



Tropentag, September 11-13, 2024, hybrid conference

“Exploring opportunities ...
for managing natural resources and a better life for all”

Are farmer organisations (FOs) such a big deal for agroecological innovation? An assessment of small holders FOs' innovation intermediation functioning

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Abstract

Integration of productivity, resource management, and institutional innovations is crucial across different system levels. Traditional research and extension services face challenges in disseminating innovations effectively, leading to the emergence of agricultural innovation system (AIS) approach. AIS involves collaboration among various stakeholders to improve technological, managerial, and institutional aspects in agriculture. Intermediary actors play a pivotal role in facilitating innovation exchange and learning processes. In Tunisia, farmer organisations (FOs) like agricultural development groups (GDAs) and mutual companies for agricultural services (SMSAs) are key intermediaries. However, there is a lack of comprehensive assessments of FOs' innovation roles, which this study aims to address using Social Network Analysis (SNA) method. The findings aim to shed light on FOs' effectiveness as innovation intermediaries and identify potential challenges and benefits associated with their roles in innovation processes through the comparison of three farmers groups divided by their membership statutes to detect the effect of FO presence or absence on innovation facilitation and actor's configuration. The studied sample involves 592 farmers from Kef and Siliana governorates in northwestern Tunisia. This context is the typical small-scale agriculture in semi-arid bioclimatic stage in Tunisia, with limited access to land, a family-based system combines livestock rearing with annual crops, particularly olive growing mainly for self-consumption. The results show that farmer organisations (FOs) are playing a crucial role in facilitating collaboration and knowledge exchange among farmers and other agricultural actors. However, their effectiveness varies depending on membership status and contextual factors. While FOs contribute to reshaping sales channels and optimising access to services, they face limitations in promoting inclusivity and equitable knowledge sharing. The recommendations include strengthening FOs' social dimension, addressing trust barriers, and investing in reinforcement measures to enhance their functionality. Long-term strategies should reevaluate the effectiveness of collective action and focus on fostering a culture of shared learning and local empowerment.

Keywords: Agricultural innovation, farmer organisation, innovation intermediation, small holders, social network analysis, sustainable intensification