

Unleashing the creativity of farmers

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Farmers can be very creative innovators, adapting their farming systems as conditions and needs change. Without the direct support of extension agents or researchers, they try out new ideas that they have seen or heard about from other farmers, visitors or elsewhere, put their own new ideas into practice and sometimes work further on innovations that have arisen “by accident”. Many innovations are born out of necessity, others out of curiosity. An innovation can be a farming technique or a different way of organising things, such as when farmers make new arrangements for sharing common property resources.

Particularly in areas where extension services are poor, farmers have to solve their problems by putting their trust in their own skills. Local experimentation is deeply rooted in the day-to-day struggle of small-scale farming. Many innovations, especially those made by women, are hidden or isolated, but there are also cases in which farmers work closely together to improve their farming systems. For example, more than ten years ago, peasants supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Central America created the *Campesino a Campesino* (Farmer-to-Farmer) movement in order to develop sustainable agriculture that makes optimal use of local resources by drawing on indigenous knowledge and values. Now more than 10,000 farmers are involved in this movement.

Widening interest

Farmer innovation is not new; it has always been an essential part of agriculture. Since at least two decades, many books and articles have drawn attention to the importance of farmer innovation as an engine of local development. Despite this, formal research has paid little attention to the dynamics of local knowledge in reaction to changing conditions and needs. It has therefore tended to produce results which are of limited relevance to small farmers.

Now, the tide seems to be turning. Some development programmes have started to go beyond Farmer Participatory Research (FPR) on techniques that come from formal science. They are deliberately looking to indigenous innovation as an entry point into joint experimentation to further develop “home-grown” ideas (Participatory Technology Development or PTD). These initiatives involve local innovators, neighbouring farmers, development agents and sometimes also research scientists.

International and national research and development organisations are now considering how farmer innovation can best be supported, especially for developing ecologically-sound practices of agriculture and natural resource management suitable for diverse and specific sites.

Seeking complementarities

Ways are being sought to trigger participatory innovation processes in which the knowledge and experiences of small-scale farmers and external advisors are combined in a “learning dialogue”. In this research approach, scientists have different tasks to play than in conventional formal research. They are important partners who can bring in information, methods and analyses that complement what farmers already know and can do themselves.

Evaluation of the *Campesino a Campesino* movement in Nicaragua revealed that more systematic learning, rigorous comparison of options, and insights from outside are needed to make farmer experimentation more effective. This can be achieved through more intensive collaboration with researchers and by seeking complementarity in methodologies. For example, the approach of enhancing farmer experimentation and the wider sharing of information between farmers (a strength of *Campesino a Campesino*) could be combined with systematic comparison (a strength of PTD) and experimental learning-by-doing (a strength of Farmer Field Schools).

Enthusiasm and ownership

Experiences in Latin America stress the importance of “farmer promoters” in facilitating innovation. Farmer promoters help farmers realise that they are capable of recognising and offering solutions,

doing experiments and communicating options to others. Promoters can help farmers bring forth their ideas and can guide them in designing their own experiments. The goal is to promote a culture of enquiry and experimentation among farmers. This helps build enthusiasm, self-confidence, pride and hope for the future.

Magazines, video, radio, television, fairs, workshops and farmer congresses have proven to be effective tools for identifying, sharing and analysing local innovations and for stimulating further experimentation. The important thing is that innovators do these things for themselves and take pride in them. In Costa Rica, innovating farmers took the initiative to found a committee composed of farmer experimenters and representatives from NGOs and the public sector to support and plan participatory innovation development at regional level. This put farmer organisations in charge of research.

Re-orientation needed

There seem to be two major preconditions for supporting farmer innovation: firstly, empowering farmers to take the lead in experimentation, communication and organisation; and, secondly, changing the attitudes and roles of researchers and development workers so that they recognise farmer innovators as equal partners, with experiences and skills different to their own. Only then can they facilitate processes of participatory innovation and provide the complementary inputs needed.

Re-orientation is also needed in policy-making from the local to the international levels. Experiences of, for example, the *Campesino a Campesino* movement show how vital it is to involve all stakeholder groups (farmer organisations, research and extension institutes, universities, development agencies, ministries, banks and the private sector) in platforms for dialogue about development. This should lead to change in policy relating to research, extension, education, land tenure, trade and many other factors that can stimulate or constrain farmer innovation.

The ultimate aim is to stimulate social processes that unleash the creative skills of people and their organisations in order to create a permanent movement of innovation driven by the rural people.

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