

Climate forecast information: the status, needs and expectations among smallholder agro-pastoralists in Machakos district, Kenya

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Abstract

The potential use of seasonal climate forecasts in farm and resource management has been studied in a number of cultural contexts around the world. Many of these studies reveal difficulties that smallholders encounter in accessing, interpreting and applying forecasts for their own benefit. This study looked at the awareness of and usage of climate forecast information in central Kenya in the aftermath of the 1997/98 El Niño event. Household surveys were conducted in Machakos District, Kenya, in January 2001. Retrospective and concurrent awareness and application of seasonal forecast information was assessed for 240 households across a range of agro ecological zones. The results show high degree of awareness and use of forecasts. Farmers discussed both actual and potential application of forecasts for both above-normal and below-normal rainfall. The influence of the El Niño tendency to increase the rainfall as in the case of 1997/98 El Niño was clear from their emphasis on strategies to mitigate the impacts of above-or below-normal rainfall. Applications of information in both crop and livestock management are documented. Constraints still exist, such as interpretation of information, relevance of the variables forecast to the management decisions of concern, confidence in the forecasts, and timely and affordable access to resources such as seeds. We suggest that collaborative efforts between the forecast providers and the users of information may be directed towards addressing these constraints. For instance in case of abnormal phenomenon such as droughts or floods, forecasts can be closely followed by early warning campaigns with clear guidelines of how to prepare, distributed through the FM radio in local languages order to abate human suffering.