



Tropentag, September 17-19, 2018, Ghent

“Global food security and food safety:
The role of universities”

Use of Research Evidence amongst Agriculture Decision Makers in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

The outcomes from different approaches to sustainable agricultural intensification (SAI) is highly contested, such as between agrochemical input-based and agroecological intensification. The SAI research and learning in Africa programme (www.sairla.nri.org) aims to identify and generate research evidence to inform how poorer smallholders, women and youth may better access and benefit from SAI. But what is the demand and capacity to use research evidence by decision makers in agricultural development? Ninety-seven decision makers from government, civil and private sectors across six African countries (Burkina Faso, Ghana, Ethiopia, Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia) completed a self-assessment of their demand for and use of research evidence. This was complemented with 39 semi-structured interviews with key informants and revision of the main agricultural policy documents in the different countries. At least fifty per cent of decision makers actively sought research evidence, although this was lower in private sector respondents (only 33 %), while over 70 % in other groups. A majority of respondents consult evidence on at least a yearly basis, with government and research organisations being the main sources. Content of research evidence was weakest on issues of gender and generational equity, as well as on social and environmental trade-offs. Over 80 % of respondents consider they had a moderate to very good opportunity to apply research evidence and would receive recognition for doing so, thus indicating motivation to use research evidence was high. While a majority of researchers considered that the influence of research evidence on policy was weak, a majority of government sector thought it was strong. Review of agricultural policy documents indicated that the majority included consideration of social and environmental sustainability. However, responses from key informants indicated that the implementation of these aspects of policy was weak, often due to conflicting interests. Therefore, we conclude there is interest amongst African decision makers to use research evidence, but they lack the evidence and tools to implement environmental sustainability and social equity in agricultural development.

Keywords: Environmental sustainability, informing policy, social equity, sustainable agricultural intensification