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Operationalizing social equity in agricultural research

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Abstract

Studies that apply multi-indicator frameworks to assess the sustainability of farming systems have tended to focus narrowly on production and the environment, neglecting the social dimension of sustainability. This study addresses this gap by examining the specific challenges involved in operationalizing social equity in a large-scale research-for-development project that applied a comprehensive sustainability framework to assess impacts of farming technology interventions in northern Ghana. Our preliminary analysis of project documentation and interviews with project staff revealed that social equity is conceptualised and operationalized via related concepts such as farm household diversity, social differentiation, poverty reduction, gender and inclusivity, which are sometimes used interchangeably. Practical entry points to engage with social differentiation included farm household typologies and data disaggregation by farm type or gender. Typologies were regarded as an important tool to evaluate the fit between technology and intended beneficiaries and to identify farm households to target in scaling activities. Key challenges arose as farm household types could be dynamic, difficult to identify in the field, and difficult to adopt by scaling partners. Furthermore, the disciplinary backgrounds of project staff favoured quantitative approaches to describe and compare farm types, but these did not necessarily reveal the differentiating mechanisms that a technology might put in motion, nor whether these were problematic or not. The right expertise distribution and task division among staff are therefore crucial. We assessed the multiple system boundaries within which equity was considered in the project, and captured reflections on the conduciveness of integrating a social equity perspective across-the-board or in distinct, focused research activities. The insights generated throughout this learning trajectory of operationalizing social equity can provide guidance for future research-for-development projects in their steps towards equity.

Keywords: Farm typology, inequality, inequity, sustainability assessment