 2030.

So how do we tap into this potential? This is where the story might get contentious, because it will require shifting our agricultural policies, subsidies, and financing options so that they focus first on supporting small farms rather than large agribusinesses. Nobody is saying large farms shouldn't get a share, but their current proportion (70-80% of these resources) is out of whack.

However, this significant adjustment of agricultural policies will probably cause some friction (to put it mildly), but it's a crucial step. That's because many small-scale farms aren't managed like businesses, but function more like extended personal gardens. Poor farmers typically plant much less than they could on their land because they lack the money, resources and knowledge of advanced farming to do anything more.

But when they have access to all the supports that large-scale farms enjoy, small farms can become true businesses and flourish. For example, if small farmers can't get crop insurance, they are forced to plant tried and true (but less productive) crops because they will starve if their crops fail. Access to crop insurance means they can plant higher risk, higher reward crops that increase yields and farm income.

Better farm support would dramatically change the pictures in other ways. It would mean many small farmers, especially women, would get access to financing to buy better land, tools, or support technologies, like advanced irrigation systems. Or they could afford to get training in the latest farming techniques, or learn basic business skills like bookkeeping, marketing and planning that are essential to turning their subsistence farms into productive farm businesses.

If you combine all this with improved community support, like establishing local processing facilities for crops, better storage, and comprehensive food waste prevention programs, the potential is enormous.

So what about large-scale farms and GMOs? Weren't they supposed to be the key to feeding the world? When they were first introduced, these technologies created sharp rises in food production, but those increases are plateauing. That's a great pity. If you are someone who is interested in feeding the hungry people of the world, there's no joy in seeing these technologies stutter.

But it is not surprising that they are. Introducing GMOs and other advanced food technologies into our flawed food system is like adding an advanced fuel additive into the engine of a car that has flat tires and broken steering. However, if you fix the basics first, then these technologies might become the supercharged additions they were supposed to be. In our global food system, there is nothing more basic than small-scale farms, so let's put them at the front of the line instead of at the back if we want our story to have a happy ending.

Steve Mullins is the communications manager for Richmond Food Security Society. We work to ensure that all people in the community have access to safe, nutritious, culturally appropriate foods that strengthen our environment and society. To contribute, check out www.richmondfoodsecurity.org and find out how you can get involved.