Social Groups Supporting the Scaling of Conservation Agriculture-Based Sustainable Intensification

What is the role of social and collective institutions in the diffusion of agricultural innovations?

Social and collective institutions can be important entities that enable agricultural value chain development. For example, agricultural innovation platforms (AIPs) have the potential to enable farmers and other agricultural value chain actors to create value using locally available resources. Collective institutions strengthen the social capital of communities. They help increase the levels of trust, reciprocity and cooperation. They create networks for information exchange, market access and resource mobilization. They support the creation of collective arrangements for demand articulation and technology transfer.

But what are the gaps in collective institutions, and how do they affect technology adoption?

Despite being economic players in a complex and difficult environment, many farmers operate in isolation. Some of the difficulties in accessing information, markets or new technologies are brought about by lack of participation in networks that provide support to access these services. It has been estimated that a majority of rural households (70 percent) do not belong to any formal organization.

What can be done to close these gaps, and what did we learn from SIMLESA work?

In Uganda, before AIPs, eight out of 10 farmers had no access to extension services, after participating in AIPs for a few seasons, nine out 10 were regularly interacting with extension personnel. In Malawi, during five farming seasons, the AIPs grew and saw an increase in the number of farmers using conservation agriculture-based sustainable intensification (CASI) technologies from 2% in 2011 to 35% in 2017/8. The drivers for the successful implementation of the AIPs were market linkages (input and output markets), access to opportunities for common storage and large volume purchases of inputs at discounted prices. To illustrate: a typical bag of fertilizer cost $30, but due to volume discounts, farmers were able to purchase at a lower price of $24. Storing large volumes of commodities centrally did not only reduce the cost of storage, but also facilitated farmers to comply with the targeted market requirements.
The importance of social networks enabled by AIPs suggests the need to support collective institutions as well as other relevant organizations to assist in accessing markets, information and finance. The low capacity in the management of large, complex groups is what can undermine the operations and the viability of farmer groups. Using the agricultural extension infrastructure as a tool for facilitating these groups can be a useful policy innovation. The training opportunities could focus on group formation, managing group dynamics (such as conflict resolution), financial and business management and the like.

How can the research lessons be translated into action?

Strengthen and formalize social network formation in farming communities

About SIMLESA

Since 2010, the Sustainable Intensification of Maize-Legume Cropping Systems for Food Security in Eastern and Southern Africa (SIMLESA) has been implemented in Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. The project seeks to increase food security, productivity, income levels and resilience to climate change while simultaneously protecting the natural resource base through integrating sustainable intensification technologies and practices in African smallholder farming systems.

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Further readings

For further information on which this brief is based, please visit https://simlesa.cimmyt.org/resources/to access policy briefs, synthesis reports, journal articles, datasets and other information.