

PROGRESSIO

Waterproofing agriculture for smallholder farmers

How 'Benchmarking Business in Agriculture' can promote access to water resources for smallholder farmers

Smallholder farmers, particularly women, play a critical role in the global food system. There are around 500 million smallholder farmers in the world and they produce up to 80% of the food consumed in Africa and Asia.¹ Their ability to contribute to food security and increase their own incomes, however, is often hindered by policies and practices that fail to recognise or meet their needs.

As the World Bank develops indicators for 'Benchmarking the Business of Agriculture' (BBA) the factors that affect smallholder farmers the most should be captured and measured. The BBA should help governments and donors to develop positive enabling environments for smallholder farmers, including those who are not yet market ready, and to facilitate greater participation in markets as the means of ensuring food security at the household and national level. The BBA must avoid negative impacts on smallholder farmers and should instead promote their role within agricultural growth.

The smallholder farmers that Progressio's local partners work with throughout the world tell us that the greatest barrier to producing food and scaling up their participation in markets is inadequate and unreliable access to water. Water resources are becoming degraded, there is growing competition for their use and availability is becoming unreliable. Water is critical to agriculture at all scales. Smallholder farmers depend on sustainable and equitable access to water. Governments play a vital role in recognising and protecting water rights, regulating for good governance of water and other natural resources, and investing in infrastructure to improve access to water.

1 IFAD (2010) 'Viewpoint: Smallholders can feed the world'

Progressio recommendations for the water indicator

Progressio welcomes the commitment of the World Bank to develop a water indicator within the BBA. Based on many years of experience working alongside smallholder farmers, Progressio wants to see a water indicator addressing the following areas:

- Does the government prioritise investment in infrastructure to improve smallholder farmers' access to water? What percentage of the national budget is invested in irrigation projects? Does this budget support both large-scale and small-scale irrigation projects, including the development of both on-farm water management and water harvesting technologies? How many smallholder farmers benefit from these projects?
- What policies, laws and regulations exist to ensure equitable access to water and the sustainable management of water resources? Does the government implement water use policies? How do policies ensure Integrated Water Resource Management at national, sub-national and river basin levels? Is data captured for water quality and availability?
- Are water rights recognised and protected? Are customary rights afforded in law? Are there special provisions made to protect the rights of the most vulnerable and excluded?
- What regulations and monitoring mechanisms are in place to ensure good governance of the water source, particularly by the private sector? Are there regulations to ensure multi-stakeholder management of water and consultation with communities and farmers who rely on it for their livelihoods?
- What regulations and monitoring mechanisms are in place to ensure efficient consumption of water by the private sector? Do regulations relate to both water quantity and quality?
- Can poor and marginalised communities access judicial systems for redress? How many disputes around access to water have been brought to resolution?
- Are implications for water users adequately considered in granting land access to large-scale foreign and domestic investors? What percentage of the impact assessments conducted include water? Does the pricing of such deals take full account of impacts on water availability and existing user's rights of access? What measures are in place to safeguard access?

Sustainable and equitable access to water: The critical issues behind the challenge

