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Impacts of the liberalisation of agricultural research and extension on the multi-functional agriculture in Banikoara, Benin

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Abstract

The assessment of the performance of agricultural services for sustainable poverty alleviation in the context of globalisation and liberalisation should take the multi-functionality of agriculture into consideration. This multi-functionality forces to an interdisciplinary analysis of the impacts of the liberalisation of research and extension on agriculture. This paper aims at investigating the impacts of the withdrawal of the state and the involvement of private stakeholders, NGOs and farmer organisations in delivering and financing research and extension on the subsistence and income farming system, the social cohesion and collective action, the agriculture as source of prestige and the environment protection in Banikoara. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with local government leaders and workers of public research and extension organisations, development projects, the district farmer organisation and NGOs in Banikoara district. The study provided the evidence that the liberalisation of agricultural research and extension in Benin tends to (i) orient farmers towards the production of cash crops to the detriment of food availability and quality, (ii) destroy the social cohesion through the dismemberment of families, tensions and conflicts in villages, and (iii) damage the environment. However, its impacts on the agriculture as sources of prestige are mitigated. Any reform of agricultural research and extension to fit into the globalisation and the liberalisation context should serve all of the functions of agriculture, if it has to drop local communities from poverty and to ease the transition into the globalisation. Strengthen the ability of research and extension workers to take into account the multi-functionality of agriculture may be useful in the context of globalisation.

Keywords: Agricultural research and extension, Benin, Liberalisation, Multifunctional agriculture

Introduction

Beyond its primary function of production of food, fibre, hides, timber, and market-related activities such as trade, agriculture has many other functions sometimes called non-food products (Bohman et al. 1999). Romstad et al. (2000, p5) define the multi-functionality as “the set of interlinked outputs from a productive activity where some goods are private and some are public. The public goods may be produced only by this activity, i.e., they are unique for the production in mind – or they may also be provided by other activities, i.e., they are secondary”. Krinke and Boody (2001) distinguish environmental, social and economic benefits of agriculture. More explicitly, according to Bad DeVries (2000), specific aspects of multifunctional agriculture are viable rural communities, environmental benefits, food security, landscape values, food quality and safety and animal welfare. Reforms such as liberalisation and privatisation are ongoing with the expectation to improve the effectiveness and the efficiency of agricultural research and

extension. If there is evidence that each of the functions of agriculture plays important role in rural community development, one may wonder whether, reforms undertaken the last couple of years are consistence with preserving and promoting them. Consequently, the assessment of the performance of agricultural services for sustainable poverty alleviation in the context of globalisation and liberalisation should take the multi-functionality of agriculture into consideration. This multi-functionality forces to a multi-dimensional analysis of the impacts of the liberalisation of research and extension on agriculture. This paper aims at investigating the impacts of the partial withdrawal of the state and the involvement of private stakeholders, NGOs and farmer organisations in delivering and financing research and extension on the main functions of agriculture in Banikoara. In the light of the findings, some recommendations are suggested for agricultural research and extension policy making.

Methods

Banikoara District is located in north-western Benin. It covers an area of 4,383 km², about 3.9% of the country's total area. The climate is sudano-sahelian with an average annual rainfall of 850 mm, average temperature of 34°C. The population of the district is about 150,000 inhabitants. The main ethnic groups in the area are Bariba and Fulani (Mairie de Banikoara 2002). The study took place in Tokey-Banta village in the middle of the district. Five (5) group interviews have been carried out with farmers to identify the main functions of agriculture in the village. Semi-structured interviews with fifteen (15) heads of household have been conducted to analyse the impacts of the liberalisation of agricultural services on the different functions. Scientific observations as well as semi-structured interviews with local government leaders and workers of public research and extension organisations, development projects, the district farmer organisation and NGOs enhanced the reliability and the consistence of the findings.

