Exchanging Experience with Conservation Agriculture
Towards Climate Resilience

Authors: LI Hongwen, XIE Mei, HE Jin
Art drawing: JIANG Heping
Acknowledgements

Technical and Language Editor: William CRITCHLEY

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The conservation agriculture technology won four national scientific and technological awards in China, and is among the key areas of technological innovation in agriculture that the government is promoting domestically.

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Hello, My name is Maria. I work at the Ministry of Agriculture. I’m looking forward to hearing about China’s experience, and bringing it back to Africa.

Pleased to meet you! I am Amos and I’m a farmer. I won a farming prize to visit China! I wonder how Chinese farmers manage to increase crop production. And I am excited to climb the Great Wall.
It is our pleasure to meet you, Mr. Li. My name is Li Long. Welcome to my farm.

Thank you for inviting us! It is our pleasure to meet you, Mr. Li.

I hear that you are having a bad drought. But I see that your crops are doing very well. What is your trick?

Well, my “trick” is conservation agriculture.
Did you say "conservation agriculture"? I’ve seen it in Zambia. Tell us more about it.

Conservation agriculture? I’ve heard about it. It’s reported to be a common practice now in the USA and Brazil, and is spreading within Latin America and to Central Asia.

1. No plow, no till

2. Cover the soil

3. Rotate crops from year to year

It is a new way of growing crops that saves labor and makes the land healthy. Three important things....
How have you benefited from this new way of farming?

In a lot of ways! First, less soil erosion in my field. Remember point 1, “Don’t plow”? Plowed fields without vegetation cover get easily eroded by wind and water.

Soil erosion is a big problem in our region ....

Yes, you often see earth-colored water running off farm lands.
I heard about the "Great Dust Bowl" of the last century in the US. That was because of plowing large fields year after year. To address this problem, the US started no-till.

We also have bad dust storm problems, and they affect cities too. Soil erosion used to be my headache. That was partially why I decided to stop plowing.

No plow? How do you sow seeds? I use a disc plow to loosen the soil ....

Not even an animal-drawn plow?
Actually, we say: “The deeper you plow, the more you lose!”

Plowing exposes organic matter, releases greenhouse gases

Plowing disturbs soil organisms

Plowing creates a hard plough pan

Plowing reduces water infiltration and moisture holding

Li Long, in our region, when heavy tropical rains hit bare soil, the runoff washes away topsoil. Can conservation agriculture help?

Yes! Remember the second point of conservation agriculture?

“Cover the field”
... and when soil is covered with residues, the surface wind speed is slowed down.

... it reduces soil blown from farmland too.

Right, Amos. Under conservation agriculture, I leave crop residues in the field to cover bare soil after harvesting. So, runoff and evaporation are both reduced.

I see ... more moisture is kept in the soil for crops to grow. It helps during dry spells or droughts.
Also, burning releases greenhouse gases, and smoke pollutes the air.

At home, I burn crop residues. It clears the field, and makes it look tidy before planting.

Oh, no. I used to do so too. But no more! Under conservation agriculture, you don't burn residues. Burning crop residues is like burning your fertilizer.

It is growing crops in sequence, taking advantage of their different agronomical features.
For me, after wheat harvest, I directly seed maize with no-till. Sometimes, I add a legume crop to improve soil nutrients and control pests.

Some farmers grow a cereal crop, followed by a cash crop like cotton...then, a legume crop, such as beans. In Africa, farmers often use crop association through intercropping rather than crop rotation.
Some innovative farmers practice agroforestry, using faidherbia trees in croplands. They call them fertilizer trees, whose nitrogen-rich leaves drop on the ground during the cropping season, enriching soil, and making crops stronger.

That is so interesting and innovative.

What crops work well under conservation agriculture?

You can use it for most crops. I grow maize, wheat, groundnuts, soybeans, and even rice.
Well, you should begin at harvest. Either you harvest your crops manually or by machine, leave 20 cm height of residue on the ground.

Straw management

What if we need crop residues to feed livestock? How do you manage it?

I cut the upper half of my maize crop for livestock, leaving the lower half on the ground. I also started to grow a fodder crop this year.

Li Long, this is all wonderful. Now let us get to specifics. What do you advise me to begin with if I want to do conservation agriculture?
How much residue should I leave in the field?

The more, the better. If you don’t have enough, you should at least cover 30% of the field. Distribute the residues evenly.

Does conservation agriculture require special seeds?

No. I use undamaged seeds with a high germination rate. I pre-mix them with chemicals against pests and diseases.
You can use no-till seeders like these. Over time, mulching makes the soil soft to work with.

How do you seed if you don’t plow? Wouldn’t the ground be too hard to sow?
I spray pesticide. But best to use integrated pest management measures.

How do you deal with pests and diseases, with all the straw on the ground?

You can weed by hand, herbicide or machine. You should control weeds before they set seed, so weeds become less of a problem over time.

How do you control weeds if you don’t plow?
I hear conservation agriculture could increase manual labor input. But you said it reduced labor input. How?

I used to do four operations. Now I do only two. Big savings!

Can you ensure good crop yield?

