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Dynamic Drylands ep 5: 'Farming after fighting: how farmers recover when wars end'

In this episode of Dynamic Drylands podcast, an expert discusses how smallholder farmers recover after fighting—and why they receive so little support.

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Below is an edited transcript of "Farming after fighting: how farmers recover when wars end", the latest episode of Dynamic Drylands podcast. We recommend listening to it in its original form for the full effect. You can do so on Acast, Amazon Music, Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or watch on YouTube below:

Bola Mosuro: Around the world right now, some 35 countries are grappling with conflict—many of them for years, even decades. And while wars eventually end, peace brings its own challenges: how to restart economic growth and social progress after so much destruction.

Steve Wiggins: Farming is especially vulnerable to conflict. Crops can be burned, animals can be slaughtered, irrigation pumps can be smashed, barns can be burned down. And farmers are people in the Global South with few resources. They tend to be disproportionately poor. So people worry considerably about how you would get agriculture—often the core of the economies of the Global South—how you get it back up and running when peace is finally restored.

Bola: Steve Wiggins is an agricultural economist who has been working on agriculture and rural development since 1972. He's part of a team that led research to find out how farmers are recovering from crises on their own—and what governments and donors could be doing to support them.

So when peace finally comes, how do you get farming—and with it, development—back on its feet?

Let's hear more from Steve, who tells us about the results from SPARC's report, *Farming after Fighting*:

Steve: Well one of the principal findings, in fact the principal finding of the report, is that in almost all cases, agriculture recovered strongly, perhaps more strongly than anyone could

have hoped, and that much of the increase in production was coming from small farms—not from large commercial estates, plantations, big farmers or anything like that. It was coming from smallholders.

So that was the first gratifying result there. Now, how were smallholders doing that? Well, it was very simply by hard work. They were going back to their fields, fields which had often been abandoned for many years. Nevertheless, the increases in production were very, very considerable, and so output grew rapidly when peace was restored.

So look, the other big finding was: the way that smallholders were able to rebuild their agriculture when peace was restored; but very surprisingly they got very, very little support from their governments to do so.

In almost all of these countries, leaders did not put their faith in smallholders. They saw small farms, not very technical—they saw that as poverty and the past. And they wanted to see a transformation of their agricultural systems into something that was larger scale, better technology, more machinery, capital knowhow, you name it. This was nonsense. Nonsense! Any attempt that they ever made to get larger-scale farms going was always half baked. And the real boost to production came from the smallholders. And the smallholders do have the ability to gradually ramp up their operations and use better seeds, use more fertiliser, use more irrigation and apply better technology, but not in one colossal jump forward.

Now the big problem with the dreamers who have the colossal leap forward is they nearly always ignore the sorts of details of farming that a smallholder would never ignore. They bring in tractors where mechanisation doesn't make sense. No small farmer would spend money on a tractor, a massive investment, without checking the tractor would actually work on their fields and work well. They put in big irrigation schemes and they don't ask many questions about how on earth the irrigation scheme will actually be operated by ordinary field staff when it's in there. They're just fascinated by the big engineering challenge of getting the water to the fields, and so they spend a heck of a lot of money on a big irrigation scheme that never fully works. Now when smallholders go for irrigation, they do it at small scale. They work with friends and neighbours at village level, where everybody can trust each other that they will maintain the canals, that they will operate things, they'll give fair shares of water to everybody… And small-scale irrigation schemes run locally actually work. Yes—giant schemes that governments have come in, dreaming away, often with big corporations behind them, also dreaming away—they founder on the rocks of reality.

Now this absolutely of course burns me. You know history shows we should have faith in small farmers—they can do it—from the Green Revolution onwards and indeed before the Green Revolution—smallholders have shown that they can do everything that society would want them to do which is to produce more, more productively, with gains for everybody in society.

So what should they do with the small resources which they have? Repair the roads and bridges if they need repairing. Restore irrigation works if those have been damaged. Re-open schools and health posts. Get water supplies running. These are all really important for people to live their everyday lives and to have hope for the future, sending their kids to schools and making sure that some of the diseases that they face they've got the drugs to combat them. And finally on the list is to get agricultural research and extension systems back up and running and having agents in the countryside who can go from farmer to

farmer and say “Have you tried this”, “Here's a better seed”—that can produce good effects.

