

BURLEIGH DODDS SERIES IN AGRICULTURAL SCIENCE

The sustainable intensification of smallholder farming systems

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Contents

Series list	xii
Foreword I	xix
Foreword II	xxi
Introduction	xxiii

Part 1 Understanding smallholder farming

1	The challenges of smallholder farming	3
	<i>Steve Wiggins, Overseas Development Institute, UK</i>	
	1 Introduction	3
	2 Defining small-scale and family farms	4
	3 Differences among small and family farms	9
	4 Challenges faced by smallholders	15
	5 Future trajectories and policy opinions	17
	6 Conclusion	25
	7 Where to look for further information	28
	8 References	28
2	The economics of smallholder farming	33
	<i>David Eagle and Nadira Saleh, Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA), Canada</i>	
	1 Introduction	33
	2 Segmentation	34
	3 Land	36
	4 Labour	38
	5 Capital	39
	6 Inputs	41
	7 Market access	43
	8 Decision-making	44
	9 Case study: BEST Cassava	47
	10 Summary	61
	11 Where to look for further information	63
	12 References	63

Part 2 Agricultural production

3	Water management for rainfed smallholder farming <i>Christoph Studer, Bern University of Applied Sciences (BFH), Switzerland</i>	67
	1 Introduction: water use in agriculture	67
	2 The challenge of producing more agricultural goods with less water	71
	3 Factors determining water use in agricultural production	73
	4 Smallholders can change the crop microclimate climate to reduce evapotranspiration and improve water use efficiency and productivity	77
	5 Crop choice affects water use and water productivity	80
	6 Good agricultural practices can greatly improve water use efficiency and water productivity	86
	7 Enhancing infiltration is key for good yields and water productivity in rainfed agriculture	89
	8 Water harvesting at different scales allows for enhanced production and resilience	98
	9 In-field water harvesting and small-scale water storage can be interesting for smallholders	101
	10 Developing rainfed agriculture requires new approaches to introducing innovations	111
	11 Water management beyond rainfed agriculture - caring for our water resources	114
	12 Conclusion	116
	13 Where to look for further information	118
	14 References	119
4	Smallholder seed systems for sustainability <i>Ian Barker, International Potato Center (CIP), UK; Richard Jones, formerly AGRA-SSTP, Kenya; and Dominik Klausner, Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture, Switzerland</i>	133
	1 Introduction	133
	2 Smallholder challenges that can be mitigated through better access to seed	134
	3 Opportunities and trends in seed production and delivery: emergence of a commercial seed sector	137
	4 Opportunities and trends in seed production and delivery: public investment in plant breeding and 'handover' for seed production and dissemination	139
	5 De-risking seed production to safeguard supply	140
	6 Interventions in building more economically sustainable seed systems: community-based seed production (CBSP)	142
	7 Interventions in building more economically sustainable seed systems: early generation seed (EGS)	145

8	Improving regulation and quality control in the seed sector	145
9	Conclusions	148
10	References	149
5	Tools for pest and disease management by stakeholders: a case study on Plantwise <i>Washington Otieno, Willis Ochilo and Lorna Migiro, CAB International, Kenya; and Wade Jenner and Ulrich Kuhlmann, CAB International, Switzerland</i>	151
1	Introduction	151
2	Plantwise trainings	156
3	Plant clinics	156
4	Information resources for pest diagnosis and management	159
5	Repositories for pest data	160
6	Conclusion	164
7	Future trends	166
8	Where to look for further information	169
9	Acknowledgements	171
10	References	171
6	Improving integrated soil fertility management (ISFM) by smallholders <i>B. Vanlauwe, International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), Kenya</i>	175
1	Introduction	175
2	Sustainable intensification and soil fertility	177
3	Integrated soil fertility management (ISFM) as a path toward sustainable intensification	179
4	Increasing uptake of ISFM and addressing variability	181
5	Conclusions and future trends	183
6	Where to look for further information	184
7	References	184
7	Access to mechanization for smallholder farmers in Africa <i>O. A. Fatunbi and R. Kombat, Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA), Ghana</i>	187
1	Introduction	187
2	Key issues in smallholder agricultural mechanization in Africa	188
3	The demand for mechanization by smallholder farmers in Africa	190
4	The role of smallholders mechanization in attaining the desired future for agriculture in Africa	191
5	Barriers to successful mechanization of the smallholder's system in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)	193

6	Land holding and the use of tractors in smallholder systems in Africa	196
7	Leveraging mechanization for the development of the commodity value chain	196
8	Timeliness of field operations and utilization rates of machines in smallholder systems	197
9	The growth of medium-scale farms and access to mechanization	201
10	Manufacturing of agricultural machineries in Africa	202
11	The use of animal traction in the mechanization of smallholder systems in Africa	204
12	Recommendations for enhancing smallholder access to mechanization in Africa	206
13	Conclusion	208
14	References	210
Part 3 Access to finance and information		
8	Financial services for smallholders <i>Nikesh Ghimire, Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA), Canada</i>	217
	1 Introduction	217
	2 Financial services	218
	3 Loan products for smallholders	224
	4 Risk mitigation	235
	5 Getting creative	240
	6 Case examples	244
	7 Conclusion	253
	8 Where to look for further information	254
	9 References	256
9	Strengthening public-sector extension systems for smallholder farmers in Kenya <i>Charles Nkonge, David Kamau and Felister Makini, Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Institute (KALRO), Kenya</i>	257
	1 Introduction	257
	2 The development of extension services in Kenya	259
	3 Developing new extension models	261
	4 Extension in practice: participatory variety selection (PVS) and promoting conservation agriculture sustainable intensification (CASI) in the SIMLESA project	262
	5 Successful extension techniques in the SIMLESA Project	265
	6 Case study: farmer field schools and other types of extension delivered by the Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA)	267

7 Conclusion	270
8 Where to look for further information	274
9 References	274
10 Strengthening commercial extension systems for smallholders <i>Matthew Freeman and Wanjiku Mungai, One Acre Fund, Kenya</i>	279
1 Introduction	279
2 Defining commercial extension	279
3 Defining farmer categories	282
4 Toward greater inclusion of marginalized groups	285
5 Channels for two-way learning exchange	289
6 Focusing on livelihoods and resilience	292
7 Scaling and deepening impact through technology	294
8 Strengthening the enabling environment for commercial extension	296
9 Case study: One Acre Fund	298
10 Where to look for further information	309
11 Supporting female smallholders <i>Margaret Adesugba, Newcastle University, UK</i>	311
1 Introduction	311
2 Smallholder women in an African setting	314
3 Understanding the connections between institutions, institutional arrangements and livelihoods among smallholder households	316
4 Smallholder women: life-history narratives	317
5 Analysis and discussion of case study results	320
6 Recommendations for action	326
7 Conclusion	329
8 Where to look for further information	331
9 References	331
Part 4 Access to value chains	
12 Improving market access for smallholders <i>Yanyan Liu, Nicholas Minot and Mengying Wang, International Food Policy Research Institute, USA</i>	339
1 Introduction	339
2 Challenges faced by smallholders to access markets	340
3 Findings from recent studies on policy interventions to improve access to markets	341
4 Policy takeaways and research gaps	353
5 Where to look for further information	355
6 References	355

13	Incentivizing sustainable production practices: improving and scaling extension, certification, carbon markets and other incentive systems	361
	<i>Christine Negra, Versant Vision LLC, USA; and Tanja Havemann, Clarmondial AG, Switzerland</i>	
	1 Introduction	361
	2 Challenges in developing viable smallholder incentives	362
	3 Underlying drivers of weak incentive systems	367
	4 How research can contribute to improving incentives for sustainable practices	370
	5 Case study: using research to improve incentives for sustainable practices	372
	6 Case study: overcoming the cost of compliance	373
	7 Conclusion and future trends	374
	8 Where to look for further information	376
	9 References	376
14	The role and challenges of the private sector in supplying inputs to smallholders	381
	<i>John Derera, Seed Co Group, Zimbabwe; and Joyce Gikera, Qualibasic Seed Ltd, Kenya</i>	
	1 Introduction	381
	2 Challenges in working with smallholder farmers: unpredictability in demand	386
	3 Challenges in working with smallholder farmers: purchasing power	388
	4 Challenges in working with smallholder farmers: supply logistics	391
	5 The role of governments in enabling input supply	395
	6 The role of donors and non-governmental organizations in input supply	401
	7 Conclusion and future trends	405
	8 Where to look for further information	408
	9 References	409
15	The role and challenges of the private sector in enabling market access for smallholders	411
	<i>John Logan, TechnoServe, Kenya</i>	
	1 Introduction	411
	2 Key technical challenges in enabling market access for smallholders	412
	3 Key logistical, behavioral and contractual challenges in enabling market access for smallholders	413
	4 Addressing challenges: smallholder sourcing models	414
	5 Developing models to deal with technical, logistical, behavioral and contractual challenges	416

6 Case studies	419
7 Factors affecting the choice of smallholder-sourcing model	422
8 Conclusion and future trends	422
9 Where to look for further information	424
Index	425

Foreword I

One of mankind's greatest challenges is to achieve and maintain food security for all within 'planetary boundaries', avoiding irreparable harm to the natural resource base on which civilization depends. Agriculture's role in this endeavor is to produce the raw materials of food security – crops and farmed animals – sustainably, without further farmland expansion on high-carbon landscapes and in sufficient quantity to prevent price rises that could curb poor people's access to food. This is a monumental task to which both the fate of smallholder farmers in 'emerging markets' and low-income countries and the notion of sustainable intensification are intimately tied.

