

CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION: AN UNENDING CHALLENGE FOR WEST AFRICAN SAVANNAH FARMERS

West Africa Savannah farmers are among the ones most affected by climate change on the continent. More frequent droughts and heavier rains add up to already fragile ecosystems, weak economies and unstable political systems. Farmers react to changing climate conditions in different ways. Some scientists believe that governments should consider these activities carried out by farmers to improve their policies on climate change adaptation.

"Questions and answers" with stakeholders

In this context, a team of researchers of the West African Service Center on Climate Change and Adapted Land Use (WASCAL) evaluated farmers' attitudes and adaptive responses to climate change in two case study regions: Dassari arrondissement in northern Benin and Dano department in southwestern Burkina Faso. Farmers, local authorities and development workers were asked about their personal and institutional positions, and activities on farming climate change adaptation; and small farming households' responses were evaluated in order to assess how suitable they might be as climate change adaptive measures.

About the author



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Cross-checking farmers' responses

Our results indicate that farmers' observations of climate change are often subjective and conjectural, and the subsequent adaptive measures are, at large, inconsistent with their observations. We found out that the measures farmers implement, do not respond causally to the climate threats or the impacts pointed out by themselves. For instance, in Dassari, the danger of rainfalls is overstated and the windstorms under-considered, but our estimates reveal that their impacts are inverse. Actually, we learned that farmers' adaptive responses rather tend to address their households' broader needs such as food security, income generation and capitalization of the family. They frequently operate beyond the farm's geographic boundaries, such as undertaking off-farm activities in neighboring cities and even countries. Also, we determined that 'on the ground' adaptations are site-specific and therefore vary regionally.

Need for differential and systemic policies

These findings call for caution in the crafting of policies on adaptation at national and local scales. Linking hazards, impacts and responses causally can be misleading, and the resulting measures might be ineffective. Likewise, the application of 'one fits all' measures, habitually preferred by policy and decision-makers, should be considered with caution as well. Alternatively, we identified the key features for well-functioning adaptive measures: capability to generate economic benefits in the short term; compatibility with the ecological and institutional settings; and fitting with the local customary farming traditions. And, despite their weaknesses, the national agricultural extension services still seem to hold the best capabilities for encouraging their application.

