Making markets work for smallholders or wage labour?

WHY THIS ‘PROVOCATION’?

Development efforts to make agricultural markets work for the poor tend to focus on supporting small-scale farmers or producers. But what about the millions of poor rural workers employed in commercial operations such as plantations and large farms? Could more attention to improving wage labour offer a faster route to reducing poverty?

Venue:
Room 5.204, 5th floor, University Place, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, M13 9PL, UK
www.manchester.ac.uk
25 May 2011
12.00–16.30
(British Summer Time)

Join the debate

Live streaming at: www.iied.org/provocation4
Ever since the World Development Report was published in 2008, small-scale producers have been front and centre of efforts by the development community to ‘make markets work’ for the rural poor. This intense focus on small-scale producers is partly based on their absolute numbers — an estimated two billion people are small-scale independent food producers, farmers, fishers or herders (Olivier de Schutter). But there are also an estimated 450 million waged workers in agriculture alone (FAO), without taking into account unpaid family labour. Yet workers are often overlooked in agricultural policies and strategies to address rural poverty.

Food businesses are being urged to rethink their traditional preference for procuring from commercial-scale operations, and adapt their business models to be more inclusive of small-scale producers. But there is not a consensus on this point. Many critics suggest that the higher capital investment in commercial agriculture provides greater scope to reduce poverty than smallholder agriculture. It can raise productivity, provide better access to modern food value chains, as well as provide jobs for the rural poor.

Furthermore, large companies are under pressure to improve standards for worker welfare — wages, benefits, health and safety regimes. Some food companies have signed up to this under processes such as the Ethical Trading Initiative. Such standards are rarely applied by smallholders, who are also employers but mainly operate outside of public and private sector governance. By targeting wage labour, the development community could also reap benefits for improving women’s empowerment. Women make up an estimated 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force in developing countries, ranging from 20 per cent in Latin America to almost 50 per cent in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Research shows that raising incomes of women enhances their independence, and is more likely to enhance welfare within poor households.

THE PROVOCATION IN PRACTICE

The provocation will bring together policymakers, academics and practitioners working at the interface between small-scale production, markets and development to contest the benefits of smallholders and commercial agriculture as targets of efforts to make markets work for the rural poor.

It will aim to address the following:

- Why are shifts taking place from smallholder to wage labour in agricultural markets?
- What are the gender dimensions?
- Is agricultural wage labour a route out of poverty for rural households?

SPEAKERS

- Sue Longley, International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (International Union of Foodworkers)
- Sally Baden, Oxfam, United Kingdom
- Peter McAllister, Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), United Kingdom
- Miet Maertens, University of Leuven, Belgium
- Sukhpal Singh, Indian Institute of Management, Centre for Agriculture, India
- Wilfred Kamami, Wilmar Agro Ltd, Kenya

HOSTING PARTNERS

Institute of Development Policy and Management (IDPM), Brooks World Poverty Institute (BWPI) and Capturing the Gains (CtG) University of Manchester, UK.

LIVE STREAMING

The seminar will be broadcast as a live video stream on the IIED website in English and Spanish (www.iied.org/provocation4), and also recorded and posted on the site for later viewing. Viewers of the live stream will be able to submit their own perspectives and ask questions in real time. The broadcast will be made in collaboration with One World Media.

For further information on the event and registration, please contact debra.whitehead@manchester.ac.uk.