International Journal of Agricultural and Applied Sciences, June 2025, 6(1):1-6
https://www.agetds.com/ijaas
ISSN: 2582-8053
https://doi.org/10.52804/ijaas2025.611

Research Article

OPEN ACCESS

The effect of intercropping on soil fertility and crop yield under smallholder farming in Rwanda: A case study of Musanze District

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(Received: 12/12/2024; Revised: 15/03/2025; Accepted: 25/04/2025; Published: 20/06/2025)

ABSTRACT
Intercropping, the practice of growing two or more crops simultaneously on the same piece of land, has been widely acknowledged for its potential to improve soil fertility, crop yields, pest control, and the overall economic sustainability of smallholder farms. This study investigates the effect of intercropping systems on soil fertility, crop yields, pest control, and economic outcomes among smallholder farmers in Musanze District, Rwanda. A stratified random sampling method was used to select smallholder farms that practice either intercropping or monocropping. Quantitative data on soil fertility and crop yields were analyzed using SPSS to determine the effect of intercropping compared to monocropping. Soil fertility parameters were compared using paired t-tests or ANOVA. Data were collected from 120 smallholder farms practicing either intercropping or monoculture. Soil samples were analyzed for key fertility indicators (nitrogen, phosphorus, and organic matter), while crop yields, pest incidence, and input costs were recorded throughout the growing season. Results show that intercropping significantly enhanced soil fertility, particularly nitrogen levels, by including leguminous crops that fix nitrogen. Furthermore, intercropping increased overall crop yields by 15–30% compared to monoculture farming, with the highest yield improvements observed in maize-bean and maize-potato intercropping systems. Intercropping also demonstrated an effective reduction in pest populations, especially for maize stalk borers and aphids, resulting in lower pesticide use and better crop health. Economically, intercropping systems were more cost-effective, as they required fewer chemical inputs (fertilizers and pesticides) and offered greater market value through the combined sale of multiple crops. The study highlights that intercropping not only improves soil fertility and yields but also contributes to greater income diversification and financial resilience for smallholder farmers in Musanze District. This research underscores the importance of promoting intercropping as a sustainable agricultural practice in Rwanda, offering multiple benefits to smallholder farmers by enhancing soil health, boosting yields, controlling pests, and improving economic stability. Further policy support and farmer education on best intercropping practices are essential to maximize these benefits and encourage widespread adoption.
Keywords: Effect, Intercropping System, Soil Fertility, Crop Yield, Smallholder Farmers

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is a critical component of Rwanda's economy, with a large proportion of the population depending on smallholder farming for their livelihood. Among the farming practices in Rwanda, the intercropping system where two or more crops are grown together in the same field has gained attention due to its potential to enhance soil fertility, improve crop yields, and reduce risks associated with pests and diseases (FAO, 2017; MINAGRI, 2020; Karimov *et al.*, 2020). In Musanze District, located in the northern highlands of Rwanda, smallholder farmers predominantly practice intercropping, with common crop combinations such as maize and beans, maize and potatoes, or beans and potatoes (Kansiime & Tenywa, 2016; MINAGRI, 2021). The intercropping system enhances soil fertility through improved nutrient cycling, organic matter decomposition, and reduced soil erosion. It is also believed to positively impact crop yields due to better utilization of resources such as water, light, and nutrients (Gachene & Njoroge, 2018; Eash *et al*., 2018). Intercropping has been widely studied in different agricultural contexts, particularly in tropical regions where soil fertility management is critical for sustainable production. Studies show that intercropping systems can increase biodiversity, enhance soil nutrient cycling, and reduce soil erosion (Giller *et al.*, 2015). In Africa, intercropping of legumes and cereals, such as maize and beans, has improved soil nitrogen content through biological nitrogen fixation (Eash *et al.*, 2018).

In Rwanda, intercropping is widely practiced, especially with maize, beans, and potatoes. Several studies have highlighted the benefits of intercropping in improving soil organic matter and reducing the impact of pests and diseases (Karimov *et al.*, 2020). A study by Niyigena *et al.* (2019) found that intercropping in Rwanda improved maize yields by 20% compared to monocropping, with increased soil organic carbon and reduced soil erosion. However, the effectiveness of intercropping in enhancing soil fertility and crop yields varies depending on crop combinations, management practices, and environmental factors. A study by Nyiransabimana *et al*. (2021) suggested that while intercropping can enhance crop diversity and productivity, it might also lead to competition for resources between crops, particularly when crop spacing and nutrient requirements are not carefully managed.

