



## Challenges Facing Small-Scale Farmers in Developing Countries

(\*Abhiranjan Kumar<sup>1</sup>, Diksha Kumari<sup>2</sup>, Dr. Virendra Pratap Singh<sup>3</sup> and Ranjit Kumar<sup>4</sup>)

<sup>1</sup>Department of Agronomy, SHUATS, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh

<sup>2</sup>Department of Horticulture, J.S. University, Shikohabad, Uttar Pradesh

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, United University, Jhalwa, Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh

<sup>4</sup>Department of Management & Commerce, Sanskriti University, Mathura, Uttar Pradesh

\*Corresponding Author's email: [abhiranjanabhi4746@gmail.com](mailto:abhiranjanabhi4746@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Small-scale farmers in developing countries play a crucial role in global food security and rural economies. However, they face numerous challenges that hinder their productivity and livelihoods. This article provides a comprehensive review of these challenges, categorizing them into economic, environmental, social and cultural, technological, and policy and institutional dimensions. Through an extensive literature review, we identify key issues such as limited access to markets, vulnerability to climate change, gender inequality, technological gaps, and inadequate policy support. The article also explores potential solutions and future outlooks, emphasizing the need for integrated approaches to address these multifaceted challenges. Our findings highlight the importance of targeted interventions and supportive policies to empower small-scale farmers and enhance their resilience in the face of evolving global dynamics.

**Keywords:** Finance, land-tenure, market, migration, policy, security, value chains.

### Introduction

Small-scale farmers, also known as smallholders, are the backbone of agricultural production in many developing countries. They typically cultivate less than 2 hectares of land and rely primarily on family labor (FAO, 2014). These farmers produce a significant portion of the world's food, with estimates suggesting they contribute up to 80% of the food supply in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Lowder et al., 2016).

Despite their crucial role in global food security and rural economies, small-scale farmers face a myriad of challenges that impede their productivity, profitability, and overall well-being. These challenges are complex and interconnected, spanning economic, environmental, social, technological, and policy dimensions.

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive review of the challenges facing small-scale farmers in developing countries. By synthesizing existing literature and research, we aim to offer a holistic understanding of these issues and their impacts. Additionally, we explore potential solutions and future outlooks to address these challenges effectively.

Understanding these challenges is crucial for policymakers, researchers, and development practitioners working to support small-scale farmers and promote sustainable agricultural development. As the global population continues to grow and climate change intensifies, addressing the needs of smallholders becomes increasingly urgent to ensure food security, reduce poverty, and achieve sustainable development goals.

## Economic Challenges

Small-scale farmers in developing countries face numerous economic challenges that significantly impact their livelihoods and agricultural productivity.

**1. Limited Access to Markets:** One of the primary economic challenges is limited access to markets. Small-scale farmers often struggle to connect with broader market networks due to poor infrastructure, lack of transportation, and limited market information (Wiggins and Keats, 2013). This isolation can result in reduced bargaining power and reliance on local intermediaries, leading to lower prices for their products.

**2. Price Volatility:** Agricultural commodity prices are notoriously volatile, creating significant income uncertainty for smallholders. Factors such as weather conditions, global market trends, and policy changes can cause rapid fluctuations in prices, making it difficult for farmers to plan and invest (Minot, 2014).

**3. Limited Access to Credit and Financial Services:** Many small-scale farmers lack access to formal credit and financial services. Without collateral or credit history, they struggle to secure loans for inputs, equipment, or land improvements. This limitation hampers their ability to invest in productivity-enhancing technologies and practices (Poulton et al., 2010).

**4. High Input Costs:** The cost of agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides can be prohibitively high for smallholders. Limited purchasing power and the inability to benefit from economies of scale further exacerbate this challenge (Adjognon et al., 2017).

**5. Land Tenure Insecurity:** In many developing countries, small-scale farmers face insecure land tenure arrangements. This insecurity discourages long-term investments in land improvement and sustainable practices, as farmers fear losing their land rights (Lawry et al., 2017).

**6. Limited Economies of Scale:** The small size of their operations prevents smallholders from achieving economies of scale in production, marketing, and processing. This disadvantage makes it challenging to compete with larger, more efficient producers (Hazell et al., 2010).

