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in the Tropics and Subtropics”

**Managing Agrobiodiversity: Successful Farmers as Environmental
Agents. A Case Study from Kenya and Tanzania**

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Abstract

Results of a study carried out between 1998 and 2002 in 18 rural, partly female-headed smallholder families in two project areas in Tanzania and one in Kenya are presented. The research focuses on sustainable livelihood strategies of successful female farmers, the role of (women's and mixed) groups, the potentials and problems of project approaches and activities, success indicators as well as field methods, paying special attention to gender aspects. A multi-method approach has been applied with main focus on participant observation.

The paper concentrates on various measures implemented as well as on trickle-down effects of the farmers and self-help groups researched on their social environment. It is demonstrated that successful female farmers and self-help groups show positive effects on their natural environment through carrying out measures like tree plantings, natural tree regeneration, organic farming, promotion of traditional medicinal and food plants, physical measures, techniques of sustainable water and energy management, zero-grazing and fodder banks, off-farm income generation, etc. Within this context, practices related to organic farming like mulching, composting, the use of green manure and animal manure are central with regard to soil conservation, soil fertility and income increase. Additionally, off-farm income seems to be crucial within the context of farm stability and livelihood improvement.

Furthermore, farmers and groups have got a decisive influence on their social environment. In fact, they function as knowledge carriers and multipliers and consequently take over the role of important mediators between projects and local people, especially marginal groups like female-headed households and resource-poor farmers in general. The findings apply to 'open-minded' men (e.g. husbands) as well.

Various closely linked success indicators have been sifted out on farm and project level, being responsible for the success or failure of project measures.

As one of the most important outcomes, the study shows that qualitative field research based on participant observation is a promising approach: it not only contributes to mutual understanding between researcher and participants as well as to intercultural exchange but it is also a valuable method for the collection of additional, complementary and specific information.

Keywords: East Africa, gender, natural resource management, successful farmers