Liberalisation of agricultural services in Benin

In the past, public organisations delivered almost exclusively research and extension services. The liberalisation of agricultural research and extension in Benin has resulted in:

- Partial withdrawal of the State from delivery and financing agricultural research and extension
- Involvement of private actors, NGOs, farmer organisations and development projects in delivering agricultural services
- Financial contribution of farmer organisations and individual clients

Such a reform impacts differently on the functions of agriculture. The following section explores some impacts of the liberalisation on different aspects of the multi-functionality of agriculture.

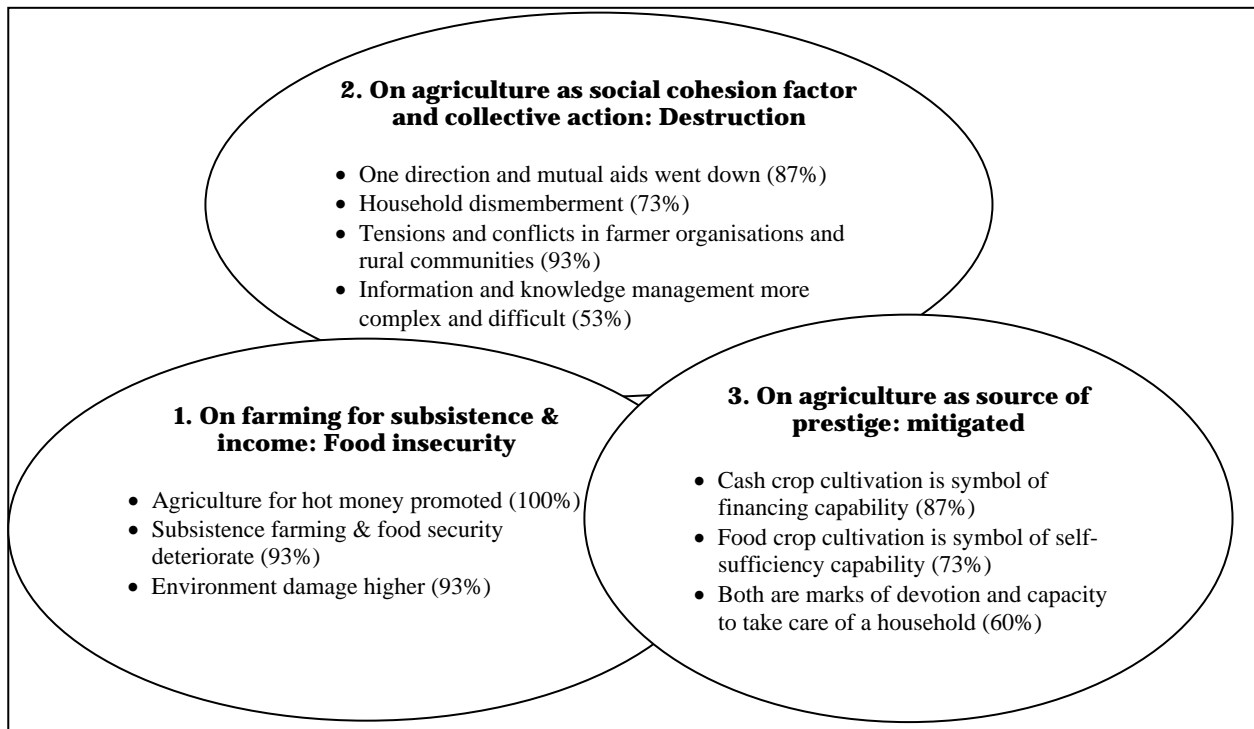
Impacts of the liberalisation on the multi-functional agriculture

The diagram below highlights the impacts of the liberalisation of agricultural research and extension on the agriculture for subsistence vs. income, the agriculture as vector of social cohesion and collective action and the agriculture as source of prestige. The shares of households (sample of 15 households) which are concerned by the issues are indicated.

