

# *les dossiers* d'**AGROPOLIS** INTERNATIONAL

*Expertise of the scientific community  
in the Languedoc-Roussillon region (France)*



## Family farming



# Economic, organizational *and social dynamics*

**F**amily farming still overwhelmingly dominates global agriculture. Capital-intensive agribusiness only accounts for the main market supply of some agricultural products—such as soybean and palm oil—but family farming massively contributes to global production (cereals, tubers, fats, stimulants, fibres, animal products). Family farms are intimately linked to the agricultural landscapes and *terroirs* shaped by their practices and thus play a critical role in natural resource, biodiversity and land management, as well as in preservation of cultural diversity and local development. They contribute directly to generating income and employment for a large segment of the world population.

Family farms therefore have a pivotal role in the evolution of societies and environments upon which they are highly dependent. Their centuries-old transformation has accompanied the slow process of transition from predominantly agricultural to more diversified economies where secondary and tertiary sectors provide the bulk of the wealth and employment. As a consequence of world demographics, around 75% of agricultural workers are located in Asia, 20% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 5% in the rest of the world. Urbanization is under way on all continents, but most of the population in Africa and South Asia will remain rural for several decades.

Despite these reconfigurations and the growth of urban areas, farmers and their families occupy the largest part of the *ekumene*\* on all continents, including those where agriculture is no longer peoples' main activity. Rural areas, even in the most ecologically marginal zones, have been shaped by remarkably diversified agricultural development, thus demonstrating the high flexibility and adaptation capacity of family farming. This adaptability is both spatial and historical. Farmers have been able to adapt under heavy constraints, while concomitantly being technically and organizationally innovative when the setting is favourable, particularly when benefitting from public support via agricultural policies (credit, training, extension, market regulations).

This diverse range of social and environmental contexts, scales and timeframes is being documented and analysed by Agropolis member institutions in Montpellier (CIRAD, CNRS, IAMM, INRA, IRD, etc.). Nine research teams directly or indirectly devote research to these dynamics, often in partnership with research organizations in developing countries throughout much of Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, Latin America, South and Southeast Asia. Studies are carried out on the dynamics of farms hampered by land pressure, on the resilience of farming systems and their contribution to sustainable development, on the effect of changing family strategies on production systems and natural resources, on new opportunities for the adoption of agroecological practices arising from urban growth, on the social management of seeds and on revitalizing local economies, to name but a few.

Various theoretical and empirical approaches are implemented, involving a range of disciplines related to earth and life sciences, and especially social sciences. Innovative designs of new research frameworks provide effective responses to new challenging issues (e.g. the World Agriculture Watch). As illustrated in this chapter, specific approaches, sometimes comparative and often interdisciplinary, are needed to deal with the diversity of situations and questions to be addressed. The expertise of Montpellier researchers in this area is well established, as they are regularly called upon by policymakers and various stakeholders. One of the greatest challenges is to continue, delve deeper and pool research and data in order to gain further insight into the complexity of past and current dynamics, to anticipate change and effectively support the future of family farming worldwide.

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\* The inhabited part of the world