

Battle to feed the world pits small farmers against big agriculture

Do small-scale farmers hold the key to fulfilling global goals on hunger and poverty? Or can they only be achieved by large-scale agriculture ?

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Dotted along the narrow path that skirts the edge of Beatrice Alvitsa's house in Shimanyiro, a green Kenyan valley near the border with Uganda, are dozens of millet plants, each protected by a carefully assembled fence made of sticks.

Having received training in farming techniques and secured regular access to quality seeds and fertiliser, Alvitsa now produces enough food on her acre and a half of land to feed her family.

As the world prepares to transition from the millennium development goals (MDGs) to the sustainable development goals – which aim to end poverty and hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable development – some experts say farmers like Alvitsa exemplify the path to meeting these targets.

Smallholder farmers provide up to 80% of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa's food, where the vast majority of the world's poor people live. The most recent hunger statistics suggest that 14% of the world do not have sufficient access to food, making it unlikely that the MDG to bring hunger rates down to 12.5% by the end of this year will be met.

At a time when the world's population is soaring, a debate has emerged about how best to support farmers between advocates of large-scale agricultural projects and those who prefer more targeted, small-scale efforts. Global food production must double by 2050 to feed the world, the World Food Programme says.

"We need our national governments to carry out comprehensive agrarian reforms, giving land to the peasants," says Nyoni Ndabezinhle, press officer at Via Campesina, an advocacy group for small-scale farmers. « In order to thrive, farmers in the developing world need access to seed, fertiliser, microcredit and microinsurance, as well as rights to land and union representation. »

Others say commercial agricultural schemes like the G8's New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition initiative will complement gains made on local levels, linking smallholders with international markets. The New Alliance says it will lift 50 million people out of poverty by 2022.

New Alliance projects, which require governments to change laws and policies to favour businesses, have been rolled out in 10 sub-Saharan countries. Critics have expressed alarm at the lack of effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and have condemned the scheme as a new wave of colonialism.

Nearly 35m hectares (82m acres) of land in 66 countries has been leased by foreign investors to produce food crops since 2006, according to Grain, an environmental watchdog. Large-scale agricultural production will benefit private-sector firms rather than poor people, Grain says, noting that financial companies and sovereign wealth funds are responsible for about a third of the deals.

"Large-scale commercial agriculture can indeed play a significant role in feeding the world's poorest, but food availability alone will not translate to reduced poverty, hunger and undernutrition," says (an official). "[Food security](#) is not simply about producing enough to feed every person. Ensuring adequate supply comes down to four key factors: food availability, access, stability and utilisation », he says. "The question of access is probably the most fundamental of the four dimensions of food security. We talk about the availability of food, the stability of food supplies and then access."

Hilal Elver, the UN's special rapporteur on the right to food, says: "Transnational corporations can be part of the problem, tending to undermine the livelihood of locals, displacing them from their home and land, interfering with their access to natural resources, and causing environmental destruction."