

# Family farming in Mexico: a review of its evolution and exclusion over time

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective.** This paper aims to analyze the evolution and various forms of exclusion experienced by Mexican family farming over time.

**Results.** Family farming originated with the agrarian reform that followed the Porfiriato era. However, the 2007-2008 global food crisis catalyzed renewed attention to this production system as a means of providing food, employment, and income to the poorest populations, particularly in rural areas. Its development and marginalization have been shaped by the so-called agro-export phase, which was integrated into the neoliberal export-oriented model that entered Latin America between the 1980s and 1990s. Despite this, over time and as family farming has come to be recognized as a cornerstone of food security for rural households it has gained relevance and has increasingly attracted the attention of stakeholders in Mexico. The trajectory of family farming in the country is closely linked to both national and international reforms in public and trade policy, as well as to Mexico's bilateral relationship with the United States.

**Conclusion.** Current rural development policies fail to explicitly and adequately incorporate family farming. Nevertheless, this sector represents a key opportunity for reducing poverty and hunger in marginalized regions of Mexico.

**Keywords:** Subsistence agriculture, rural development, agrarian reform, public policies.

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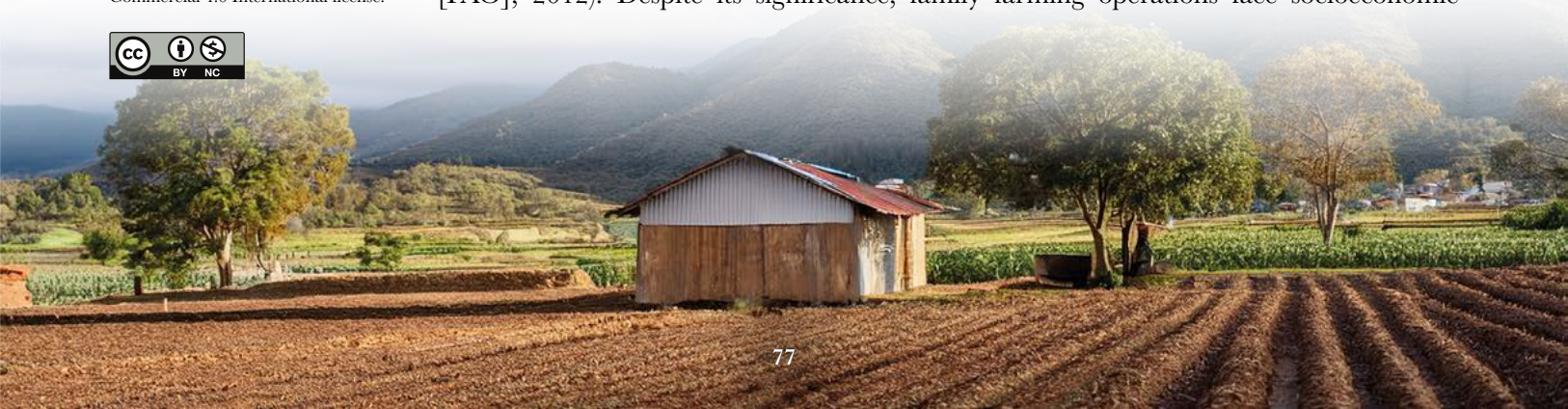
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## INTRODUCTION

Family Farming (FF) emerges as a vital mechanism to support the livelihoods of rural and Indigenous households, contributing to the eradication of hunger and poverty, the achievement of food sovereignty, and the sustainable management of natural resources (Fondo Internacional de Desarrollo Agrícola [FIDA], 2014). In Mexico, FF comprises 4.33 million Rural Economic Units (REUs), with agriculture as the predominant activity. Key crops include maize, beans, wheat, sorghum, coffee, sugarcane, oranges, and alfalfa (Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación [SAGARPA]; Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Alimentación y la Agricultura [FAO], 2012). Despite its significance, family farming operations face socioeconomic



constraints and limited access to productive resources (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe; Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Alimentación y la Agricultura; Instituto Interamericano de Cooperación para la Agricultura, 2017). In this regard, it is essential to conduct research aimed at promoting the sustainability of FF and moving toward ensuring food security in Mexico. It is therefore necessary to provide further information that enhances understanding of the context in which FF has developed.

Within this framework, the objective of this paper is to analyze the evolution and forms of exclusion experienced by family farming in Mexico over time. To that end, the study first addresses the conceptualization of FF, followed by its historical background and development up to the present. The third section examines public policies implemented in support of FF in Mexico, and the final section discusses the current advantages, opportunities, and limitations faced by FF, with the aim of contributing to the ongoing theoretical debate surrounding this activity.