These economic challenges often create a cycle of poverty and low productivity, making it difficult for small-scale farmers to improve their livelihoods and contribute effectively to national food security goals.

## Environmental Challenges

Small-scale farmers in developing countries are particularly vulnerable to environmental challenges, which can have severe impacts on their agricultural productivity and livelihoods.

**1. Climate Change and Variability:** Climate change poses a significant threat to small-scale agriculture. Increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, and heatwaves can devastate crops and livestock (Vermeulen et al., 2012). Moreover, changing rainfall patterns and temperature regimes require farmers to adapt their practices, often with limited resources and knowledge.

**2. Soil Degradation:** Intensive cultivation, overgrazing, and poor soil management practices have led to widespread soil degradation in many developing countries. This degradation results in reduced soil fertility, erosion, and decreased water retention capacity, all of which negatively impact crop yields (Gomiero, 2016).

**3. Water Scarcity:** Many small-scale farmers rely on rainfed agriculture, making them highly vulnerable to water scarcity. In areas where irrigation is possible, competition for water resources with urban and industrial sectors is increasing, further straining agricultural water availability (Fraiture and Wichelns, 2010).

**4. Pest and Disease Pressure:** Climate change and globalization have altered the distribution and intensity of crop pests and diseases. Small-scale farmers often lack the knowledge and

resources to effectively manage these evolving threats, leading to significant crop losses (Savary et al., 2012).

**5. Biodiversity Loss:** The loss of agricultural biodiversity poses a threat to small-scale farming systems. Reliance on a narrow range of crop varieties and livestock breeds increases vulnerability to pests, diseases, and environmental shocks (Altieri et al., 2015).

**6. Deforestation and Land Use Change:** In some regions, small-scale farmers contribute to deforestation as they seek to expand their cultivated area. This practice, often driven by necessity, can lead to long-term environmental degradation and loss of ecosystem services crucial for agriculture (Rudel et al., 2009).

These environmental challenges not only threaten the immediate productivity of small-scale farmers but also undermine the long-term sustainability of their agricultural systems. Addressing these issues requires a combination of adaptive strategies, sustainable farming practices, and supportive policies.

### Social and Cultural Challenges

The challenges facing small-scale farmers in developing countries extend beyond economic and environmental factors to include various social and cultural dimensions.

**1. Gender Inequality:** Women play a crucial role in small-scale agriculture, yet they often face significant disadvantages. These include limited access to land, credit, education, and extension services. Gender norms and cultural practices in many societies restrict women's decision-making power and control over resources, limiting their productivity and economic empowerment (Quisumbing et al., 2014).

**2. Limited Education and Literacy:** Many small-scale farmers have limited formal education and low literacy levels. This challenge hinders their ability to access and utilize information on improved agricultural practices, market opportunities, and financial services. It also limits their capacity to engage with formal institutions and navigate complex bureaucratic processes (Reimers and Klasen, 2013).

**3. Health and Nutrition:** Poor health and malnutrition are both causes and consequences of low agricultural productivity among smallholders. Limited access to healthcare, poor sanitation, and inadequate nutrition can reduce labor productivity and increase vulnerability to shocks. Conversely, low agricultural productivity can lead to food insecurity and malnutrition within farming households (Kadiyala et al., 2014).

**4. Youth Migration and Aging Farmer Population:** Rural-to-urban migration, particularly among youth, is leading to labor shortages in many small-scale farming communities. This trend results in an aging farmer population and raises concerns about the future of small-scale agriculture. The perception of farming as an unattractive and unprofitable profession contributes to this challenge (White, 2012).

**5. Indigenous Knowledge and Cultural Practices:** While traditional farming knowledge can be a valuable resource, it may sometimes conflict with modern agricultural practices or be insufficient to address new challenges like climate change. Balancing indigenous knowledge with scientific innovations presents a complex challenge for agricultural development initiatives (Agrawal, 2014).

**6. Social Marginalization:** Small-scale farmers, particularly those from ethnic minorities or lower castes, often face social marginalization. This can result in reduced access to resources, services, and decision-making processes, further exacerbating their vulnerability (Hall et al., 2011).

