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“Filling gaps and removing traps
for sustainable resource management”

Filling Knowledge Gaps Between Model Farmers and their Communities: Implementing the Concept of Social Debt

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Abstract

In Benin like in most sub-Saharan countries, agriculture is dominated by smallholder farmers whose capacities to sustain and intensify food production relies on healthy soils. Yet, soil degradation in this region is reaching alarming rates recalling the urgent need of innovative approaches in promoting sustainable land management practices at local scale.

While numerous challenges contribute to the low adoption of SLM good practices in sub-Saharan Africa, technology diffusion beyond the circle of direct project beneficiaries appears as a major challenge of SLM technology long-term adoption by small farmers.

This paper presents the results of a pilot-experimentation of a technology diffusion model implemented within the frame of an accompaniment research to a GIZ soil protection and rehabilitation project in northern Benin. The core of the model is the so called Tem Sesiabun Gorado, that is a community-based agent (CBA) selected by their respective communities, and the concept of “social debt”. The concept of social debt and the decision to share gained knowledge to new farmers is not an injunction or a simple requirement of project implementers or technology promoters. Rather, it is the result of a careful facilitation of village meetings and a deep reflection process involving both project beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries on the implementation strategy, the risk of technology non-diffusion and mechanisms to best address soil degradation challenges that farmers are facing.

Findings of the model implementation show that giving clear responsibility to farmers’ representatives in technology diffusion through a carefully designed and adapted accountability mechanism (social debt) can help to reach farmers beyond the circle of direct project beneficiaries and out-scale project activities to new intervention areas. The model proved also to be effective in reaching more women and other disadvantage groups.

Though the model proved to be effective in addressing challenges of technology diffusion at local scale, further research is needed to apprehend conditions under which it can be self-sustained and successfully replicated in different agro-ecological and socio-cultural contexts and conditions.

Keywords: Social debt, sustainable land management, technology diffusion, Tem Sesiabun Gorado