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“Global food security and food safety:
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Cooperatives and Food Security: Trade-Offs in Ethiopian Multipurpose Cooperatives

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Abstract

It is paradoxical that small-scale farmers who provide a majority of the food in the poorest regions of the world, continue to be prone to food insecurity. Although small-scale food production is important for household food security, farmers face many challenges and constraints which impacts their productivity levels. Constraints faced by small-scale farmers relate to lack of access to land and water, poor physical and institutional infrastructure, limited ability of small-scale farmers to transport inputs and produce, and lack of capital assets, information and access to services and financial markets, amongst others. Cooperatives (coops) are acknowledged as important organisations to tackle these constraints while aiming at improving yields and income of member farmers through pooling resources and efforts. Through their collective benefits, they aim to secure ecological, social and economic empowerment. Interventions for both food and cash crops may induce food availability and accessibility and as such, contribute to realising the SDGs No poverty and Zero hunger. Yet, the ultimate impact cooperatives make, will depend on how much their services match the requested support needed to overcome the constraints that farmers face. In this paper we consider the multipurpose cooperatives in Ethiopia which are typically set up to provide inputs and market services to farmers. Instead of studying farmer level effects, which are well-described in literature, we focus on cooperative-level decision making. We use data collected from 180 multipurpose cooperatives in the Tigray Region to assess their potential to contribute to food security. By comparing the functioning of these cooperatives and their priority impact activities, we try to assess the inherent trade-off cooperatives make between supporting food and cash crop production. We study how important these cooperatives perceive it to contribute to the different potential pathways of impact (including direct pathways through food production and food diversification, and indirect through employment and improved income), and try to identify key intervention areas.

Keywords: Cooperatives development, food security, small-scale farmers