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Title: Small Farmers And Sustainability



This paper examines the viability of small farmers and small farming in different agro-ecological regions of India, based on household level data from 17 village socioeconomic surveys conducted by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies. There are scholars and activists that view small farms and small farmers as a solution to the problems of efficiency, equity, food security and environmental sustainability. This paper attempts to empirically evaluate some of these hypotheses. Specifically, it examines if small farmers get a higher net income or return per hectare than larger farmers; if small farmers have a more diversified cropping pattern than large farmers; and if they grow more food crops for home consumption and subsistence than large farmers.

On the first question of relative “efficiency” of small versus large farms in terms of profit or net farm income per hectare, in no village was an inverse relationship between farm size and profitability per unit area observed. The differences in incomes or returns as between small farmers and large farmers were on account of factors such as differences in cropping pattern, access to irrigation, and cost of inputs. Secondly, an interesting finding is that small farmers tend to have relatively more area under inter-cropping than other farmers, and this was particularly notable in rainfed and drought-prone villages. This choice can be interpreted as a risk reducing strategy in an uncertain agricultural environment. Thirdly, small farmers in India participate in markets, including markets for their produce, for purchase of inputs, for sale of labour power. As in other market economies, however, participation is constrained by ownership of resources (land, in this case) as well as by specific production relations and caste and other social barriers. Lastly, for small farmers, the level of income generated from crop production was in most cases inadequate to meet basic needs, resulting in pluri-activity and diversification of incomes.

These findings are somewhat contrary to the romantic view of small farmers and suggest that policy support in different forms is needed if small farmers are to remain viable and sustainable.