



The evolution of participatory research and extension in Zimbabwe

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searching for new solutions or adaptations suited to the diverse and complex environments of smallholder farming

- Participatory research can be enhanced through the involvement of large numbers of smallholders in formal and informal tests of new practices
- The community is mobilized to understand and address landscape-level environmental problems related to water quality, forest and biodiversity protection, soil conservation, and others

There are, however, three significant concerns about the sustainability of the Landcare Movement:

- The Landcare concept is becoming so popular that there is a definite risk of attracting support projects that do not understand the concept, provide funds in a top-down mode and thus defeat the whole basis of a farmer-led movement
- How do such movements sustain themselves in the long run? Networking, and the stimulation from outside contacts, is widely considered to be crucial for the long-term success of such institutions. This can be provided through Landcare Federations, as have evolved locally in Claveria, and through provincial and national federations, which are currently being explored in the Philippines
- Group leadership is a time-consuming and exhausting task, particularly when it is done on a voluntary basis. Landcare is still a new movement in the Philippines, but already leadership 'burn-out' is becoming an increasing concern

We believe that the following measures are required in order to realize the full potential of the Landcare concept:

- The public and non-government sectors should assist in facilitating the formation of groups and networking among them, enabling them to grow, develop their managerial capabilities and enhance their ability to absorb new information from the outside world

- These sectors can also provide leadership training to farmer leaders, helping ensure the sustainability of the organizations
- Cost-sharing external assistance should also be provided. For this, the use of trust funds should be emphasized, where farmer groups can compete for small grants to implement their own local Landcare projects

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The experience described here reflects the work of a bilateral co-operation project between the Zimbabwean Government Extension Service and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ). The project started in 1990 with the development and promotion of soil and water conservation.

At the beginning of the on-farm research work in 1990, conservation-tillage techniques were tested as an entry point for a process of technology development with farmers. The focus of the project changed repeatedly over time as the shortcomings of various approaches to achieving the ultimate goal (that is, the large-scale spreading of technologies) became apparent. The approach changed from adaptive on-farm research to participatory research, then to participatory technology development and then participatory extension as the vehicle for scaling up technologies and processes. Once the approach developed in the project was accepted by the Extension Department, the project developed into an institutional reform project. Subsequently, this supported the Extension Department with the aim of helping to increase performance in order to scale up processes and technologies. It is important to emphasize that throughout the life of the project it was clear project policy that no material incentives were to be provided to farmers.

The impact of this project has been technology development, as well as the spreading and adoption of technologies. More than 25 different natural resource management (NRM) technologies were developed, and in the pilot areas up to 80% of the households were practising soil and water conservation technologies. A third important impact was the commitment of the Extension Department to adopting a more participatory approach to scaling up.

The major success factor was the learning-process approach that was applied in the evolution of the project, as well as the field intervention with farmers. This allowed the optimum adaptation of innovations to specific local conditions. We called this approach 'kukuraya' (farmers' research) and, later, the participatory extension approach (PEA). Key elements within this approach, are:

An increase in the self-organizational capacity of communities involved in the innovation process. This was enhanced through needs-based local organizational development involving the whole community. Through this process, a free sharing of ideas and experiences on innovations took place, greatly accelerating the technology-adoption process.

The spirit of experimentation which emerged among farmers. Through enhancing this, it became the social norm for farmers to aspire to carrying out their own experimentation with ideas and technical options in order to improve natural resource management.

Sharing of experiences from farmer to farmer, and exposure of farmers to other sources of innovation. This approach generated many ideas, introduced technical options to the communities and enhanced the dissemination of innovations from farmer to farmer.

Facilitation of this process, initially through outsiders and later through members of the community.

Several challenges remain, the major ones being the following:

- To 'induce' the extension agents who implement such approaches into the 'process mode'. In the past, these technical agents have mainly implemented linear programmes using standard solutions. The change towards flexible site- and situation-specific management of a process is very demanding
- Building up facilitation skills among implementing agents
- Implementation of this 'process approach to innovation' by government bureaucracies which requires a change in their mode of operation, institutional culture and management behaviour. Organizational development is a complex process
- The creation of accountability by the service providers to their clients. This involves structural and behavioural measures to guarantee that farmers do not only depend on the good will of extension agents but can claim the right to high-quality services from them

In our case, the strategy for scaling up was based on the Extension Service, as these agents are available and operational in all rural areas throughout the country. We decided not to implement these activities beyond the pilot case studies ourselves but to institutionalize the capacity for implementation within the Extension Service, thus attempting to ensure a sustainable impact over a wider area.