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Title: Who is a smallholder farmer? Features and implications of alternative definitions with an application to household survey data in Nigeria, Tanzania, and Ethiopia

Smallholder farmers are at the core of agricultural policy initiatives in many countries and at the global level. The Sustainable Development Goals has set the target of doubling, by 2030, “the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers” (SGD 2.3). Yet, there is no unique and universally agreed upon definition of the term “smallholder”. In this paper, we review the manner in which analysts define a "smallholder" and examine the features and implications of these definitions. We find that criteria used in smallholder definitions range from land size to less conventional criteria related to a household's reliance on agriculture. We then develop a typology of these definitions and apply a selected number of them to data sets of the Living Standards Measurement Study-Integrated Surveys on Agriculture for Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Tanzania. We identify three types of definitions: i) definitions based only on land size using thresholds ranging from 2 ha to 30 ha; ii) definitions that combine land size with other measures such as livestock holdings and indicators of access to markets, reliance on family labor, and economic size; iii) definitions that do not use land size but use other measures.

Our application of these definitions shows that differences in criteria used to define smallholders have significant implications for the proportion of households categorized as smallholders, their importance and contribution to agriculture, and the constraints they face. While land-based definitions are simple and intuitive, they fail to account for the many other unique challenges that small producers face as reflected in their dependence on family labor, limited access to output markets, and lack of economic opportunity within and outside of agriculture, and poverty. We find that multicriteria definitions that combine land size with other criteria show promise of identifying the most vulnerable farmers needing policy attentions. We also find that flexible relative thresholds rather than rigid absolute thresholds more accurately capture important cross-countries heterogeneities in term of agro-ecologies and stages of development. Understanding these implications is key to developing a harmonized and unique definition of smallholder to monitor the SDGs target which refers to the concept of smallholder.