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Unraveling governance challenges in the provision of extension services for smallholder agricultural carbon projects: Evidence from western Kenya

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Abstract

Development projects aimed at increasing Soil Organic Carbon (SOC) stocks in agricultural soils are considered one of the great opportunities opened up by the Clean Development Mechanisms. Carbon projects promote Sustainable Agricultural Land Management practices in order to increase SOC and sell carbon certificates on voluntary markets. With the revenues obtained, projects attempt to 1) finance the set-up and maintenance costs (mainly monitoring), and 2) support farmers either by direct payments or by financing agricultural extension services. However, carbon projects often face implementation challenges such as the duplication of services or other uncoordinated actions. In order to increase the understanding of possible governance challenges of carbon projects and identify some tools to address them, this study aims to analyse the landscape of extension actors around the Western Kenya Carbon Project by combining a theoretical framework for the evaluation of extension and monitoring services with the concepts of the New Institutional Economics. Two qualitative empirical methods were applied to collect data; a participatory mapping technique known as Net-Map and expert/key informant interviews involving a broad set of stakeholders. The findings highlight elements that may compromise the effectiveness of extension services, such as the presence of other initiatives with interests that are either 1) in opposition to the Prosoil project (e.g., promoting subsidies for chemical fertilisers and/or pesticides) or 2) aligned with those of the project, preventing proper measurement of extension impact as farmers may adopt practices and technologies due to a contagion effect. In addition, the short period of training granted to producers given the high number of farmers targeted by the project, may generate additional governance challenges related to the reduction of SOC storage, as extensionists must move from one farmer group to another in order to cover the target farmers while reducing the support required to ensure long-term SOC sequestration. Project managers will be better prepared to offer extension services in upcoming agricultural carbon projects by recognising these difficulties, particularly by understanding how crucial the institutional environment is for fostering collaboration among initiatives and develop strategies to support farmers and minimise SOC loss.

Keywords: Africa, carbon markets, development projects, extension services, soil carbon