

Family farming in Colombia: A pillar for food security and sustainable development

Agricultura familiar en Colombia: un pilar para la seguridad alimentaria y el desarrollo sostenible

Family farming is defined as a form of organization of agricultural production characterized by an indissoluble connection between the production unit and the family, either through ownership or leasing, which can use family labor and excludes the permanent existence of employees. Thus, this type of livelihood generation strategy is the one that allows the families to consume their own products, which can be partial or dominant. This organization of farms or agricultural production originates from an organic link between the production unit and a family; it uses family labor, and when it is necessary to pay for labor, this organization is complementary. Unlike conventional schemes, which are more capital-intensive, family farming tends to rely more on labor.

Thus, the provision of nutrients, vitamins, and minerals essential for the proper function of a population that is constantly growing is in the hands of food-producing families. Even though industrial agriculture continues to generate a large amount of agricultural goods and services with high social and environmental costs, the dominance of family farms, which constitute 87% at the national level, continues to supply the household with fresh, healthy, and nutritious food products. In terms of food production, approximately 70% of national production in Colombia comes from family farming.

The relationship between family farming and sustainable development is progressively recognized. The productive units under this scheme are recognized for their multi-functional attributes, which assume a crucial role not only for their contribution to food and nutritional security but also for the effective management of natural resources, the preservation of the environment, and the establishment of sustainable livelihoods. Therefore, the contribution to the sustainability of the rural community in ecological, economic and social terms is evident, and this type of

agriculture decisively supports food security while combating the lack of economic and financial resources.

It is generally recognized that small family farms are more environmentally sustainable than their large, corporate counterparts. They are more diverse, employ traditional methods of farming, conserve various landscape features, are planned for the long term, and are usually intended to be passed on to the next generation. Family farming is recognized as a crucial element of climate resilient food systems, providing a method for food production, defending local and sustainable food systems. In rural regions of Colombia, around 12 million people derive their livelihoods from family farming, which offers a food production strategy usually framed by local knowledge and ecologically friendly techniques. Therefore, the family scheme has a vital role to play in both adapting to and reducing the effects of climate change through the implementation of sustainable land management techniques, diversification of production, and the use of local resources and knowledge.

Family farming in Colombia is frequently made up of Afro-descendant and peasant communities, with around 115 indigenous communities and some families that have immigrated to rural areas from the cities. The production models are based on conventional, organic, agroecological and agroforestry schemes. In most cases, conventional schemes predominate, such as potato, carrot, pea, bean and onion production. To a lesser extent, production is focused on organic and agroecological models, which restrict the use of chemical synthesis inputs, trying to take advantage of the internal resources of the production unit to produce manure, fertilizers and inputs for phytosanitary control; under these schemes, vegetables, aromatic and medicinal plants are obtained. On the other hand, agroforestry, by integrating agricultural production with the perennial woody species, i.e. with trees, shrubs and palms, generates

crops such as plantain, banana, cassava, corn, citrus crops, cocoa and coffee, and products such as milk and meat.

Family farmers in Colombia have chosen to take differential attitudes that allow them to compete in the market, with innovative products, reduced dependence on raw materials, and collaborative means of production. An important example is the transformation of coffee, cocoa and dairy production, which has allowed Colombian consumers to enjoy high quality products, increased the demand for these foods, and allowed producer families to diversify their economy for the benefit of their life quality.

The importance of family farming is based on its potential to offer a diverse range of nutrient-rich foods, generate employment opportunities, enhance biodiversity and ecosystem services, and improve local food sovereignty. The family scheme relies heavily on agricultural activities; however, it also depends on multiple activities. Thus, family farming serves as a fundamental pillar of the local economy and culture in certain regions of Colombia, while in other locations it constitutes a component of a broad and varied economic scheme.

VANDREÉ JULIÁN PALACIOS BUCHELI, PhD in Agricultural Science

Assistant Professor

Universidad de Ciencias Aplicadas y Ambientales U.D.C.A., Bogotá (Colombia)

E-mail: vpalacios@udca.edu.co