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"Agricultural development within the rural-urban continuum"

Farmers' Perceptions of Agrobiodiversity in Western Kenya

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Abstract

Policy makers, programmers and researchers see enhancing agrobiodiversity as an important way to improve nutrition and livelihoods of small-scale farmers. This study assessed the perceptions of farmers in Western Kenya on agrobiodiversity to develop recommendations on how to better integrate these perceptions in future agricultural interventions.

A total of twelve focus-group discussions (six with women and six with men) were conducted in six villages in Teso South and Bondo districts in Western Kenya, located in an agrobiodiversity-rich area just neighbouring a sugarcane-growing belt. In addition 30 farm households in the same villages were interviewed on their perceptions and level of agrobiodiversity using structured questionnaires.

On average, study households cultivated 22 food crop species on a farm of 0.9 ha. When asked to choose, 29 out of the 30 households preferred an agrobiodiversity-rich farm to a specialised one such as sugarcane. The five main reasons for preferring a agrobiodiversity-rich farm were given in the focus-group discussions as food security, income, a balanced diet, improving soil quality and saving money (by not spending it on buying food). The main theoretical and practical reasons given against high agrobiodiversity were land scarcity, insufficient inputs such as fertilisers and agrochemicals, and high labour needs. Respondents suggested that the best interventions to increase agrobiodiversity would be improved access to farm inputs, especially seeds, availability of labour force, and enhanced knowledge on managing the different species. However, some respondents may have confused 'agrobiodiversity' with 'farm productivity', which should be better explained in future studies.

The fact that farmers value agrobiodiversity should encourage key stakeholders in development programs to further promote diversification of farming systems for improving rural livelihoods and food and nutrition security. Capacity building and improving farmers' access to agricultural inputs should be integrated into future interventions on enhancing agrobiodiversity. Farmers also believe that higher agrobiodiversity needs more fertiliser and chemicals. In general it is assumed that diverse farms need less fertiliser and have fewer pest and disease problems.

Perceptions exist that enhancing agrobiodiversity can contribute to food security and income, as these present the strongest incentives for high agrobiodiversity from the farmer's point of view.

Keywords: Agrobiodiversity, food security, Kenya, perceptions

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