Impacts of the liberalisation on the farming for subsistence vs. income and the sustainability

The primary function of agriculture is production which aimed principally at ensuring food security. The liberalisation of agricultural research and extension in Benin oriented farmers towards the production of cash crops to the detriment of food availability and quality. With the liberalisation of agricultural services, farmers have easier access to advices, inputs and market with regard to cotton cultivation. The idea to cultivate cotton, to earn money and to buy food emerged and developed within the farmer community. Subsequently, food production decreased and food security deteriorated. Furthermore, agriculture has a key function to protect environment

and should be given such an orientation. Unfortunately, the use of inappropriate land and cotton pest management technologies results in heavy environmental damages.



Impacts of the privatisation on the agriculture for social cohesion and collective action

According to Chan et al. (2006, p290), “social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioural manifestations”. They distinguished horizontal (within civil society) and vertical (State-Citizen) cohesions. However, at a more local stage, social cohesion could be analysed at three different levels. At familial level, the social cohesion displays by the fact that the household is a production, consumption, habitation, mutual help and solidarity unit. Various collective actions characterise social cohesion at community and intercommunity levels. In rural community, agriculture plays significant role in social cohesion, especially at the two first levels.

The liberalisation of agricultural research and extension in Benin tends to destroy the social cohesion in many respects. Money and personal interests guide increasingly farmers since cotton has emerged as cash crop. Mutual help as well as one direction aid went down. One direction aid occurs when someone helps his family members, friends or neighbours without expecting something in return. Aids to old people, family-in-law, etc, are some examples. The most common mutual help is the *wuru* through which people help each other in turn in farm activities. Such solidarity principles are being replacing by the one of “every man for himself”. Household dismemberment is certainly one of the most important changes due to the development of cotton that occurred during the last couple of years. In the past, grand-father, his wives and sons, sons’ wives and children, etc. belonged together to a same production, consumption and habitation unit. Solidarity supported social cohesion of the household. The misunderstanding on sharing revenues got from cotton cultivation results in disrupting social cohesion. Young people leave their parents and set up their own household in order to get directly access to their earnings. In the cases where, everyone has his own separate cotton field, household members find hardly agreements on time to allocate to food crop production. The household dismemberment makes the management

of information and knowledge for agricultural development more complex and difficult in a context, where knowledge is passed verbally from generation to generation.

Moreover, farmer organisations have been given a sense of responsibility in the framework of the liberalisation reform. They are in charge of managing cotton inputs, marketing, distributing earnings to members and allocating plus-values to different socio-economic projects (wells, schools, hospitals, etc.) Due to the bad management and embezzlement, tensions and conflicts evolved at the farmer organisations level. Tensions and conflicts altered heavily the social environment in farmer community making collective actions less and less effective.

Impacts of the liberalisation on the agriculture as source of prestige

Prestige is a fame or reputation due to success. The impacts of the liberalisation of agricultural research and extension on the agriculture as source of prestige are mitigated. On the one hand, cultivating cash crop is a symbol of financing capability. The one who can cultivate cotton may earn money in keeping with the size of his farm to take care of his household. On the other hand, food crops production is a symbol of self sufficiency capability. The one who cultivates food crops can secure or ensure food for his family. Cash crop and food crop cultivations are both marks of devotion to work and capability to take care of a household. Therefore, they are all sources of prestige within farmer community. However, prestige from financing capability has been given more importance by farmers for a long time. This has supported the development of cotton. The consecutive deterioration of the food security seems to be enhancing the relative value of the prestige to owe food crop farmers.

Conclusion

With the liberalisation process, research and extension activities were not directly linked to the different functions of agriculture. Consequently, no clear role with regard to social cohesion preservation has been assigned to these agricultural services. The agriculture for income and the agriculture as source of prestige are the functions that have been served by liberalisation. The agriculture for food security and quality, environment sustainability and the agriculture vector of social cohesion have been injured by the reform. Any reform of agricultural research and extension to fit into the globalisation context should serve all of the functions of agriculture, if it has to drop local communities from poverty, to preserve social structures and models in rural communities and to ease their transition into the globalisation. Accordingly, strengthening the ability of research and extension workers to take the multi-functionality of agriculture into consideration reveals itself to be a critical issue.

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