Smallholder farmers are the dominant producers of food in many countries. They work hard and are keen to adopt innovations, such as better seeds and agronomic practices, when these help them get their work done without adding too much risk. They understand 'sustainable intensification' intuitively without necessarily knowing the term. They know that taking care of soils and natural habitat is good for their farms. They know intensification and diversification into higher-value products are routes to improved lives and livelihoods as farmers. The problem is that the innovations they need may not be available for adoption when pre-conditions and supporting services go unfulfilled. Adoption depends on many factors – the suitability and relevance of the proposed innovation in users' eyes, the dependability of property rights over land and water, access to markets to procure inputs and sell farm products, financial resources, risk transfer options such as weather insurance, and farm services of different kinds. Even when all of this is favorably in place, incentive distortions from unhelpful policy and governance arrangements can interfere with adoption. Intensification and sustainability might then both suffer, with negative consequences for livelihoods and the environment alike.

Sustainable intensification is sometimes interpreted as 'growing more from less' but, in truth, it is about more than that. We can identify two dimensions – productivity enhancement and resource regeneration. The productivity dimension refers to raising yields of crops with market- and consumer-preferred characteristics with desired nutritional, processing and resilience traits, gender-intentional designs, and biotic and abiotic stress resistance. Productivity growth calls for high levels of use efficiency of all inputs. Wasting water, fertilizer, chemicals, fuel and other inputs and resources is not compatible with the notion of sustainable intensification. Yield gaps must be closed or in practice reduced to 'economically attainable' levels through scalable, producer-focused solutions by crop, farming system and geography over time. Given demographic pressures and urban food demand, the central principle of securing the harvest without converting new non-agricultural land is not achievable without very significant progress on this front.

The resource regeneration dimension of sustainable intensification serves the purpose of offsetting as much as possible of the inevitable environmental cost of farming – past and present. To this end, regenerative practices linked to crop rotations, agroforestry, the planting of cover crops, and no-till precision farming to restore and protect soils, biodiversity, waterscapes, and favorable microclimates must be part of the approach. Regenerative practices and appropriate fertilizer management can help reduce greenhouse gas emissions from farming. There is scope for the development of new activities and sources of income from paid-for environmental services.

Achieving productivity growth and effective resource regeneration can be challenging in smallholder farming settings. As well as local knowledge that farm operators and their families accumulate over generations, external science- and engineering-based knowledge must find its way to the farmer in ways she or he can absorb and put to use. This transfer works well in advanced farming systems, for instance in North America, Europe and parts of South America and East Asia. It works much less well in other parts of the world, in particular poorer countries where research-to-farmer linkages and agricultural extension are weak. How to address and overcome these challenges is the subject of this timely book.

Ensuring smallholder access to appropriate technologies and knowledge will be key to guarantee the continued capacity of farming systems to produce adequate and sufficiently nutritious food whilst also keeping agriculture's adverse effect on the environment and resource base under control. Ultimately, technological progress must reach every acre of farmland – be it through improved inputs, equipment, infrastructure, or knowledge.

The book *The sustainable intensification of smallholder farming systems* focuses on approaches to facilitate a scaled-up delivery and sustained uptake of innovation. It collects the knowledge of both academics and practitioners along agricultural value chains – from agricultural inputs to production to market linkages. In doing so the authors underline the need for demand-led interventions, focusing on farmer needs and preferences, and the creation of the necessary 'enabling environment' (policies, regulations and investment in rural infrastructure) to allow for a sustained and scaled-up impact.

I would like to congratulate the authors and editors of this book for contributing their experiences in a structured way to inform future initiatives in the agricultural research for development space to deliver scaled-up adoption of solutions that drive the 'sustainable intensification of smallholder farming systems'. Time is of the essence if we want to achieve food security for all without harming the planet irreversibly. Sustainably intensifying farming systems is the only recipe we have to get there.

Dr. Marco Ferroni
Chair, CGIAR System Board

Foreword II

Farming has always been a challenging profession and there are good reasons why this will continue to be the case in the future. On one hand, agricultural production has to respond to the needs of a **growing human population**, ensuring that there will be **enough sufficiently nutritious food** available and accessible in the future. On the other hand, a **degrading resource base in terms of soil health, water and biodiversity** render future productivity gains increasingly difficult to achieve. This will be even more difficult in the face of a **changing climate** as more extreme weather events threaten future production.

Smallholder farmers in developing countries are particularly exposed to these trends. They live in places where populations and urbanization are growing fastest, where yield gaps are highest, and where weather volatility is accelerating fastest. Smallholder farmers often operate from a very **limited resource base** in terms of human and financial capital, leaving them exposed to production shocks, and with limited desire to take on risks associated with new technologies and practices. Lastly, as a consequence of decades of extractive production practices, many smallholder farmers repetitively grow the same crops on **degraded soils** that are prone to erosion and have a low water retention capacity, locking them in low production cycles. Overlay increasing climate risks on this picture and their vulnerability is increasing, rapidly.

Given these challenges, it is not surprising to see a consensus that we urgently have to find ways to help smallholders improve how they farm. Agriculture has to be **sustainably intensified**, increasing the efficiency of resource use to increase food diversity, nutrients, and volumes, with fewer adverse effects on environment and society. Emerging concepts for sustainably intensified, climate-smart agriculture recommend a focus on three particular dimensions:

- 1 Agriculture has to become more **resilient** to shocks, in particular from shocks caused by a changing climate, as well as crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This will include developing and delivering appropriate solutions that limit the risk and severity of yield failures, and enabling 'building back better' to happen.
- 2 The negative impact of agriculture on the environment has to be **mitigated** as much as possible. Especially for smallholder farmers, this has to go beyond agriculture's impact on climate change but also include minimizing negative impacts on local ecosystems and communities through an increased resource-use efficiency (land, water, pesticides, fertilizers) and halting deforestation. Indeed agriculture

needs to move towards being regenerative, leaving more nutrients than it extracts. Farming needs to lead to healthier soils, animals and people.

- 3 Sustainably intensified farming has to be **productive and profitable**. This is particularly the case for smallholder farmers that often operate near poverty thresholds. Sustainably increasing their production, integrating into remunerative value chains and ensuring a conducive policy environment that will incentivize and reward sustainable farming will be key to ensure that farmers endorse the principles of sustainable intensification.

The **Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture** has the mandate to help smallholders have a bright future by improving their livelihoods by improving their productivity. We seek to achieve this through helping farmers adopt **value-creating** innovations, practices and products and connecting them to sustainable and remunerative value chains. It is hence our ambition that all our work delivers benefits to farmers in terms **resilience, mitigation and profitability**. We believe that many such solutions already exist but are not yet available to and adopted by farmers at the scale necessary to achieve sustainably intensified smallholder farming systems.

It continues to be vital to ensure that new solutions provide sufficient monetary benefits to smallholder farmers, **creating value at farm and value chain level**. This will often depend on the overall farming ecosystem. Interested actors need to move from **'pushing out'** solutions to responding to needs and creating sufficient **'market-pull'**. This will allow for lasting delivery through the local private sector, be it seed companies, agro-dealers, insurance companies or providers of mechanized services; complemented, as needed, by a supportive public sector strengthening the enabling environment.

Creating such **conducive ecosystems** will require multi-disciplinary, **multi-stakeholder partnerships**, including the public, private and social sectors and spanning across agricultural value chains. This book is built on experiences of many partners the Syngenta Foundation has and continues to work with in supporting smallholder farmers efforts to improve themselves and their communities. I would thoroughly recommend this book to readers that seek to drive systemic change in order make sure that the agriculture and food system will be able to respond to the many challenges it faces today and achieve a thriving and viable future.

Dr Simon Winter,
Executive Director of the Syngenta Foundation
for Sustainable Agriculture

Introduction

Agriculture is a major driver for economic growth in developing countries. It is widely regarded as the most effective way to sustainably reduce poverty and food insecurity (de Janvry and Sadoulet 2010, Christiaensen et al. 2011). In Africa, the agricultural sector accounts for 65% of all employment, 35% of the continent's gross domestic product (GDP) and more than half of export earnings (Bank 2008). Smallholder farmers – defined here as producers who grow their crops on less than five hectares – produce a large part of the food eaten worldwide (Grain 2014). Their success or failure thus contributes significantly to global food (in-)security. Sadly, smallholder agriculture, particularly in Africa, has not benefitted much from innovation and technological progress (Pretty et al. 2011). While average yields of major crops have tripled since the 1960s, most smallholders' harvests have lagged far behind.