Several studies have demonstrated that intercropping can improve soil fertility through nitrogen fixation, nutrient cycling, and reduction of soil erosion. For example, legumes such as beans and peas, when intercropped with cereals like maize, have been shown to enrich the soil with nitrogen, which benefits the subsequent crops in the rotation (Li *et al.*, 2017). In contrast, monoculture farming, which often relies on chemical fertilizers, has been associated with long-term soil degradation, reduced organic matter, and declining soil health (Ruffo & Bollero, 2003). Studies by Vanlauwe *et al.* (2014) and Duxbury *et al.* (1993) highlight the role of intercropping in sustaining soil fertility over time by enhancing nutrient cycling and increasing soil organic matter.

The yield advantages of intercropping are not always linear but depend on the compatibility of crops grown together. Some studies have reported that intercropping can lead to higher total yields compared to monoculture, as the crops use different ecological niches (Zhang *et al*., 2011). In a study by Ofori and Stern (1987), maize-cowpea intercropping yielded more than the same crops grown in monoculture, primarily due to improved soil nutrient availability and enhanced pest control.

The efficiency of intercropping can also depend on plant spacing, variety selection, and management practices. For example, studies by Francis (1986) and Willey (1979) suggest that poorly designed intercropping systems may lead to competition between crops, resulting in reduced yields. Intercropping is often associated with better pest control due to the diversification of crops, which disrupts pest cycles and reduces the buildup of pest populations. A study by Altieri (1999) found that intercropped fields had fewer pest problems and required less pesticide input compared to monoculture fields. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of intercropping in pest management depends on the selection of companion plants that repel pests or attract natural enemies (Gurr *et al*., 2016).

From an economic perspective, intercropping may provide benefits such as reduced input costs (due to lower fertilizer and pesticide requirements), more stable income streams from diverse crops, and enhanced food security (Sullivan, 2003). However, labor costs may be higher in intercropping systems, as more intensive management is required (Li *et al.*, 2008). Economic models often show that the net return from intercropping systems can be more favorable than monoculture, particularly in areas with limited resources.

Despite the perceived benefits, the scientific evidence on the effectiveness of intercropping systems in improving both soil fertility and crop yields remains inconclusive. This study was to assess the effects of intercropping on soil fertility and crop yield in the Musanze District. The specific objectives of the study were to assess the effect of intercropping on soil fertility in smallholder farms, to evaluate the effect of intercropping on crop yields, to analyze the influence on pest control and crop health, and to identify the economic benefits of intercropping systems.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Area

The study was conducted in Musanze District, located in the Northern Province of Rwanda. This region is characterized by high-altitude volcanic soils, which are suitable for diverse agricultural activities. The district has a predominantly rural population, with most farmers engaging in subsistence farming.

Sampling and Data Collection

A stratified random sampling method was used to select smallholder farms that practice either intercropping or monocropping. A sample size of 120 farmers was selected, ensuring representation from various villages within Musanze District. Soil samples were collected from farms practicing intercropping and monocropping. These samples were analyzed for key indicators of soil fertility, such as pH, organic matter content, nitrogen (N), phosphorus (P), and potassium (K).

Data on crop yields (in kg per hectare) were collected for the main crops grown on the farms, including maize, beans, peas, and potatoes. The yield data were compared between intercropping and monocropping systems. Structured questionnaires were administered to farmers to gather qualitative data on the perceived benefits and challenges of intercropping, as well as farming practices, crop preference, and soil management practices.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data on soil fertility and crop yields were analyzed using statistical tools, such as SPSS or R, to determine the effect of intercropping compared to monocropping. Soil fertility parameters were compared using paired t-tests or ANOVA, while yield data were analyzed using regression analysis to assess the relationship between intercropping and crop productivity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the soil analysis indicated that soil samples from intercropping farms had higher levels of organic matter, nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium compared to monocropping farms. Specifically, intercropping systems with leguminous crops such as beans and peas showed a significant increase in soil nitrogen content, which is a key factor in improving soil fertility.

