Published on *TECA* (http://teca.fao.org)

Conservation agriculture for smallholder farmers in dryland areas, Kenya

SUMMARY:
The Laikipia district, in the Rift Valley of Kenya, is located on the plateau north west of Mount Kenya. Due to its leeward position, the district is significantly dry, with aridity increasing from the slopes of the mountain to the dry lowlands. Inadequate rainfall and periods of drought have caused land degradation and soil erosion, affecting the productivity of agriculture and the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in these arid and semi arid areas. Two Farmer Field Schools established in the district introduced Conservation Agriculture principles and techniques which mitigated the impact of drought on farm production and on the environment.

KEYWORDS:
Soil management [1]
water management [2]
Crop rotation [3]
soil fertility [4]
Minimum tillage [5]
Drought [6]
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CATEGORY:
Capacity development [13]
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Natural Resources Management [15]

COUNTRIES:
Kenya

DESCRIPTION:

Introduction

The Laikipia District is situated in the rain shadow of Mt. Kenya, which creates a generally unreliable, inadequate and unevenly distributed rainfall pattern. Seventy five per cent of total land area is devoted to livestock production and game parks/reserves, leading to overstocking which in turn results in a high rate of soil and environmental degradation. Due to several factors the yield of most crops has declined by 40% over the years, with continued tillage identified as one of the principal causes. Frequent tillage operations expose and destroy soil micro organisms, release carbon into the atmosphere and put the ozone layer at danger of depletion.

A project funded by the German Trust Fund and implemented by FAO and the MoA led to establishment of a two Farmer Field Schools in the district, involving 55 individuals, with a 50-50 gender balance. Village-

based facilitators were trained on the farmer field school approach and Conservation Agriculture (CA) farming practices. CA is based on integrated management of soil, water and agricultural resources and its three essential features are crop rotation, minimum disturbance of soil and maintenance of a permanent soil cover.

In particular, the use of cover crops ensured cost effective weed management as well as improving soil fertility. The introduction of specific soil rotations and associations, on the other hand, promoted biological sub soiling which facilitated plant root growth and water infiltration, besides breaking cycles of crop pest and disease.

Objective

The goal of conservation agriculture is to maintain and improve crop yields and resilience against drought and other hazards, while at the same time protecting and stimulating the biological function of the soil.

Implementation of the Technology

Conservation Agriculture (CA) is a farming practice based on integrated management of soil, water and agricultural resources. The three essential interrelated features of conservation agriculture are:

1) minimizing tillage, whereby ploughing, harrowing, and any kind of mechanical soil disturbance operations by farmers are reduced to a minimum or, where possible, abolished altogether. Mechanical tillage hinders "biological tillage", that is, the process of soil biological activity that relies on soil life to produce very stable soil aggregates and various sizes of pores, allowing air and water infiltration. Furthermore, among the farming operations, soil tillage is the single most energy consuming and thus air polluting operation; farmers may therefore save between 30 and 40% of time, labour, and in mechanized agriculture, fossil fuels by not tilling the soil .

2) maintenance of a cover of (live or dead) vegetal material on the soil surface that protects the soil from the physical impact of rain and wind and stabilizes soil moisture and temperature in the surface layers. Soil cover turns this zone into a habitat for soil life (plant roots, insects, worms, fungi and bacteria). Soil life uses soil cover and organic matter, recycles them into humus and nutrients and contributes to the stabilization of the soil structure. The aim of maintaining a permanent soil cover is incompatible with the widespread farming practices of burning plant residues and of incorporating organic matter or plant residues into the soil. These practices disrupt soil life and structure, remove the soil cover and destroy humus by enhancing organic matter mineralization. Uncontrolled grazing, which may completely destroy soil cover and induce soil compaction, should be avoided too. The soil cover also inhibits the germination of many weed seeds, minimizing weed competition with the crop. *Mucuna spp* for example contains Dihydroxyphenylalanine, which causes suppression of weeds such as *Striga hermonthica* and *Cynadon dactylon* among many others. Some species, such as the leguminous, have the added value of improving soil fertility. In the first few years herbicides may have to be applied, so knowledge of specific locations where weeds grow is very important. However, in the long term the approach aims to manage weeds through agronomic means (soil cover, cover crops) or minimal mechanical means (superficial weeding with hoe or cutlass).

3) diversified crop rotation (annual crops) or plant associations (perennial crops), enhancing the soil's rooting environment, its structure, nutrients and moisture retention capacity, while avoiding build-up of pests and diseases and controlling weeds. Crop rotations are designed to make full use of the physical and chemical interactions between different plant species and to achieve multiple purposes: crop production for food and energy, cattle feeding, biological tillage and decompaction through different kinds of rooting systems, nutrient cycling and weed control.

Another essential element of CA is to plan crop sequences over several seasons, to minimize the build-up of pests or diseases and to optimize plant nutrient use through synergy between different crop types and by alternating shallow-rooting crops with deep-rooting ones.

Smallholder farmers in the Laikipia district have been able to increase their yield by 30-40% by adopting *in situ* water harvesting methods and technologies which are part of CA approach.

Before the introduction of CA techniques, intensive cultivation resulted in development of hard pan/plough pans which hindered plant root growth and water infiltration into the soil. Subsequent introduction of specific crop rotation/association under CA promoted biological sub soiling, saving the cost of hiring or using mechanical means. Such rotation/association of crops also helped breaking crop pest and disease cycles.

