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Contests as a Tool to Enhance Farmer Innovativeness and Sharing of Information for Sustainable Farming: A Case for Uganda

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Abstract

A farmer contest was organised among 23 Farmer Research Groups (FRGs) during implementation of a pilot project on Integrated Rural Resource Management (IRRM) in Central Uganda. The FRGs were made up of 135 and 186 farmers from sub-counties of Kayonza and Wakisi, respectively. The major objective of the contest was to foster farmer innovativeness in water harvesting techniques, soil and water management and facilitate exchange of knowledge and information among farmers. During planning, key stakeholders (farmers, NGOs, opinion leaders, extension agents and researchers) brainstormed to develop the contest theme, guidelines, criteria for judgment and prizes. The agreed theme was Sustainable Farming Practices and Innovations for optimum Productivity While Conserving the Natural Resource Base. Evaluation was at three levels. First, FRGs (most of which had 10–16 members) identified the best three farmers, using their own criteria. In phase two, sub-county Evaluation Committees were elected and sensitized to develop criteria to screen out the best 10 performing farmers from each of the sub-county. During phase three, the Project Contest Evaluation Committee (composed of all the stakeholder representatives) was instituted to make final contest judgment and award prizes. During the contest process innovations were identified and farmers showed that they could engage in productive agriculture using readily available resources. Given the innovativeness exhibited in soil and water management practices by participating farmers, it was evident that under proper guidance farmers can enhance sustainable agricultural production with minimum external inputs. The three-level evaluation of the contest facilitated exchange of knowledge, as farmers visited fields far from their areas of operation. The final day of the contests attracted a cross section of the communities and enabled farmers and other stakeholders to exchange knowledge and learn from one another. The enthusiasm shown by the many observers including political leadership pointed to fact that contests can be a tool for enhancing farmer innovativeness in sustainable agricultural production, including organic farming. It was concluded that contests are an alternative avenue through which knowledge, farm practices and technologies can be shared among farmers.

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