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Social Learning in Agriculture and the Battle Against Systemic Inequalities: The Case of Southwestern Ethiopia

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Abstract

While Ethiopia maintains a large agricultural extension service system, access to extension knowledge and its resources is largely limited to model farmers, as parts of the rural elites. In consequence, social learning is widely practiced as an inherent coping mechanism to the segregated distribution of knowledge, technologies and agricultural inputs. Despite the widespread use of social learning for knowledge and technology transfer, it has so far hardly been documented in the context of rural Ethiopia or analysed with reference to the translation and adaptation processes through which the passed on knowledges are embedded into the local system of knowledge production and sharing. The purpose of this study is, therefore, to identify the different methodological types of social learning as well as their contribution to innovation development and diffusion within the agricultural context of Ethiopia. A mixed methods approach was employed using household surveys, expert interviews, focused group discussions, informal discussion as well as key informant interviews. The data were documented, coded and analysed using SPSS and ATLAS.ti. The findings show that 55 % of the farmers in the case study area fully relied on social learning to adopt technologies followed by 35 % who partly use social learning. Overall, about 90 % of the farmers acquire knowledge through social networks and by means of communication, observation, collective labor, public meetings, social events and group socialization. Social informal institutions such as Iddir, and collective labor groups, notably *Debo* and *Dado*, help to learn, adopt and diffuse technologies where the formal extension services is rather limited to model farmers, which account for only about 10% of all farmers in southwestern Ethiopia. Social events and group socialization with peers along with the inherent tradition of seed and knowledge sharing stimulates diffusion of new knowledges and technologies. Based on the empirical findings, we suggest that social learning substantially contributes to resource poor farmers and other majorities to access knowledges and technologies mainly through their interaction. It serves as a coping mechanism to the prevailing limitations, but at the same time stabilizes a knowledge system that allows for the further fostering of social, political and epistemic inequalities.

Keywords: Communication, group socialisation, observation, social events