The water harvesting methods and technologies that are part of CA, crop rotation/associations, and maintenance of a permanent cover crop have drastically reduced soil and environmental degradation and increased resistance to drought and climatic variability. All this is improving that CA is an approach that enhances livelihoods´resilience against the impact of natural hazards, in the case draught in the Lajkipia district.

Institutions fostering the practice

IGO: FAO

Government Institution: Ministry of Agriculture (Kenya), Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI)

NGOs African Conservation Tillage network (ACT), Kenya Draught Animal Technology (KENDAT)

Research Institution Regional Land Management Unit based at International Center for Research in Agro-Forestry (RELMA/ICRAF)

Beneficiaries of the Practice

Adopting smallholder farmers and their households, especially HIV/AIDS affected households. The hydropower generating companies downstream indirectly benefit from decreased sedimentation in the dams thanks to zero tillage. Spillovers from adoption of CA benefit equipment hirers, tractor and draught animal hirers, seed-fertilizer-chemical-equipment companies

Impacts on natural resource base

Actual: Reduction of soil runoff by 60%, enhancement of water infiltration into the soil by 70%, reduction of soil water evaporation by 30%, increased soil fertility, for example maize stover cover added to the crop field the following elements: 0.7 N, 0.14 P, 1.43 K, 0.36 Ca (% of dry weight).

Expected: Increased ground water quality and level, reduced sedimentation downstream, reduced greenhouse gases as a result of carbon sequestration, increased soil micro-organism activities leading to improved soil fertility, reduced weed seed bank.

Impacts on livelihood of the practice users

Actual: Improved food security as a result of increased crop yield by 30-40% and better household nutrition as a result of sufficient household food reserve.

Improved household income as a result of the sale of surplus crop production. Reduced household labour

requirement by over 40% thanks to zero till and reduced mechanical weeding.

Expected: Reduced food deficit and over reliance on relief food (especially important for HIV/Aids infected). Increased household purchasing power. Improved overall economic growth in the region. Increased hydro power generation due to better water quality.

Other impacts

Better watershed management leading to environmental resilience

General success factors

-The two Farmer Field Schools established in the district have strengthened group cohesion and understanding among smallholder farmers.

-The project provided the FFS with a grant of $500 to acquire input for the trial plots and to pay the facilitator a small allowance.

-*Dolichos lablab* (hyacinth bean), used in CA as a source of soil cover had a high adoption rate among small scale farmers in the district. This was due to the fact that besides fixing Nitrogen in the soil, its seeds are considered a delicacy by the Kikuyu and Meru inhabitants of the district.

-The use of jab planters reduced the household's workload during planting.

-The equipment used for direct seeding also spreads fertilizer and seeds simultaneously, reducing the overall workload: a single person can now perform the work initially undertaken by three persons.

-Farmer field days and farmer to farmer exchange visits facilitated by the project attracted the participation of small scale farmers within the district and other stakeholders such as equipment manufacturers and hires, chemical companies, seed companies, fertilizer companies among others.

-Farmer field schools were backstopped by subject matter specialists, including local and international consultants that gave training on key subjects such as weed and cover crop management, gender and group dynamics, equipment access and utilization, efficient use of chemicals and fertilizers, among others.

Problems remaining to be resolved

-Weed management for those farmers who are reluctant to use herbicides needs further research. Some mechanical shallow weeding should be considered acceptable within the CA approach;

-Cover crop management, especially hyacinth bean, is a challenge to most farmers, due to the fact that it can easily outgrow a main crop such as maize and suffocates it if not planted at the correct time.Other challenges include the fact that this species is site specific, hence will do better under certain AEZ. It is also easily affected by diseases such as *Fusarium oxysporum*, Anthracnose (*Colletotrichum lindemuthianum*), Leaf spot (*Cercospora dolichi*), Powdery mildew (*Leveillula taurica* var. macrospore) while common insects include Pod-borer (*Adisura atkinsoni*), Gram caterpillar (*Helicoverpa armigera*), Plume moth (*Exelastis atomosa*), Spotted podborer (*Maruca vitrata*), Bruchid beetles (*Callosobruchus* spp.), Root-knot nematodes (*Meloidogyne* spp.), Reniform nematode (*Rotylenchus reniformis*), Lession nematode (*Pratylenchus penetrans*);

-Access to CA equipment by farmers is a challenge since they are not available at the local equipment distributor outlets; increased private sector involvement in field days and project activities is therefore recommended for the follow up phase;

-Dissemination of information on CA for awareness creation among small scale farmers needs to be reinforced for greater impact.

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e-Resources

Africa Conservation Tillage Network http://www.act-africa.org/ [17]

Sustainable Agriculture Information Network www.sustainet.org [18]

FAO Conservation Agriculture website www.fao.org/ag/ca [19]

FURTHER READING:

Kambutho, Pascal, Kienzle Josef, eds. Conservation agriculture as practiced in Kenya: two case studies. Nairobi. African Conservation Tillage Network, Centre de Coopération Internationale de Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement, FAO

SOURCE(S):

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Italy

Source URL: http://teca.fao.org/technology/conservation-agriculture-smallholder-farmers-dryland-areas-kenya

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