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Smallholder Farming in Kenya: An Evaluation of Livelihood Dynamics

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Abstract

The rural population of semi-arid lands in Kenya face multiple challenges that result from population growth, poor markets, land use and climatic changes. In particular, subsistence oriented farmers face various risks and opportunities in their attempt to secure their livelihoods. In light of recent calls for more effort on understanding livelihood dynamics this paper contributes to comprehend long-term change and poverty dynamics with an inter- and intra-household comparison over the last fifteen years. A longitudinal livelihood survey was conducted in Laikipia County, Kenya, based on standardised questionnaires and semi-open questions with 150 smallholder households in 1997 and 2013. A participatory well-being index was developed and livelihood portfolios compared.

The results show persistence in low asset endowment for the majority of smallholders from an aggregated perspective, while transitions into and out of better livelihood conditions become apparent from a household perspective. The investment in, and accumulation of, conventional buffer or productive assets, such as grain stocks, livestock or land, does not shield households from adverse shocks as smallholders are shown to easily slip back into poverty. The study analyses the lack of sustained graduation out of poverty and highlights correlations between livelihood strategies, assets and the well-being pathway of households. The paper further explores the reasons for a significant reduction that was found in livestock keeping and identifies livelihood strategies to cope with a reduction in common grazing areas. Water projects in the area were found to be partly ineffective; ways to counter management problems to better cope with water shortages are discussed.

Keywords: Kenya, Laikipia, livelihood, longitudinal, rural development, smallholders