Global improvements in agricultural productivity have gone hand in hand with substantial increases in resource use. Since the 1960s, water extraction for irrigation, use of mechanized equipment and application of synthetic nitrogen fertilizers have risen by a factor of two, two and seven, respectively. Use of pesticides has increased to a substantially (Pretty and Bharucha 2014). There is widespread agreement that intensification to date has been accomplished – at least in part – at the expense of natural resources such as water, land and biodiversity. The general consensus is that this erosion of the resource base threatens to make future production systems less efficient and resilient (Dobbs and Pretty 2004). Smallholder farming systems already tend to lack resilience to shocks and stresses; this situation looks likely to deteriorate further.

The continued pressure on agricultural production from population growth, changing dietary patterns, climate change and environmental degradation is believed to be particularly prevalent in Africa (Haggblade and Hazell 2010). To respond to these challenges, a next wave of agricultural intensification is needed. This time, crop production will have to increase while agriculture's adverse impact on environment and society is reduced. This means maximizing output per unit of resource used (Society 2009).

The track record of African agriculture has been mixed in terms of overall sustainability and productivity gains. Most increases in crop production have come from expanding agricultural land rather than improving productivity. This remains the case despite numerous donor- and public sector-led investments in developing and delivering technological solutions to sustainably intensify smallholder farming systems across the continent (Stevenson and Vlek 2018). The urgent need for solutions to increase African agricultural production and the challenges in deploying technical solutions to smallholder farmers at scale form the background to this book. Academics and practitioners present lessons

in designing and deploying initiatives to sustainably intensify smallholder production whilst reducing adverse impacts on environment and society. The authors aim to inspire and advise donors, implementers and other public and private stakeholders.

The concept of sustainable intensification

A finite and degrading resource-base and a changing climate will make it more difficult to deliver productivity increases that keep pace with population growth and shifting dietary patterns. Moreover, there are often tensions between political and donor-led initiatives and practical, effective solutions on the field. Part of this disconnect is based on ideological perceptions on what is considered as 'good' in agriculture (e.g. small vs. large farms, organic versus conventional production, land sharing vs. land sparing, amongst others). These perceptions also tend to influence decisions in agricultural research for development (AR4D). We deliberately included the term 'sustainable intensification' in the title of this book. It avoids position-taking on technologies and interventions. Instead, the term focuses on desirable ends that can be achieved through a variety of means, emphasizing the desired outcomes at farm or systems level rather than the tools used to get there (Pretty and Bharucha 2014).

Sustainable intensification is built on four guiding principles (adapted from Society 2009, Vanlauwe et al. 2014):

- 1 Increased **production** per unit of land, labour and capital;
- 2 **Preservation** of ecosystems and soils;
- 3 Increased **resilience** of farming systems to shocks and stress; and
- 4 Improved or maintained **profitability** at farm-level.

Key attributes for sustainable intensification include the use of more productive crops and varieties, judicious application of external inputs, harnessing of existing biological processes (where possible), minimization of adverse effects on the environment, and productive use of human capital.

There is a frequent misconception that sustainable intensification promotes a net reduction of input use. In fact, successful intensification processes are centered on more efficient resource use rather than a reduction (Tilman et al. 2011). Especially in the context of smallholder farmers in Africa, this will likely mean *increased* use of external inputs, to release farmers and production systems from the low input/low output cycles that limit their productivity and profitability for years (Tittonell and Giller 2013). For instance, most protocols for Integrated Soil Fertility Management (ISFM) promote the use of synthetic fertilizers to reverse soil nutrient depletion and sustainably increase the productivity of farming systems on more fertile soils (Vanlauwe et al. 2014).

Drivers of sustainable intensification Initiatives in sustainable intensification tend to focus on developing and deploying solutions that increase agricultural productivity per area or unit of inputs such as water, fertilizer or crop protection chemicals. These solutions traditionally include seeds of new crops or improved varieties, better crop nutrition and crop protection products and more sustainable agronomic practices. However, particularly in smallholder farming systems, productivity increases tend not to translate automatically into increased on-farm profitability (Stevenson et al. 2019). Initiatives that aim solely to intensify agricultural production can expose farmers to increased financial risk (Morton 2007).

Rather than sustainability, smallholders' main concern is typically profitability, as many of them operate close to the poverty threshold. Many initiatives that raise on-farm productivity end in failure when farmers are unable to market their surplus production (Pretty et al. 2011). New technologies need to be low-risk and ideally provide a rapid return on modest initial investment. Factors such as reliable offtake markets, access to finance and credit and the creation of social infrastructure are at least as important as productivity increases (Pretty et al. 2011). Creating the right 'enabling environment' for sustainable intensification requires additional on-farm, value chain, finance and policy interventions (Klauser and Negra 2020 - <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsufs.2020.576606/abstract>). This book provides an overview of the pre-conditions for holistic and sustainable intensification. Figure 1 displays them along the farm value chain.

Implications for initiatives that aim to deliver sustainable intensification

Successful delivery of initiatives to drive sustainable intensification of smallholder farming systems depends to a large extent on an enabling environment. Important enablers include remuneration for more sustainable farming practices and technologies, help to farmers in accessing resources when they are needed and sufficient safety nets for farmers to invest in new technologies.

Creating the right environment often requires a change in conditions at a higher, more systemic level that can then generate a self-organized dynamic referred to as 'pull-scaling' (Schut et al. 2020). Historically, scaling has tended to be based on 'push', the delivery of improved technologies and practices (Wigboldus et al. 2016). Successful pull-scaling requires practitioners to understand and embrace the multidimensional, multi-level and multi-stakeholder nature of agriculture.

Many initiatives have failed to do sufficient justice to the complex nature of innovation and scaling (Schut et al. 2020). This shortcoming can be mitigated in several ways. Firstly, projects aiming for sustainable intensification of smallholder

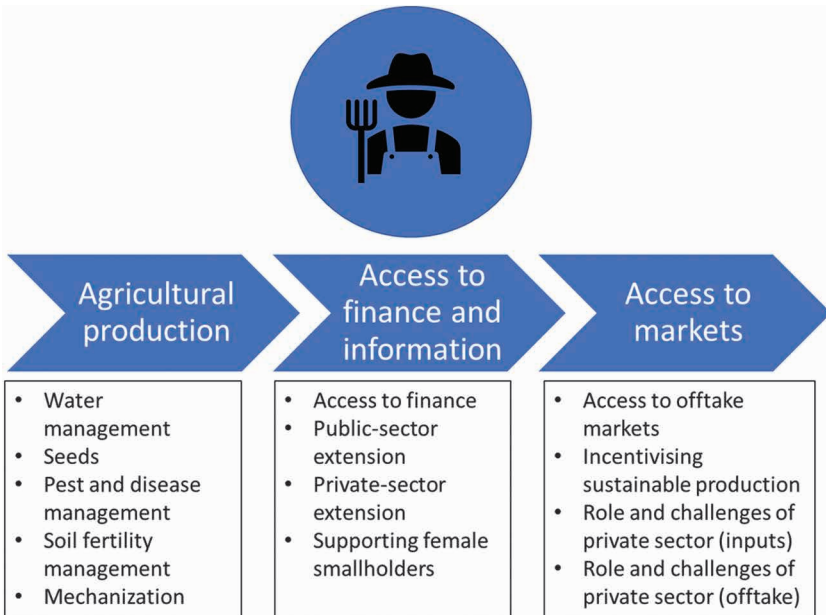


Figure 1 Depiction of dimensions needed for sustainable intensification of smallholder farming systems. These can be clustered into inputs and production equipment (first pillar), access to appropriate financial and risk management tools as well as knowledge (second pillar) and access to reliable and remunerative offtake markets (third pillar). Each chapter of this book covers one of these aspects. Other equally important factors and parts of the enabling environment are discussed within particular chapters. These factors include rural infrastructure (e.g. roads, education, healthcare) and a reliable framework of agricultural policies, land tenure and incentive systems for sustainable farming practices.

farming typically make most sense when using a multi-sector, programmatic, outcome-based approach to address the multi-dimensional challenge (Woltering et al. 2019). Secondly, there is a need to foster more cross-sectoral partnerships, bringing in the private sector for sustained delivery of innovation and to ensure value creation at farm level. Currently, most project budgets only cover proof of concept, but not the costs of shaping the enabling environment and creating the necessary market pull (Spicer et al. 2014, Gillespie et al. 2015). Thirdly, innovation at scale should be regarded as a part of a package. The combination of a core innovation (a product, technology or practice) with complementary innovations (e.g. delivery channels, pricing, marketing) helps create the conditions for successful pull-scaling (Schut et al. 2020).

The call for more holistic programmatic approaches runs against the trend in AR4D of the last 20 years. The number of projects has doubled during that time, but their duration and budgets have halved (Cooley and Howard 2019). This redistribution reflects major donors' desire for more oversight, more (thematic) prescription, more reporting, strategic reviews and changes (Lobell

2020) and their increasing demand for fast and visible impact at scale (Glover et al. 2016).

