

# The Limits of Land Size:

## A Framework for Defining Smallholder

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#### Introduction

Despite 693,000 Google Scholar results for "smallholder" (Oct 2025) and a near seven-fold rise in N-gram instances since 1990 (fig. 1), showing extensive effort to delineate, study, and engage such populations, the term remains effectively undefined. Without a holistic and objective definition, research cannot describe the study population, compare across contexts, or identify valid counterfactuals, and development cannot design effective support, assess eligibility and need, or match interventions with issues. This study aims to examine legacy definitions and related actions, and ultimately reach an objective and functional definition relevant to diverse stakeholders. The conceptual framework is predicated on three main points:

- 1. Global coffee supply chains depend heavily on smallholder producers, yet there is no universally accepted definition of "smallholder" in academic or industry discourse.
- 2. Land size-dependent definitions oversimplify lived realities and obscure important social and economic dimensions that shape farmer livelihoods, resulting in disjointed discourse, ineffective interventions, and non-generalizable findings.
- 3. Clear, human-centric, holistic definitions are vital for proper conceptualization of conditions and to guide support, shape policy, and ensure effective intervention.

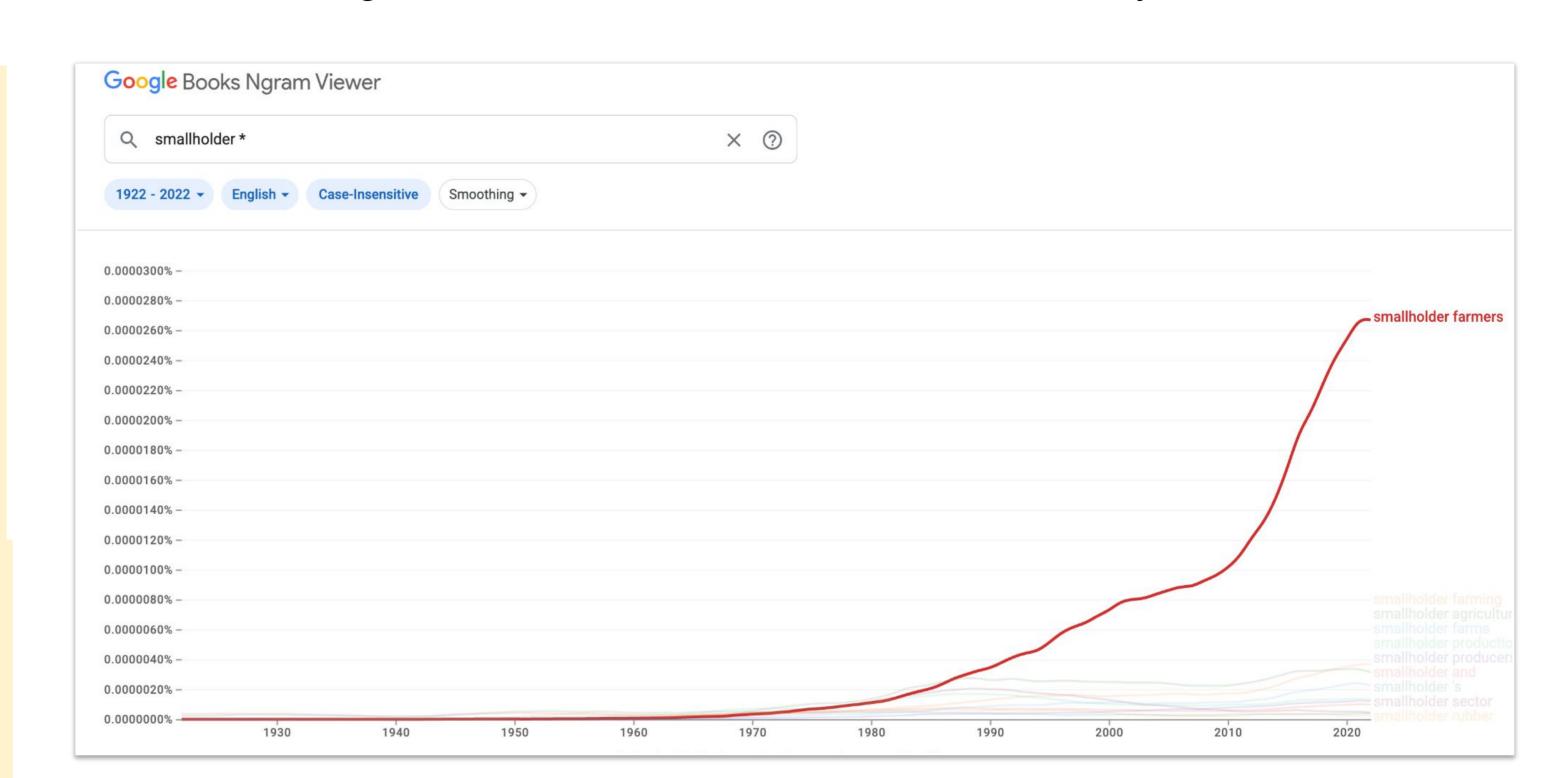


Fig. 1: N-gram Instances of "smallholder" Since 1990 (Google Books)

