COMMUNITIES TAKING THE LEAD

The relevance of social innovation amongst land-based communities in Uganda to improve agriculture and enhance livelihoods

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SUMMARY

In sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), the natural resource of land plays a crucial role in the everyday lives of its people: SSA is home to more than 750 million people of which two-thirds depend on agriculture to sustain a livelihood. The reduction in the capacity of the land to function – land degradation briefly defined – therefore poses great challenges to the inhabitants (and decision-makers) in this region. In the Republic of Uganda, agriculture is one of the main economic sectors. Moreover, 85% of the population lives in rural areas of which the majority depends on the key livelihood resource of land. The problem of land degradation causes food insecurity, poverty and hampers all kinds of (social, economic) development. Land degradation is also driven by underdevelopment, embedded in a broader social, economic and also political context. Issues of inequality, lack of education, sickness, access to information, lack of ownership, inappropriate policy-making, and so forth are all influencing and part of the context in which land degradation exists.

The 'farmer innovation approach' is increasingly acknowledged as a great value for agricultural research and development (ARD), presenting a bottom-up approach to issues of land degradation: by consulting different stakeholders – from farmer to researcher – and creating partnerships, context-specific and efficient solutions to land degradation are developed. This approach came up within the discourse of sustainable land management (SLM), which promotes an integrated approach to problems of land degradation. SLM emphasises that land management should have complementary foci, such as I.) being technologically sound and effective, II.) caring for environmental functions and landscapes, III.) being economically efficient and IV.) making people part of the solution, by using participatory methods. This last point plays an important role in this thesis.

The focus of this research project is on identifying local, innovative solutions to the problem(s) of land degradation in the Republic of Uganda. Under the auspices of project 'Stimulating Community Initiatives in Sustainable Land Management' (SCI-SLM), this research aims to specifically address social innovations, as identified in land-based communities, which touch upon issues of land management. SCI-SLM is a partnership project (currently up and running in four African countries: Ghana, Morocco, South Africa and Uganda) which acknowledges and harnesses farmers' and land-based communities' capacities to come up with innovative solutions internally (without outside help), and looks to disseminate these initiatives to other

communities, since it is convinced of the value of community-based SLM for further agricultural (and other sorts of) development.

The farmer innovation approach mainly paid attention to technological innovations so far: under SCI-SLM and its forerunner 'Promoting Farmer Innovation' (PFI), numerous technological farmer (or community) innovations were identified, and have been disseminated successfully (e.g. through cross-visits and farmer-to-farmer learning) amongst different farmers and communities within various African countries. The farmer innovation methodology has gained ground in this process, and (stimulating locally initiated) SLM is increasingly being mainstreamed in agricultural development agendas. Social innovation has also been identified as a type of farmer or community innovation; evidence of successful social innovations amongst farmers or land-based communities have been documented in the past and its relevance has been discussed. Social innovation was defined within the SCI-SLM framework as: new forms of institutional arrangements to improve agriculture and the environment. However, the exact relevance and characteristics of this type of innovation amongst farmers and land-based communities has not received much attention in the SCI-SLM project. In addition, for technological innovations a criteria test (assessing a technical innovation on its technical effectiveness, economic validity, environmental friendliness and social acceptability), was designed to assess the true merit of a farmer innovation and its potential for dissemination to other farmers or communities. For the social type of innovation, the (farmer innovation) methodological steps have been lagging behind within the SCI-SLM project, and the current criteria test for assessing social innovation is not yet comprehensively developed.

Since there was a demand from SCI-SLM to have a closer look at the potential and relevance of social innovation for improving sustainable land management, this research focuses on identifying and analysing the process of social innovation. By applying a participatory and qualitative research design, two pre-selected communities in Uganda under the 'SCI-SLM radar' (preselected by the national SCI-SLM team of Uganda) were visited to find evidence of social innovation and to analyse the true potential of this farmer innovation type for improving agriculture and people's livelihoods.

In the research project, two research objectives were developed:

I.) The primary aim of the research is to define social innovation as a rather new concept as part of farmer innovation methodology in the field of sustainable land management under SCI-SLM auspices; finding evidence for its development in the field and analysing its impacts in two rural land-based communities in Uganda.

II.) The secondary research aim concerns the not yet fully developed SCI-SLM methodology relating to social innovation; how to analyse social innovation in the field is reassessed and refined where necessary and possible. The SCI-SLM criteria for a 'good' social innovation must therefore be evaluated on their appropriateness, and adjusted or specified where needed.

The following central research question was developed to address both research objectives:

What forms of social innovation can be found under 'Stimulating Community Initiatives in Sustainable Land Management' (SCI-SLM) Uganda, what are the on-the-ground impacts, and how relevant is its recognition for improved sustainable land management (SLM)?

Four sub-questions help address the main research question:
1. How can social innovation be conceptualised and consequently be identified in rural Uganda?
2. What are on-the-ground impacts of social innovation within the communities as observed in Uganda?
3. What can we learn from the evidence gathered in rural Uganda regarding the relevance of including social innovation in sustainable land management?
4. How – if at all – should the current SCI-SLM methodology to analyse social innovation be adjusted, refined or completed – with respect to the in-field research and the S-R-I (Sustainable, Replicable and Inclusive) test; are the current SCI-SLM requirements for a 'good' social innovation appropriate and sufficient?

