

FARMER INCOME LAB



Welcome to the third newsletter from the Farmer Income Lab. In it, we give an overview of our activities and insights from the first half of 2019 and take a look ahead to the rest of the year.

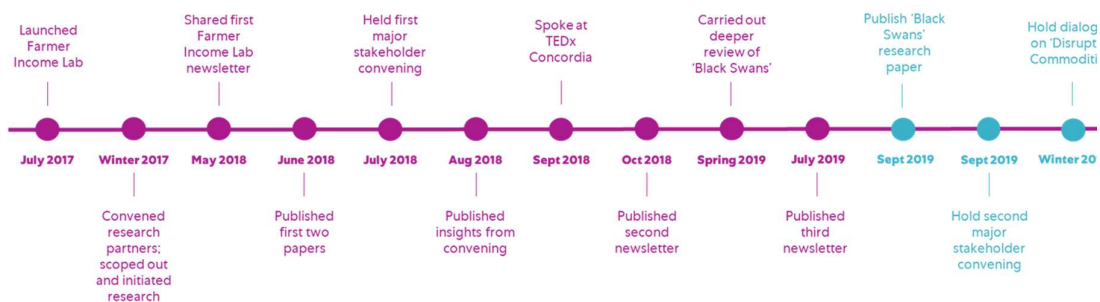
The story so far

In our last newsletter, we described how the Farmer Income Lab had [reviewed evidence](#) from hundreds of efforts to empower smallholder farmers to move out of poverty: things like [poverty graduation programs](#), [outgrower schemes](#), and [savings-led groups](#).

Our research into 'what works' found that the most successful interventions can increase incomes by 50-100%. However, it wasn't clear whether this significant step up actually allowed farmers to move out of poverty.

This year, to build on these insights, the second phase of our research delved deeper into what *really* works. The goal was to deepen our understanding of the outliers, the 'black swans' that at least doubled farmer incomes. We wanted to understand what's behind that remarkable success so we and others can replicate it.

Rather than relying on desk research, we decided to harness the power of crowdsourcing to find these 'black swans.' In April, we emailed more than 80 experts in smallholder agriculture, asking them to send us the names of the most impactful programs they could think of.



What we learned

The question was harder to answer than we expected. We thought we were making a quick ask, and that it would only take the experts and practitioners on our list a minute to think of the most impressive programs they'd been involved in or heard about. For a few, it was that easy—but the majority really had to reflect, and even then didn't seem totally convinced their suggestions would rank at the top of the list.

It isn't easy to tell whether farmers are moving out of poverty, and staying out. For each case received, we scanned available documentation for basic data, especially on the increase in farmer income achieved. We found that evidence of impact on income was often thinner than people had stated in our communication with them. Moreover, the data we did find generally referred to crop income, not overall household income. This doesn't tell us whether a farming family moved out of poverty, or how much closer they are to earning an income that supports a decent standard of living. We didn't find many baseline or endline figures, and there were virtually no ex post assessments to tell us whether increases had lasted over time. Unless income is less important to poverty alleviation than we think, it seems the field needs stronger, more widely applicable tools to track and understand the effects.

It really takes time to understand what's changed and why. We reached out to a sizeable group of experienced practitioners and academics working to improve smallholder livelihoods. People who know the difference between real change and wishful thinking. Even so, we've spent significant time trying to substantiate their impressions of improvements in income. It will take even more time to understand what drove the improvements—what they tried, what worked well, what didn't, and who played what role. These insights are worth discovering, but that won't happen in a day or even over the course of six months.



Our next steps

This summer, we're digging deeper to identify key success factors that increase farmer income.

Altogether, the experts and practitioners we reached out to suggested 103 unique cases from more than 40 countries—many more than we expected. Of these, quick scans revealed that more than 40 had no income data, and another 20 had increased income by less than 50%. But 21 claimed to increase farmers' incomes by 100% or more, and six by over 200%. The full list will be available on our website at the end of the summer.

From this longlist, we've selected a group of cases with some of the the highest documented increases in income from across commodities and geographies. We're doing a rapid review of available documentation on each case to assess what they achieved, and how they did it. We'll assess what's already known, and what isn't.



Other Lab news

Outside of our research into 'black swans', we've been busy identifying Advisory Council members to advise the Lab and help lead our efforts to increase smallholder farmer income.

We are excited to have initially signed up a number of organizations from different sectors, including Oxfam, AB InBev, Nestlé, Danone, IDH, the Gates Foundation, and the Livelihoods Fund for Family Farming. Together, we will host a series of dialogues on what we call ‘Disrupting Commodities.’ This work will seek to challenge conventional purchasing practices and envision the supply chain of the future, one with better outcomes for farmers and businesses alike. We’re delighted to announce that the [Institute for the Future](#) will be joining us in this work, starting in the fall and continuing into spring 2020.

Please watch this space for more updates, and keep in touch with us at info@farmerincomelab.com. We hope that together, we can develop the insights we need to create breakthrough strategies that empower small farmers to move out of poverty, and achieve a living income.

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Farmer Income Lab
Mars, Incorporated
6885 Elm Street
MacLean, Virginia 22101

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