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'Farmer-led irrigation schemes can transform food security'

By Gift Chanda on Friday 28 September 2012, 12:40:00 CAT (462 Reads)

FARMER-LED irrigation schemes could transform food security in Zambia, a new study has revealed.

According to a report titled 'Water for wealth and food security: Supporting farmer-driven investments in agricultural water management' released by the [International Water Management Institute \(IWMI\)](#), expanding the use of on-farm water management techniques could increase yields up to 300 per cent in some cases, and add tens of billions of US dollars to household revenues across sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Researchers looked at these trends in six countries, including Zambia.

"Water is critical for agricultural growth and improved livelihoods in sub-Saharan Africa," according to Dr Timothy Williams, [IWMI's](#) director for Africa.

"Agriculture provides food and employment for a large segment of the population in sub-Saharan Africa and inadequate access increases their vulnerability to food insecurity."

The report unearthed for the first time the scale at which enterprising smallholder farmers themselves are driving this revolution by using their own resources innovatively rather than waiting for water to be delivered.

The assessment quantified the potential reach and possible additional household revenue for a number of different on-farm and local community water solutions.

In Zambia, for instance, opportunities for individual smallholder operations were identified.

At a 50 per cent adoption rate for small motorised pumps by rural households in potential areas, an estimated 268,000 households could benefit, translating into the utilisation of 214,000 hectares of land.

At the same rate of adoption and utilising dambos (wetlands) for rice cultivation, 70,000 smallholder households could benefit and render about 105,000 hectares of land productive.

"Here in Zambia, much is already happening," said Kenneth Chelemu of IDE, an organisation dedicated to creating income and livelihood opportunities for poor rural households, who coordinated the initiative in Zambia.

"It is difficult for many smallholder farmers to find the money to invest in better water management practices on their farms. However, a few have begun to see the benefits as they access loans from the few micro-financing institutions like Cetzam and VisionFund - who have recently developed agro-loan products encouraging investment in water management solutions."

Chelemu said there was need to support and invest in this entrepreneurial spirit and help develop market access and better value chains for small-scale farmers.

Water is a major constraint on food production for millions of smallholder farmers not only in Zambia, the report stated, adding that: "While water resources are often sufficient, farmers lack the means to harvest it, which limits crop production to the rainy season and diminishes income opportunities."

Of sub-Saharan Africa's abundant renewable water resources, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization reported that only three per cent are withdrawn for agriculture.

Approximately four percent of arable land is equipped for irrigation, of which less than six per cent is serviced by groundwater.

Experts believe improving water management capabilities could unleash smallholder farming and it could become a major driver of economic growth, poverty reduction and food security.

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