



Can small farmers survive in a globalized world?

The answer is yes. Dr. Prabhu Pingali, Director of the Agriculture and Development Economics Division of Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, in his lecture at the SEARCA Agriculture and Development Seminar Series (ADSS), says that “If we can make farmers move from viewing agriculture as a way of life into viewing it as business” – they can happily hop in and get the best seat inside the entrepreneurial wagon.

Possible but difficult. To follow this roadmap, however, Pingali urges policymakers to hurdle two main challenges, namely: a) ensuring participation of small farmers and rural poor in the emerging agri-industry systems, and b) enabling the transformation and competitiveness of agrifood systems.

Why is there a need to ensure small farmer participation? Rapid growth in incomes and GDPs have led to the mushrooming of supermarkets that service consumers, also with



parallel increase in purchasing power, possessing a diversity of needs in terms of changing diet, food safety, product preparation, packaging, and distribution.

Encapsulated in this change in diet are the consumers' preference for reduced rice consumption, more wheat and wheat-based products, diversity of food crops, higher protein calories, more temperate products, popularity of fast foods, and the "rise and rise of supermarkets".

With supermarkets around the corner, the menu of the day no longer includes farming that is seen as individual, or a distribution system that is minimal, or the consumer that is sited at the end of the process, or government that is basically providing infrastructure.

The supermarkets did not evolve overnight. A lot of interconnected events have paved the pathway for supermarkets; among others, these include: technological changes such as the revolutionary grounding of ICT, genetic engineering, and transportation.

Racing against the goliath boxers, are the lowly small farmers. Their punches if thrown individually cannot match against the multinational agri-based opponents competing for the more lucrative kill inside the globalized boxing ring. Such punches from isolated individual small farmers will have no stinging effect. These

will only place the small farmers in a more melancholic and depressing situation-- if they would not fight according to the rules. Pingali brings in some "potential actions" to make the playing field equal.

One of these, he says: Increase small farmer competitiveness. In practical terms – improve their management skills. Another action: strengthen small farmer linkage with agribusiness – link farmers with agribusiness mechanisms. Still another: group together farmers to be producers. A finale fortifying action, would be as Pingali puts it, is to "revitalize the extension system".

The government as one of the defenders of the small farmers must "move towards being a regulator of contracts of various legislative arrangements: property rights, legal rights [deviating] from its traditional role of providing technology."

Not to end up being knocked down by the highly profit-oriented big players, small farmers need policies that will cushion them from the impact of losing out in the midst of a highly globalized economy. Perhaps, the ultimate act from government, and a challenge to all conscientious citizens, groups, etc. would be to invest more heavily on rural development: "health, transportation, technical, ..." and establish rural businesses – this action would help create safety nets for small farmers.

These actions are complicated, like a thousand strands of thread being tangled all together. Yet, the challenge remains, and at the end of the day, the most meaningful action would be weighed in terms of what policies have been put up that have enabled small farmers to participate in the supply chain and made him rise from rags to riches. (Photos courtesy of SEARCA Biotechnology Information Center)

