Partnerships in Research with Indigenous Groups: A New Perspective for Agricultural Development

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Abstract

This paper presents analysis of issues pertinent to partnership in researching with local people. The aim of the paper is to review and argue the two main approaches in conducting agricultural research: conventional and participatory approaches that recognize farmers as partners. Emphasis is given to the methodological aspects from a comparative perspective with the conventional research approach. First, an overview on the prime usefulness of participatory approaches is presented followed by a little introduction on the meaning of indigenous knowledge in an attempt to justify for involving the periphery in agricultural research. It then analyses how local people and scientists organize themselves around agricultural research and extension. The third section draws on Ethiopian experiences in involving farmers in research with especial emphasis to the work of three organizations in forming partnerships. This is followed by a section that delineates the doubt of certain categories of professionals with participatory research methodology in revealing testable and measurable results within the realm of science. Reflection from Ethiopian experiences and the shift of focus in agricultural research are taken as points of departure for the argument and analysis. Lastly, it draws possible conclusion in relation to the needs for shifting towards an alternative perspective for doing agricultural research.
Introduction

Over the years, different approaches to agricultural research have been developed and the changing path denotes efforts made by different scholars to make the outcome of science relevant and employable to solve human problems. Some of these approaches include farming systems research, participatory action research, agricultural knowledge and information systems, participatory rural appraisal, participatory learning and action, an actor-oriented perspective that opens up windows on a particular social contexts and participatory technology development. The intention here is not to make distinction among these elements of participatory approaches as enough has been done already but rather to re-emphasize that their evolution does not imply a mere fashion. Nevertheless, it is to deprecate the persistent failure of the deterministic (conventional) approach to research in enhancing rural livelihoods in ever-changing human activity systems and to affirm the success of participatory approach through taking advantage of indigenous knowledge systems.

Partnership refers to pooling of efforts and resources to achieve a common goal by organizations of different ‘life worlds’ at times of resource scarcity and knowledge gap, whereas participatory is more strong and associated with working together on the field towards innovation. Partnership can be formed with farmers or among organizations. This new perspective for agricultural development addresses indigenous value systems, beliefs and socio-economic links. It has been practically tested and widely accepted among numerous research and extension organizations as well as groups of professionals. For example, Pretty (1995:5) contends that "participation and collaboration become essential components of any system of inquiry, as any change cannot be effected without the full involvement of all stakeholders and the adequate representation of their views and perspectives".

Gura (2001) underscores that there is a methodological shift presumed to take place among the CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) centers in terms of their research approach. This was based on the evaluation of their past achievements in improving the agriculture of small-scale farmers in the south. Little change took place in agriculture of poor countries despite huge investment in research as their approach overlooks the specific indigenous conditions of CDR (complex, diverse and risk prone) farming systems. There was no place for local knowledge and experiences in their conventional approach. What is local knowledge?

The importance of indigenous knowledge is widely understood in guiding agricultural research (Scoones and Thompson, 1994), natural resource management (Jiggins & Röling, 1995), conflict management on the use of common resources (McKean, 1992), in the planning and implementation of development projects (Leeuwis, 1995). Therefore, farmers are resources for achieving these purposes and beneficiaries of the outputs if they have active role in their involvement. In this perspective, local knowledge is decisive in creating a maneuver for every collective action towards resource management and common problem solving. Understanding local structure, kinship and interests of different socio-economic groups is the initial step in setting up the research design (Marsden, 1994) because these variables influence research strategies.

Research aiming at development efforts of today has begun to reconsider that the researched groups (the farmers) have considerable knowledge. Retrospective analysis of research achievements in Ethiopia has revealed that the implementation of policies and programs that did not actually fit into the existing local farming system failed to realize
improvements in rural livelihoods. Having recognized this situation with prudence, critical social thinkers (Rhoades, 1994:65; Longino, 1990) began to contend that the standard methodology of researchers requires a ‘psychological flip’ in which their basic philosophy of ‘techno-scientific-Salvationism’ gives a way to more humanistically based orientation that accords respect and appreciation to indigenous views, knowledge and expertise.

Organizational perspective

Until recently the interdisciplinary basis of indigenous knowledge research has broadened to include a wide array of social and technical scientists with new perspectives and analytical tools that are essential to study it. With this increasing interdisciplinary dialogue, two distinct approaches have emerged (Thompson, 1996).

1. Researching with local groups has to involve analyzing and interpreting the validity of local agro-ecological and socio-cultural beliefs, concepts and practices. The aim is to empower local people vis-à-vis researchers and integrate indigenous knowledge with standardized science in the research and development process. This will bridge the gap between rural people and agricultural researchers. Since recently, this approach has gained sufficient attention and support from development agencies and institutions to begin challenging the conventional approaches of research and extension.