### **Conceptualization of Family Farming**

The interpretation of the concept of FF carries significant implications for both social frameworks and public policy, offering a deeper understanding of the development of this activity from its origins to the present. The concept of FF has been recognized since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, although no single, universally accepted definition exists (Samper, 2016), as each author emphasizes their own contextual and theoretical framework. According to Maletta (2011), FF is a family-based economic unit carried out on a farm of sufficient size to support a household. Piza *et al.* (2016) add that it may sometimes involve the use of improved seeds, fertilizers, agrochemicals, and even agricultural machinery. FF integrates economic activities, product exchange, land tenure arrangements, social interaction networks, power dynamics, governance structures, and collective identity (Samper, 2016). In essence, a family unit engages in agricultural and livestock activities to produce goods and services (Schneider, 2014).

In Mexico, SAGARPA as a national agency and FAO as an international organization define FF for the purpose of designing effective public policies as agricultural, livestock, forestry, fisheries, and aquaculture production systems characterized by limited access to land and capital, predominant use of family labor, and the direct participation of the head of household in the production process (SAGARPA and FAO, 2012). Across the definitions presented, the family unit emerges as the foundational element in the development of this activity.

### **Background and current situation of family farming in Mexico**

With a clearer definition of FF, it is pertinent to examine its historical development and present-day context. The progression of FF in Mexico has been fraught with challenges, marked by exclusion and disadvantages compared to commercial agriculture. Nevertheless, over time and as FF has come to be recognized as a pillar of food provision for rural households it has gained prominence and drawn the attention of stakeholders in Mexico. Understanding its evolution is thus essential to ensuring its sustainability. The trajectory of FF in the country is closely tied to both national and international reforms

in public and trade policy, as well as to Mexico's relationship with its neighboring country, the United States. According to Quintero (2017), FF in Mexico originated as a result of the agrarian reform that followed the Porfiriato era (1876-1910). This reform began with the Mexican Revolution of 1910, during which peasants fought for access to farmland (Warman, n.d.), ultimately leading to the establishment of small-scale holdings and the creation of a subsistence peasant sector (Quintero, 2017). In the 1930s, under the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas, a perceived need arose to modernize agriculture (Otero, 2004). This "modernization" involved the adoption of innovations and strategies that widened the gap between small-scale and large-scale producers. Traditional agriculture lost value in comparison to industrialization and the adoption of new technologies and techniques, leading to a devaluation of peasant labor (Jarquín *et al.*, 2017). Industrialization was fueled in part by the overproduction of staple grains in the United States following the Green Revolution of the 1940s, which introduced industrial-scale agricultural production and enabled transnational agribusinesses to dominate the global agri-food market. As a result, the U.S. sought external markets for its agricultural surpluses and pursued strategies aimed at increasing production and reducing costs (Rubio, 2014). In response, Mexico implemented strategies to remain competitive, promoting agricultural development as a central component of an import-substitution model aimed at producing food and raw materials for domestic consumption and export. This facilitated resource transfers toward national industrialization (Reyes *et al.*, 1974). However, this phase became unsustainable by the late 1960s (Ramírez-Juárez, 2022). In the agricultural sector, this decline manifested in a reduced capacity to provide rural families with adequate income and employment, leading to the unequal distribution of natural resources, capital, education, and infrastructure. Consequently, rural households adopted a range of subsistence strategies according to their income levels (Escalante *et al.*, 2007), often resulting in livelihood diversification and migration to urban centers in search of better opportunities. This trend has led to a gradual abandonment of agriculture, particularly FF. The neoliberal agro-export phase significantly deepened the exclusion of rural producers, especially small-scale family farmers. According to Rubio (2002), this phase aligned with the secondary export model and was introduced in Latin America between 1980 and 1990. It was characterized by the dominance of transnational agribusinesses. This exclusion arose from three key dynamics: (1) the state withdrew from direct involvement in productive activities, ceding control to agribusiness; (2) trade liberalization and open borders facilitated an influx of imported products; and (3) U.S. agricultural policy promoted food expansion into developing countries. In Mexico, domestic food-producing agribusinesses gained control over raw materials and internal prices, generating adverse effects such as intensified internal and external competition for raw materials, where only the most competitive farmers prevailed. Another factor that disadvantaged Mexican farmers was the rise of the neoliberal model in the 1990s, particularly through the Uruguay Round of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which established rules for so-called "free" trade (Rubio, 2014). One key outcome was the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which gradually eliminated tariffs. NAFTA represented a major trade agreement, especially for Mexico, as it largely

benefited export-oriented sectors, including agricultural products such as tomatoes and avocados. However, one major drawback was the exclusion of farmers unable to compete under this trade regime due to unequal conditions particularly family farmers, who lacked the necessary productive resources and were thus placed at a disadvantage compared to large-scale producers. The condition and dynamics of FF, which became more widespread in the 2000s (Garner and de la O, 2014), are linked to Mexico's development trajectory over the past fifty years and to the role of the state in agricultural and rural development (Reyes *et al.*, 1974). In recent decades, FF has not been perceived as economically or socially viable. However, the 2007-2008 global food crisis revived interest in this production system. In response, the debate intensified around a new phase of FF development and the formulation of public policies to enhance food production and alleviate rural poverty (Schneider, 2014). Today, FF in Mexico is primarily characterized by holdings of no more than 15.5 hectares, a reliance on family labor up to 15 individuals per production unit and a transitional status in which production is intended both for self-consumption and for market sale. This segment comprises 56.8% of the country's REUs (SAGARPA and FAO, 2012). Looking ahead, population growth and changing dietary patterns are anticipated, positioning family farmers as key actors in this transition. Most of them already incorporate ecological and sustainable practices that contribute to environmental conservation.

