

How communities assess local innovators

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As part of my doctoral research I studied indigenous soil and water conservation (SWC) practices in Northern Shoa and Southern Wello in Ethiopia. The study covered six rural communities with either high or low levels of government extension support in SWC. A total of 371 household heads (including 10% women) were asked to name at least three local farmers who were innovative in SWC and to explain why they had chosen them. In the survey, an "innovation" was defined as something new, started within the farmer's lifetime - either a completely different way of doing something or a modification of an existing technique. A farmer innovator is not necessarily a "model" farmer. He or she creates or tries new ideas without these having been recommended by extension.

Top innovation

More than 70% of those interviewed thought that, nowadays, every farmer was an innovator, in the sense of trying out something new. When a farmer innovates, the basic idea may no longer be new to the community, but it is new to that farmer, who experiments with it to adapt it to the specific conditions of his or her farm. Less than 5% of the interviewees could not identify any innovative farmers in their community.

In each community, 5-10 outstanding innovators were named. Most were mentioned by several farmers in the same locality. The interviewees said these farmers were chosen because they had:

- few gullies in their plots
- well arranged and integrated physical and biological SWC techniques
- good-quality SWC work, requiring little maintenance
- safe drainage of excess water so that it did not damage neighbouring plots
- a healthy crop stand.

More innovators were identified in the areas with low compared to high extension inputs. This was probably because the government campaigns introduced standardised SWC techniques and did not encourage adaptation to different conditions.

Characteristics of innovators

Most innovators were elderly (over 50 years). Some middle-aged innovators were ex-soldiers who had been resettled in the area. Their exposure to other parts of Ethiopia possibly gave them ideas to try out in their new surroundings. The level of

formal education was not correlated with the degree of innovativeness. Family size was also not decisive. Many innovators were single or had only small families. They did their SWC in a way that did not demand a lot of labour at once. They spread it over several months or years. The farmer innovators were ranked locally as "rich" (46%), "medium" (33%) and "poor" (21%) on the bases of their livestock and land holdings. Some farmers explained that the rich can innovate more because:

- they have their own draught oxen and can release family labour for SWC work;
- they can use manure from their stock, adding to the positive effect of the SWC work;

Only about 4% of those interviewed said they did not know of any innovative farmer in their community.

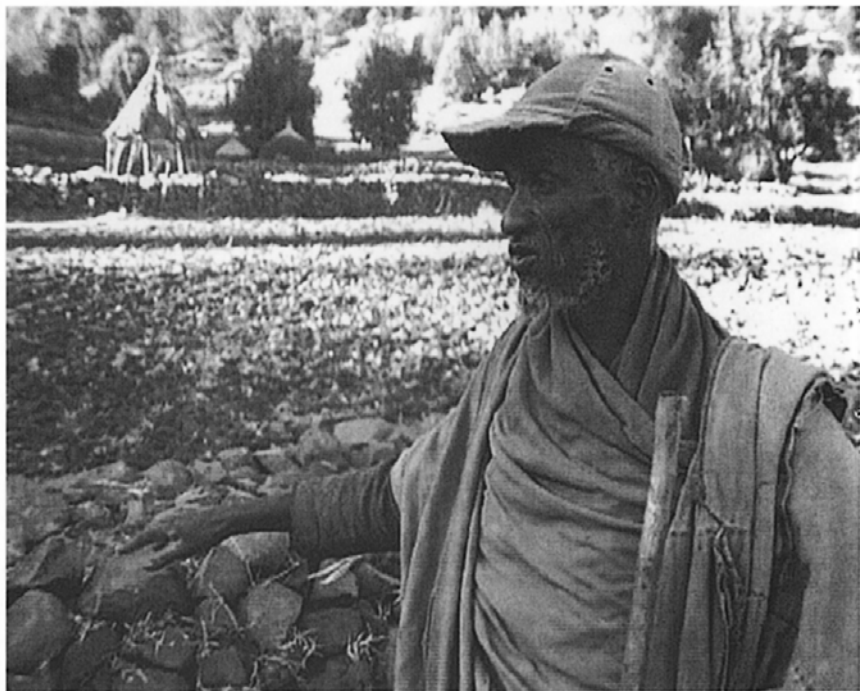


Photo: Martin Wolf

- they are usually elders, more experienced in experimentation and better able to assess the potentials and limitations of SWC techniques;
- they have many plots with different agro-ecological conditions, demanding different innovations.

All interviewees agreed on two basic features of innovators: they work hard at farming as a full-time job, and they have an ethic of devotion to the land. Many of the innovators' plots were located on steep slopes, at run-on sites, in depressions and near big gullies, i.e. at critical sites where physical SWC structures are indispensable. Land security had little influence on the propensity to innovate. At such sites, short-term survival would

be impossible without good land care because the seed would be washed away. It was in the farmers' immediate interest to minimise erosion in the current year, no matter whether the land would be theirs in future years.

Innovators and community values

Farmers who had innovated in ways that could harm the community were not socially recognised. For example:

- In one village, the community criticised some young farmers who planted marginal hillside plots with eucalyptus trees. From past experience, the farmers feared that re-afforested land would be re-claimed by the government.
- In another area, a middle-aged farmer had increased his yields by using fertiliser and imported seed but was criticised through the *Edir* (a traditional institution) because other farmers did not want his success story to be used as a reason to force them to buy inputs at high interest rates - a current government policy.

It can thus be seen that farmers were assessing local initiatives according to their value to the community. Research and development agents often assess innovations according to the yield increase they bring to individuals. It was obvious from this study, however, that community members have other criteria. ■

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Reference
Yohannes GebreMichael. 1998. *The use, maintenance and development of SWC measures by small farming household in different agro-climatic zones of Ethiopia*. Thesis, University of Bern, Switzerland.