Learning achievements of farmers during the transition to market-oriented organic agriculture in rural Uganda

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Abstract

Organic agriculture requires farmers with the ability to develop profitable agro-enterprises on their own. By drawing on four years of experiences with the Enabling Rural Innovation approach in Uganda, we outline how smallholder farmers transition to organic agriculture and, at the same time, increase their entrepreneurial skills and competences through learning. In order to document this learning we operationalised the Kirkpatrick learning evaluation model, which subsequently informed the collection of qualitative data in two study sites. Our analysis suggests that the Enabling Rural Innovation approach helps farmers to develop essential capabilities for identifying organic markets and new organic commodities, for testing these organic commodities under varying organic farm management scenarios, and for negotiating contracts with organic traders. We also observed several obstacles that confront farmers' transition to organic agriculture when using the Enabling Rural Innovation approach. These include the long duration of agronomic experimentation and seed multiplication, expensive organic certification procedures and the absence of adequate mechanism for farmers to access crop finance services. Despite prevailing obstacles we conclude that the Enabling Rural Innovation approach provides a starting point for farmers to develop entrepreneurial competences and profitable agro-enterprises on their own.

Keywords: organic agriculture, enabling innovation, learning, Uganda

1 Introduction

Organic agriculture has a considerable poverty reduction potential, which is a key rationale for its promotion in developing countries (Parrott & Marsden, 2002; Kotschi \textit{et al.}, 2003; Willer & Yussefi, 2007). Farmers who have successfully transitioned to certified organic agriculture often benefit from increased farm productivity and access to niche markets for organic products. Farmers, the private sector and donor agencies find the price premium offered by organic buyers particularly attractive (Gibbon, 2006; Musiime \textit{et al.}, 2005). Despite its niche nature, a growing number of development specialists consider organic agriculture a viable strategy for developing farmer-market linkages and hence reducing income poverty of farmers and farming communities (Walaga, pers. com). Over the past decade, these perceptions contributed to the development of the Ugandan organic agriculture sector and made it one of the most distinct show case in sub-Saharan Africa. Within 10 years the organic sector expanded from a few hundred to over 200,000 certified organic farms producing primarily cotton, coffee, fresh and dried fruits (Taylor, 2006; Tumushabe \textit{et al.}, 2006; Willer & Kilcher, 2009).

The enormous success of organic agriculture in Uganda is to a large extent credited to contract farming arrangements (Gibbon, 2006; Bolwig \textit{et al.}, 2007). Under such arrangements, the role of farmers is to produce a specific amount and quality of an organic commodity for which traders have identified buyers in Europe, the USA and the Middle East. Traders make crop variety choices and provide technical training and extension services to farmers (Bingen \textit{et al.}, 2003). In most cases, traders manage the internal control system for group certification, cover certification and annual inspection costs, organise transport, processing and value addition, and take responsibility for packaging and shipping raw or processed organic products to clients overseas. Traders play a critical role in organic...