Addressing these social and cultural challenges requires sensitive and context-specific approaches that respect local norms while promoting equity and empowerment. Integrating social considerations into agricultural development strategies is crucial for creating sustainable and inclusive solutions for small-scale farmers.



## Technological Challenges

The technological landscape presents both opportunities and challenges for small-scale farmers in developing countries. While advancements in agricultural technology have the potential to significantly boost productivity, smallholders often face barriers in accessing and utilizing these innovations.

**1. Limited Access to Modern Technologies:** Many small-scale farmers lack access to modern agricultural technologies such as improved seeds, machinery, and precision farming tools. The high costs of these technologies, coupled with limited awareness and availability in rural areas, create significant barriers to adoption (Lowder et al., 2021).

**2. Inadequate Extension Services:** Agricultural extension services, which play a crucial role in disseminating knowledge and technologies, are often underfunded and understaffed in developing countries. This results in limited reach and effectiveness, particularly in remote rural areas where many small-scale farmers reside (Anderson and Feder, 2007).

**3. Digital Divide:** The growing importance of digital technologies in agriculture, including mobile apps for market information and weather forecasts, presents a challenge for smallholders with limited access to smartphones or internet connectivity. This digital divide can exacerbate existing inequalities in agricultural productivity and market access (Deichmann et al., 2016).

**4. Adaptation of Technologies to Local Contexts:** Many agricultural technologies are developed for large-scale, commercial farming and may not be suitable for small-scale, diverse farming systems. Adapting these technologies to local agronomic, economic, and social contexts remains a significant challenge (Pingali, 2012).

**5. Limited Research Focus on Smallholder Needs:** Agricultural research and development often prioritize technologies for large-scale, commercial agriculture. There is a need for more targeted research on technologies and practices suitable for small-scale, diverse farming systems in developing countries (Pardey et al., 2016).

**6. Biotechnology and Intellectual Property Rights:** While biotechnology offers potential benefits for smallholders, issues surrounding intellectual property rights and the dominance of large corporations in the seed industry can limit access to these innovations. There are also concerns about the long-term impacts of genetically modified organisms on biodiversity and farmer autonomy (Glover, 2010).

Addressing these technological challenges requires not only investments in research and development but also efforts to ensure that innovations are accessible, appropriate, and beneficial for small-scale farmers. Participatory approaches to technology development and dissemination can help ensure that solutions meet the specific needs of smallholders in diverse contexts.

## Policy and Institutional Challenges

The policy environment and institutional structures in developing countries significantly influence the challenges faced by small-scale farmers. These factors can either support or hinder smallholder agriculture, depending on their design and implementation.

**1. Inadequate Agricultural Policies:** Many developing countries lack comprehensive and coherent agricultural policies that address the specific needs of small-scale farmers. Policies often favor large-scale commercial agriculture, neglecting the unique challenges and potential of smallholder farming systems (Birner and Resnick, 2010).

**2. Limited Government Support:** Insufficient public investment in agriculture, particularly in research, extension services, and rural infrastructure, hampers the development of small-scale farming. Budget constraints and competing priorities often lead to underinvestment in the agricultural sector (Fan et al., 2008).

**3. Weak Institutional Capacity:** Many developing countries struggle with weak institutional capacity in agricultural ministries and related agencies. This weakness results in poor policy implementation, inadequate service delivery, and limited ability to respond to emerging challenges (Poulton et al., 2010).

**4. Land Tenure and Property Rights:** Insecure land tenure and weak property rights systems discourage long-term investments by small-scale farmers. Complex and often outdated land governance systems can lead to conflicts and further marginalization of vulnerable groups, including women and indigenous communities (Deininger and Byerlee, 2011).

**5. Market Regulations and Trade Policies:** Trade policies and market regulations can significantly impact small-scale farmers. While trade liberalization can create new opportunities, it can also expose smallholders to competition from heavily subsidized producers in developed countries. Domestic market regulations, such as price controls or input subsidies, can have unintended consequences on smallholder livelihoods (Hazell et al., 2010).

**6. Limited Farmer Organization and Representation:** The lack of strong farmer organizations in many developing countries limits the ability of small-scale farmers to advocate for their interests in policy-making processes. This results in policies that may not adequately reflect the needs and perspectives of smallholders (Markelova et al., 2009).

