Linkages between Integrated Soil Fertility Management Technologies and Marketing of Smallholder Produce in Meru South and Mbeere Districts, Kenya

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Land degradation and declining soil fertility are increasingly being viewed as critical problems affecting agricultural productivity and human welfare in tropical Africa. It is then imperative that improving soil fertility is key entry point for achieving food security, reducing poverty and preserving the environment for smallholder farms in Africa. However, due to high costs of inorganic fertilizers, tackling soil fertility issues thus requires a holistic approach that integrates biological and social elements. Linking farmers to markets and adding value to raw products have great potential for improving the incomes of smallholder farmers. This study was conducted in Meru South and Mbeere districts of Kenya which are located in the central highlands of Kenya from May to November 2008. The study involved a survey of 150 farmers who had access to Integrated Soil Fertility Management technologies (ISFM). Purposive sampling method was employed. Simple random sampling was used in selecting the farmers from the four catchment areas of Murugi, Mukuuni, Kirege locations in Meru South district and Machang’a location in Mbeere district. A total of 150 farmers were interviewed during the survey. Self administered questionnaires were used to collect data from the sampled farmers. Information on the type of agricultural crops cultivated, area under cultivation and inputs applied were gathered. Information on marketing dynamics among smallholder farmers in the study area was also collected. An analysis of the ISFM technologies introduced and the ones currently in use by farmers was done. Market analysis of smallholder produce was conducted with a focus on market types, marketing channels and identification of constraints to crop marketing. The data were correlated in a bid to establish whether a relationship exists between crop production using ISFM technologies and marketing of smallholder produce. Tables, figures and other descriptive methods were used in data analysis such as the Chi-Square and correlation analysis. The results revealed that sampled farmers were aware of the benefits accrued from application of the ISFM technologies and other extension services. However, these technologies were not continuously being practiced among smallholder farmers due to their inability to obtain good returns from crops. They indicated that the main problem facing the wide practice of ISFM innovations was poor market returns for their produce caused by low prices offered especially by brokers. This is despite the fact that 66% of the farmers in both study sites obtained their main income from sale of crops. In order to improve the returns that the farmers get from their application of ISFM technologies, this study recommends that project developers and policy makers...
on soil fertility should recognize the need to equip smallholder farmers with not only practical soil fertility replenishing skills but also on marketing skills. Farmers should be assisted in identifying suitable agro-enterprises and in formation of marketing groups. This will not only give them advantage of economies of scale but also boost their bargaining power while selling their produce. The study recommends further research to be conducted among small, medium and large scale farmers to provide a basis for comparisons on the aspects of natural resource management and marketing.