Farmers’ organizations

Farmers’ organizations ensure the effective implementation and spread of conservation agriculture as they understand and defend farmers’ needs and interests. Such organizations can:

- stimulate farmers to analyse and improve their systems and activities;
- provide useful information and support individuals on different issues related to conservation agriculture;
- facilitate knowledge sharing with other farmers, farmers’ associations and institutions;
- help to concentrate efforts in resolving common problems;
- strengthen and secure equal communication and collaboration with research and technical institutions;
- facilitate communication with civil society and within their communities;
- reinforce their influence on policy-making.

These organizations serve to strengthen the role of farmers at community, national and international levels. Support for the creation of new farmers’ organizations, and for existing ones, and for linking such organizations will facilitate consistent agricultural development.

Financial assistance

Adequate funding programmes are needed to support farmers, particularly resources-poor farmers, during the costly 3-5-year transition phase. This support is crucial in the case of soil degradation because the farmer must undertake preparatory and expensive operations for soil amelioration. However, it is important to ensure that existing incentives and subsidies do not hinder the implementation of conservation agriculture.

A possible option for facilitating conservation agriculture adoption could be to provide incentives to farmers for environmental services. This will:

- stimulate farmers to undertake sustainable land management;
- promote awareness and understanding of the socio-economic and environmental impacts of sustainable resource management.

Adequate policy framework

Decision-makers must enable an appropriate framework to meet the requirements and facilitate the initiatives and needs of local groups and land users, especially undervalued smallholders. Policy support should:

- establish effective communication channels with rural communities, Non-governmental organizations and the private sector;
- address land tenure and related social conflicts (with a special focus on gender issues);
- adjust legislation to the new goals and needs;
- ensure the development of infrastructure to facilitate farmer access to markets;
- institute policies for fair access to markets in order to increase farmers’ economic security.

The agriculture sector must be reoriented to include local environmental, economic and social development. It should not only support industrial and export agriculture that is easily translated into national economy terms. In conclusion, when correctly implemented and under adequate circumstances, conservation agriculture can constitute a valid tool for improving rural livelihoods and fostering bottom-up sustainable rural development.
ADEQUATE CONCEPTS FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Agricultural practices that consider and work with isolated elements of agro-ecosystems have a common bottleneck: site specificity. Such approaches cannot guarantee an adequate scaling-up under great heterogeneity of socio-economic and agro-ecological conditions. Instead, conservation agriculture, based on agro-ecological principles of universal applicability, is much more effective for achieving sustainable rural development. Conservation agriculture is not prescriptive; it offers a set of concepts and principles that can be adapted to specific conditions and integrated with other approaches where necessary.

In this way, conservation agriculture provides farmers with flexible cropping systems that lead to enhanced resilience under market and ecological fluctuations.

CONSERVATION AGRICULTURE: SHARING SERVICES AND BENEFITS

Systems based on conservation agriculture can lead to environmental improvements as well as socio-economic benefits for farmers and society in general:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>ON-FARM BENEFITS</th>
<th>OFF-FARM BENEFITS</th>
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These services and benefits can constitute part of the framework needed for promoting rural development. The goal of this process must be to lead to socially and economically fair development where the rural poor satisfy their needs.

STEPS FOR IMPLEMENTING CONSERVATION AGRICULTURE

Step 1: awareness, information and training

Awareness

For creating awareness, it is necessary to:

- indicate how conservation agriculture can reduce or resolve the current problems farmers and the agriculture sector are facing;
- inform parties of the environmental and socio-economic benefits of sustainable natural resources management provided by the system;
- address ‘resistance to change’ issues from local to international levels;
- interact with a broad spectrum of stakeholders involved in agricultural development, including farmers and agricultural workers, civil society organizations, indigenous peoples, public and private organizations, consumers and policy-makers.

Information

It is crucial to guarantee access to specific and technical information for interested people, associations or institutions. The capacity to inform farmers is essential in this bottom-up approach. The main issues of interest to farmers are:

- potential benefits and risks;
- how conservation agriculture can be implemented in specific situations, especially with degraded soils.

Equipment and input supply

Access to conservation agriculture equipment and inputs is indispensable for its adoption. Partnerships between farmers’ organizations and the private sector (local craftsmen/artisans and companies) can facilitate:

- purchase of inputs;
- acquisition/rent of equipment, or modification of conventional tools.

Technical assistance

The provision of technical assistance serves to overcome the limitations farmers face, mainly related to a lack of experience in dealing with the system. Capacity building of technical personnel of local public institutions is necessary to ensure quality and appropriate support.

Organizations involved in this action should be coordinated in order to provide up-to-date and consistent information.

Step 2: equipment and inputs supply, technical assistance, farmers’ organizations

Key bottlenecks for the adoption of conservation agriculture that need to be resolved are:

- technical support;
- access to tools and equipment;
- access to cover crops seeds.

Step 3: awareness, information and training

Step 2: equipment and inputs supply, technical assistance, farmers’ organizations

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