

Understanding farmer institutional development in the context of rural transformation: A framework with case studies from East Africa

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Abstract

Smallholder farming systems are faced with formidable challenges and yet provide livelihoods to the majority of inhabitants in sub-Saharan Africa. In East Africa, poverty and food insecurity is pervasive, due to myriad factors that include, declining crop yields, land degradation, poor infrastructure and inadequate policy and institutional support. The problem of food insecurity in the region is intricately linked to natural resource management and use. Increasing population numbers, diminishing soil productivity resulting from land degradation and poor marketing access limit productive investments, further exacerbating the situation. Poor adoption of sustainable land management (SLM) practices is a key issue both technically and institutionally leading to declining agro-ecosystem productivity and increase in poverty levels. Although there are numerous technologies for SLM, slow adoption is hampered by weak rural grassroots institutions characterized by low capacity, failure to exploit collective capital and poor knowledge sharing. This paper is premised on the belief that vibrant grassroots institutions are necessary for farmers to leverage on technical innovations, policy and market incentives. We detail a farmer institutional development process and through case studies show that capacity improvement of farmer organizations ensures efficiency and improved productivity along the value chains; that fostered collective action enable horizontal and vertical integration of conservation in the context of market development. Based on case studies in six districts in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, the paper concludes by highlighting a farmer institutional development framework, and the application of innovation platforms for wide scale landscape level adoption of improved technologies and practices.

Key words: Partnerships, linkages, market demand, governance, capacity analysis, institutions