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Factors Affecting the Functioning of Farmer Groups: Perspectives from Three Farmer Groups in Tanzania

RAÚL FERNÁNDEZ^{1,2}, PAMELA NGWENYA², BRIGITTE KAUFMANN²

¹*Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Germany*

²*German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL), Germany*

Abstract

There has been considerable interest in establishing farmer groups based on the assumptions that groups give farmers bargaining power, enable cost-effective delivery of extension services, and empower members to influence policies. However, research has also shown that many groups fail, often due to issues pertaining to social capital such as group cohesion, trust and reciprocity. This research aimed to reveal farmers' own perceptions of factors that affect the functioning of groups in their specific locality.

Working closely with three farmer groups in the Dodoma and Morogoro regions of Tanzania, this study took a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach. Ten days were spent with each group and activities included creation of a 'group history' and a self-assessment. Members outlined their own criteria for assessing group functionality. In addition, in each case study site at least four semi-structured key informant interviews and two focus groups with non-members took place, to further explore factors effecting group formation and functionality in each community.

Through these activities, key questions relating to how groups started, what motivated different members to join the group, and perceptions about what makes the particular group more or less functional were addressed. Results show that differences in social capital at the community level produce contexts that can enable or constrain group formation processes. Farmers belonging to groups identified aspects of social inter-relations such as unity, love and trust as important factors in determining functionality. Focus groups with non-members gave insight into disincentives to joining groups, such as perceived lack of time, resources or community cohesion.

The PAR approach enabled observations of group activities to take place and critical engagement with farmers' characterisations of group functionality. In feedback sessions, videos and preliminary results were presented to each group to stimulate reflection, discussion and new ideas.

The three case studies offered contrasting insights into farmer group functionality and formation contexts. Moreover, differences in perception among different group members and between villages led to a nuanced and multivocal assessment that was attentive to issues of social difference.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, farmer groups, participatory action research, social capital, Tanzania

Contact Address: Pamela Ngwenya, German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL), Steinstrasse 19, 37213 Witzenhausen, Germany, e-mail: p.ngwenya@ditssl.org