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“Global food security and food safety:
The role of universities”

More Modest Goals to Reach Higher Impact? Differentiating Between Food Security and Poverty to Do Justice to Both

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Abstract

Two of the most prominent sustainable development goals are the eradication of poverty and the achievement of food security. To address both goals simultaneously and to bring about a rural transformation, the agricultural sector has re-gained the attention of policy-makers and donors alike, as many of the world's poor live in rural areas and depend on agriculture. Yet, emerging data describe a range of realities of smallholders across countries at different stages of development and within countries. Whilst Thailand and Brazil have become larger-scale commercial players in international food markets, in Sub-Saharan Africa land fragmentation processes are resulting in quasi-landless farmers and the increasing prevalence of off-farm employment to make ends meet. These realities have sparked ongoing debates about the usefulness and effectiveness of simultaneous agriculture-focused poverty reduction and food security interventions. Using several datasets across a range of countries, this paper aims to question the observed focus on productivity and production technologies for the dual achievement of poverty eradication and food security. The data collected under multiple projects cover a wide range of countries and regions East African countries (Tanzania, Malawi, Ethiopia, Kenya), West Africa (Nigeria, Mali and Niger), Asia (several provinces in India). We argue for a needs and capacity based disaggregation of smallholders and the definition of appropriate technologies to address either poverty eradication or food security (and rarely both). Rather than diluting the focus by trying to design intervention as that fit everyone's needs, a clear focus on the very different setting of households in need of food or households lacking cash income will likely achieve wider adoption and thus increase impact especially in least-developed agricultural regions. At the same time, this should provoke a discussion about the apparent exclusive focus on smallholders which are less likely to achieve major success in generating farm returns that are able to lift them out of poverty given their very limited land sizes.

Keywords: Africa, Agriculture research, food security, poverty, smallholder agriculture