Pressure to show rapid results can tempt implementers to overpromise on immediate impact. It can also lead them to focus on quick wins rather than investing in development of greater structural capacity for innovation and scaling (Leeuwis et al. 2018, Hall and Dijkman 2019). Moreover, the notion of “reaching many” can be problematic. It can create inappropriate incentives for short-term achievements and rapidly reportable numbers rather than development of sustainable mechanisms and partnerships that can catalyze long-term systemic change (Woltering et al. 2019, Sartas et al. 2020). As a consequence, many organizations in AR4D try to deliver innovations themselves rather than embed them in systems and partnerships that could ensure sustained delivery and address the complexity of pull factors (Schut et al. 2020). In agricultural development – in contrast to medical aid, for example – focusing impact reports on direct beneficiaries is generally misleading. This is because it does not consider changes in the enabling environment or efforts to ensure a sustained delivery of benefits after the project ends (Woltering et al. 2019).

Other misconceptions related to AR4D impact include the idea that more resources bring more impact. In fact, scaling through replication alone and the mere transfer of best practices from one area to another is expensive and unsustainable. It also often hardly addresses the actual problems on the ground. (Woltering et al. 2019).

Potential strategies to tackle these challenges bring us back to the original definition of sustainable intensification, which emphasizes the desired outcomes and evaluates the appropriate means for achieving them. A more structured approach, as proposed by Schut et al. (2020) for a systems-focused and outcome-oriented framework, can be based on the following sequential steps:

- 1 Map the livelihood and development challenges in a specific context and location;
- 2 Make an inventory of innovations and initiatives with high potential to address the challenges identified whilst also ensuring alignment with targets in terms of production, resilience, conservation and profitability;
- 3 Develop a vision/idea of the context-specific measures and conditions through which innovations could be accessed by end users; and
- 4 Identify key bottlenecks in the enabling environment and develop strategies and partnerships to address them.

The structure of this book

This book aims to provide an overview over different parts that need to be in place to allow for a successful intensification of smallholder farming systems,

clustering them along the farming value chain. Throughout the respective chapters of this book, there will be re-occurring themes that highlight the preconditions for successful interventions to sustainably intensify farming systems. They are aligned with many of the statements listed in the previous paragraphs and include the need for a sufficiently attractive enabling environment to attract the adoption of sustainable farming practices and create sufficient pull for investment (such as the need for rural public goods and infrastructure). Furthermore, they emphasize the complexity and heterogeneity of farming systems and the need for the sustained value creation at farm and value chain level to ensure the sustained adoption of tools and practices that sustainably intensify smallholder farming systems. It has to be noted that there are a variety of components that generally contribute to creating a favorable environment for most of the interventions listed in the respective chapters, such as conducive policies and regulations as well as public investment in rural infrastructure, be it social, physical or economic. These generically conducive factors are not featured as separate chapters, but included in the respective chapters on specific actions along the smallholder farmer value chain.

The **first section** consists of two chapters that describe the challenges and economics of smallholder farming to set the context. They highlight the heterogeneity of farming systems in terms of crops, demographics, cultural context, resources, market linkages and other factors, demonstrating the limitations of approaches that solely rely on the replication of existing models and initiatives. Prof. Steve Wiggins (the challenges of smallholder farming) also underlines the need for a functional, enabling environment, e.g. through investment in rural infrastructure (roads, education, health care) and the need to ensure a favorable investment climate and rural public goods to overcome three basic challenges that smallholder farming systems face, namely: i) the need for functional rural institutions, ii) the need to overcome market failures in rural farming systems (especially in terms of access to finance, knowledge and inputs), and iii) the need to efficiently and sustainably generate and disseminate agricultural technology and knowledge.

David Eagle (the economics of smallholder farming) then re-emphasizes the need for investment in rural infrastructure as (physical) access to value chains greatly influences farmer profitability. David Eagle furthermore offers solutions to be identified from several domains, such as public sector initiatives (policy, finance and infrastructure), innovation, digital tools and catalytic investment to support the development of rural markets.

The **second section** then continues with aspects needed to be in place for intensified **agricultural production**, such as water management tools, quality planting material as well as tools for pest and disease management, soil fertility management, and mechanization. Focusing on rainfed smallholder production, Prof. Christoph Studer (smallholder access to water management

tools) describes potential options for water management in a smallholder context. Prof. Studer also highlights the fact that smallholder farmers, focusing on immediate returns on investment in terms of finance and labor, tend not to always see the direct benefits of water management tools that increase the resilience of their production. Hence, Prof. Studer promotes the idea of changing how new solutions are introduced to farmers, focusing on attractiveness and profitability rather than technical novelty, hence stressing the need for monetary incentives/disincentives for more resilient and resource-efficient farming. Drs. Ian Barker, Richard Jones and Dominik Klauser (smallholder access to seed) highlight the importance of seed systems to deliver improved genetics and clean, disease-free planting material. This is followed by a text from Dr. Ulrich Kuhlmann (tools for pest and disease control) that describes new approaches for pest and disease identification and control, leveraging digital technologies to multiply impact exponentially by going beyond replicative processes. Being at the heart of the theme of 'Sustainable Intensification', Dr. Bernard Vanlauwe describes the concept of Integrated Soil Fertility Management (ISFM) in a smallholder farming context and the challenges that smallholder farmers face when attempting to access the necessary knowledge and inputs needed for the sustainable intensification of their production. He also highlights the opinion that sustainable farming systems can only be achieved through an intensification of production (at least in the context of smallholder farming in Africa) and the need for research to shift away from purely focusing on extensive, low input systems. Lastly, Dr. Fatunbi Oluwole makes a case on how appropriate mechanization solutions can increase the productivity of African smallholder farming systems by allowing for timely and labor-efficient planting, harvests and better soil preparation. This will also allow releasing the scarce rural work force towards more productive and remunerative jobs in agricultural value chains. He also describes the current challenges in the mechanization sector, such as a lack of skilled workforce to maintain equipment and the lack of supply chains for spare parts. Lastly, he calls for more public investment to establish the relevant local infrastructure needed to ensure appropriate access to mechanization, such as technical training, local manufacturing and maintenance, and transport linkages.

In the **third section**, aspects of **access to finance and information** are discussed. First, Nikesh Ghimire writes about the need for appropriate financial tools to allow farmers to invest in production as an avenue to realize higher incomes. Mr. Ghimire also highlights the fact that interventions to improve farmer access to finance should always result in improved income, a better quality of life and/or a reduced exposure to risks. This becomes ever more important in the context of digital tools where an emphasis has to be on delivering technological disruption in a way that directly benefits smallholder farmers.

Felister Makini and Matthew Freeman then discuss the need to provide reliable extension services to farmers in order to ensure that innovation gets translated into actual benefits 'on the field'. They discuss several models from both the public and the private sectors to deliver such services, as well as the respective motivations of the sectors to engage with smallholder farmers. Finally, Dr. Margaret Adesugba describes the challenges of female smallholder farmers based on a number of case studies from Nigeria. Her work highlights the need to understand and tackle the underlying, structural and societal barriers female smallholder farmers face, rather than just designing interventions that only curate the symptoms.

The **fourth section** describes different ways on how to **include smallholder farmers into markets and value chains**. Firstly, Dr. Yanyan Liu provides an overview of six major factors that determine farmer access to markets, namely infrastructure, ICT, market intermediaries, farmer organizations, contract farming systems and government procurement. The chapter also highlights the existing evidence of the beneficial impact of investment in rural infrastructure on market access and incomes of smallholder farmers. Dr. Yiu also highlights that so far, most innovation in the digital space have benefitted traders and intermediaries. However, there is a substantial, yet mostly unmet potential for digital tools to facilitate farmer access to markets through an improved information flow on offtake demand and pricing. In the subsequent chapter, Dr. Christine Negra describes potential monetary incentives for farmers to adopt more sustainable production practices, such as changes in policy, markets and finance. Dr. Negra again highlights the heterogeneity of farming systems and hence the need for locally tailored and validated incentive packages. In Chapter 14, Mr. John Derera shares his experiences on the role and challenges of the private sector working with smallholder farmers from the input supply side. Highlighting the complexity of these fragmented and mostly underdeveloped markets, John Derera emphasizes the need for a reliable and sufficiently enabling environment in terms of conducive policies, rural infrastructure and farmer capacity. Lastly, he also highlights the importance of public sector and donor led investment not to compete with or distort existing private sector activities (for instance by giving away free inputs). John Logan then changes the perspective from providing inputs to sourcing from smallholder farmers from a private sector perspective. He stresses pertinent challenges, such as small transaction volumes, unreliable supply and varying product quality and discusses models to deal with them, be they deeply inclusive (contract farming) or on a more transactional base. John Logan then also discusses new opportunities through digital tools that will allow for a better traceability of smallholder grown products, potentially catalyzing smallholder access to remunerative offtake markets and sourcing schemes.

