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Innovating for sustainability in rural Uganda - Developing and implementing local approaches to global challenges

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Sustainability innovations are understood as innovations that reconcile economic, environmental, and social goals (Strambach & Surmeier, 2016). These types of innovations aim to address societal needs and disrupt established social practices and relationships to pursue opportunities to promote transformative sustainable change (Littlewood et al., 2022; Strambach, 2017). Therefore, sustainability innovations are inherently connected with changing social practices and institutional change (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Nilsson, 2019).

Innovating for sustainability is not a straightforward process and more research is needed that investigates the complex negotiation and development processes that underlie sustainability innovations (Cillo et al., 2019). Currently, most empirical research on sustainability innovations is limited to the Global North, and the roles of African actors as agents of change have been largely overlooked (Littlewood et al., 2022; Loorbach et al., 2017). Therefore, there is a strong need for comparative research within and across African countries to investigate how different institutional environments influence the development, implementation and diffusion of sustainability innovations, and how they can contribute to transformative sustainable change.

This contribution addresses this research gap by focusing on Uganda and is guided by the question: How do local actors address interrelated social, economic and environmental needs in challenging contexts in innovative ways? Based on a qualitative research design, it analyses how local actors identify and leverage opportunities to promote sustainability innovations within rural farming communities that are strongly impacted by the effects of climate change. The empirical insights reveal three phases in the development process of sustainability innovations in rural Uganda that are characterized by different actor constellations and guided by different institutional logics. The findings also underline the need to build legitimacy and trust, and a deep understanding of local context conditions as a pre-requisite for the development and implementation of sustainability innovations. These processes evolve over relatively long periods of time. Considering the urgency of climate change challenges, the contribution argues that the development and implementation of sustainability innovations needs to be led by locally embedded actors. Policy makers and international development organizations should adequately resource and support local actors.

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