

## **Small farms as potential intervention points to improve the sustainability of food systems**

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Adoption of a systemic approach to understanding food issues is imperative if we are committed to achieve the goals set in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This is because the processes affecting food define the linkages between people, prosperity and planet. Food systems' development depends on natural resources, and paradoxically, food systems are currently also responsible for their depletion and degradation. In order to ensure that people have access to safe and nutritious food, in suitable quantities, natural resources need to be managed and used through sustainable and effective practices.

Since the industrial revolution, food systems have been largely dominated by large-scale farming, which benefits from economies of scale and increases in productivity and efficiency. Large-scale farming is also closely connected to the supply chain, through which it is granted bargaining power to negotiate and play within global markets. This has resulted on smaller and alternative types of farms – and farming practices – undergoing detrimental consequences for their development and continuation. They have become the unseen players in policy with all the negative consequences this entails.

In spite of all this, small farms continue to exist today in many parts of the World, especially in Europe; generating employment, forging communities, and growing food for thousands of people, as well as holding together the fabric of rural landscapes. Thus, small farms could be an effective point of intervention in food systems to increase their sustainability. However, little is known about what specific role are small farms currently playing in food systems, or what structural and socio-economic characteristics and factors shape the dynamics within their food systems.

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the empirical case studies of small farms in 12 Mediterranean regional food systems located in 6 different countries: Spain, France, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Croatia and Tunisia. Quantitative and qualitative data was drawn from 187 key expert interviews, 355 interviews to small farms and 9 focus groups in total. Results show both similarities and differences across food systems related to territory, local implementation of sectoral regulations, small farmers' profiles, networking strategies, and governance patterns. Identified variables hinted at the diversity

of actors, as well as the complex dynamics defining their interaction. This systemic analysis to food processes at the micro-level enabled to determine the contribution that small farms might have to their corresponding regional food system.

Presenting the diversity of these realities, and the role small farms play in the food system, served to assess that small farms could be effective points of intervention for policy makers to improve the sustainability of food systems, as well as to promote regional food and nutrition security.