



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW



**UN expert group meeting on:
Sustainable land management and agricultural practices in Africa:
Bridging the gap between research and farmers**

Gothenburg, Sweden, April 16 - 17, 2009

Rationale:

Most economies in Africa are agro-based. The agricultural sector directly affects economic growth, poverty alleviation and social welfare in this region. Increasing productivity in Sub-Saharan agriculture is widely recognized as a key driver of regional development. Reducing land degradation threats and promoting Sustainable Land Management (SLM) and Sustainable Agricultural (SA) practices that are suited to the agro-ecological conditions and other resources farmers are endowed with has been recognized as a necessary requirement for achieving a sustainable African green revolution.

Over the last decades, knowledge about SLM and SA practices has been accumulating steadily. In particular, a number of initiatives have undertaken to collect data on successful practices. The initiatives have collected data on soil conditions, agro-climatic conditions, biodiversity conditions etc that are deemed to be relevant to the determination of success or failure of LM and agricultural practices.

However, these collections have been scattered. The accumulated knowledge is largely in the form of a collection of compilations of data, and has not systematically been aggregated and fed into models with predictive abilities. In brief, while today we have a good deal of evidence on the prevailing conditions under which practices have been successful, we still are not able to go the other way round, i.e. using the prevailing conditions to assess a priori which practices would be most successful.

This is due to a number of reasons, including:

- The large number and variation of agro-climatic factors. These affect the degree of success of a particular practice in any specific area, and this variation also creates the need for extensive data collection and seriously limits the possibilities of inference about what would work in other locations;
- The influence of other factors independent from agro-climatic conditions, such as economic, legal, political and institutional factors (e.g. international prices, market access, land tenure regime, extension services, infrastructure), on the success or failure of practices. That is, the same practice adopted in two different places sharing similar agro-climatic conditions could turn out differently depending on those socio-economic and political factors.

Combined, these two sets of factors create barriers to inference and replicability, particularly across countries that do not share the same socio-economic and political contexts. Perhaps because of this complexity, despite substantial resources being invested by governments and international donors to promote SLM and SA practices, success has been limited. As a result, land degradation remains a major challenge in the attempts to increase agricultural productivity in Africa.

Purpose of the meeting:

The meeting will attempt to answer two questions that arise from the above discussion:

- 1) Is it feasible to incorporate all the accumulated knowledge on what works and what does not work in terms of SLM and SA practices into models that can effectively help farmers, planners, and policy makers to improve agricultural productivity? If yes, what is the appropriate scale of these models in terms of accuracy vs. cost ?
- 2) Provided such models could be designed, how could they be turned into practical tools that inform decision-making by planners and farmers? Then, how could they be deployed on the ground, at what scale, with which institutional support? In particular, what would be the necessary building blocks of information systems designed for that purpose?

In addition to providing experts a forum for reflection on these two issues, the meeting aims to foster research and development projects that would address them. The focus will be on identifying the missing links that explain why past activities have not provided the expected impact, and in particular how research could help address this situation.

Most of the participants will represent institutions that have their own research or extension programs. Therefore it is expected that the meeting will contribute to strengthening and creating synergies between them. A UNDESA innovation brief on sustainable agriculture will serve as a background document for the meeting. Though examples of successful SLM and SA practices will be presented, the focus will be on how to scale them up, and in particular on how to institutionalize a link between innovation, evaluation of such innovation, and extension. Ideally, the meeting will contribute to national networks where local researchers, such as agricultural research institutes, continuously evaluate SA practices, feed these into syntheses for experience sharing and up-scaling that can guide extension services and targeting of interventions.

Specific objectives of the meeting

- Identify possibilities and constraints to scale up successful SLM and SA practices based on the adoption research literature;
- Discuss approaches to categorize what SLM and SA practices work where and for whom;
- Discuss how learning from best practices could be institutionalized into a knowledge management framework that could guide interventions and extension;
- Discuss how to design and implement such frameworks at the country level;
- Work towards establishing an informal institutional network between various actors active in this area.

Expected outputs:

- An updated research and extension agenda on Sustainable Agriculture for the participating organizations.
- Greater consensus on a methodology to increase investment in SLM and SA.
- A partnership platform established between relevant actors in this area.
- Meeting proceedings with presentations and summary of discussions.