

# Learned helplessness and agricultural investment among small farmers: An experimental study in rural Uganda

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**Abstract**— The farm income of small farmers in developing countries, who lack the resources or access to institutions to protect themselves against all kinds of income shocks, is highly sensitive to external forces such as weather and crop price fluctuations. Consequently, the relationship between farming effort and farming outcomes could be tenuous for these farmers, potentially resulting in a perceived lack of control over farming outcomes. This perceived lack of control could result in learned helplessness in some farmers, who would then be less motivated to invest in their farm. As such, the psychological phenomenon ‘learned helplessness’ could be an explanatory factor of agricultural underinvestment in developing countries, frustrating agriculture’s potential to reduce food insecurity and poverty. 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 who score more towards the pessimistic extreme on an attributional style scale for negative 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 with real life implication if losses in the priming task are small, and *decreases* investment in the same 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 global and stable attributional style for both positive and negative events. These results are in line with the learned helplessness theory underlying this research, which leads this paper to conclude that learned helplessness could cause agricultural underinvestment among small farmers in a developing country context, potentially contributing to a poverty trap.

**Keywords**— Agricultural investment, attributional style, farmers, learned helplessness, poverty trap, Uganda, income shocks.