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“Solidarity in a competing world —
fair use of resources”

Fostering Collective Action in Sustainable Natural Resource Management with the Enabling Rural Innovation Approach

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Abstract

The sustainable use of water and land resources for subsistence and commercial agriculture poses considerable challenges to farmers and development workers. This calls for collective action with farmers to help them conserve their natural resource base while becoming self-reliant entrepreneurs.

Since 2013, HORIZONT3000 has implemented the project “Enabling Rural Innovation in East Africa” (ERI-EA), which aims at enhancing and balancing food sovereignty and increasing incomes through market-oriented agriculture, while sustaining the natural resource base. It uses the Enabling Rural Innovation (ERI) approach developed in East Africa by the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) to overcome the linear, top-down mode of technology development and market access in agriculture. In ERI-EA, community development facilitators in HORIZONT3000’s partner organisations in Uganda and Tanzania trained farmer groups in their respective districts. The training comprised five modules: Participatory Diagnosis, Participatory Market Research, Farmer Participatory Research, Enterprise Development, and Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation. Project evaluations and field visits in 2015/16 showed that participating farmers were able to build strong groups that jointly manage material and knowledge resources for action. Within and across the farmer groups, collective action of pooling labour, financial resources (e.g. through savings and credit) and applied knowledge and skills (e.g. building energy-saving stoves in teamwork) enhanced their capacities for sustainable natural resource management (NRM). Through interacting with various market players, farmers were able to build profitable enterprises and negotiate fair prices and good terms of transaction for their products. As they know what the market needs are and what resources are required, farmers now invest part of their earnings in NRM to maintain steady production for the market. Farmer groups use an internal self-monitoring mechanism at group level that informs them about their progress toward self-set goals. By applying the ERI approach, farmers have demonstrated impressive development in terms of social organisation, group/individual marketing capacities, improved income and food security, and sustainable NRM.

Keywords: Collective action, farm investment, market access