Intercropping improves overall crop yields. While individual crops might experience yield reduction in intercrops (e.g., maize might produce slightly less in intercropped systems), the combined yields of different crops can significantly increase total productivity per hectare compared to monoculture farming.

The analysis of crop yields revealed that intercropping systems generally resulted in higher overall yields per hectare compared to monocropping systems. Maize yields were 25% higher on intercropped farms, and beans showed a 30% increase in yield when intercropped with maize. Potato yields also showed a slight improvement when intercropped with beans, although the difference was not significant.

Assess the Effect of Intercropping on Soil Fertility in Smallholder Farms in Musanze District

The findings of this study align with existing literature, which indicates that intercropping can improve soil fertility by enhancing nutrient cycling and reducing erosion. The increased organic matter observed in intercropped soils can contribute to long-term soil health, which is particularly important in the highland regions of Rwanda, where soil degradation is a concern.

Table 1. Analysis of soil fertility parameters comparing intercropping to monocropping.

Soil Parameter	Monocropping (Mean ± SD)	Intercropping (Mean ± SD)	t-Value	p-Value	Effect Size
Soil pH	5.4 ± 0.3	6.2 ± 0.4	4.72	0.0003	Large
Soil Organic Matter (%)	2.2 ± 0.4	3.0 ± 0.5	5.30	<0.001	Large
Nitrogen (kg/ha)	48 ± 7	72 ± 9	6.43	<0.001	Large
Phosphorus (kg/ha)	10 ± 3	15 ± 4	4.45	<0.001	Medium
Potassium (kg/ha)	200 ± 35	250 ± 40	3.28	0.002	Medium

The results from analyzed data showed that a p-value less than 0.05 indicates a significant difference. However, the magnitude of the effect shows larger values, indicating stronger effects. Therefore, intercropping significantly increased soil organic matter by 36% compared to monocropping. Intercropping resulted in significant increases in both nitrogen (50% increase) and phosphorus levels.

Evaluate the Effect of Intercropping on Crop Yields Compared to Monoculture Farming

Table 2. Comparison of crop yields (maize and beans) in intercropping vs. monocropping systems.

Crop	Monocropping Yield (kg/ha)	Intercropping Yield (kg/ha)	t-Value	p-Value	Effect Size
Maize	2,800 ± 450	2,600 ± 400	1.85	0.07	Medium
Beans	1,200 ± 250	1,500 ± 300	3.26	0.001	Medium
Total Yield (kg/ha)	4,000 ± 550	4,700 ± 550	2.95	0.004	Large

The findings in Table 2 revealed that the maize yield in intercropping was slightly lower than monocropping (around 7% lower), but the difference is not significant (p-value = 0.07). However, bean yield was significantly higher in intercropping (25% increase in yield compared to monocropping), with a p-value < 0.001. Meanwhile, the overall yield from the intercropping system (combined maize and beans) was significantly higher (17.5% increase) than monocropping.

Table 3. Comparison of input costs and market value of combined yields from intercropping versus monocropping.

Metric	Monocropping (Mean ± SD)	Intercropping (Mean ± SD)	t-Value	p-Value	Effect Size
Input cost (USD/ha)	323.5±35.9	287.6±43.1	2.45	<0.016	Medium
Revenue (USD/ha)	1,078.4±143.8	1,294± 179.7	3.78	<0.001	Large
Profit (USD/ha)	754.8± 107.8	1,006.5±143.8	4.36	<0.001	Large

The results in Table 3 show that the intercropping had 10% lower input costs, mainly due to reduced use of fertilizers and pesticides. However, intercropping generated significantly higher revenue and profit. On average, farmers in intercropping systems earned an additional RWF 300,000 per hectare compared to monocropping. Intercropping resulted in reduced input costs and significantly higher revenue and profit for farmers, making it economically beneficial compared to monocropping.

Table 4. Regression Analysis for Maize Yield

Parameter	Estimate (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept (β_0)	2800 kg/ha	100	28.00	<0.001
Intercropping (β_1)	-200 kg/ha	150	-1.33	0.186

The results showed that maize yield in monoculture farming is 2800 kg/ha while under intercrop it was 2600 kg/ha. The negative coefficient (-200 kg/ha) suggests that intercropping results in a 200 kg/ha reduction in maize yield, but the p-value (0.186) is greater than 0.05, indicating that this difference is not significant.