Government, of course, also needs to make sure that the macroeconomy is functioning, that there's an investment climate. So it's common-sense things, for the most part, which will then allow ordinary farmers to get on with their lives and to do the things those ordinary farmers would like to do, which is: to farm a little bit better and to be a little bit more prosperous.

Bola: Steve’s work on farming after fighting really underlines a bigger story here about drylands development: messages I’ve been hearing again and again throughout this series. We’ve heard about how resilient people in the drylands are, and how they are adapting and innovating in the face of new challenges.

Such resilience belies or challenges the common misconception that people living in the drylands are helpless and in need of radical change.

We’ve also heard that people aren’t always paying attention to what works in the drylands. Policymakers and donors often focus on big solutions. They suggest irrigated agriculture, urbanisation and livestock intensification—which simply don’t work. Meanwhile the smaller, grassroots, indigenous, locally led, successful efforts go underfunded.

Here’s Margie Buchanan-Smith, policy and humanitarian researcher, talking about the importance of listening:

Margie Buchanan-Smith: In the international world we need to get out of some of our boxes and some of our conventional ways of working. And especially in Sudan we really have to listen better, to informed researchers who are still on the ground, to civil society actors. And we have to do it more on their terms than ours. We need to be really careful we don’t put people at risk but we make it possible for them to communicate with us. And we really need to listen, rather than coming in with our pre-determined questions and ideas about how things work. And that’s how we’ll understand the nuance and that’s how we’ll get it right in terms of supporting trades and markets.

Bola: This is just as true for companies and NGOs developing new tech for drylands communities, as Mark Kaigwa, founder and CEO at Nendo, explains:

Mark Kaigwa: If I could offer one recommendation for organisations looking to serve pastoralist communities… For me, it would be to listen first, collaborate, to discover, and prototype quickly. I think the listening goes pretty underrated. We often sometimes approach it as “build it and they will come”. And then the prototyping just means if you can travel with a small three-person team, it might not be the most simple of conditions, but the human-centred design process we've seen in our experience can happen pretty rapidly where we're spending a day in the field, an afternoon building, even if it's very low fidelity prototypes, trying something out—and making sure to just embed with people from those communities, even as we build. That's what we've seen in common with some of the most interesting, most enduring, and certainly the solutions that mean the most and have the best uptake amongst pastoralists.

Bola: None of these messages are new. In fact, they’ve been around for decades. But too often, development practitioners aren’t asking the hard questions.

Perhaps the biggest challenge for policymakers and development practitioners in the

drylands is this idea that we can't solve everything—but by celebrating and supporting what's working, we can start to make a difference.

Here's Dr. Dorice Agol from the London School of Economics from episode 2:

Dorice Agol: I'm always thinking we need to go there empty handed. Because the thing is, we always think that we can go with a bag of solutions without actually listening to the people and asking and understanding: what is it that they want? Because the dryland communities, there's a lot of complexity in terms of culture and economy and also social life, and it's really complex. And also just looking at community or the community members—because some household but not benefit. And we have to think of issues of gender and disability and age, because I found in one of the one of the water projects that even though access to water was physical, access to water economically was not possible for some households who could not afford it.

Bola: We read a lot of doom narratives about the drylands of Africa and the Middle East: as places which are inherently conflict-affected, unproductive and poor. And there is certainly a lot to be concerned about: from the civil wars tearing up people's lives in Sudan and Yemen to jihadism and unrest across parts of West Africa, the Sahel and Horn of Africa.

Yet if there's a message from this series, it's that the drylands of Africa and the Middle East are worth investing in. They're full of potential, most of it untapped. Herders and farmers are the economic engine of the drylands—and with just a little support they can continue to have a critical place in the region's development.

I'm Bola Mosuro and this has been Dynamic Drylands. Thank you to everyone who has contributed their time and expertise to this series. And thank you for listening. You can find out more about the entire SPARC programme from the links in the show notes.

Hosted by Bola Mosuro. Contributors: Steve Wiggins, Margie Buchanan-Smith, Mark Kaigwa, Dorice Agol.

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