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Part 1

Understanding smallholder farming

Chapter 1

The challenges of smallholder farming

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- 1 Introduction
- 2 Defining small-scale and family farms
- 3 Differences among small and family farms
- 4 Challenges faced by smallholders
- 5 Future trajectories and policy opinions
- 6 Conclusion
- 7 Where to look for further information
- 8 References

1 Introduction

The great majority of the world's farms are operated by families, rather than commercial firms or cooperatives. Most of these farms are small-scale as well: if area operated is considered, less than five hectares. Defining 'small-scale' precisely is elusive, but the concept of the family farm, where the household takes decisions and provides most of the labour, captures the essence of small-scale farming – a scale where the advantages of self-supervising household labour outweigh any further economies of scale for most farm enterprises.

Among smallholdings, however, considerable differences exist, above all along two dimensions. One is geographical, consisting of access to land and water, both in quantity and quality, and to urban markets. The other comprises the economic and social circumstances of the household. From these considerations, several schemes have been developed to classify smallholdings. The key point is that while a minority of small farms may have sufficient resources and advantages to generate living incomes from agriculture, many do not. For the less-advantaged smallholdings, non-farm incomes can make the difference between poverty and a decent livelihood.

Challenges faced by smallholders include those faced by all farmers – bad policy, underinvestment in rural public goods, climate change and the need to make farming environmentally sustainable, and the historic reality that in real terms, farm prices tend to fall. In addition, some challenges apply particularly

strongly to small farms: failures in rural markets for inputs and financial services; and meeting the requirements of emerging supply chains dominated by supermarkets, processors and exporters for bulk deliveries, on time, and to exacting standards.

From these considerations, a policy agenda for small-scale family farms is proposed: one that begins with policies that benefit all farmers – an enabling rural investment climate, rural public goods, making agriculture environmentally sustainable and climate smart, and then it deals with those that apply especially to smallholders, above all resolving or mitigating failures in rural markets. Finally, policies needed for marginalised smallholders, including social protection, are set out. The conclusion argues that much of what needs to be done to promote agriculture in general and small-scale farming in particular is relatively straightforward and feasible – given the political will and funding.

2 Defining small-scale and family farms

Most of the world's more than 570 million farms are small, operated by families. More than 475 million farms have two or fewer ha (Lowder et al. 2014). Updating these estimates, Graeub et al. (2016) report:

We find that family farms constitute 98% of all farms and at least 53% of agricultural land, thus producing at least 53% of the world's food. Our work identified 475 million family farms out of 483 million farms in our sample, supporting the SOFA estimate on the existence of at least 500 million family farms (out of a total of 570 million farms) in the world.

Looking at the developing world, minus North Africa, the Near East and Central Asia, Samberg et al. (2016) found:

By our estimates, 918 subnational units in 83 countries in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and South and East Asia average less than five hectares of agricultural land per farming household. These smallholder-dominated systems are home to more than 380 million farming households, make up roughly 30% of the agricultural land and produce more than 70% of the food calories produced in these regions, and are responsible for more than half of the food calories produced globally, as well as more than half of global production of several major food crops.

Because agricultural censuses are infrequent in many countries, and owing to differences in definitions, a precise estimate of the numbers and significance of small-scale farms cannot be obtained easily. That said, the exercises reported in these studies agree that they constitute the bulk of the world's farms, especially in the developing world.

The eagle-eyed will have spotted, however, that sometimes reports refer to small farms, and at other times to family farms. As will be argued, since these two categories largely overlap, this is less problematic than might be imagined. But to justify this, we need to first review some definitions.

What is meant by a small farm? No single definition exists. The most commonly used criterion is area, either owned or operated. Small farms then become those whose area lies below a defined threshold, with 2 ha, 5 ha and 10 ha being typically adopted, although no universally agreed threshold exists. Defining 'small' by area alone, however, raises questions when classifying farms across agroecological zones, since to call a 1.9 ha farm in a high-potential zone 'small', but a 10.1 ha farm in a semi-arid zone, 'medium', seems odd. The physically smaller farm in this comparison may well produce more, and employ more labour, than the physically larger one. It becomes clear that additional criteria may define small - in this case, scale of output and labour use.

Because defining 'small-scale' by area alone seems too restrictive as well as problematic, the concept of the 'family farm' is often used to capture qualities of smallness. Not that changing terms makes definition any more precise. Reviewing definitions of family farms, Garner and de la O. Campos (2014) found no less than 14 criteria, most of which can be summarised in four sets, as follows:

- Physical area;
- Family management, in which the family decides on the use of farm and its produce, provides most of the labour even if it hires in additional help at peak times, and is a prime source of any capital invested;
- Role of the farm, in which the family farm may directly provide much of the food the family consumes, or is the main source of income; and,
- Social and cultural dimensions, in which the family usually resides on the farm, has inherited the land and will pass it on to their heirs as both physical and cultural patrimony, and where running the farm marks the family as belonging to a local community.

For the 2014 International Year of the Family Farm, the FAO adopted this definition:

Family Farming ... is a means of organizing agricultural, forestry, fisheries, pastoral and aquaculture production which is managed and operated by a family and predominantly reliant on family labor, including both women's and men's. The family and the farm are linked, co-evolve and combine economic, environmental, social and cultural functions. (FAO 2013)

While one might have a long debate on exactly how to define a family farm, bearing in mind that differing criteria may be appropriate for different purposes,

it is easy to see what is not a small or a family farm. The typical characteristics of estates, plantations and large-scale commercial farms are readily rehearsed: much of their labour comes from farmworkers; many are managed by hired professionals; they usually can access working and investment capital from banks; they produce largely for the market; and the farm is usually primarily considered an economic asset to be bought and sold as such.

All that said, one feature of the family farms stands out, and that is the operation and management of the holding by the family. That does not preclude some hiring in of labour, some recourse to professional services for technical and business advice, or contracting in machine operations: it just means that most decisions are made by the family, most operations are managed by them, and often it is the family members that provide most of the labour needed.

Now, if family farms are defined by family operation and management, most farms across the world are family farms. Admittedly family farms with machinery may be able to operate tens, hundreds and even thousands of hectares, but they remain family-run entities. If a definition that allows a 300-hectare wheat farm in Cambridgeshire to be similar to a half-hectare coffee smallholding in Kenya seems too liberal, then the implications need to be appreciated. The point is this: while so much economic activity, above all in high- and middle-income countries, is undertaken by firms operating at large scale, so large that in many industries much of the sector's output comes from a handful of large corporations, most farming remains atomised – rural districts and counties usually contain hundreds of farms, while nationally farms are counted in the tens and hundreds of thousands. Exceptions can be seen. In high-income countries pigs and poultry, horticulture is an increasingly industrial activity, carried out by large enterprises; in the developing world some crops that require prompt and precise processing may best be produced on estates. But these are exceptions.

Why is so much farming atomised? Few economies of scale apply to most agricultural enterprises: indeed, diseconomies may apply once farm operations expand beyond the ability of the farm household to manage them. Diseconomies arise first and foremost in labour. Family labour can work flexibly to provide the time and effort to suit the varying, and sometimes unpredictable demands of agriculture – for example, planting times that depend on the rains, and control of pests and diseases whose incidence varies. Above all, family labour is self-supervising and motivated to work diligently. In contrast, farms depending largely on hired labour incur (transactions) costs in recruiting, supervising and motivating labour. Diseconomies of scale explain in part the often-observed inverse relation between the size of farm and yields per hectare: smaller farms commonly have higher land productivity than larger ones, see Box A.

Box A The higher land productivity of small farms

Surveys of farms of different sizes in developing countries frequently show small farms producing more per hectare than large farms, with an inverse relationship between farm size and production per unit of land (Cornia 1985; Eastwood et al. 2004; Larson et al. 2014).

At least four sets of explanations have been suggested to explain this:

- measurement errors of land size and production;
- variations in soil quality, in which the most productive land has been divided into small plots so that their yields are higher than large plots on less productive land;
- small plots having a higher proportion of land close to the plot edge that typically has higher yields than the centres of plots - which may arise from more sunlight, nutrients and water being available towards the plot edges, and perhaps even from farmers who know this and hence work their plot edges more intensively than the plot centres (Bevis and Barrett 2020); and, the most commonly cited reason; and,
- factor market imperfections in which smallholders work on their fields intensively because the shadow cost of their labour is lower than applies to hired labour on larger farms, and in which difficulties in land renting prevent farmers equalising their labour use by renting land.

Conclusive evidence on the reason is elusive, even if the inverse ratio is observed time and again. Reasons may vary by context, and combinations of these factors may apply.

See Barrett et al. (2010) for a discussion of potential causes and testing of them in Madagascar.

Further advantages apply to family-scale operations when farmers know the conditions of their fields – variations in fertility, drainage, etc. – in detail; or know their livestock and can readily see when individuals are ill, in heat, or suffering from some ailment. Family farms may also be able to ride out times when prices are low, since members may accept lower returns to their labour. As compared to commercial farms where pay is agreed, fixed wages to farmworkers might lead to bankruptcy.

