Green niche actors navigating an opaque opportunity context: Prospects for a sustainable transformation of Ethiopian agriculture

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ABSTRACT

Identifying trajectories of agricultural development that enable substantial increases in food production is of prime importance for food security and human development in Sub-Saharan Africa in general, and Ethiopia in particular. To ensure long-term welfare for people and landscapes, it is imperative that such agricultural transformations sustain and enhance the natural resource base upon which agriculture depends. To understand the prospects for a sustainable transformation of Ethiopian agriculture we develop a new conceptual framework for sustainability transformations that combines insights from the social-ecological transformations literature with research on socio-technical transitions and institutional entrepreneurship. Using this framework, we analyse the agricultural development trajectory currently envisaged by the government, as expressed in policy narratives and public institutions. We also explore the opportunity context facing non-state actors who promote sustainable intensification (referred to as green niche actors), as well as the strategies they employ to navigate this context and lever change in the direction they perceive as desirable.

1. Introduction

Despite rapid economic growth and increasing crop yields in agriculture over the past decade (Dorosh and Rashid, 2013), Ethiopia remains one of the world’s poorest countries, marked by significant food security problems and recurrent famines (Berhanu, 2012). Similar to large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa smallholder agriculture is the primary livelihood source, engaging 85% of the Ethiopian population.
agricultural development, as expressed in government policy narratives and institutions, as well as the opportunity context faced by proponents of sustainable intensification (hereafter referred to as green niche actors), and how they navigate this context, to understand the prospects for a sustainable transformation of Ethiopian agriculture.

2. Theoretical framework

To analyse the prospects for this type of transformation, we develop a new conceptual framework that combines concepts from the literatures on social-ecological transformations (e.g. Olsson et al., 2006; Westley et al., 2013; Moore et al., 2014), socio-technological transitions (e.g. Rotmans et al., 2001; Geels, 2002; Markard et al., 2012), and institutional entrepreneurship (e.g. DiMaggio, 1988; Fliedstein, 1997; Maguire et al., 2004), combining the respective strengths of these three perspectives. Although stemming from different fields and using somewhat different terminologies, transition and transformation scholars are both concerned with radical change processes towards sustainability, and as illustrated by this study, these two strands of research could benefit from greater cross-fertilization (see also Olsson et al., 2014). The study also draws on the concepts of opportunity context (Dorado, 2005) and situated agency (Roene, 2006) that originate in studies on institutional entrepreneurship, as a response to recent calls for an increased understanding of the interplay between actors and the contexts in which they are situated (Westley, 2013).

2.1. Using a social-ecological transformation lens on agricultural development

Research on social-ecological transformations focuses on deliberate processes of change, whereby the system starts developing along a new trajectory (Walker et al., 2004). Drawing on e.g. Enfors (2013) and Moore et al. (2014), we conceptualise these different development trajectories as being distinguished by their i) structure, in terms of capitals, practices, institutions and actors; ii) internal dynamics – in particular the interactions between humans and the environment – that push the system in a certain direction; and iii) social, economic and ecological outcomes in terms of e.g. ecosystem services and distributed human well-being that are generated by these structures and dynamics.

A key assumption of the transformation literature is that social and ecological systems cannot be understood in isolation from one another, but are fundamentally interlinked (Berkes and Folke, 1998; Folke, 2006). Agricultural systems are prime examples of such coupled social-ecological systems (Enfors, 2013). A social-ecological perspective recognises that the capacity of ecological systems “serves as the foundation upon which prosperity and development ultimately rests” (Folke et al., 2016), and the economy is understood as a sub-system of society, in turn a subsystem of nature. The social-ecological perspective also acknowledges that humans and our societies and economies depend on resources and services from nature. Similarly, ecological processes and patterns cannot be understood without considering the human influence on these (Folke et al., 2016).

The focus of this study is the Ethiopian smallholder agricultural production system and its associated resources, practices, actors and institutions in the ecological, social and economic domain. This system has over time developed along a trajectory that is in general terms characterized by low levels of agricultural production, especially measured per capita, and degradation of land (primarily due to erosion), with widespread poverty as a consequence (Dorosh and Rashid, 2013; GIZ, 2015). While there is broad agreement about the need for transformation in the Ethiopian agricultural sector (see e.g. ILRI, 2011; ATA, 2016), one could imagine this system being transformed in a number of different ways, either through conventional intensification strategies, or as we focus on here, through sustainable intensification approaches. These kinds of transformations would entail very different configurations of resources, practices, actors and institutions with
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