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Framing Indigenous Farming Practices for Adaptation to Climate Change: Evidence from the Rwenzori (Uganda)

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Abstract

The limited institutional capacities in the tropics which is prone to climate hazards have led to the wider interest of related scholars and institutions into the role of indigenous knowledge. Indigenous knowledge is seen from the lens that it can (enable to) produce locally adapted interventions. While research on indigenous knowledge for farmers exposed to climate change risk is increasing, it remains focused on content. There is scarce focus on the socio-epistemic processes through which indigenous practices are crafted by farmers, thereby limiting the grasp of the best ways to engage with indigenous knowledge practices. In this study, ethnographic field surveys were conducted to interact with farmers and grasp the processes that enables them to design the indigenous practices to adapt. The study based on a case of indigenous flood risk reduction since flooding is regular and can induce perspectives on a regular basis. Findings indicate several interesting aspects. First, farmers have learnt from experience, tradition, and the local culture. Second, they follow the regularities of local ontologies to develop indigenous theorisations that enhance their lived experience and then grounded into their localised farming practices. Thirdly, indigenous theorisations are enabled by the cultural structures that favour openness to production and applying the most appropriate knowledge. Overtime, this enable farmers to learn from one event to another how to adapt and live with floods. The capacity to learn from each flood event is illustrated by developing “a basket of adapted options” from rescue to prevention and management of subsequent floods. Key examples include shifting from degrading to non-degrading farming practices, e.g., obuwathirira (slash and plant, without ploughing, practised mainly practised in the higher slopes and along close to the river), shift from crop to tree farming and/or pastoralism in the downstream; but also agronomic adjustment like intensive cultivation during flood free periods and land use planning (e.g., plant indigenous trees close to the river, then followed by crops), agroforestry where specific flood ‘immunizing’ trees are interplanted with crops. This study highlights the ability of indigenous people to question their knowledge foundations to evolve practices that enable living with floods.

Keywords: Climate Change Adaptation, Disaster Risk Reduction, indigenous Farming, Indigenous Knowledge