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Informal Institutions and Climate Change Adaptation among Indigenous Communities of Southern Ethiopia

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Abstract

Climate induced changes in livelihood practices can increasingly be observed in the pastoral land use system of Ethiopia. Despite considerable progress in understanding farm household's adaptation choices, there is still limited knowledge in regard to what explains the decisions of indigenous pastoral community members to adapt to the impacts of climate change. The presentation highlights the role of the National Adaptation Program in the context of pastoralism and development policies of the Ethiopian government, by relating it to practical actions of adaptation of the indigenous pastoral communities. Navigating through these adaptation options and corresponding theories, we show how informal institutions shape adaptation of the indigenous in the face of unfavorable interventions.

Using a multistage sampling procedure, the empirical data for this paper was collected throughout the application of Participatory Rural Appraisal techniques between February-April 2015 in Hamer district. The aim was to understand the mechanisms by which institutions shape adaptation and relating these to theories in order to better understand the adaptation practices of indigenous communities, and the compatibility of institutions. We show that choices of adaptation measures are mainly determined by local norms, previous experiences, affordability, and sustainability of the measure. Further, many stakeholders and different development approaches have been tried to build adaptive capacity of the pastoralists.

Household's purpose of production and adjustment to climate variability is greatly influenced by incentives and disincentives embodied in traditional rites of passage that the communities perform. Further, there seems to be a mismatch between the 'settlement/farming oriented', market based adaptation approaches, and the norms of the pastoralists that historically secured their survival. These contradictions, besides leading to inertia and waste of resources, are leaving the pastoral communities with short term, survival oriented, and costly reactive actions prompted by lack of alternatives. This finding could be explained by institutional incompatibilities which become apparent when formal rules of adaptation fail to conform to the communal norms, so that opportunistic behavior emerges. In conclusion, the pro-farming development approach, which seldom considers the role of traditional institutions of indigenous communities', are leading efforts of the indigenous people that ultimately lead to maladaptation. These findings may contribute to designing better processes, for example in regard to social learning, that take on board the institutional architecture and communication practices in a way that actually supports decision-making to climate change and sustainable economic development in indigenous pastoral context.

Keywords: Adaptation, climate change, indigenous communities, institutions, pastoralism

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