I can get 7 tons per hectare of maize, higher than the conventional method.

I see ... Lower input costs, higher yields, these lead to increased income!

1. Harvest & chopping
2. Plow
3. Leveling, pressing
4. Seeding
Conservation agriculture stores carbon in soils, and reduces GHG emissions. It is climate-smart. Absolutely!

We farmers can be climate-smart. Healthy land and sustained production make us better prepared for climate change.

Li Long, was it easy for you to switch to conservation agriculture?

It has been a learning process. I learnt it from these sources....
Li Long, how does government support conservation agriculture?

Pleased to meet you. Now, China has 6 million ha under conservation agriculture. Our government has supported it in 4 ways ....

1. Demonstration in areas with potential to scale up
2. Incentives to the private sector for manufacturing affordable machinery
3. Subsidy on CA machinery
4. Research and training

Hmmm... It is best to talk to our extension officer, Ms. Jiang Ying.
First look at this seeder, specially designed for no-till. It does everything in one operation. It has also anti-blocking, stubble breaking, and depth control functions.

Can you explain more about machinery?

This tractor mounted chisel ripper opens shallow planting furrows.

This is a combine harvester with residue chopper. It spreads straw evenly on the fields as it harvests.
It seems that the scaling up of conservation agriculture in China benefited a lot from innovative mechanization, right?

Right. Innovation in agricultural mechanization has helped a lot.

Indeed, it is a key for me to switch to this new farming practice.

Where does conservation agriculture work well?

Here, we found that it works more effectively in regions where:
1. Soil moisture is a constraint.
2. Farmers have surplus residues or burn them to clean ground.
3. Labor is short.

Farmers burn residues

Soil moisture is a constraint

Labor is short
I hope one day I can visit your countries. Please join us for dinner, taste our local food produced by conservation agriculture!

Seeing is believing. I will share what I learnt with our farmers. Thank you, Li.

Today has been wonderful.

I have seen how conservation agriculture works in China. It can help us feed our families and raise income, while reducing soil erosion and climate change impact!
Dear colleagues,

Conservation agriculture can help address issues of productivity, land degradation and climate resilience. Our government should support extension, farmer learning and agricultural mechanization.

Conservation agriculture pays – I have seen it in China.
China – No-till direct seeder driven by two-wheel tractor

China – No-till maize seeder with herbicide sprayers

China – Jab planter

China – Li Seeder

China – After rain, no logging in CA field

China – Comparison of crop growth
China – No-till maize field after the first crop (left). Second maize crop in the same field (right).

China – No-till sowed wheat in the maize residue field.

Kenya – Maize intercropping with dolichos lablab.

Kenya – Pigeon pea after the maize harvest.

Zambia – Faidherbia trees in maize field (GART).

Burkina Faso – Millet intercropping with cowpea.
Dr. LI Hongwen is Professor of Agriculture and Changjiang Scholar at China Agricultural University. He is the Head of the Conservation Tillage Research Center at the Ministry of Agriculture, and Chairman of the Agricultural Mechanization Committee of the China Society of Agricultural Engineering. He has over 20 years of research experience in conservation agriculture. He has published over 180 papers, received 70 patents, and won three times second prize of the National Award for Technical Advancement for his work on conservation tillage. Email: lhwen@cau.edu.cn

Dr. XIE Mei is Senior Natural Resources Management Specialist at the Climate Change Group of the World Bank. She has over 20 years of development experience in sustainable land and water management, and worked in regions of South Asia, East Asia, Central Asia, Middle East and Africa. While at the World Bank Institute, she was program leader for climate-smart agriculture, and led to produce a series of learning products and global eCourses relating to sustainable land management. Email: mxie@worldbank.org

Dr. HE Jin is Associate Professor of Agricultural Engineering at China Agricultural University. His research focuses on agricultural machinery design, residue management, conservation tillage, and soil protection. He has published dozens of papers, and has won second prize for the National Award for Technical Advancement on Conservation Tillage in China. Email: hejin@cau.edu.cn

Ms. HUAN Yu is Consultant at the Climate Change Group of the World Bank. Her work focuses on development and implementation of capacity building and knowledge exchange activities related to climate-smart agriculture, sustainable land-water management, and carbon finance in agriculture, forestry, and other land use. Email: yhuan@worldbank.org

This wonderful booklet offers hands-on, practical advice for farmers and extension workers interested in using conservation agriculture techniques to boost crop yields, soil quality and water retention. These practices represent some of the many ways we can become more ‘climate smart’, which is essential if we are to sustainably produce more food on less land to feed our growing planet.

~Juergen Voegele, Senior Director, Agriculture Global Practices, World Bank

Conservation Agriculture: a modern farming practice with ancient Chinese philosophy.

~Ke Bingsheng, President, China Agricultural University

Smart use of land resources can turn agriculture around from being part of the problem to being part of the climate change solution.

~Saidl Mkomwa, Executive Secretary, African Conservation Tillage Network

Sharing of experience between practitioners through South-South exchanges is an effective way to learn from mistakes of the past and scale up successes to meet climate change challenges.

~Neeraj Prasad, Manager, Climate Change Knowledge, World Bank

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