### **Current public policies on family farming in Mexico**

The adjustments in agriculture prompted by neoliberal globalization during the 1980s and 1990s led Mexico to implement various public policy reforms. These reforms aimed primarily at mitigating the negative impact on small-scale farmers while enabling export-oriented producers to remain competitive in the new globalized environment. This analysis, however, focuses specifically on the public policies that have been implemented to support FF. In Mexico, rural development policies prioritize regions with significant social and economic marginalization, where production units with potential for FF are located (SAGARPA and FAO, 2012). Programs such as PROCAMPO, Alianza por el Campo, and the Programa Especial Concurrente para el Desarrollo Rural Sostenible have been implemented over time, often overlapping and evolving under the influence of political shifts and the NAFTA, to provide support to the rural sector (Maletta, 2011). PROCAMPO offered direct support to farmers cultivating staple crops such as barley, beans, maize, cotton, rice, sorghum, soybeans, sunflower, and wheat. Alianza por el Campo aimed to engage low-income producers in rural agribusiness initiatives. Meanwhile, the Programa Especial Concurrente para el Desarrollo Rural Sostenible sought to integrate public policies geared toward rural development (Maletta, 2011). Despite these efforts, FF in Mexico continues to face challenges due to the absence of a constitutional framework that explicitly supports it. In response, the Mexican Network for Family and Peasant Farming was established in 2013 with the goal of strengthening differentiated public policies and promoting a new constitutional framework grounded in gender equity and youth participation (Red Mexicana por la Agricultura Familiar y Campesina, 2015).

### **Current opportunities and limitations for family farming in Mexico**

Family Farming has historically undergone periods during which it was not granted economic or social relevance, and thus was not considered a driver of structural transformation. Nevertheless, numerous scholars and international organizations have demonstrated that FF is a strategic sector for achieving food security and alleviating rural poverty (Yúnez *et al.*, 2013). Today, FF occupies a strategic position in addressing food supply challenges, fostering competitive and sustainable development, and offering viable solutions to the problems facing the Mexican countryside. Despite its potential, FF faces several limiting factors that are nonetheless critical to its success. From a natural resource standpoint, FF is challenged by changing agroecological conditions, insufficient or degraded productive resources, and the loss of genetic diversity. These factors compel rural families to improve their tools, technologies, and organizational systems (Hernández & Salazar, 2018). Socioeconomically, FF is affected by rural outmigration and the abandonment of farmland, as remittances have become a primary source of income for peasant households (Hernández & Salazar, 2018). On the market front, FF grapples with price volatility for both agricultural products and inputs. Limited access to technology, credit, services, capital, and specialized technical assistance further widens the gap between FF and commercial agriculture (Hernández & Salazar, 2018). Compounding these issues is FF's constrained access to and control over productive means particularly land and water which must also be shared with other competing productive sectors. Moreover, while the Secretaría de Agricultura y Desarrollo Rural (2016) acknowledges that agricultural output in Mexico has improved through modernization, innovation, and mechanization especially among small producers FF continues to face challenges stemming from limited public investment (Yúnez *et al.*, 2013). Nonetheless, FF presents distinct advantages and opportunities that position it as a cornerstone of national development. It has demonstrated resilience in marginal environments by using locally adapted resources and requiring minimal wage labor. Consequently, FF exhibits higher survival potential than commercial agriculture (Hernández & Salazar, 2018). It can also contribute to economic development by leveraging locally available rural resources (Ramírez-Juárez, 2022). FF units typically maintain greater biodiversity, adopt practices that promote soil and water conservation (Hernández & Salazar, 2018), and offer a pathway toward sustainable production (Ramírez-Juárez, 2022), while enhancing food security. Additionally, FF plays a vital role in supplementing rural household incomes (Yúnez *et al.*, 2013). Beyond its socio-economic, environmental, and cultural contributions, FF also holds significant relevance in shaping public policy and promoting rural development (Hernández & Salazar, 2018). Today, FF is fundamental to the eradication of hunger and poverty, ensuring food security, safeguarding natural resources and the environment, and promoting the holistic development of rural areas (Ramírez-Juárez, 2022).

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Family Farming has evolved in response to the structural reforms that have taken place in Mexico and globally. This production system has faced numerous challenges that have hindered its economic and social advancement. Nevertheless, FF holds significant

productive potential to combat poverty and hunger in marginalized areas, thereby capturing the attention of various stakeholders. Studies such as this one shed light on the historical processes that have shaped the role of families in agriculture in Mexico. Moreover, they open the door to further lines of inquiry, such as the specific roles played by different family members. This, in turn, could lead to a more in-depth analysis of the respective contributions of men and women throughout the history of family farming in Mexico.

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