The **term social innovation** was conceptualised after a comprehensive literature research, serving as a working definition for identifying social innovation in the field:

> *The process of creating or renewing systems of social order and cooperation which govern the behaviour of a set of individuals within a given human community with the aim to improve agriculture and the environment and strengthen livelihoods.*

Additionally, the SCI-SLM mandate requires a social innovation (as part of SLM) to be:
i.) new in local terms;
ii.) developed by the local community/group;
iii.) with no /little help (or money) from outside;
iv.) and preferably, having potential for spread.

In both of the visited communities in Uganda, Banyakabungo grazing land management society in Ntungamo district, and farmer network BANDERA 2000 in Kamuli district, evidence of social innovation (as defined above) was identified during the fieldwork.

“Banyakabungo” is a members-only society which was founded by a small group of local people. The group communally manages and owns a 186 ha. piece of land (collective ownership of the land title) on which their cattle grazes; each member brings in a cow. The members together take care of the cattle, land (grass, garden, trees) and water resources, and live of their produce (subsistence and market) which is shared according to the share the members own. The group secures its 107 members of land ownership and applies a democratic system of governance to make decisions about the land and the group’s assets. This social innovation thus not only improves land husbandry, it also secures the Banyakabungo people of a more sustainable income.

“BANDERA 2000” was founded by a small group of farmers with the motivation to fight poverty and improve the local people’s circumstances by helping them earning an income: the idea was that more can be achieved when the people work together. This ‘cultivators network’ links farmers to farmers by sharing knowledge on farming and offering trainings in the Busoga region (central Uganda) and looks for opportunities to develop enterprises in rural agriculture. The group pays special attention to the situation of orphans, widows and other vulnerable people in the region as well, and has become a well-known association in the area, both for its agricultural and other development aims. BANDERA 2000 celebrated successes and has been disappointed in the past: some enterprises failed, others were successful for some time and brought in money for its members. At the moment, the group is thinking of new initiatives to own communal land (again) and produce fruits for the local market. The number of members went from 5 to 1000 in the past; it currently has 350 paying members, of which more than half is female. The aim of the group is still to support one another and to fight poverty and sickness collectively by improving agricultural practices and the environment.

Concluding from observations and interviews in the two land-based communities, it became clear that the social initiatives they create do not exclusively aim to improve productivity and taking better care of the land (although improving productivity and creating an income is an important, or even most important driver for the social innovation). By working together and involving multiple people to contribute and benefit, the communities both address those social issues that hamper agricultural development as well as social and economic development in their society. In Banyakabungo this is achieved by securing land, thereby tackling the problem of lack

of ownership, and avoid the "tragedy of the commons". In BANDERA, women's development and care for the vulnerable members of society is one of the main objectives, aiming at issues of inequality and empowerment. These forms of social innovation touch upon drivers of land degradation that are often forgotten in agriculture and are important to include to achieve actual sustainable land management. Examples of Banyakabungo and BANDERA 2000 prove that there is more to gain from involving these kind of farmer innovations and that they are relevant for improving agriculture and livelihoods, at the same time.

Finally, several recommendations are proposed to the SCI-SLM project, concerning analysing social innovation in-field, and adjusting the currently used SRI criteria test (Sustainability, Replicability, Inclusiveness) to better integrate the concept of social innovation in the farmer innovation methodological framework.

1. To develop the social innovation concept as part of SLM

- First, it is crucial to develop a clear working definition of social innovation and specifying its crucial role for improving sustainable land management. If a working definition is not agreed on from the start of the programme, it will lead to confusion and discussion; this must be avoided.
- In addition to the working definition, certain SCI-SLM standards must be met for a social (farmer) innovation to be suitable for this project: listing these alongside the working definition helps to clear up from the beginning whether the social innovation is appropriate for SCI-SLM (standards such as: local development of the initiative and development with little or no help from outside).
- Subsequently, it is proposed here to develop a new criteria-test to judge whether a social innovation is a 'good' social innovation; a subdivision of different aspects important to sustainable land management (i.e. sustainability, economic, social, and a separate SCI-SLM criterion) are included in the SER-FIELD test:
    - (endurance) ***s****ustainability*
    - (economic) ***e****fficiency*
    - (SCI-SLM objective) ***r****eplicability*
    - (social) ***f****uture vision;* ***i****nclusiveness;* ***e****mpowerment;* ***l****eadership;* ***d****emocracy*

2. In-field research methods

- A close collaboration between researchers with different backgrounds is encouraged when analysing social innovation in the field: learning from the researcher's own experiences:

- A local extension workers or local university student could cooperate with a (foreign) researcher, each with their own backgrounds but, obviously, with an interest in agriculture and development, to create hybrid knowledge and have new insights;
- Preferably, the local student(s) / extension worker(s) speaks the local language of the community so better communication is achieved;
- When possible, a local agricultural officer should be involved in the project so he or she is aware of the research and can continue following up on further developments in the innovative community after the researcher(s) leave the region;

- After field research, SCI-SLM forms should be used to store the collected data and share the preliminary outcomes with the national SCI-SLM team who should continue stimulating innovativeness and arranging cross-visits with other identified communities under SCI-SLM.

3. Stimulating* more *community initiatives in Sustainable Land Management

- More land-based communities, also in other countries where SCI-SLM is active, should be researched in detail to observe their efforts to collectively improve land management and tackling socio-economic problems at the same time;
- In order to upscale the farmer innovation methodology focussing on social innovation, more research on social innovation and its impact on improving SLM is needed, so better insights into social innovation and its relevance can be created and (possibly) additional characteristics of a 'good' social innovation can be distilled.