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Guest editors' foreword

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This is a special issue of the *African Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics* (AfJARE), with papers contributed by the faculty members of the Collaborative Master's in Agricultural and Applied Economics (CMAAE), one of the collaborative training programmes of the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC).

The African Economic Research Consortium (AERC) is a premier capacity-building institution for the advancement of research and graduate training that informs economic policies in Africa. The principal mission is to strengthen local individual and institutional capacity to conduct independent, rigorous inquiry into problems pertinent to the management of Sub-Saharan African (SSA) economies. This is done through synergistic programmes combining economics research with postgraduate training in economics, and in agricultural and applied economics.

The training programme of AERC augments the pool of economic researchers, policy analysts and policy makers in Sub-Saharan Africa by supporting graduate studies in economics and improving the capacities of departments of economics and agricultural economics in the participating universities. This is achieved primarily through harnessing and pooling human and other resources to produce standardised and high-quality degree programmes. The three programmes are the Collaborative Master's Programme in Economics (CMAP), which spans departments of economics in 26 public universities; the Collaborative PhD Programme in Economics (CPP), which brings together eight participating universities; and the Collaborative Master's in Agricultural and Applied Economics (CMAAE) programme, which is spearheaded by departments of agricultural economics in 17 public universities across 13 eastern, central and southern African countries.

The CMAAE gives voice to themes around agriculture, food security and environmental management, including climate change. The programme entails a coursework component, which is split into core courses delivered in the first two semesters on the campus of the university offering the degree, and elective courses offered at the Shared Facility for Specialisation and Electives (SFSE). The SFSE, usually held at the University of Pretoria, runs for a period of four months from August to November every year, with lectures delivered by a team of visiting professors sourced internationally.

The faculty research programme of AERC-CMAAE supports the networked university staff to develop their chosen areas of specialisation through the provision of faculty research grants. Faculty research at the frontier of a specific issue can expand knowledge, sharpen skills, raise morale and enrich the programme curriculum. Traditionally, the AERC senior policy seminars have been the forums for sharing research outputs with senior African policy makers for policy dialogue. However, as of 2018, faculty research outputs have been disseminated through regional policy

forums targeting the southern, eastern, western and central Africa regions. Three forums were held until May 2019, one each for southern, east and west Africa. The themes of these forums were: *Enhancing resource use efficiency in smallholder agriculture in Southern Africa*; *Agricultural policies for improved health and wealth*; and *Financial inclusion for rural development*. These have generated insightful debates and useful feedback to AERC network researchers.

Efforts have been made to integrate the AERC-CMAAE faculty research programme into the AERC thematic research programme. To this end, the thematic group “E”, titled *Agriculture, climate change and natural resource management*, was officially inaugurated during the December 2015 biannual research workshop in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Since then, this thematic group has been oversubscribed by AERC thematic and faculty researchers under four main research projects; first, research by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation on the impact of agricultural, food and nutrition policies on nutrition outcomes in SSA; second, the GIZ/World Bank land economics and governance analytics research; third, research on the USAID/IFPRI beef and other agricultural value chains; and fourth, the Rutgers Consortium faculty research on trade, agricultural indicators and policy change.

In this special issue, we present four faculty research papers from three Sub-Saharan countries, namely Ethiopia, Malawi and Zimbabwe, documenting the results of research on natural resource management and agricultural microfinance. The results of the paper on the adoption of rainwater-harvesting technologies in Malawi show that the choice of technologies was influenced by land slope, farm size and soil texture, among other factors, and resulted in improved farmer income and food security. Using Pontryagin’s maximum principle and comparative statics, the paper on the optimisation of benefits from agriculture and wildlife land uses by wards in Zimbabwe indicates that there is a need to make it mandatory for communities bearing the cost of wildlife management to share in the revenue from wildlife. The second paper from Zimbabwe used the propensity score-matching approach to estimate the impact of conservation agriculture and discovered that the practice increases maize productivity and grain supply, particularly for female-headed households. The paper on microfinance in rural Ethiopia examines the characteristics of MFIs and the factors determining the choice between MFIs and informal institutions by farmers. The MFIs have achieved rapid growth in the number of beneficiaries, and also have gradually shifted away from their traditional primary targets, namely poor households, toward the not-so-poor households and even large-scale investors. The paper notes that, unless regulated, the commercialisation incentivises MFIs to transform themselves into conventional banks.

We acknowledge Prof Nick Vink, the immediate former Chief Editor of AfJARE, and the copy editor, Marisa Honey, for accepting our request to have the faculty research work published in a special issue of this esteemed journal. Gratitude also goes to the new editorial team, Dr Joshua Ariga and Dr Suresh Babu, the Chief Editor and Co-editor respectively, for the support they offered in the production of this special issue.

The African Economic Research Consortium

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