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

Expanding to Wetlands in Beninese Family Farms: A Trade-Off Between Collective and Individual Development Opportunities

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Abstract

Agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa is mostly upland-based. Indeed, wetland potential for rice and market gardening production is currently underexploited. Opportunities for greater provision of year-round food are expected from utilising these land and water resources. Wetland crops are, however, labour-demanding crops. Besides, in some smallholder households, labour is already distributed between family fields intended for collective profit and individually managed fields intended for individual financial benefit to the women or men. Changes in crops and cropping calendars may thus interfere with intra-household labour distribution. Our objective was to investigate differences in the uptake of wetland crops among smallholder households in relation to intra-household labour distribution.

Smallholder households were described in a functional farm typology for two villages where rice fields and market gardens co-occurred in wetlands; Zonmon in the southern part of Benin and Pelebina in the north-western part. Larger areas under wetland crops were found for farm types with more available labour. However, among the farm types with greater labour availability, the extent of wetland crops depended on the labour distribution between upland fields and wetland fields as well as between family fields and individual fields.

Granting individual fields may be a strategy to secure a fair remuneration for work and freedom of initiative. The extent of the expansion to wetlands may be the result of a trade-off between collective interest and individual interest. Just as increasing the area farmed in family fields in wetlands may conflict with fairness associated with individual development opportunities, increasing the area farmed in individual fields in wetlands may conflict with fairness associated with collective development opportunities. Unlocking the potential of wetlands therefore requires insight in practices at the level of the farm and the level of the workers within the farm.

Keywords: Farm typology, intra-household labour distribution, wetland crops