Not that small-scale operations do not face disadvantages compared to larger-scale operations. Economies of scale commonly apply to procuring inputs, formal finance and technical advice, to marketing produce and providing certification (Poulton et al. 2010). The most efficient scale of farming is thus the balance between economies and diseconomies of scale,

Index

- AATF *see* African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF)
- Abuja fertilizer summit (2006) 175
- ACAI *see* African Cassava Agronomy Initiative
- Access to Seeds Index 138
- Accreditation 146
- Accredited certification bodies 147
- AE *see* Agronomic-use efficiency (AE)
- African Agricultural Technology Foundation (AATF) 404
- African agriculture 192
- African Cassava Agronomy Initiative (ACAI) 181
- African seed companies 138
- Agora MF microfinancing 251–252
- AGRA *see* Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)
- Agricultural
- extension 257
 - mechanization 188
 - production 70, xxviii
 - research 26
- Agricultural research for development (AR4D) xxiv, xxvii
- Agro-dealers 138
- Agronomic-use efficiency (AE) 179
- Agronomy at scale 182
- Agro-processing enterprises 190
- AgVenture Ltd. 140
- AICRP *see* All India Coordinated Research Projects (AICRP)
- AINFP *see* Alliance for Inclusive and Nutritious Food Processing (AINFP)
- Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) 177
- Alliance for Inclusive and Nutritious Food Processing (AINFP) 421
- All India Coordinated Research Projects (AICRP) 137
- Animal
- power 204
 - traction 204
- Annan, Kofi 177
- AR4D *see* Agricultural research for development (AR4D)
- Asset financing models 232–234
- Banker to the Poor* 250
- Bench terraces 95
- Bharat Financial Inclusion Limited 247
- see also* SKS Microfinance
- Blue water 68
- Broad-based agricultural development 18–19
- Broad-based mechanization 197
- Business loan 221
- CAADP *see* Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP)
- CABI's Plantwise programme 155
- Canopy density 78
- CAP *see* Command Agriculture Programme (CAP)
- Cargill 418
- CASI *see* conservation agriculture sustainable intensification (CASI)
- Cassava brown streak viruses (CBSVs) 48
- Cassava mosaic geminiviruses (CMGs) 48
- Cassava seed commercialization 49
- Cassava Seed Entrepreneurs (CSEs) 34
- Cassava 'seed' production 48
- Cassia siamea* 94
- CBSVs *see* Cassava brown streak viruses (CBSVs)

- Central pivot irrigation scheme, Cerrados (Brazil) 178
- Certification 146
schemes 365
- CGAP *see* Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP)
- CGIAR *see* Consultative Group on International Agriculture Research (CGIAR)
- Class A farmers 13, 18
- Class B farmers 13, 18
- Class C farmers 13, 18
- CMGs *see* Cassava mosaic geminiviruses (CMGs)
- COGS *see* cost of goods (COGS)
- Command Agriculture Programme (CAP) 395
- Commercial farmers 202
- Commercial model decision-making 46
- Commercial smallholders
loose value chains 283
tight value chains 284
- Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) 146
- Communal 37
- Competitive grant system (CGS) 267
- Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) 191
- Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture 69, 112
- Conservation agriculture 97
- Conservation agriculture sustainable intensification (CASI) 262-264
- Conservation Agriculture (CA) techniques 263
- Consultative Group on International Agriculture Research (CGIAR) 401
- Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) 35, 282
- Consumer loan 221
- Contour
earth ridges 103
stone lines 102-103
trenches 103-104
- Contract farm 230
- Contribution principle 237
- Cooperative and Rural Development Bank (CRDB) 56
- Cooperative ownership 200
- Cost of goods (COGS) 139
- CRDB *see* Cooperative and Rural Development Bank (CRDB)
- Credit guarantee fund 230-231
- Crop
breeding programmes
DtMA 135
WEMA 135
choice 108-109
germination rates 135-136
husbandry 109
pests 153
production changes 176
- Cross-slope barriers 102
- CSEs *see* Cassava Seed Entrepreneurs (CSEs)
- Customary rights 37
- 'Daily Nation' newspaper 267
- Dalberg's analysis 217
- Data
harmonization 161
validation 161
- Decision-support systems 182
- Deep knowledge 225
- Demonstration effect 60
- Department for International Development (DFID) 269
- Diagnostic Advisory Services 157
- Diagnostic photosheets 159
- Digital tools 423
- Digitizing agriculture 154
- Direct smallholder lending 225-226
- Dissemination methods 265
- Diversifying cropping systems 136
- Domestic livestock 204
- Dorward 12
- Drip irrigation 79
- Dr. Mohammad Yunus 250
- Drought
avoidance 85
escape 85
tolerance 85
- Dry seeding 83
- Earth bunds 103
- Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) 146
- Economics
BEST Cassava
capital 54-57
case introduction 47-49
decision-making 60-61

- inputs 57
- labour 52-54
- land 50-52
- market access 57-59
- segmentation 49-50
- capital 39-40
 - cash flow challenge 40
 - lack of capital challenge solved by financing 40-41
 - lack of capital challenge solved by government and NGOs 41
- decision-making 44-47
- inputs 41-43
- labour 38-39
- land 36-38
- market access 43-44
- overview 33-34
- segmentation 34-36
- E-finance 243-244
- EFL *see* Entrepreneurial Finance Lab (EFL)
- Emerging farmers 202
- EMI *see* equal monthly installments (EMI)
- End point royalty systems (EPRS) 399-400
- Entrepreneurial Finance Lab (EFL) 247
- EPRS *see* End point royalty systems (EPRS)
- Equal monthly installments (EMI) 234
- Equipment finance 232-233

- Facilitated models 230-232
- Factor credit 228
- Factory unit manager (FUM) 269
- FACTS 223
- Fanya juus* 103
- FAO *see* Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
- FAO-AUC mechanization framework 206
- Farm to Market Alliance (FTMA) 415
- Farmer input support program (FISP) 396-397
- Farmer organization (FO) 346-347
- Farmers, number of 266-267
- Farm-gate aggregators 415
- Farm-gate buying 422
- Farming contract 347-351
- FDA *see* US Food and Drug Administration (FDA)
- Feed composition 76
- Feed conversion efficiency 76
- Female smallholders
 - institutions, institutional arrangements and livelihoods 316-317
 - overview 311-314
 - smallholder women *see* Smallholder women
- Fertilizer use 176
- Field service coordinator (FSC) 269
- Financial
 - education 219
 - incentive 281
- Fintech solutions 242-243
- First loss fund arrangement 238-239
- FISP *see* Farmer input support program (FISP)
- Floodwater harvesting system 99, 101
- FO *see* Farmer organization (FO)
- FOGAPE *see* Fondo de Garantía para Pequeños Empresarios (FOGAPE)
- FOGAPE-Chile 244-245
- Fondo de Garantía para Pequeños Empresarios (FOGAPE) 244
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) 175, 260
- Food Reserve Agency (FRA) 351-352
- Formal seed systems 143
- FRA *see* Food Reserve Agency (FRA)
- FSC *see* Field service coordinator (FSC)
- FTMA *see* Farm to Market Alliance (FTMA)
- FUM *see* Factory unit manager (FUM)

- GADC *see* Gulu Agricultural Development Company (GADC)
- GDP *see* Gross domestic product (GDP)
- Gender-based structural roadblocks 285
- Geographic concentration 225-226
- Global sourcing 280-281
- Government body intermediation 232
- Governments role, supply input
 - input subsidy programmes 395-397
 - policies and regulations 397-400
- Greenhouse emission consideration 206
- Green Revolution 137
- Green water 68
- Grey water 68
- Gross domestic product (GDP) 268
- Group lending model 228-229
- Gulu Agricultural Development Company (GADC) 418

- Hanging in 13, 14
- Harvest index (HI) 74
- Higher land productivity 7
- Hire purchase 234
- Horticultural/seasonal crops 413
- Household-level decisions 367-368

- Hub-and-spoke model, cassava seed system 58
- Hybrid maize seed 138
- ICT see Information and communication technology (ICT)
- ICT, market information 343-345
- IE see Irrigation efficiency (IE)
- IFAD 175
- IFC see International Finance Corporation (IFC)
- IFPRI/SARI survey (2013) 196
- Improving integrated soil fertility management (ISFM)
- addressing variability 181-182
 - increasing uptake of 181-182
 - by smallholders 175
 - soil fertility 177-179
 - sustainable intensification 177-179
 - toward sustainable intensification 179-181
- Improving market access
- challenges 340-341
 - policy interventions 341
 - contract farming 347-351
 - farmer organizations 346-347
 - government and institutional procurement 351-353
 - information and communication technology (ICT) 343-345
 - infrastructure 341-343
 - market intermediaries 345-346
 - policy review and research gaps 353-355
- Indemnity principle 237
- Index-insurance products 141
- Indirect financing options 241
- Individual ownership 201
- Information and communication technology (ICT) 294
- Information resources
- and management 159-160
 - for pest diagnosis 159-160
- Information technology (IT) 148
- Infrastructure finance 233
- I/NGO-facilitated mechanisms 231-232
- I/NGOs see International/non-government organizations (I/NGOs)
- Innovation in Outcomes Measurement (IOM) 420
- Innovation platforms (IPs) 265
- Input finance 226-227
- Insecure tenure 22
- In-situ water conservation 97
- Insurable interest 237
- Insurance premium 220
- Insurance services 236-238
- Integrated pest management (IPM)
- principles 152
- Integrated soil fertility management (ISFM) xxiv, xxix
- Interactive Voice Response (IVR) 182
- Intermediaries 154
- International Fertilizer Association 179
- International Finance Corporation (IFC) 416
- International/non-government organizations (I/NGOs) 231
- Intersectional gender analysis 36
- Invoice discount 229-230
- IOM see Innovation in Outcomes Measurement (IOM)
- Irrigation 114
- practices 79
- Irrigation efficiency (IE) 72
- ISFM see Integrated soil fertility management (ISFM)
- ISFMadd 180
- ISFMsub 180
- IVR see Interactive Voice Response (IVR)
- Jatropha Mali Initiative (JMI) 140
- Kaldor, Nicholas 193
- KALRO-Tea Research Institute 269
- Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA) 267-270, 415
- Kenyan national agricultural research service 141
- Kenyan tea industry 415
- Korea Technology Finance Corporation (KOTEC) 245
- KOTEC see Korea Technology Finance Corporation (KOTEC)
- KOTEC-Korea 245-246
- KSTP 94 maize variety 263
- KTDA see Kenya Tea Development Agency (KTDA)
- KTDA Sustainable Agriculture Project 269
- Kukata kichwa 40
- Kulaks 11
- Kumwe 415
- Land capability assessment 195
- Land-tenure 37

