

AGRICULTURE

Helping farmers find their own solutions

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Ken Giller, who heads the Plant Production Systems Group at Wageningen University in the Netherlands, is a technical advisor to the Africa Soil Health Consortium and chairman of the N2Africa steering committee, a project that aims to boost the use of nitrogen-fixing crops in smallholder agriculture. With extensive experience of farming systems, particularly in Africa, he is concerned by a tendency for organisations and individuals to promote blanket solutions, which fail to account for the complex and varied constraints facing smallholder farmers.

In my work over the last ten years or more, including recently as a technical advisor to the Africa Soil Health Consortium, I have had the chance to discuss agricultural development with numerous policymakers, ministers and their advisers, and I'm shocked by how many people talk about 'the solution for Africa'. A recent example is Conservation Agriculture. It sounds like such a laudable concept - who can object to 'conservation'? - and many people assume that it is a form of low external input agriculture. In fact, in the areas where it is most widely and successfully practised, in North and South America, it is high external input agriculture, dependent on herbicides and fertilisers.

No blanket solutions for African farming

Conservation farming has some powerful and influential supporters, but promoting it as a panacea, a single solution for African farmers, is unhelpful and at times even dishonest. Rural communities are extremely variable in their resource endowments, from those who are virtually landless labourers to larger, wealthier households able to do farming as a business. The majority fall somewhere in between,

often highly constrained in terms of land and cash to invest. If farmers do have funds, it's often better that investment goes into fertilisers than herbicides, which are essentially useful for labour-saving.

Since the 1930s, well meaning organisations have been carrying out field demonstrations to show how with such-and-such a technology, farmers can double or treble their yields. But such demonstrations have proven of limited value, as they fail to appreciate the constraints that farmers are under at many different levels. In Conservation Agriculture, the theory is that farmers can prepare their land in the dry season so that it's ready for planting when the rains come. In reality, very few people do this because the soil is hard and difficult to work; so the solution doesn't fit with the circumstances of the farmer. There are exciting instances where Conservation Agriculture offers real opportunities for farmers to stabilise yields and reduce erosion, but these are masked by a current tendency for over-selling.

Baskets of options

Rather than looking for a panacea, we must embrace diversity and locally adapted solutions, opening up the debate to investigate options that can be used under certain circumstances by certain people. We need the whole development community, whether it's thinkers in universities, researchers, development agents, NGOs or farmer organisations, to engage with the fact that there are not simple solutions to complex problems. I much prefer the concept of 'baskets of options' from which farmers can pick and choose, and recombine suited to their own interests. In Africa, the socio-economic and political environment for agriculture is very unfavourable; if we can explore the constraints that prevent farmers adopting more productive technologies, we can begin to identify which are the binding constraints that we need to address and leverage, in order to bring about change.

The approach of the Africa Soil Health Consortium, rather than giving blanket recommendations or precise recipes for farmers to follow, is to provide people with the knowledge and skills to derive their own locally adapted recommendations, based on them having an understanding of principles and processes. I'm an educationalist. I think everybody wants to learn, and we frequently underestimate the learning ability of the farming community. Farmers have a given number of approaches and tools at their disposal; they are the ones who must integrate all the knowledge that is available to them, within their constraints. Our role is to educate the extension workers, the NGO staff and those at the forefront of communicating with the farming community.

At a recent meeting of the Africa Soil Health Consortium, there were several suggestions that we should be promoting certain strategies. My own feeling is that we shouldn't be promoting anything, as such. What we should be doing is putting out vigorously vetted information and letting people decide. It's about helping people access the knowledge that they need in order to make the right choices.

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