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Barriers to agroecological transition of coffee-based farming systems in the central highlands of Vietnam

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Abstract

The expansion of export commodity production systems across Vietnam's Central Highlands (VCH) has come at significant environmental costs for communities. Land degradation stemming from unsustainably intensive farming practices particularly threatens the livelihoods of ethnic minority groups. The EU's deforestation regulation ((EU) 2023/1115) that restricts the import of coffee if sourced from areas affected by forest degradation further calls for urgent interventions to reverse unsustainable practices.

This study investigates barriers and opportunities to the adoption of agroecological (AE) interventions of VCH cropping systems to combat land and forest degradation practices. An adapted Rural Household Multi-Indicator Survey (RHoMIS) was conducted during 2022–2023 with 724 representative coffee farmers across 4 districts of Lam Dong and Dak Nong. The findings were validated and enriched through stakeholder interviews, workshops, and farmer focus groups.

The analysis reveals diverse yet limited knowledge of sustainable practices such as intercropping, integrated soil fertility management, responsible use of agrochemicals and water use for irrigation across ethnic groups, socio-economic status, and literacy levels. Barriers to AE adoption also stem from ineffective policies and underfunded extension systems. Market-based and policy incentives to transition farms to AE practices are lacking. Limited access to cooperative structures and supply-chain linkages and their related benefits of cost savings and market premiums among marginalised farmers hinder the adoption of AE practices. The high financial investments for intercropping and/or agroforestry constitute disincentives for many smallholder farmers. Additionally, recent production requirements (e.g., pest control) for durian exports pose obstacles to the participation of marginal farmers in lucrative specialty crop export markets. Barriers to AE stand against increasing buyer demands for eco-friendly production supported by government initiatives to mitigate forest degradation and to restore natural forest land using AE practices. Moreover, market and policy support for AE transition is complemented by donor-funded programs. The presence of these varied developments serves as strong rationale for context-specific interventions including tailored support policies and extension programmes to facilitate the widespread adoption of AE practices especially by marginalised farmers.

Keywords: Challenges, climate-resilient production practices, ethnic minorities, farming practices, household economics, literacy level

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