- Land-tenure rules 37
- Large-scale mechanization 195
- Latin America 14, 17, 24
 family farms 13
 rural households, distribution of 14, 15
- Latin America Network on Rural
 Development (RIMISP) 12-14
- LCA *see* Life cycle assessment (LCA)
- Lease finance 224, 233-234
- Lending through associations 229
- Life cycle assessment (LCA) 206
- Loans 220-221
- Local
 manufacture 203
 value creation 136
- Logistic challenges 392-394
- Long-term impact, Temporary solutions
 for 241-242
- Macro-catchment water harvesting 99
- Maize and legumes seed road maps 266
- Maize distributor/processor 224
- Maize grain yield 265
- Maize yield 176
- Mapping investments and policies 23
- Market 43
- Market access enabling for smallholders,
 private sector
 addressing challenges, sourcing
 models 414-416
- Akili (Kenya) 419-421
- behavioral challenge 413-414
- contractual challenge 413-414
- developing models 416-417
 behavioural and contractual
 challenges 418-419
 logistical solutions 418
 technical solutions 417-418
- factors affecting smallholder-sourcing
 model choice 422
- future trends 422-424
- Josiche General Traders (Kenya)
 421-422
- key logistical challenge 413-414
- key technical challenges 412
- overview 411-412
- Marketing 43
- Market research 239-240
- Mbata 40
- MEDA *see* Mennonite Economic
 Development Associates (MEDA)
- MEDA's pro forma models 54
- Medium-intensity mechanization 195
- Mega demonstrations 265
- Mennonite Economic Development
 Associates (MEDA) 47
- Micro-basins 104, 105
- Micro-catchment water harvesting 99-100
- Ministry of Agriculture 259
- Mitigation of loss principle 237
- Mobile money 242, 249-250
- Modern chemical-based seed
 dressings 149
- Mohammad Yusuf 228
- Money, time value of 241
- MPESA 249
- Mwai Kibaki (President) 249
- myAGRO 141
- NAAIAP *see* National Accelerated
 Agricultural Inputs Access
 programme (NAAIAP)
- NABARD *see* National Bank for Agriculture
 and Rural Development (NABARD)
- NAFIS *see* National Farmers Information
 Service (NAFIS)
- NALEP *see* National Agriculture and Livestock
 Extension Programme (NALEP)
- NARS *see* National agricultural research
 system (NARS)
- National Accelerated Agricultural Inputs
 Access programme (NAAIAP) 42
- National agricultural research system
 (NARS) 141
- National Agriculture and Livestock Extension
 Programme (NALEP) 267
- National Bank for Agriculture and Rural
 Development (NABARD) 154
- National Cereal Produce Board
 (NCPB) 351-352
- National Farmers Information Service
 (NAFIS) 267
- National plant protection organizations
 (NPPOs) 416
- National Seed Regulatory Authorities
 (NSRAs) 145
- National Seeds Corporation (NSC) 137
- NCPB *see* National Cereal Produce Board
 (NCPB)
- Net positive premium structure 237-238
- Non-conventional water resources 115
- Non-governments role, supply input
 African Agricultural Technology
 Foundation (AATF) 404

- Consultative Group on International
 Agriculture Research (CGIAR) 401
 seed varieties 401-403
- Non-life insurance products 220
- NPPOs *see* National plant protection
 organizations (NPPOs)
- NSC *see* National Seeds Corporation (NSC)
- NSRAs *see* National Seed Regulatory
 Authorities (NSRAs)
- OECD *see* Organization for Economic
 Cooperation and Development
 (OECD)
- OECD's Development Assistance
 Committee 12
- One Acre Fund
 channels for 307-308
 collaboration 308-309
 farmer services 299
 focus on 300-302
 gender balance 303-304
 research and development (R&D)
 306-307
 structure and costefficiency systems 300
 technology 305-306
 youth benefit 304-305
- One Acre Fund (Kenya) 140
- Open-pollinated crops and varieties
 (OPV) 136
- Organization for Economic Cooperation and
 Development (OECD) 292
- P4P *see* Purchases for Progress (P4P)
- PABRA *see* Pan-African Bean Research
 Alliance (PABRA)
- Paid labour 54
- Pan-African Bean Research Alliance
 (PABRA) 372-373
- PARI *see* Program of Accompanying
 Research for Agricultural Innovation
 (PARI)
- Partial Credit Guarantee Fund 244
- Participatory variety selection (PVS)
 process 262-265
- Patrilineal inheritance 37
- Payments for ecosystem services (PES) 366
- PES *see* Payments for ecosystem services (PES)
- Pest and disease management
 plantwise, case study on 151
 tools for 151
- Pest Management Decision Guide
 (PMDG) 152, 159-160
- Photosynthetic pathway 73, 80
- Plant clinics 152, 156-158
 cases of 157
 networks of 157
- Plant doctors 151
- Planting pits 95, 105
- Plantwise Data Collection app 152
- Plantwise Factsheet Library app 152, 159
- Plantwise Factsheets for Farmers 152, 159
- Plantwise Knowledge Bank 152, 159
- Plantwise Online Management System 152,
 157, 161
- Plantwise trainings
 module 1 156
 module 2 156
- PMDG *see* Pest Management Decision Guide
 (PMDG)
- Policy-related solutions 62
- PPPs *see* Public private partnerships (PPPs)
- Private ownership 37
- Private sector 279-280
- Private sector, supplying inputs
 challenges with SHFs
 demand unpredictability 386
 purchasing power 388-390
 supply logistics 391-394
 future trends 405-408
 investment 382-383
 motivate 382
 technology 383
 thematic analysis
 demand reliability 387
 logistical challenges 394
 purchasing power 391
 thematic analysis, role 384-385
- Product replacement rate 382
- Program of Accompanying Research for
 Agricultural Innovation (PARI) 188
- Psychometric testing 247-249
- Public breeding sector
 CGIAR 140
 NARS 140
 SARI 140
- Public-private-partnership (PPPs) 135,
 199-200
- Pull-scaling xxvi
- Purchases for Progress (P4P) 352-353
- Quality management system 147
- Regional economic communities
 COMESA 146
 ECOWAS 146
 SADC 146

- Registered seed merchants 142
- Repayment
 capacity 225
 primary source of 225–228
 secondary source of 228–234
- Repositories
 data validation process 162
 for pest data 160
 plant doctor self-assessment tool 162
 rapid information flow 162
 top five crops 163
 top problems 163
- Response farming 88
- Retention ditches 103–104
- Reverse factor 230
- RIMISP see Latin America Network on Rural Development (RIMISP)
- Ripper furrowing 95
- Risk basket 237
- Rooftop and courtyard water
 harvesting 101
- Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) 365
- RSPO see Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO)
- Rural world 1 12, 14
 Rural world 2 12, 14
 Rural world 3 12, 14
 Rural world 4 12, 14
 Rural world 5 12, 14
- SACCOS see Savings and Co-operative Credit Organizations (SACCOS)
- Safaricom 249
- SAMA see Sustainable agricultural mechanization for Africa (SAMA)
- SAPs see Structural adjustment programs (SAPs)
- Savannah Agricultural Research Institute (SARI) 141
- Savings 220
- Savings and Co-operative Credit Organizations (SACCOS) 415
- SCDA see Special Crop Development Authority (SCDA)
- Scientific breeding 143
- Seed
 embedded technologies 134, 135
 industry 146
 inspectors 147
 sellers 138
 system 49
- Seed-adjacent technologies 136
- 'Seeds of Gold' series 267
- Seeds production research (SPR) 139
- Self-help groups (SHGs) 229
- SFSA see Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture (SFSA)
- SHFs see Smallholder farmers (SHFs)
- SI see Sustainable Intensification (SI)
- SKS Microfinance 247
- Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) 411
- Small commercial farm 34
- Smallholder farmers (SHFs) xxiii
 agricultural inputs summary 382
 co-operative society model 390
 end point royalty systems (EPRS) 399–400
 farmer input support program (FISP) 396–397
 increase and decrease factors 388
 input supply chain 392
 one acre fund, role of 405
 private sector role, supplying 383
 private sector role, thematic analysis 384–385
 push and pull factors 386
 release and adoption, new varieties 402–403
 village-based agent model 394–395
- Smallholder farmers in Africa
 access to mechanization for 187
 agricultural machineries, manufacturing of 202–203
 animal traction 205–206
 animal traction, use of 204–205
 barriers
 institutional issues 194–195
 technological issues 193–194
 commodity value chain 196–197
 demand for mechanization 190–191
 desired future for agriculture 191–193
 field operations, Timeliness of 197
 infrastructural and natural resource-based constraints 195–196
 key issues in 188–190
 land holding 196
 machines, utilization rates of 197–201
 medium-scale farms, growth of 201–202
 motorized machines 206–207
 tractors, use of 196
- Smallholder farmers in developing countries
 challenges faced 153
 constraints 153

