

Learned Helplessness and Agricultural Investment among Poor Farmers: An Experimental Study in Rural Uganda

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Abstract : Poor farmers in developing countries typically do not have the resources or access to institutions to protect themselves against all kinds of income shocks, which makes their farm income highly sensitive to weather and crop price fluctuations, and various other intervening forces. Consequently, the relationship between farming effort and farming outcomes can be noisy, potentially resulting in a situation in which farmers perceive little personal control over the outcomes of their farming efforts. This perceived lack of control can result in learned helplessness in some farmers, who would then be less motivated to invest in their farm. This paper presents the results of a household survey and controlled field experiment conducted in ten villages in a farming area in eastern Uganda with a view to examining the link between learned helplessness and agricultural investment. The results show that (I) farmers with a more pessimistic attributional style for negative life events invest less in their farm, (II) an experience of uncontrollability over income in a priming task increases investment in the farm in a subsequent task if losses in the priming task are small, and decreases investment in the subsequent task if losses are moderate or big, and (III) the relationship between the number of income shocks experienced in the past two years and investment in the farm is more negative among farmers with a more pessimistic attributional style. These results are in line with the reformulated learned helplessness theory underlying this research, which leads this paper to conclude that learned helplessness can cause agricultural underinvestment in a developing country context, potentially contributing to a poverty trap.

Keywords : agricultural investment, attributional style, farmers, learned helplessness, poverty, income shocks

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