**7. Corruption and Governance Issues:** Corruption and poor governance can undermine efforts to support small-scale farmers. Misallocation of resources, unfair distribution of subsidies, and lack of transparency in agricultural programs can disproportionately affect smallholders (Transparency International, 2011).

Addressing these policy and institutional challenges requires concerted efforts to strengthen agricultural governance, improve policy coherence, and enhance the participation of small-scale farmers in decision-making processes. Effective policies and institutions are crucial for creating an enabling environment that supports smallholder agriculture and rural development.

### Potential Solutions and Future Outlook

While the challenges facing small-scale farmers in developing countries are complex and multifaceted, there are numerous potential solutions and promising approaches that can help address these issues. The future outlook for smallholder agriculture depends on the effective implementation of these solutions and the ability to adapt to changing global contexts.

**1. Sustainable Intensification:** Promoting sustainable intensification practices can help small-scale farmers increase productivity while minimizing environmental impacts. This approach includes adopting climate-smart agriculture techniques, agroecological practices, and integrated pest management (Pretty et al., 2011).

**2. Strengthening Value Chains:** Improving market access and integration into value chains can enhance the economic viability of small-scale farming. This involves developing inclusive business models, strengthening farmer organizations, and improving rural infrastructure (Seville et al., 2011).

**3. Digital Agriculture:** Leveraging digital technologies, such as mobile-based information services, remote sensing, and blockchain for traceability, can empower small-scale farmers with information and market opportunities. Efforts to bridge the digital divide are crucial for ensuring equitable access to these technologies (Trendov et al., 2019).

**4. Climate Change Adaptation and Resilience:** Implementing climate adaptation strategies, including crop diversification, improved water management, and weather index insurance, can enhance the resilience of small-scale farming systems to climate variability and change (Howden et al., 2007).

**5. Gender-Sensitive Approaches:** Addressing gender inequalities through targeted interventions, such as improving women's access to resources, education, and decision-making power, can significantly enhance agricultural productivity and rural livelihoods (Quisumbing et al., 2014).

**6. Participatory Research and Extension:** Adopting participatory approaches in agricultural research and extension can ensure that technologies and practices are relevant and appropriate for small-scale farmers. Farmer field schools and community-based extension models have shown promise in many contexts (Davis et al., 2012).

**7. Innovative Financing Mechanisms:** Developing tailored financial products and services for small-scale farmers, such as microfinance, value chain financing, and mobile banking, can improve access to credit and risk management tools (Meyer, 2015).

**8. Policy Reforms:** Implementing supportive policy frameworks that prioritize smallholder agriculture, secure land tenure rights, and promote sustainable farming practices is crucial. This includes aligning agricultural policies with broader rural development and poverty reduction strategies (Birner and Resnick, 2010).

**9. Capacity Building and Education:** Investing in rural education and vocational training can enhance human capital in agricultural communities. This includes improving agricultural education curricula and promoting youth engagement in agriculture (White, 2012).

**10. Ecosystem Services and Biodiversity Conservation:** Recognizing and rewarding small-scale farmers for their role in maintaining ecosystem services and biodiversity can provide additional income streams and incentivize sustainable practices. Payment for ecosystem services (PES) schemes and agroforestry initiatives are promising approaches in this regard (Power, 2010).

## Future Outlook

The future of small-scale farming in developing countries will be shaped by several key trends and factors:

**1. Technological Advancements:** Continued innovations in agricultural technology, particularly in areas such as biotechnology, precision agriculture, and digital solutions, have the potential to revolutionize smallholder farming. However, ensuring equitable access to these technologies will be crucial.

**2. Climate Change:** The impacts of climate change are likely to intensify, requiring ongoing adaptation efforts and potentially reshaping agricultural landscapes and practices.

**3. Urbanization:** Growing urban populations will create both challenges (e.g., rural labor shortages) and opportunities (e.g., increased urban food demand) for small-scale farmers.

**4. Global Market Integration:** Increasing integration of smallholders into global value chains may offer new economic opportunities but also expose them to international market volatility.

