KEY MESSAGES

- Small-scale farmers have important knowledge and information about farming in their communities, and this must be combined with other forms of knowledge that can help them improve agricultural productivity, resilience, and sustainability.

- There is great potential for low-input, agro-ecological farming techniques throughout the world, and policies need to be formulated that enable and encourage these practices.

- The undernourished population disproportionately includes smallholder farmers and rural wage earners, especially women. We need to target these groups when crafting future food policies as well as to ensure environmental sustainability and improved productivity.

THE PROBLEM

The field of agriculture consists of many different worlds. Farms differ from each other socially, physically, and economically. The rural poor are facing new drivers of hunger, including food-price volatility and unpredictable weather caused by global climate change. At the same time, the global food system is itself degrading the natural resource base. Unsustainable agricultural practices, influenced by legislation and the private sector, undermine biodiversity and soil health, which in turn undermine the agricultural systems themselves.

Almost 2 billion people are fed by produce from the 500 million small farms in developing countries. But it is these small-scale producers who are the most food insecure: 80 percent of hungry people live in rural areas. Emphasizing a singular “fix” to grow our global food system will limit resilience and income for these smallholders, which will restrict the productivity of these farms.

Equalizing gender roles and regulating land rights will provide justice and power to many people who need it. Land tenure in the developing world often involves discrepancies between legal and customary rights, and smallholders typically come up short. Research and development in the field has been geared toward large companies that focus on packages of products, helping large industrial farms but putting smallholders at a disadvantage. We must begin to emphasize smallholder techniques and strategies that increase production sustainably.

MOVING FORWARD

- **Smallholder productivity.** Our challenge is to produce enough food to feed everyone in a way that is sustainable, equitable, and resilient. To do this, we must see the agricultural field through an ecological lens. With low-input, agro-ecological farming techniques, we can raise yields, improve soil fertility, conserve natural resources, and reduce dependence on expensive inputs. This movement has already begun.

  For example, studies of the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) developed to help smallholders boost productivity and reduce reliance on inputs found average yield increases across eight countries of 47 percent and average reductions in water use of 40 percent. These practices also bring economic benefits: growth that comes from the agricultural sector, particularly small-scale production, has twice the effect on the poorest populations as growth from other sectors.

- **Gender equity.** Studies have shown that when women have control over household income, the money is more likely to go toward improving family food consumption, child nutrition, education, and overall well-being. Because women are the major agricultural producers of the developing world, public spending to increase women’s empowerment will have a large impact.

- **Access to networks and information.** Increasing access for rural families is crucial to improving agricultural output. Financial services can help farmers manage risk and invest in their farms.
Private sector involvement. Private sector actors must integrate small-scale food producers into value chains under fair terms. If food security is a priority for these groups, they must coordinate with and support country-led plans, which should be developed in a transparent and inclusive manner. These investments and partnerships should apply a gender lens to their work, addressing issues of access alongside intentional cultivation of a more agro-ecological approach to farming.

**LOOKING AHEAD**

Agricultural policy must take into account the wide variety of farms that exists—in social, physical, and economic terms. By using a combination of internationally standardized, rights-based legislation and localized, culturally specific legislation, policy can help smallholders optimize both farm production and environmental sustainability. This approach will help encourage smallholder productivity, gender equity, access to networks and information, a new angle for research and development, and transparent, responsible involvement on the part of the private sector. This approach can lift scores of people out of poverty, promote empowered communities, and grow a food system that achieves food security while sustaining the Earth’s systems and maintaining ecosystem diversity.

An SRI (System of Rice Intensification) instructor in Cambodia offers advice to a farmer on how to pull rice seedlings without damaging their roots.