



## **Why Do Smallholder Farmers Dis-adopt Conservation Agriculture? Insights from Malawi**

Edna Chinseu, Andrew Dougill, and Lindsay Stringer

University of Leeds, School of Earth & Environment, Leeds, United Kingdom (a.j.dougill@leeds.ac.uk)

International donors and advisory bodies, national governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are all actively promoting conservation agriculture (CA) as a route to sustainable agricultural development, recognising the importance of agriculture to the national economy and livelihoods of rural communities. CA is anchored in 3 principles: i) minimum soil disturbance, ii) continuous soil cover and iii) crop associations. It is advocated on the basis of improving crop yields, income and/or profits; reducing production costs; and conserving soil and water. Despite huge investments made by CA proponents, many farmers only practice CA for a short time. They subsequently dis-adopt (abandon) the seemingly appropriate innovation and revert back to conventional tillage practices. While factors affecting the (initial) adoption of agricultural technologies have been studied extensively, dis-adoption has rarely been investigated. Improving our understanding of dis-adoption of seemingly appropriate and sustainable interventions is vital for long-term sustainable land management, food security and for ensuring sustained impacts of agricultural development project interventions more broadly.

This research investigates why smallholder farmers abandon CA practices in Malawi by exploring farmers' experiences of CA and their implications in dis-adoption. A mixed methods approach was used, involving household questionnaire survey and focus group discussions with smallholder farmers. Findings reveal that reasons for dis-adoption are multi-dimensional and multi-layered. While CA proponents are marketing CA as a time saving, labour saving and yield improving technology, many farmers report contrary experiences. Findings also showed that farmers lacked ownership of CA projects and encountered various social challenges, which coupled with unfulfilled expectations, led to dis-adoption. In sub-Saharan Africa, this suggests that there is a need to: (1) market CA as a climate-resilience and sustainable land management technology, not simply a commercial one based on increased yields; (2) develop and better communicate to smallholder farmers the opportunities for low input CA; and, (3) genuinely involve farmers and community leaders from the project design stage, integrating their preferences and cultural norms to reinforce project ownership.