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What is the future for smallholders in the face of expanding global agribusiness?

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Urban markets around the world, including those in developing countries, are increasingly being supplied with produce by large agribusiness. The marketing of fresh food by corporate giants is leading to the replacement of local open markets by large and medium sized supermarkets even in the seemingly most isolated urban areas. What are the effects of expanding global agribusiness on the livelihood of the millions of smallholder farmers and how they are dealing with such drastic change? We will attempt to come up with a few answers in this brief article. Our work in PLEC, a global programme that focuses on smallholders and their changing resource use, provides some new and encouraging information that we would like to share with the readers of ePNV.

We have observed in many communities in Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America that poor farmers are adjusting to the changes by diversifying their economic activities. Farmers have long moved between rural and urban environments, and agricultural and off-farm activities in search of income and other resources. This phenomenon described by some experts as a process of “deagrarianization” is increasing dramatically and is challenging conventional categories of what constitutes urban and rural populations. From the highlands of Kenya to the Amazon lowlands, a great number of rural families have members living in the cities and in some cases have a house in burgeoning shanty towns. These dispersed or multi-sited households play a critical role in moving capital, knowledge and resources from the city to the village and from the village to the city. Some governmental and non-governmental agencies are responding to these new needs and patterns in innovative ways.

A pioneer programme that aims to provide temporary employment to dispersed households was established in the municipality of Santarem, Brazil, the site of long-standing PLEC activities. The programme, based partly on data provided by PLEC, offers jobs to one member of participating rural families to work for 15 days in the city while the rest of the family are working in their landholdings or protecting their lakes and forests. Other members of the same family can then substitute for their family member. The programme structure allows fathers or