- Smallholder farmers in Kenya
 - case study 267-270
 - extension in practice 262-265
 - extension services, development of 259-261
 - new extension models, developing 261-262
 - public-sector extension systems, strengthening 257
 - successful extension techniques 265-267
- Smallholder farming, challenges of
 - challenges 15-17
 - future trajectories 17-25
 - overview of 3-4
 - policy opinions 17-25
 - small-scale and family farms 4-9
 - economic and social circumstances 10-15
 - geography 9-10
- Smallholder seed systems
 - commercial seed sector 137-139
 - community based seed production (CBSP) 142-145
 - de-risking seed production
 - aggregators/processors, investment by 140-141
 - inclusive finance 141
 - intellectual property management 141-142
 - risk management 141
 - early generation seed (EGS) 145
 - mitigated to seed, challenges
 - climate change 135-136
 - market-based agriculture 137
 - productivity 134-135
 - social change 136-137
 - plant breeding
 - public investment in 139-140
 - seed production and dissemination, 'handover' for 139-140
 - seed sector
 - improving regulation 145-148
 - quality control 145-148
 - for sustainability 133
- Smallholder women
 - action recommendations
 - balancing policy implementation 328
 - blending vs. bending 328
 - business sustainability 326
 - financing, value chain development and market linkages 327
 - gender transformative approach 326
 - infrastructure, technology and investment 329
 - legal and targeted vulnerability policy 329
 - literacy and accountability 327
 - african setting 314-316
 - case study of
 - analysis and discussion 320-325
 - Aisha (Disabled: puffpuff seller and petty trader) 320
 - Alhaji Yahaya's third wife (farmer and petty trader) 318-319
 - Mama Bello (widowed farmer and business woman) 317-318
 - Mama Ibeji (Garri processor and marketer) 319-320
 - Mama Teacher (Retiree-Garri processor assistant) 319-320
 - determined factors 312
 - legal security 312-313
 - programmes 313
- Smallholder-farming environment, Western Kenya 178
- Smallholders
 - case examples 244-253
 - financial services for
 - elements of 218-219
 - insurance 220-221
 - payment 219-220
 - financing, concepts in
 - alternative financing 223
 - collateral 224
 - impact of 223-224
 - interest 221-222
 - repayment capacity 224
 - risk 222-223
 - Timing 222
 - getting creative 240-244
 - loan products 224-225
 - right model, selecting 234-235
 - risk mitigation 235-240
 - see also individual entries*
- Small-scale farmers 34, 264
- Small-scale food producers 34
- Small-scale water 107
- SMEs *see* Small and medium enterprises (SMEs)
- Sorghum 109
- Southern African Development Community (SADC) 146
- Spate irrigation 99

- Spatial arrangement 109
- Special Crop Development Authority (SCDA) 268
- SPR see Seeds production research (SPR)
- SSA see Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)
- Stable value-chain relationships 226
- State-owned land 37
- Stepping out 12, 14
- Stepping up 12, 14
- Stock finance 227
- Stone bunds 102-103
- Strengthening commercial extension systems
- case study 298-300
 - actors collaboration 308-309
 - gender inclusivity 303-304
 - livelihoods and resilience 300-302
 - research and development (R&D) 306-307
 - scaling and deepening impact, technology 305-306
 - two-way learning exchange 307-308
 - youth inclusion 304-305
 - definition 279-282
 - environment for 296-298
 - farmer categories 282-283
 - commercial categories 283-284
 - noncommercial categories 283
 - livelihoods and resilience 292-293
 - approaches 293-294
 - marginalized groups 285-287
 - opportunities, inclusive programs 287-288
 - overview 279
 - scaling and deepening impact, technology 294-296
 - two-way learning exchange 289-292
- Structural adjustment programs (SAPs) 260
- Structural changes 62
- Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) 20
- adoption rates 134
 - commercial seed sector in 138
 - imports 134
 - yield gaps in 21-22
- Sufia Begum 250
- Survival recovery 85
- Sustainable agricultural mechanization for Africa (SAMA) 207
- Sustainable intensification xxiv, 178
- Sustainable mechanization 189
- Sustainable production practices, incentives
- case study (cost of compliance) 373-374
 - case study (research improvement) 372-373
- challenges 362
- buyers connection 365
 - financial tools adoption 365-366
 - paying producers (directly/indirectly) 366-367
 - skills and advisory support 362, 365
- future trends 374-375
- mechanisms, challenges and new directions 363-364
- overview 361-362
- research practices contribution
- adaptive implementation strategies 371-372
 - research models 370
 - targeting 370-371
- weak incentive systems, causes of
- 'bias for action,' 370
 - complex production systems 367-368
 - low investment 368-369
 - over-extrapolated estimates 369
 - poor adoption 368
 - structural reasons 369
- Synergetic partnerships 240-241
- Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture (SFSA) 134
- TE see Transpiration efficiency (TE)
- Tea Research Foundation of Kenya (TRFK) 269
- Technology-based solutions 62
- Technology transfer 259
- TechnoServe 417, 420
- Temporary incentives, access new inputs 62
- Three Share Farm Experiment* 250
- Tied ridges 95
- Tillage
- methods tested 264
 - practice 95
- Traditional seed systems 143
- Transaction costs 340-341
- Transpiration efficiency (TE) 80
- Transportation costs 340-341
- Trash lines 102
- TRFK see Tea Research Foundation of Kenya (TRFK)
- T&V extension system 260
- 2014 International Year of the Family Farm 5

- UBER tractor 199
 UNICEF 175
 Unstructured supplementary service data (USSD) 182, 252
 US Department of Agriculture (USDA) 374
 US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) 420
 USDA *see* US Department of Agriculture (USDA)
 USSD *see* Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD)
- Value for cultivation and use (VCU) 144
 Variety identification numbers (VINs) 145
 VCU *see* Value for cultivation and use (VCU)
 Vegetation barriers 94
 Vegetative strips 102
 Venanzio Vallerani 105
 VINs *see* Variety identification numbers (VINs)
 Virtual water 70
 trade 116
 Vodafone Group plc 249
- Warehouse receipts 234
 Warehousing 422
 Water management
 in agriculture 67-71
 beyond rainfed agriculture 114-116
 change crop microclimate to reduce evapotranspiration 77-79
 factors determining water use in 73
 climate 74-75
 livestock production, water use in 76-77
 plant type 73-74
 production techniques 75
 improve water use efficiency and water productivity 86-88
 adapting land use and crop husbandry 88-89
 in-field water harvesting 101-102
 issues 107-111
 runoff farming 102-105
 small-scale water storage 106-107
 infiltration enhancement 89-90
 cover crops 92-95
 mulch 90-92
 physical measures 95-98
 precipitation infiltration 90
 more agricultural goods with less water, challenge of 71-72
 efficient water use in 72-73
 rainfed agriculture development approaches 112-114
 increasing the profile 111-112
 water harvesting 98-101
 water use and water productivity, crop choice affects 80
 crop choice by farmers, aspects affecting 86
 drought tolerance 84-86
 growing period, length of 82-83
 harvest index (HI) 81-82
 photosynthetic pathway 80
 plant morphology, anatomy and physiological processes 80-81
 root system 83-84
 transpiration efficiency 80
 Water productivity (WP) 72, 87
 Watermelon distributor/processor 224
 Water-spreading weirs 107, 108, 115
 Water use efficiency (WUE) 72, 87
 WCS *see* Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)
 WFP *see* World Food Programme (WFP)
 WHO 175
 Wide-scale adoption 139
 Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) 373
 Wind breaks 78
 WMO *see* World Meteorological Organization (WMO)
 World Food Programme (WFP) 175
 World Meteorological Organization (WMO) 235
 World Trade Organization (WTO) 223
 WP *see* Water productivity (WP)
 WTO *see* World Trade Organization (WTO)
 WUE *see* Water use efficiency (WUE)
- Yunus, Dr. Mohammad 218