2. Generating agricultural knowledge should be seen as a social, institutional, environmental and political process and local agricultural knowledge systems need to be defined in terms of multiplicity of actors or agents through whom certain kinds of information are communicated and stipulated. This approach to organizational aspect of agricultural research and extension indicates the emergence and development of different farmers’ organizations with numerous objectives that fosters the communication and exchange of experiences among themselves leading to the improvisation of indigenous knowledge system (Engel, et. al, 1995).

In addition, Rivera and Elkalla (1997) argue that farmer groups, committees and councils need to be established for the purpose of overseeing the inclusion of farmers’ needs and interests in extension programs at village, district and higher levels respectively.

By merging the ideas from the two organizational levels for the study of local knowledge, it could be argued that researching with local groups seriously focuses on the interaction and dialogue between different groups and networks of farmers often with contrasting fidelities and competing interests. In this line, the first approach to the organization of interdisciplinary researchers strengthens how systematic should stakeholders involvement in research be and the second underpins that the process of knowledge generation in agricultural research should involve the potential users of the existing knowledge.

Ethiopian Experience in Research with Farmers

The practical examples of involving farmers in research process in Ethiopia can be cited from the work of three organizations: Debre-Zeit Agricultural Research Center of the Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organization, the Farm Africa Farmers Participatory Research Project and the SOS Sahel’s Participatory Land Use Planning and Implementation. An overlapping characteristic of these organizations is they begin from the basic interests of the stakeholders (partners) and consider local realities as the basis of intervention.
A) The Approach of the DereZeit Agricultural Research Center (DZARC)

As an organizational unit of the Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organization, DZARC intervenes on the basis of interest and values local experiences. The main objective of researching with farmers in DZARC Approach is to take up the advantage of incorporating farmers’ lifetime experience in technology development. Farmers are divided into core research interest groups. These groups work intensively with professional researchers beginning from the planning stage. The practice is usually farmers are clustered into soils experimental groups, crop improvement groups and livestock husbandry groups. It is a kind of on-farm experiment conducted through encouraging farmers to comment, contribute, measure, see, observe and practice on their own farm with little or minimum assistance of professional researchers. Distinctive feature of the approach is responsibility and task sharing in an endeavor to learn jointly. Recently launched in DZARC, this approach has been widely disseminated to different academic and research institutes including Alemaya University and Malkassa Research Center, where participatory plan breeding (PBB) is increasingly adopted to involve farmers in selection and assessment of various technologies.

The second advantage of this approach is farmers see results quickly that makes subsequent uptake easier. For the researchers and co-researchers it builds up confidence and promotes gaining wider acceptance and trust laying a basis for future collaboration. Whereas this benefit has been missing in the conventional research approach and linear technology transfer system of the country.

B) The Farm Africa Approach of Farmer Participatory Research Project (FPRP)

Farm Africa, a British Based NGO, is bringing farmers, development workers and researchers together to undertake research in the farmers’ environment in Southern Ethiopia. It started to implement FPRP in 1991 under the terms of agreement with the Ethiopian Government with the funds from the Department for International Development (DFID). The intentions were creating linkages among different stakeholders, transferring knowledge on better ways of involving farmers in research, enhancement of GOs and NGOs to enable farmers to do their own research and finally institutionalization of FPRP in government agricultural training and research institutions (Farm Africa, 1998).

As long as the objective is to expand knowledge of FPR to other collaborating organizations, Farm Africa spent many years on training extension agents of the Regional Ministry of Agriculture. Staff from Awassa College of Agriculture has also been part of the organization’s program to learn improved approaches of working with farmers.

Farm Africa focuses more on practical and technical issues than on conceptual issues since the former can easily convince scientists and development workers with positivistic epistemology. After nine years of experience, the organization conducted stakeholders’ workshop that involved the beneficiaries (the target farmers), other NGOs, Universities, Ethiopian Agricultural Research Organization and the Federal Ministry of Agriculture. During this actors’ workshop, the target farmers made short presentations of their contributions to the FPRP and the yield obtained in comparison with the outcome of working with other field staff of the MOA (Farm Africa, 1998). In this case closely working with insiders assisted more and more farmers to improve their productivity than receiving prearranged prescriptions from the extension agents of the MOA through the National Package Program. In many parts of the country, farmers are considerably dropping use of improved seeds with fertilizer due to a wrong approach in technology delivery system. This
evidence leads one to criticize the deterministic approaches. At present, academic institutions in Ethiopia are creating encouraging conditions in giving space for integration of participatory approaches and interactive teaching-learning styles in their curricula although there is still resistance from some groups who question the credibility of the findings from participatory research approaches.