#### Methods

Following a similar approach to Harvey et al<sup>1</sup>., this study applies a sequential mixed-methods design, with goals to: 1) categorize, and map current smallholder definitions, emphasizing coffee systems; 2) identify common factors that holistically, accurately, and actionably describe smallholder conditions; and 3) propose an operational definition that delineates smallholders by incorporating key realities and contexts. Together, these methods will inform an actionable, multi-dimensional, human-centered definition of "smallholder" that aims to describe the human condition and is therefore more descriptive, accurate, and actionable than those currently in use.

Literature Review of peer-reviewed scholarship and key documents from industry, development, and research bodies to identify legacy definitions, assess regional and historical terminological differences, and evaluate how these are applied in engagement with smallholder farmers.

Semi-structured & Structured interviews with experts in coffee research, production, industry, and development to identify practical insights around current terminology and application of such, and gain insight into emerging needs and opportunity for an improved definition.

#### **Components & Process**

- 1. Initial literature review to identify a) current definition, b) application in research and development, c) need for a more holistic definition
- Inductive, qualitative assessment using semi-structured interviews with subject matter experts to illuminate current and legacy definitions, discourse, and interventions
- Comprehensive detailed literature review to assess existing definitions, discourse, and intervention approaches regarding individuals and populations identified as smallholder

