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Influence of Public and Private Agents in the Use of New Knowledge and Technology among Small-scale Producers: The Case of the Honduran Coffee Chain

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Abstract

Various providers of knowledge and technology can influence the way small-scale coffee producers innovate. In the paper we present results from a study in which we define five different innovation trajectories in which public and private agents influence the producers' decision to adopt new knowledge and technologies. These include: a) innovation through local buyers b) innovation through international buyers and exporters c) innovation through input suppliers d) innovation from government and development cooperation and e) innovation through farmers' initiatives. In order to test which of those trajectories had most influence on coffee producers in Honduras we rated levels of innovativeness among coffee producers in three communities in major coffee producing areas. We also collected data on the type of relationships these producers maintain with other members of the community and with public and private agents in coffee development. Depicting the internal and outbound connectedness of producers in the three communities studied, tools of social network analysis were applied to find out how interactions with certain agents, separately and cumulatively, have influenced the use of improved methods in coffee production and marketing. According to the results, there are significant differences in the way that various providers of knowledge and technology, especially private buyers and development agencies, but also input providers and farmers organisations and unions influence the farmers' behaviour towards innovation. Buyers exert an influence particularly on certification and quality aspects, whereas development agents have a greater influence on improved agronomic practices. Farmers who communicate with the extension branch of input providers tend to be more innovative. These results suggest that development programs should take more seriously into account the role of private actors in innovation among agricultural producers and, hence, design development programs in such a way to allow for collaboration with these agents.

Keywords: Coffee production, Honduras, innovation, social networks