C) The SOS Sahel Approach

With the vision of far reaching positive results in improving the natural resource situation of Ethiopia, the SOS Sahel formed a project partnership with farmers through the participatory land use planning and implementation (PLUPI) (Shitarek, 1998). Northern Ethiopia, particularly North Wollo, is known in the country’s history for its frequently happening famine to which a foreign assistance in millions of dollars flows. The main objective of the SOS Sahel is to improve the soil and grass condition of the area so that crop production is possible and feed is available for livestock. The framework for the operational structure of the organization is illustrated in the figure below.

The figure shows the research approach is demand-driven. Farmers are classified into groups (FG1…FGn), identify their felt-needs, and communicate their needs to the village development committee (composed of farmers and DAs). Then this proposal passes over to the District Development Committee and finally reaches the office of SOS Sahel for final approval in order to allocate budget and secure technical support. Team-based field-level monitoring is consistently carried out to assess farmers’ progress in improving productivity. Like the Farm Africa approach, this organization intimately works with the Regional Ministry of Agriculture. However, it gives more emphasis to soil fertility improvement and sustainability to mitigate environmental problems of the area. Similar procedure has been followed in institutionalization of the approach through conducting series of workshops and consulting professionals.

Figure: Framework for operational structure of the SOS Sahel
Methodological challenge

This section presents arguments of scholars for and against conventional approaches. Experience shows that following the conventional research and extension approach having its own standardized methods has not sufficiently responded to the technological demand of farmers at the periphery. Research has also shown that over the last decades some of the fundamental assumptions set by agricultural researchers and extension workers in Africa, Latin America and Asia have been shaken due to the underlying reason (Cornwall, Guijt and Welbourn, 1994). In contrast to the standards of this research approach, researching with local groups (known as participatory research) does not follow the deterministic principle for the reasons stated above. The methodological framework is flexible depending on the strategies in which the research takes place. This is primarily meant for satisfying diverse and interdependent interests of the participants. In my view, the challenge emerges when multidisciplinary researchers and farmers attempt to create equitable environments to attune the benefits among target groups. This can be seen as a challenge for effectiveness and sustainability.

On the contrary, critics seem to crop up from different perspectives among the conventional researchers in questioning the credibility of research outcome that lacks standard (fixed) methodology. Prior to any contention comes the question with whom the research outcome should be credible, with researchers or with the researched? It is preferable to think critically to decide to make choices between the two other than jumping into ‘speculative’ critics. Choices are much more reputable than critics (Chambers, 1993). In this light, supporting people-centered research should not necessarily imply one is against the conventional one. For instance, economists employ ‘hard’ models to analyze important macro-economic variables to develop policy recommendations. However, they often resist admitting the limitation that the needs and problems of some categories of farmers can not be addressed. It is possible to turn this (conventional research-based policy) bias upside down through involving the periphery in the decision processes. Again, this seems sloppy, costly and clumsy among those who support the conventional line. In practice, this limitation is revealed when those segments of farmers, excluded from the research process, begin to continue to act against the policy.

In general, in conventional research methodologies are used to discover agricultural knowledge, where as in pluralistic approach to research the agricultural knowledge is constructed through interactions among partners. Therefore, by employing the two research approaches to the same problem (for instance, how should local people organize themselves around sustainable use of natural resources), it is less probable for the same recommendation to come up. Therefore, effort towards stimulating people to commit resources will be fruitful if they are at the midst of agricultural research and extension.

However, the fundamental challenge in people-centered research as the Ethiopian Farm Africa experience shows has been limited success of participatory projects on a sustainable basis. The remedy for this could be training of staff as well as proper documentation and dissemination of successful project outcomes to enhance learning. The organization is making efforts to encourage government institutions to take over the role and widely adopt the approach. But some restraining factors may limit institutionalization of FPRP, as the organization tends to withdraw strategically. These include: lack of clarity on the approach, methodology not well developed, limited fund available for government organizations, fragmented land tenure systems in some parts of the country, unstable
agricultural policies and high turnover rate of experienced staff as the government salary remains dissatisfying.

**Conclusion**

A choice for strengthening people-centered research is pivotal to bring in the active influence of local people in technology development. Therefore, social research methodologies should change to respond to newly emerging problems of societal development with emphasis on sustaining local action, trust building and community networking to improve rural livelihoods. In this perspective, it is hardly possible to argue that the available methodologies are insufficient. From the experiences of three organizations in Ethiopia, partnership in research with farmers does more than imparting technical skills in technology development; it enhances managerial and negotiating capacities and teaches stakeholders about farmer-centered approaches.

This has an implication on the existing Ethiopian Agricultural Development Policy. There is urgent need for a shift in institutional arrangement in order to accommodate new perspectives of organizing agricultural research and extension interventions on the bases of success stories of some NGOs. Only then can the technology needs of small scale and subsistence farmers be fulfilled. Finally, partnership in research with farmers can be constrained by divergence in interests, decision-making and excessive control on the process if the relationship is highly formalized. This usually happens at the beginning and as familiarity increases there would be a room for flexibility among research partners.

**References**