**5. Policy Environment:** The extent to which national and international policies support smallholder agriculture will significantly influence its future viability and sustainability.

**6. Youth Engagement:** The ability to attract and retain youth in agriculture will be critical for the long-term sustainability of small-scale farming systems.

## Conclusion

Small-scale farmers in developing countries face a complex array of challenges that span economic, environmental, social, technological, and policy dimensions. These challenges are interconnected and often reinforce each other, creating a cycle of low productivity and poverty that is difficult to break. The potential solutions discussed highlight the need for integrated, context-specific approaches that address multiple challenges simultaneously. Sustainable intensification, improved market access, digital technologies, climate resilience, gender equity, and supportive policies are all key elements of a comprehensive strategy to

support small-scale farmers. The future of small-scale farming in developing countries will depend on our collective ability to address these challenges effectively and create an enabling environment for smallholder agriculture to flourish. By doing so, we can harness the potential of millions of small-scale farmers to contribute to a more food-secure, equitable, and sustainable world.

**Table 1: Summary of Challenges Facing Small-Scale Farmers in Developing Countries**

Category	Key Challenges
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Limited access to markets</li> <li>▪ Price volatility</li> <li>▪ Limited access to credit and financial services</li> <li>▪ High input costs</li> <li>▪ Land tenure insecurity</li> <li>▪ Limited economies of scale</li> </ul>
Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Climate change and variability</li> <li>▪ Soil degradation</li> <li>▪ Water scarcity</li> <li>▪ Pest and disease pressure</li> <li>▪ Biodiversity loss</li> <li>▪ Deforestation and land use change</li> </ul>
Social and Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Gender inequality</li> <li>▪ Limited education and literacy</li> <li>▪ Health and nutrition issues</li> <li>▪ Youth migration and aging farmer population</li> <li>▪ Balancing indigenous knowledge with modern practices</li> <li>▪ Social marginalization</li> </ul>
Technological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Limited access to modern technologies</li> <li>▪ Inadequate extension services</li> <li>▪ Digital divide</li> <li>▪ Adaptation of technologies to local contexts</li> <li>▪ Limited research focus on smallholder needs</li> <li>▪ Biotechnology and intellectual property rights issues</li> </ul>
Policy and Institutional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inadequate agricultural policies</li> <li>▪ Limited government support</li> <li>▪ Weak institutional capacity</li> <li>▪ Land tenure and property rights issues</li> <li>▪ Market regulations and trade policies</li> <li>▪ Limited farmer organization and representation</li> <li>▪ Corruption and governance issues</li> </ul>

**Table 2: Potential Solutions for Addressing Challenges Faced by Small-Scale Farmers**

Solution Area	Key Approaches
Sustainable Intensification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Climate-smart agriculture</li> <li>▪ Agroecological practices</li> <li>▪ Integrated pest management</li> </ul>
Market Integration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inclusive business models</li> <li>▪ Strengthening farmer organizations</li> <li>▪ Improving rural infrastructure</li> </ul>
Digital Agriculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mobile-based information services</li> <li>▪ Remote sensing technologies</li> <li>▪ Blockchain for traceability</li> </ul>



Climate Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Crop diversification</li> <li>▪ Improved water management</li> <li>▪ Weather index insurance</li> </ul>
Gender Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Improving women's access to resources</li> <li>▪ Enhancing women's decision-making power</li> <li>▪ Gender-sensitive agricultural programs</li> </ul>
Knowledge Dissemination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Participatory research approaches</li> <li>▪ Farmer field schools</li> <li>▪ Community-based extension models</li> </ul>
Financial Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Microfinance for agriculture</li> <li>▪ Value chain financing</li> <li>▪ Mobile banking services</li> </ul>
Policy Reform	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Smallholder-focused agricultural policies</li> <li>▪ Secure land tenure rights</li> <li>▪ Alignment with broader development strategies</li> </ul>
Capacity Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Improved agricultural education</li> <li>▪ Vocational training programs</li> <li>▪ Youth engagement initiatives</li> </ul>
Ecosystem Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Payment for ecosystem services schemes</li> <li>▪ Agroforestry initiatives</li> <li>▪ Biodiversity conservation programs</li> </ul>

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