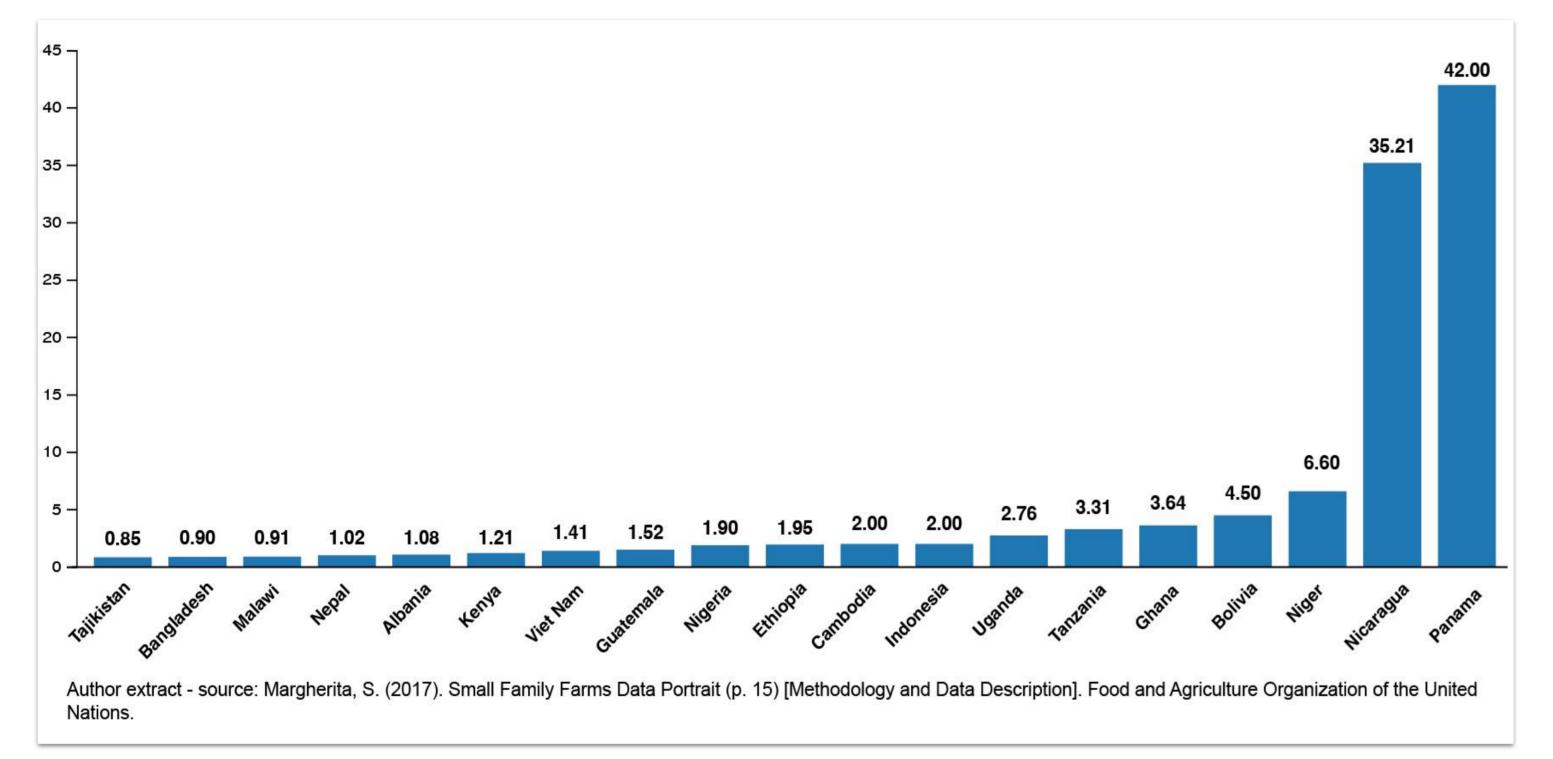


Fig. 2: Median Land Area (Ha) FAO Smallholder Data Portrait by Country



Fig. 3: Seven Key Characteristics of Smallholder Farmers identified through literature review

#### **Results & Discussion**

Initial literature review and discourse with SMEs (Step 1 from Process above) has identified inconsistencies and deficiencies in the use of the term "smallholder." Many publications discuss a general footprint of 2-3 hectares (ha), but land size parameters are not standardized among influential actors.<sup>2</sup> Further, two farms of the same size may experience risk vastly differently due to factors such as infrastructure, land conditions, and education<sup>3</sup>. Over reliance on land size as the primary criterion was found to significantly and systematically overlook critical factors such as income and income sources, labor structures, remoteness, social identity, dependence on agriculture for livelihood, and peer and information networks.

The analysis produced a list of common factors that holistically combine to form a snapshot of the socioeconomic conditions faced by the people broadly referred to as "smallholders" (fig. 3).

#### **Discourse Examples**

#### **Academic**

Out of more than 570 million farms around the world, ~475 million are 2 ha or less (Lowder et al., 2016).

Smallholders are directly dependent on agricultural production for income and livelihoods (Donatti et al., 2019).

Smallholders can be characterized by relatively intensive agricultural practices and higher use of both human energy and family labor (Morton, 2007; Netting, 1993).

"A smallholder farmer is a producer who rears livestock, raises fish or cultivates crops on a limited scale."

"A person who owns or manages an agricultural holding smaller than a farm."

"A smallholder farm is a family-owned enterprise operating on up to 10 hectares, or 24 acres, with most smallholder farmers cultivating less than 2 hectares, or 5 acres."

### <u>Policy</u>

EU Deforestation Regulation: 4ha

Zimbabwe Natl. Development Strategy One: 3-6 ha

Indonesia Basic Agrarian Law no 5: 2-5 ha

UK Small Holdings Act 1892: 1-50 ha

#### References