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AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES PROMOTED AND ADOPTED IN MALI

RESULTS OF A SURVEY OF NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND FOCUS GROUPS OF FARMERS

CONTEXT

Malian farmers constantly modify their agricultural practices to adapt to changes in climate and respond to other dynamics, such as market prices. While nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often promote certain practices intended to improve the variety and quality of agricultural produce, male and female farmers tend to adopt practices based on their own needs and experiences, and these practices are not always the ones promoted by NGOs. Understanding which practices are adopted — and why — can assist in tailoring support to farmers as they continue to adapt to climate change.

To increase knowledge about the practices promoted and those that are adopted, as well as to identify specific practices for further evaluation, the African and Latin American Resilience to Climate Change (ARCC) project conducted two exercises: a survey of 30 NGOs based in Bamako, to learn which practices they promoted; and focus groups with farmers in 12 villages across four Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS NET) livelihood zones to learn which practices they adopted.

FINDINGS

Many NGOs in Mali appear to focus their activities on the southern regions of the country. The relative lack of activity in northern Mali is most probably caused by the area's sparse population, logistic challenges, and political insecurity. Villages also differ with respect to the level of support they receive from government services, donor-funded projects, international and local NGOs, financial institutions, and the private sector. In general, villages greatly appreciate the support they receive, but they often indicate that the support is insufficient in terms of material assistance and the frequency of visits to the village by service providers.

The most important factors to consider when choosing practices to promote appear to be the local context in which the NGOs work, and the livelihoods of the populations they target. NGOs generally take a conservative approach to adaptation, building on current practice, addressing immediate concerns, describing anthropogenic climate change in the context of historical shifts in climate, and integrating climate change adaptation into other local concerns. Virtually all of the practices that NGOs promote in the Sahel predate recent increases in climate change funding by the international community.

More than 70 percent of the NGOs interviewed promote at least one practice that addresses soil fertility, moisture retention, supplemental water, or agroforestry. Practices to strengthen soil fertility, including direct application of manure and composting, were most common. NGOs also disseminate improved cereal, legume, and vegetable varieties.

Farmers must balance trade-offs among many constraints when deciding whether to adopt a practice, with labor and cost frequently being most critical. They also tend to value practices that address multiple objectives, such as soil fertility and moisture retention. Farmers also must respond to non-climate dynamics, such as market demands and the availability of resources and inputs.

When deciding which crops and varieties to plant, farmers consider a number of characteristics. In addition to the crop's suitability to the growing climate, they value taste, as well as adaptation to local soils and low demand for fertilizer. Farmers interviewed have occasionally abandoned crops, most often substituting crops that take fewer days to mature in response to decreases in the amount or duration of rainfall.

The rate at which a particular practice is adopted appears to be associated with the resource intensity of that practice. Farmers tend to avoid practices that require higher levels of labor and technical knowledge. Farmers prefer known, low-input practices that fit a range of contexts, such as composting and manure. Although the focus groups were conducted in villages identified as villages that NGOs work in, many of the practices most commonly promoted by NGOs are among those with the lowest levels of adoption. However, a number of costly and knowledge-intensive practices — chemical fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides — are used by farmers (with the support of national agencies) but are not promoted by NGOs. It is unclear if farmers would continue these practices without this external support. It also appears that male and female farmers adopt different practices, and at different rates. Different practices are also adopted at different rates in different villages.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

This brief highlights key conclusions from Boro, D., Bouaré, D., Cissouma, S., Diarra, M., LaLumia, C., Miller, D., Niang, M., Sangaré, Y., and Upton, S. (2014). *Climate Change in Mali: Organizational Survey and Focus Groups on Adaptive Practices*. USAID. Interested readers are invited to review the full paper at <http://community.eldis.org/ARCC/>.