



ISTANBUL PRINCIPLES FOR CSO DEVELOPMENT EFFECTIVENESS

7 CREATE AND SHARE KNOWLEDGE AND COMMIT TO MUTUAL LEARNING

Civil Society Organizations are effective as development actors when they enhance the ways they learn from their experience, from other CSOs and development actors, integrating evidence from development practice and results, including the knowledge and wisdom of local and indigenous communities, strengthening innovation and their vision for the future they would like to see.



Photo: Carol Thiessen/Canadian Foodgrains Bank

Conservation agriculture: Canadian Foodgrains Bank

The Canadian Foodgrains Bank is a partnership of 15 Canadian churches and church-based agencies working to end global hunger.

CHALLENGE

The Canadian Foodgrains Bank is a partnership of 15 Canadian churches and church-based agencies working to end global hunger. Declining soil fertility, poorly managed and designed farming systems, lack of investment in agriculture, and climate change are contributing to poor productivity and weakened resiliency of smallholder livelihoods in many regions of sub-Saharan Africa. Experience has shown that in many regions of sub-Saharan Africa significant improvements in agriculture production and livelihoods can be achieved with the adoption of conservation agriculture principles by smallholder farmers. Nevertheless, there are significant constraints to scaling-up adoption of these principles that need to be overcome, as the principles require a change in thinking that challenges long-held farming norms.



RESPONSE



In 2006, Canadian Foodgrains Bank in cooperation with the United Church of Canada began supporting and engaging with a conservation agriculture program being implemented by Christian Care Zimbabwe. Conservation agriculture is a method of farming that enhances natural ecological processes involving the application of three principles - minimizing soil tillage, maintaining permanent soil cover, and diversifying crop rotations and associations. Application of these principles improves soil fertility and productivity by reducing erosion, improving nutrient availability, maximizing water use efficiency, allowing timely planting, and reducing disease. In addition to financial support, technical support was provided, and an approach of experimentation and learning together with Christian Care and local communities was adopted. Practical issues needed to be worked out on the ground with the participants to ensure the conservation agriculture principles would provide real long-term benefits that would continue to be applied. An evaluation of the program conducted in 2011 found significant yield increases, labour savings, more efficient use of limited nutrients, and less expenses for inputs.

LESSONS LEARNED & BEST PRACTICES

The advantage of conservation agriculture is that it is based on some simple principles, and is not a particular technology. By using a set of principles rather than promoting a technology, there is recognition that agriculture is practiced in many different eco-systems and at different scales, and therefore technologies using conservation agriculture principles must be tailored to the specific context. Considerable experimentation at the field level is required to adapt these principles to smallholder agriculture in different ecological zones and with different crops. There needs to be close collaboration between farmers, extension workers, and researchers. Knowledge needs to be created and shared at all levels, it does not just arrive in a package.



MAINSTREAMING/KNOWLEDGE SHARING



Most smallholder farmers in sub-Saharan Africa lack awareness of conservation agriculture principles, largely because conservation agriculture is not part of the training that arrives in local communities. The agriculture development priorities of many governments and some NGOs are not supportive of this type of agriculture. In fact, many of the subsidies, policies and trainings being provided by government support agriculture practices that contradict conservation agriculture principles. However, there is a growing recognition that this approach has substantial potential improve agriculture and livelihoods, and is increasingly being promoted by the Food and Agriculture Organization, international non-governmental organizations, and local farmer groups, non-governmental organizations and networks.

In the 1970s, conservation agriculture was a new concept in South America. Faced with challenges of soil erosion and declining fertility, large and smallholder farmers in Brazil began experimenting with conservation agriculture. Gradual adoption of the principles, local innovation, knowledge sharing, and government initiatives to support a transition to conservation agriculture led to an eventual scale-up of conservation agriculture in the region. A similar story is beginning to unfold in Africa, but it still requires the creation and sharing of knowledge, and a commitment to learn from each other.

NEXT STEPS

Over the past five years, there is growing interest among various members and partners of the Foodgrains Bank to promote conservation agriculture. To facilitate the mainstreaming of conservation agriculture in sub-Saharan African, Canadian Foodgrains Bank is actively supporting farmer-to-farmer exchanges, exchanges between local partners, workshops, the development of technical resources, and engagement with government extension workers and research institutes. Regional hubs are being established of interested partners to facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing.



FURTHER INFORMATION

"A cow and four walls: conservation farming in Zimbabwe"
<http://foodgrainsbank.ca/uploads/BB%20Spring%2010.web.pdf>

"Conservation Farming in Zimbabwe - Photo Story"
http://foodgrainsbank.ca/conservation_farming_in_zimbabwe.aspx

Go here for more examples of how Canadian civil society is improving its development practice: <http://www.ccic.ca/IP-case-studies.php>