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“Solidarity in a competing world — fair use of resources”

Fostering Collective Action in Sustainable Natural Resource Management with the Enabling Rural Innovation Approach

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Figure 1: Farmers conducting self monitoring visits in their fields

Introduction

Integrating the sustainable use of water and land resources for agriculture and accessing markets poses considerable challenges to farmers. This calls for collective action to help farmers conserve their natural resource base while becoming self-reliant entrepreneurs. Since 2013, HORIZONT3000 implemented the project “Enabling Rural Innovation in East Africa” (ERI-EA), aimed at enhancing and balancing food sovereignty and increasing incomes through market-oriented agriculture, while sustaining the natural resource base. It used the Enabling Rural Innovation (ERI) approach developed by the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) to overcome the linear, top-down mode of technology development and market access in agriculture.

Methodology

In ERI-EA, community development facilitators in HORIZONT3000’s partner organisations in Uganda and Tanzania trained farmer groups in their respective districts. The training comprised five modules: Participatory Diagnosis, Participatory Market Research, Farmer Participatory Research, Enterprise Development, and Participatory Monitoring & Evaluation. The ERI-EA project brought together people in four geographic areas in Uganda (Eastern and Central) and Tanzania (Mara and Bukoba) to form a regional learning alliance to promote farmer-driven innovation processes. In 2015/16, an evaluation based primarily on focus group discussions and key informant interviews, endline survey, observations during field visits and project monitoring records showed that:

Results

- 1.Participating farmers built strong groups that jointly manage material and knowledge resources for action.
- 2.Within and across the farmer groups, collective action of pooling labour, financial resources and applied knowledge and skills (e.g. building energy-saving stoves in teamwork) enhanced their capacities for sustainable NRM.
- 3.Through interacting with market players, farmers built profitable enterprises and learned to negotiate fair prices and good terms of transaction for their products.
- 4.As they know the market needs and the resources required, farmers now invest part of their earnings in NRM (e.g. buying farmyard manure, tree seedlings and mulching material) to maintain steady production for the market.
- 5.Through farmer participatory research, farmers generated knowledge about effectiveness of agronomic and NRM practices. Farmers do experiments, monitor them and analyse results that benefit groups and neighbouring communities.
6. Farmer groups use a self-monitoring mechanism that informs them about their progress toward self-set goals related to NRM, production and marketing.



Figure 2: Farmers and scientist jointly carrying out field soil tests



Figure 3: A farmer experimenting on use of mulches and live cover crops in banana plantation

Conclusion

Over three years, the project directly benefited 6900 small-scale farmers (in 276 farmer groups) and their communities to enhance and balance their food sovereignty, income security and NRM. Through learning and applying ERI, they found common ground to exchange experiences across organisations and countries, and thus made a tangible difference in rural development.