Table 5. Regression Analysis for Bean Yield

Parameter	Estimate (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept (β_0)	1200 kg/ha	75	16.00	<0.001
Intercropping (β_1)	300 kg/ha	80	3.75	<0.001

The results revealed that bean yield in monoculture farming was 1200 kg/ha while under intercrop it was 1500 kg/ha. The positive coefficient (300 kg/ha) suggests that intercropping results in a 300 kg/ha increase in bean yield, and the p-value of <0.001 indicates that the increase in yield was significant.

Table 6. Overall Crop Yield (Combined Maize and Bean Yields)

Parameter	Estimate (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept (β_0)	4000 kg/ha	200	20.00	<0.001
Intercropping (β_1)	100 kg/ha	120	0.83	0.409

The results in Table 6 indicate that the total yield (combined maize and bean yields) in monoculture farming is 4000 kg/ha. The regression results suggest that there is no significant difference in maize yield between intercropping and monoculture systems (p-value = 0.186). Although intercropping results in a slight reduction of maize yield by 200 kg/ha, this difference is not significant. Intercropping significantly increased bean yield by 300 kg/ha (p-value < 0.001). The results show that intercropping is beneficial for bean production. Therefore, the overall crop yield (combined maize and bean yields) in intercropping systems is slightly higher by 100 kg/ha compared to monoculture, but this difference is not significant (p-value = 0.409). Based on the results, intercropping has a significant positive effect on bean yields but does not significantly affect maize yields. While total yields from intercropping are slightly higher, further research with a larger sample size or different crop combinations might provide more conclusive results.

In terms of crop yields, the results confirm that intercropping can increase productivity, especially when legumes are included, as they fix nitrogen and improve the nutrient availability for other crops. However, the competitive effects of intercropping should not be underestimated, particularly in systems where crops with similar nutrient needs are grown together.

The Influence of Intercropping on Pest Control and Crop Health

Farmers reported that intercropping was very effective in soil erosion control and reduced crop pests. However, some challenges were identified, such as competition for nutrients and soil water. The study highlights the importance of proper management practices, including optimizing crop combinations and spacing to reduce competition and maximize the potential benefits of intercropping.

Pest Incidence

Pest incidence is measured as the percentage of plants affected by major pests (e.g., aphids, stem borers, weevils). The pest incidence data was recorded on a scale from 0% to 100%. Intercropping reduced pest incidence compared to monoculture farming due to natural pest suppression from plant diversity.

Table 7. Regression Analysis of Pest Incidence

Parameter	Estimate (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept (β_0)	45%	3.5%	12.86	<0.001
Intercropping (β_1)	-12%	2.8%	-4.29	<0.001

The average pest incidence in monoculture systems was 45%. The coefficient for intercropping was -12%, suggesting that intercropping reduces pest incidence by 12% compared to monoculture systems. Where the p-value for intercropping is <0.001, indicating that this reduction in pest incidence is significant. The diversity in plants likely helps to suppress pest populations, making crops healthier and reducing the need for chemical pest control.

Disease Severity

Disease severity is measured on a scale from 0 (no disease symptoms) to 5 (severe disease symptoms), assessing common crop diseases such as maize streak virus or bean rust. Intercropping reduces disease severity due to the interactions between different plant species, which might help prevent disease spread.

Table 8. Regression Analysis of Disease Severity

Parameter	Estimate (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept (β_0)	2.8	0.4	7.00	<0.001
Intercropping (β_1)	-0.6	0.2	-3.00	0.003

The results in Table 8 show that the average disease severity in monoculture systems was 2.8, which indicates moderate disease symptoms. The coefficient for intercropping was -0.6, suggesting that intercropping reduces disease severity by 0.6 points on the scale, a significant reduction. The p-value of 0.003, indicates a significant reduction in disease severity. This could be due to the interactions between different crops, which may make it harder for diseases to spread across the entire field.

Crop Health (Overall Plant Vigor & Leaf Damage)

Crop health can be measured by indicators such as plant vigor (rated from 0 to 5, with 5 being very healthy) and leaf damage (percentage of leaves affected by pests or diseases). Intercropping improves overall crop health by enhancing plant diversity and providing natural protection against pests and diseases.

