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“Rural Poverty Reduction through
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Can Agricultural Research Impact on the Poor? — Evidence from Dry Marginal Areas in Syria and Yemen

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Abstract

Both public and private agricultural investment have always favoured the more productive areas where the potential for increasing yields and returns to investment are higher. The less favourable areas, where inherent agroecological conditions, low and erratic rainfall, eroded soils, steep slopes, small holdings and poor infrastructure prevail, are given low priority. This resource allocation is mainly justified on the basis of economic efficiency. The indirect positive impacts, in terms of off-farm employment and lower food prices, of the investments in more favourable environments on the poor are obvious. However, the environmental costs associated with the poverty-land-degradation relationship, the social costs of the high rate of migration to cities with burgeoning urban slums, the persistent rural poverty, and recent evidence suggesting comparable returns to investment in less favourable areas and larger impact on poverty than in the more favourable areas, raise fresh questions on the rationale for continued low levels of investment in the dry areas.

Based on the results obtained from participatory research methods and quantitative analysis, the paper first describes and compares the livelihoods of rural communities in two marginal environments in Syria and Yemen, and identifies typologies of farming households based on their livelihood strategies and assets. The paper then examines the importance of agriculture in the rural livelihoods and the potential for production technology to increase farm income in these dry land environments. The paper identifies pervasive policies that negatively affect the rural poor in the case of Syria and critical gaps between policies targeting the rural poor and their implementation at the community level in the case of Yemen. There is, in both cases, complete absence of services such as credit, extension, veterinary and weak market access. We argue that lack of investment in rural institutions, services and infrastructure limits the potential impact of production technology and its relevance as poverty alleviation strategy. The study highlights the need for greater attention to policy, marketing, and rural livelihoods research in order to identify critical rural development opportunities for poverty alleviation in these dry areas.

Keywords: Agriculture, dry areas, livelihood, poverty, Syria, Yemen