- Underinvestment in irrigation is preventing smallholder farmers from achieving their productive potential. The link between access to water and agriculture lacks the attention it deserves. Irrigated land is approximately three times more productive than rain-fed land but a mere 20% of agricultural land is currently irrigated.² Governments and international donors should direct significant resources to investing in large-scale and small-scale irrigation projects.
- Promoting good on-farm water management and providing training in agro-ecological farming methods, such as rainwater harvesting and water conservation are important, especially in remote areas where there is no access to energy. Such techniques have the potential to double or triple crop yields.³
- Women in particular spend hours every week collecting water for agricultural and domestic needs. Improving rural water infrastructure would reduce the time required to collect and store water and would have a significant impact on women farmers' productivity.
- The changing climate is contributing to irregular water supply and water scarcity. Rainfall uncertainty, coupled with extreme events such as droughts and floods, which are increasing both in frequency and intensity due to climate change, can have a devastating impact on harvests. Investment in water capture and storage solutions is a key to adapting.
- It is not always an issue of availability. Good governance of the water source is essential to address the structural causes of water insecurity. National policies, plans and regulations for water use and management are necessary to ensure sustainable and equitable access to the shared resource. Decision-making around resource utilisation must be participatory and inclusive so that communities and farmers who depend on water for their livelihoods are consulted. At present there is disparity between the number of countries with integrated water resource management plans and the number implementing these plans.⁴
- This is especially important where there is a private sector presence. Increasing commercialisation of agriculture and the growing pressure of large-scale agribusinesses create strong competition for water and other resources, and smallholder farmers are often faced with losing their rights of access. In addition, conventional farming can have a negative impact on water quality.
- Too often water rights are customary and inherently weak. Governments can intervene through the formal recognition and protection of water rights, particularly for vulnerable water users, including women farmers.
- Water must start to be recognised as both a target and a driver of land deals within the land grabs narrative. All too often, water is embedded in land deals, even though it is not explicitly mentioned in the contracts, and local people are not compensated for the involuntary permanent loss of their water rights and livelihoods. With possession and control of the land comes the ability to divert, over-exploit and contaminate local water resources.⁵ In assessing the impact of land deals and negotiating terms with investors, governments need to ensure that proposed pricing takes into account any impacts on water availability and access for existing users including farmers; and should put in place measures to safeguard such access. This is particularly pertinent because the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests do not cover water resources.

² FAO (2011) 'The state of the world's land and water resources for food and agriculture: Managing systems at risk'

³ UNEP (2009) 'Rainwater harvesting: A lifeline for human well-being'

⁴ UN Water (2012) 'Status Report on the Application of Integrated Approaches to Water Resource Management'

⁵ P Woodhouse and A S Ganho (2011) 'Is water the hidden agenda of agricultural land acquisition in sub-Saharan Africa?'



**'Because water is life'
– reflections from smallholder farmers in Haiti**

'Agriculture is our source of income' says Mimose Jean from Lamine, Haiti. The river neighbouring their land has dried up so they must use rainwater for agriculture. 'We are not able to collect a lot of rainwater because we don't have the means to store it. It normally rains in May, June and November but we have noticed that the rains don't come when we expect them too anymore and it doesn't rain for as long as it used to. This means we don't have as much water and cannot grow enough food to feed our family or to sell for an income. We believe we could grow more food for our family if we were able to collect and store the rain that does fall and if we could find a way of getting water from the river to irrigate our land. We are concerned that things will only get worse without leadership and intervention.'



Elismar Senatis, Mimose Jean and their children depend on rainwater for agriculture but rainfall variability and the absence of a means to collect and store rainwater is hindering their ability to grow and sell food. Credit: Fran Afonso/ Progressio

Thirsty agribusiness in Peru deprives smallholder farmers of water for their livelihoods

'Agro-exporters will never lose – first they'll finish all the groundwater and then they'll come for the surface water and the government makes it easy for them. Political favours are being paid off – the agro-exporters drill clandestine wells and the ones who suffer are small and medium sized farms. Our fate is to disappear.'

These are the words of one smallholder farmer in the Ica Valley, Peru where the production of fresh, year-round asparagus for mass export lead to the 'greening' of the desert and unsustainable demands for water in the region. The over-extraction of groundwater had negative economic consequences for small and medium-scale farmers. Farmers who had existed long before the growing of asparagus began had been forced to go without water because of drying wells and increasing salinity, or pushed into debt and forced to sell land and wells to big agribusinesses.⁶

6 Progressio, CEPES and Water Witness International (2010) 'Drop by Drop: Understanding the impacts of the UK's water footprint through a case study of Peruvian asparagus'



The 'greening' of the desert in Peru by agro-exporters has resulted in smallholder farmers losing access to water. Communities were not consulted. Credit: Nick Hepworth/ Progressio

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