

## RIO+20 RUSSIA CASE STUDY

# *Russia's drive for food self-sufficiency has its limitations*

Russia will be a key player in reshaping tomorrow's global food system. Russia is determined to become a food superpower. It has more land than any other country (nearly twice as much as Canada, which comes next) and only Brazil has more fresh water. Russia is virtually self-sufficient in minerals and in most forms of energy – and is now seeking the same in food.

Today Russia only farms 7.2 percent of its land mass and has a further seven percent of arable land available - this alone ranks it third in the world for total arable land. Some analysts say that up to 80 percent of Russia's farmland today lies fallow. Russia is the world's fifth largest food importer. The country's farming infrastructure remains very poor and its crop yields low – though they are improving – after years of under-investment since the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the government is addressing this (2012 is the end of its latest four-year agricultural development plan worth \$41bn) including by attracting more foreign investment with sophisticated new technologies. Also, many Russian experts are convinced that climate change will eventually unlock vast swathes of rich new farmland in its now-frozen north. Russia's agricultural future, they say, is bright.

In 2008 Russia resurrected its "National Food Security Doctrine" that previous governments could not afford to pursue. This aims for every Russian to have enough safe food, primarily from domestic production. The 2008-9 global food crisis pushed President Medvedev to ratify the doctrine in 2010. That same summer, a 130-year-high heat wave with wildfires and droughts nearly destroyed Russia's grain harvests. Prices went skyrocketing and the government put in place a fruitless and ultimately dangerous 12-month ban on exports. All this was seen as extra proof that Russia needed to move decisively to secure its food supply. In 2010 – for the first time in history – Russia crossed an old Cold War rivalry when its wheat crop exceeded that of the US.

The Food Security Doctrine talks about Russia being able to quickly identify and stop external threats to its food supplies such as global market fluctuations, weather and economic crises and safety issues such as disease. The doctrine also says that domestic production must seek to supply between 80-95 percent of all Russia's demand for grains, sugar, vegetable oils, meats, dairy, fish, potatoes and salt. This is an extraordinarily ambitious goal.

However **Oxfam believes that the doctrine, though broadly welcome, has some sharp limitations. Russia is making some unrealistic assumptions and questionable policy choices as it faces up to the challenge of feeding its people.**

The problem with Russia's food security – as it is globally – is less about growing more and more food, but rather that certain populations simply cannot afford a minimally healthy diet from the food already available. Meanwhile poor policies and practises continue to keep the country's small-holder farmers at a distance from the required solutions. In reality, these small-holder farmers have a vast underlying influence on Russia's agriculture and, consequently, on the country's social, environmental and economic performance.

In 2005, Russian agricultural organisations – some of which are now extremely large privatized successors to the old collective farms – were responsible for 41 percent of the

country's agricultural output. But the vast majority of Russia's food comes today from individual households (53%) and family farms (6%), especially in fruit and vegetables – and almost all of it grown for self-consumption. For example, Russia now produces twice as many potatoes as the US even though 90 percent of the crop is grown by hand on “peasant plots” of less than five acres.

Svetlana Arkhipova, a nurse and mother-of-two from Malyshevo village in the Novosibirsk region of Western Siberia says: “We spend half of the family's budget on food. And if there is a holiday, my salary is gone in the blink of an eye. We spend less on food products now, though, and our family garden really helps. We grow our own vegetables and our animals provide us with eggs and dairy products.”

**Targeting new policies and new resources into small-holder agriculture would push money into Russia's rural areas where it is needed most by the poorest people growing the bulk of the country's food.** Agriculture accounts for about 11 percent of total employment and, as a sector, this has important implications for the welfare of Russian society as a whole; about 18 percent of the population live below the poverty line and most of these people live in rural locations. More than 11 million Russians depend on agriculture for their livelihoods and live outside of the major cities like Moscow and St Petersburg that have disproportionately captured the benefits of Russia's economic growth in the past decade.

However, the National Food Security Doctrine may not achieve the necessary shift in focus to small-holder farming. For instance, the doctrine does not give a time-frame, or even suggest the means by which Russia might achieve food self-sufficiency, or how exactly it should increase its influence of export food markets. Meanwhile, the “food consumption rates” that the doctrine seeks to guarantee in order to “support active and healthy lifestyles” are simply too low, according to most independent experts. Without establishing a set of indicators of how many Russians are actually experiencing hunger or malnutrition – or even over-nutrition (Russia is more now suffering from an obesity crisis, brought about by unhealthy diet) – the government cannot properly assess progress, and the doctrine becomes more of a political wish-list rather than a legal basis for citizens to demand their right to healthy, safe and affordable food.

Russia's problems are huge in this regard. People already spend on average around 40-60 percent or more of their income on food. Between 25-30m of Russia's 142m population spend almost all their income on food and utility bills alone. Children, migrants, elderly and homeless people become especially vulnerable. Oxfam believes that the outside perception of Russia as a rich country whose problems with food insecurity and poor nourishment have been consigned to its history is far from the reality. In small Russian towns, villages and rural settlements, there is a tendency for people to get used to living in poverty and deprivation and not to demand or expect anything from local authority.

Svetlana Maksimova, deputy of the State Duma of the Russian Federation and former head of the farmers' association of Tver region in Central Russia says: “It's so frustrating for us farmers to produce food but have no way of delivering it to the consumers. Every time I'm asked whether Russian farmers can provide the country with the food, I always answer, I have no doubt they could. I think that Russia will become a prosperous country as long as it has successful farmers, then the farmers will work the land and there will no longer be any waste land. People will come back to the country. The issue is that small holder farmers have no access to the market. It's captured by big companies.

“The direct link between a farmer and a consumer is extremely important. When farmers realise that there is customer demand, they will increase their productivity. When I meet farmers and ask if there is sustainable product distribution, they all say that they will

increase their productivity by ten or even twenty times. Farmers are sure they will be able to provide everybody in Russia with enough nutritious food. Isn't it great that the number of women farmers is increasing? They take up farming when they feel there's demand for their product".

Oxfam believes that Russia needs a Food Code, like the codes for land, labour and housing that already exist, which could unify all the legal relationships between the government and food producers and consumers. Alexander Novikov, the head of the Food Security Issues Institute, says that **Russia's focus on food security needs to not only subsidize smallholder producers but also to support vulnerable groups to increase their capacity to buy food.**

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Oxfam's Grow campaign is committed to creating a better future, ensuring food security and prosperity for all in a resource-constrained world. For more information go to [www.oxfam.org/grow](http://www.oxfam.org/grow)

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