Agronomy is...

Dave Harris

ICRAF, Nairobi, Kenya & Bangor University, UK.
Agronomy is what we, as technology developers and promoters, believe is the principal means by which farmers make a living.

1. Farming is more than just agronomy.
   - Many more skills required for success.
   - Business planning, financial management, marketing, labour management, mechanics, veterinary, etc.

2. Farming is difficult.
   - In the UK, one to three years to learn all the skills necessary to farm successfully.
   - Even then many farms not financially viable without large subsidies.
   - 500 million smallholder farms. All have, can acquire or want these skills?

3. The small farm problem.
   - Small returns (money, value) from small farms and high risk. Poor incentives?
   - Improving agronomy might not be at the top of rural households’ wish lists for greater wellbeing.
   - We assume otherwise.
4. **Households are not only farmers.**
   - ‘Small farmers’ as ‘rural households’; livelihoods and the wider concept.
   - Improved agronomy one amongst competing opportunities for investment of additional resources.
   - Improved agronomic technologies should be more attractive in comparison with e.g. off-farm and non-farm employment, education, training, etc.

6. **Improved agronomy is useless unless adopted.**
   - Likelihood of adoption an inherent property of the technology itself rather than a consequence of the interaction between the technology and the potential adopter’s objectives, attitudes and circumstances.
   - Possible overestimation of the effectiveness in practice of the agronomic advances that we promote. Some possible reasons are:
     - ‘Sunk costs’.
     - Implementing new technologies consistently well on entire farms rather than in research plots.
     - Risks (and exposure to losses) associated with new technologies.

8. **What if rural households don’t want improved agronomy?**
   - If improved agronomy is not in the best interests of rural households is it ethical to continue to promote the adoption of improved agronomy? Are we wasting people’s time?
Thank you.