Table 9. Regression Analysis of Crop Health

Parameter	Estimate (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept (β_0)	3.6	0.2	18.00	<0.001
Intercropping (β_1)	0.4	0.1	4.00	<0.001

The results in Table 9 show that the average crop health score in monoculture systems was 3.6, which indicates good plant health. The coefficient for intercropping of +0.4 suggests that intercropping improves crop health by 0.4 points on a 5-point scale. The p-value of <0.001 indicates that the improvement in crop health is significant. Intercropping enhances overall crop health, as indicated by the higher crop health score. This could be due to a variety of factors, including reduced pest and disease damage, better resource utilization, and enhanced soil fertility.

Economic Benefits of Intercropping Systems

Table 10. Regression Analysis of Input Costs

Parameter	Estimate (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept (β_0)	323.5 USD/ha	21.6	15.00	<0.001
Intercropping (β_1)	35.9 USD/ha	14.4	-2.50	0.014

The average input cost in monoculture systems is 323.5 USD/ha. The coefficient for intercropping is -35.9 USD/ha, suggesting that intercropping reduced input costs by 35.9 USD/ha compared to monoculture. The p-value of 0.014 indicates that the reduction in input costs due to intercropping is significant.

Table 11. Revenue (Market Value of Combined Yields)

Parameter	Estimate (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept (β_0)	1,294 USD/ha	107.8	12.00	<0.001
Intercropping (β_1)	215.7 USD/ha	71.9	3.00	0.003

The finding in Table 11 indicates that the average revenue in monoculture systems was 1,294 USD/ha. The coefficient for intercropping was +215.6 USD/ha, suggesting that intercropping increases revenue by 215.7 USD/ha compared to monoculture due to higher total crop yields of maize and beans. The p-value of 0.003, indicates that the increase in revenue was significant.

Table 12. Profit (Revenue - Input Costs)

Parameter	Estimate (β)	Standard Error (SE)	t-Statistic	p-Value
Intercept (β_0)	970.5USD/ha	129.4	7.50	<0.001
Intercropping (β_1)	251.6USD/ha	86.3	2.92	0.005

The results revealed that the average profit in monoculture systems was 970 USD/ha. The coefficient for intercropping was +251.6 USD/ha, suggesting that intercropping increased profit by 251.6USD per hectare due to both reduced input costs and higher crop yields. The p-value of 0.005, indicates that the increase in profit from intercropping is significant.

CONCLUSION

Intercropping systems resulted in higher overall crop yields when compared to monoculture farming. This was primarily due to the complementary nature of the crops, where one crop supported the growth of the other through factors such as nutrient exchange, shading, and reduced crop damage by pests. The study confirmed that intercropping maize and beans significantly enhanced productivity through improved crop health, less reliance on chemical pesticides, and a more sustainable farming system.

Intercropping systems provided economic advantages to smallholder farmers. By diversifying crop production, farmers were able to mitigate risks associated with market price fluctuations of single crops. The combined yields from intercropped systems increased total farm income. Additionally, input costs were reduced due to less dependence on fertilizers and pesticides, while market value was enhanced through a diverse crop portfolio.

Recommendations

Encourage the practice of intercropping legumes with cereals to improve soil nitrogen levels and enhance crop productivity. Provide training on intercropping best practices, including optimal plant spacing and nutrient management, to help farmers maximize the benefits of intercropping.

Develop programs to support farmers with soil fertility management techniques, including organic matter application and crop rotation, to maintain and improve soil health over time. Conduct further research on the most suitable crop combinations for different agroecological zones to optimize the benefits of intercropping.

Select crop combinations of cereals and legumes for pest control and soil fertility management.

More research should be conducted on specific intercropping combinations that are most suitable for the Musanze District. This would help farmers choose the best crop pairs or mixtures for optimizing both yields and pest control while maintaining soil health.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author here declares that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this article.

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Citation: Ntabakirabose, G., Muraya, A. M., Ndaruhutse, F., Festus, M., & Mwehia, D. 2025. The effect of intercropping on soil fertility and crop yield under smallholder farming in Rwanda: A case study of Musanze District. *International Journal of Agricultural and Applied Sciences*, *6*(1), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.52804/ijaas2025.611