



Broad vs. Specific Agricultural Recommendations: Implications for Research, Policy and Farmer Innovation

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Extended Abstract

Two common observations are made regarding African smallholder farming systems: (i) they are typically very heterogeneous. The ecological and socio-economic context varies even in small areas and farmers have diverse needs and objectives. (ii) The recommendations for appropriate practices interact with context, so that they must be locally adapted. Several examples of practices and approaches demonstrate this understanding of farmer heterogeneity and context. These include: developing area-specific fertilizer recommendations that take into account variation in soils and other conditions and participatory plant breeding for local adaptability. However, common practice and policy is still built on the assumption of uniformity. Examples include: fertilizer and other recommendations published without reference to context and may be made at national scale; national systems for registration and variety release that require broad adaptation; and actions to scale-up technology packages that have proved useful in one location.

The central question we want to address is why this divergence between knowledge and practice exists. What are the costs, benefits and mechanisms for generating local recommendations and how do these compare with the conventional R&D systems that are built on an assumption of uniformity? An on-going scoping study aims at developing a research agenda to investigate this question. The scoping study is using a review of the current concepts, practices and policies on broad compared with specific agricultural recommendations. We are using soil fertility management in Southern Africa as the motivating example.

The emerging picture from the review is that research on recommendations has not attempted to measure the intangible costs and benefits of various innovation systems for generating locally adapted technologies (e.g. social costs and benefits of farmers who engage in a participatory variety trial). In addition, policy incentives through input and output markets support have increased the use of broad recommendations due to poor targeting, politics of patronage and weak extension systems. Some of the policy ramifications for improving agricultural innovation systems taking into account scale of recommendations include: (i) Decentralizing technology registration and release through more capacity building of extension and local change agents to facilitate local adaptive research; (ii) Aim to scale up principles and understanding of processes to form the basis of local adaptation research rather than scaling up or publishing finished recommendations; and (iii) Increasing research effort to understand exactly what the interactions with context are and the costs and benefits of various recommendations (Broad vs. Specific) under different scale and risk scenarios.

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