

NSF-AERC-IGC Workshop on Agriculture and Development

3rd and 4th December 2010, Whitesands Hotel, Mombasa

Report on Activities

The National Science Foundation (NSF) and the International Growth Center (IGC) funded a workshop in collaboration with the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) in Mombasa, Kenya over the 3-4 December, 2010.

The Workshop was planned to be a one day event on Agriculture and Development in Africa, scheduled on the 4th of December, right after the AERC Biannual meetings that were being in held in Mombasa starting on the 29th of November. Given that there was an AERC program committee meeting on the 3rd of December, the IGC researchers who came in for the Workshop planned a Technical Session for the conference presenters and for the other AERC researchers attending. This report outlines these two days of activities and accomplishments from this collaboration.

The Technical Session was organized by Chris Udry and Tavneet Suri. In addition, two IGC Agriculture Program members also presented in this Technical Session, Douglas Gollin and William Masters. Each of the four researchers have a strong focus on agriculture in their own research and presented on topics related to their specific interests in agriculture. The topics included: understanding the importance of spatial correlations in agricultural data; how to empirically estimate heterogeneous returns to technologies; the importance of spillovers of agriculture into non-agriculture; and understanding how to encourage innovation in agriculture. The presentations by the four IGC researchers were excellent - the topics were all extremely relevant for the other researchers in the room. Each of the presenters generated a lot of group discussion, which will no doubt lead to a number of future collaborations.

These presentations were followed by short student presentations - six students from Harvard, MIT and Yale who are interested in agriculture issues were invited to the Workshop and the Technical Session. Each gave a short ten minute presentation on their research interests. This was a great way for the students to present very early stage ideas and get feedback from researchers on the ground who have an immense amount of local knowledge. The final few hours of the Technical Session were designed as a group activity. Everyone was asked to write down what they thought was the most important outstanding research or policy question in agriculture in Africa. The two organizers of the Technical Session then combined all these responses into five main questions. The attendees were then split into groups of four and each group was allocated one of the five questions to brainstorm and come up with a way of answering it, what data would they need, how the question could be approached and how a

convincing analysis performed to answer the question. The groups then presented their answers. This may have been one of the most fruitful parts of Technical Session in terms of collaboration - the IGC researchers and the PhD students were spread through the groups as were any other researchers who were from the same organization. At least one PhD student has started some work with a set of Ugandan researchers as a result of this activity, with others to follow.

The Workshop itself consisted of six papers, presented by researchers from all over the world, quite literally. Presenters came in from the US, Zimbabwe, Paris, Cameroon and Nigeria. The papers were grouped into three sessions and the sessions were designed to allow plenty of time for group discussion. The sessions were on agriculture and growth, technology adoption, and the organization of agriculture. The papers were exceptional, the discussants all provided excellent feedback and the other participants gave excellent comments to all the presenters. The papers represented not just a variety of topics in agriculture, spanning both macro as well as micro topics, but also a variety of methods. The Chairs for the sessions were commendable, with the senior researchers of the AERC participating. A large number of AERC researchers participated in the Workshop, which was a very important part of the reason it was so successful. In addition to the already mentioned IGC researchers and PhD students and the AERC researchers, a few of the resource people for the AERC stayed on to attend and participate (including Mohsin Khan and Stephen O'Connell). There was also representation from the Brookings Institution - Dr Mwangi Kimenyi, Director of the Africa Growth Initiative, attended and he invited researchers from a few of the policy organizations that Brookings supports in four countries across Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Nigeria.

Overall, the Workshop brought together some exciting new papers on the forefront of research on agriculture in Africa, a number of which were presented by local African researchers. It also clearly illustrated the strengths of the researchers on the ground in Africa. Probably the most successful part of the Workshop was built into its design - there was a lot of time allowed for comments on the papers as well as for interactions between the various researchers at the Workshop. The papers at the Workshop highlighted the fact that an increasing number of researchers based in Africa collect their own primary data to understand agricultural issues in Africa. This easily led to discussions of not just how to improve the papers presented, but also what other important, policy relevant research questions could be answered.

One important aim of this Workshop was to create an environment that would encourage collaborations between researchers based in Africa and those outside interested in African agriculture. That was certainly accomplished across the course of the two days. In fact, the organizers have received emails from at least two researchers not based in Africa who are

hoping to be able to work with local researchers they met and interacted with during the course of the two days.

Finally, it should be noted that this was the first NSF funded Workshop related to economics to be held in Africa. Not only is it striking that it has taken this long for there to be such a conference, but given how successful this was, it seems that there should be an attempt to make this a more regular event.