Role of small farms in regional food availability: insights from 25 regions in Europe

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The importance of small farms is well established and recognized in developing countries, but far less is known about their role in Europe, where agriculture is largely industrialized.

We present evidence from a comparative analysis of 15 European countries to assess the contribution of small farms to regional food production and availability, across geographies and products.

Our results suggest that the contribution of small farms to regional production is closely related to the relative abundance of small farms in the agricultural landscape, while their contribution to regional food availability is driven by structure of specific supply chains and the market linkages available to small farms, and in particular the degree of self-provisioning and direct sales to consumers.

Contributions to production:
- Highest in regions where small farms are a more dominant part of the agricultural landscape;
- In Southern Europe, product systems are mostly export-oriented;
- In Northern Europe, we found both export oriented and locally oriented SF;
- In Eastern Europe SF seem to follow different marketing paths and strategies compared with larger farms. Small farms within these systems play more important roles in terms of regional food production.

Contributions to availability:
The importance of small farms is closely related with non-market channels. In food systems dominated by supermarkets, such as those in Europe, some small farms seek alternative commercialization channels and/or rely on their own production to satisfy their consumption needs. This, in turn, means that the degree to which the small farms are able to contribute to regional food availability hinges on how much of their production is consumed in the household or sold (or given as gifts) directly to consumers.