



# Developing a framework for participatory research approaches in risk prone diverse environments

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## **Developing a framework for participatory research approaches in risk prone diverse environments**

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The mission of the CGIAR is to contribute, through its research, to promoting sustainable agriculture for food security in developing countries. The focus is on increasing agricultural productivity, safeguarding natural resources, and contributing to people-centered policies for environmentally sustainable development. In addition to continuing its work on high potential areas, the CGIAR is increasingly committed to addressing the natural resource management problems of the poor in less-endowed and risk-prone areas (CGIAR 1995).

Nowadays, it is widely agreed upon that local people have to be put at the center of the perspective, and that they must become actively involved in the (formal) process of innovation development through participatory research approaches. Over the last decades, a great diversity of participatory research approaches has evolved, however, it is not yet well understood which types of participatory approaches are useful for different kinds of research questions, goals and contexts. 'Participation' is still a rather diffuse and fashionable term, which is strategically included in almost every research proposal.

The objective of this paper is to shed some light on the multiplicity of participatory approaches used in International Agricultural Research and to structure and classify this diversity by providing a *typology of approaches*. The purpose of offering such a typology is to establish a more differentiated language and a conceptual framework, that can help research managers to make better choices and more informed decisions when designing their research approach.

Findings are based on a review of literature and internet sites, discussions with key informants, and a questionnaire-based study of 53 re-

search projects carried out during 1999 by the CGIAR Systemwide Program on Participatory Research and Gender Analysis (PRGA Program). This information was analyzed in order to single out a set of prototypical approaches and to assess the state of the art of participatory research in the CGIAR.

Four prototypical approaches were identified and described along key characteristics, such as the underlying objectives, types of participation, actors involved, their roles, the procedures and the research methods used. These are the transfer of technology approach, farmer first, learning and action research, and farmer-controlled research. Most participatory research activities in the CGIAR are downstream applications at the level of applied and adaptive research. Participatory research is frequently seen as a better way of technology transfer, which is rather considered to be the task of NARS, extension services and NGOs. Examples of participatory learning and action research approaches, where scientists facilitate and support peoples' efforts in seeking solutions for constraints they have identified at local level, are still scarce in the CGIAR. Those who are advocating participatory research as a means of empowerment, equity, and capacity building are looked upon as mixing development-driven agendas with research-driven ones. In view of the complex challenges in natural resource management, which are a function of technical skills and know-how as well as social negotiation, organization and rules, the CGIAR needs to broaden and reconsider its natural resource management research strategies. Participatory learning and action research approaches at the grassroots combined with strategic research through comparative case studies are indispensable if International Agricultural Research is to achieve an impact in risk prone and diverse environments.

**Key words:** participatory research approaches, CGIAR, natural resource management