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Livelihood Analysis and Transformation Dynamics in Farmer Households in Northern Benin

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Abstract

Family farmers and herders in Western Africa are often poor or vulnerable and have to struggle in order to secure their livelihood. The objective of this study is to investigate the strategies and dynamics of smallholder farmers to improve agricultural production in the communes of N'Dali and Banikoara in Benin. The Systemic Approach to Rural Development (SARD) with a focus on the Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) is an appropriate method for this livelihood analysis. The study investigates three principal topics: the current situation, the actual changes and their causes and the vision.

The farmers of N'Dali and Banikoara can be divided into three types. Type II concentrates mainly on crop production, Type III focuses on animal husbandry, while Type I owns large areas of arable land and many animals. Farmers of each type have different assets at their disposal and choose a corresponding strategy. Many changes can be observed, which influence closely linked transformations. Population growth, the lack of arable land, the emancipation of women, etc. influence actually the farmers. Family members, powerful individuals and various organisations, have direct impact on farmers' livelihoods.

In some years, the farmer can afford to buy cattle for draft work but sometimes the cattle die or the farmer has to sell them. Communication tools, particularly radio and cell phones, are widespread. Human capital is developing positively as shown by the level of parents' education compared to their children. Natural capital reveals some problems, mainly in relation to the scarcity of arable land. Hence the farmers try to compensate for it with human capital. Social capital is characterised by extensive solidarity, which is indispensable during crises such as a scarcity of food. But there are as well some frictions between farmers and herders. Financial capital is progressing positively, but the need for money is increasing as well.

In the future, the farmers want to diversify their production. They fear both human and animal diseases. The omnipresent and most important point that the farmers mention as an essential condition for sustainable production is peace.

Keywords: Benin, household typology, livelihood analysis, smallholder farmers, transformation processes