

## Flashback on the Stakeholder Meeting of the PRGA Program

by Christine Etienne<sup>1</sup>

**The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) has in 1997 launched a Program on Participatory Research and Gender Analysis for Technology Development and Institutional Innovation (PRGA) with the objective to develop and promote methods and organizational approaches for gender-sensitive participatory research on plant breeding and on the management of crops and natural resources. The stakeholder meeting of April 22-23 in Bonn permitted to present the results of the program's first phase 1997-2001 with its lessons learnt and to seek inputs on strategic future directions.**

### Broad interest

The meeting was hosted by the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), which is one of the PRGA donors. Dr. H. Joachim de Haas – head of the Division Rural Development and Global Food Security – emphasized in his introduction and opening remarks that the Ministry was happy to provide the facilities for this meeting as it is very concerned about participation and gender issues. A total of 30 representatives of donors and development agencies, Consultative Group Centres, Universities, National Agricultural Research Centres and grass-roots organizations participated<sup>2</sup>.

Key studies commissioned and/or conducted by the PRGA Program, as well as an extensive inventorying process are being conducted around the world by different types of institutions through a small grants program. They focus on generating evidence through

action-research based learning case studies. PRGA Program wants thus to systematize and mainstream what is being learned worldwide from the integration of gender-sensitive participatory research approaches in 13 projects in plant breeding, and 9 projects in crop and natural resources management.

### Dense inputs and animated discussions

The first day (and part of the second day) was mainly geared towards a presentation of the PRGA Program's result and major findings from its first phase 1997-2001. Ten gripping inputs and presentations showed how participatory approaches definitely produce technologies and resource management options that are better suited for the end-users than the classical research approach.

During the second day more inputs on potential directions for the future were given. Vivacious group and plenary discussions permitted to identify the program's strength and weaknesses, as well as the challenges for the future and to solicit a feedback on the draft Concept Note for the "*Institutionalization of PRGA approaches*".

### Findings of presentations and group discussions (not exhaustive)

#### Strength of PRGA

- Initial findings suggest that higher degrees of farmer involvement and control in the research process yield higher levels of empowerment, give voice to farmer's technology priorities – including women's priorities, speed technology adaptation, increase human capital, boost adoption and have positive impacts on farmer profits.
- The combination of research and farmer's pragmatism and his participation in decision making induce an intensive learning process and guarantee sustainability at local level.
- Participatory research and gender analysis lead to a strong interaction between biological science and social science, reducing thus the cost of being

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<sup>2</sup> BMZ, GTZ, IAO, DGIS, DFID, SDC, CIAT, CIP, ICARDA, IPGRI, CORPOICA, PROINPA

wrong (e.g. bring – from nutritional viewpoint seen – excellent corn to producers, which can then not be ground and cooked because it is too hard....).

- Groups are targeted which are normally often overlooked: women, poor and marginal groups.
- A learning network has been created, which helps to raise awareness for participatory research and the importance of gender analysis. Experiences are available and systematically analysed and documented from all over the world. However, it is early to show impact after only 4 years. The projects are still young.

### Open questions

- Is PRGA cost efficient? Yes, because the overall time required to produce relevant technologies is reduced and the risk of introducing unsuccessful technologies minimised; no, because it is a difficult process and costs for its initial set-up have been largely underestimated.
- Why is there only a small sample of projects targeting the poor (18%). How are strata levels for “poor” being established? Have we distinguished between “*working with poor*” and “*serving the poor*”?
- Do we have to worry if projects are not targeting women? This does not mean that they are not included.
- Who is the client in client-orientated research: The donor, the institution, the farmer?
- Why is there a gap between knowledge about participatory research and the research practice? Apparently there still exist big differences in terms of understanding, priorities, and goals between biological and social scientists.
- How much of the learning in field projects goes to the level of the whole organization? Participatory research still seems to have niche character. It is strongly supported by convinced and committed groups of researchers but not necessarily by the whole institution. In one case it was said that out of 500 collaborators only 10 are convinced of participatory research (Colombia)! Even when researchers favoured the idea of doing on-farm research this did not mean they systematically took into account the views of the farmers<sup>3</sup>.
- How are changes induced (key factors) and how long does it take to change attitudes? Adoption of participatory research methods and principles requires attitudinal changes. External assistance flows only for a limited time span.

### Major challenges in the future

**Institutionalisation:** There is a general agreement that the first priority goes to make a further step and institutionalise from now on PRGA approaches in order to avoid a fragmentation of the efforts or even the possible phasing out of participatory research if it bases only on individual efforts. Political support has to be gained, scientists convinced, the right people selected for training, etc. All this requires much more than the mere creation of participatory mechanism. It is dependant on a rather deep change in strategy and approach, thinking and behaviour and of management tools. The task cannot be carried out successfully without the decision makers committing themselves very firmly to redefine the institute’s mission.

**Documentation:** PRGA Program’s results and experiences have to be documented in a more convincing, appealing and concise way for different target groups (tools, methods, impact assessment, etc.).

**Scaling up impact:** Participatory Research approaches have to be realized on a broader scale and ownership must be improved.

### Feedback on the Concept Note for “Institutionalisation of PRGA”

The Concept Note indicates already possible future directions and suggests to conduct an organizational analysis and to initiate action research in CIP and CIAT<sup>4</sup> – the two Consultative Group centres that have gained major experience in participatory research over the past decades. Emphasis would also be placed on analysing empirical lessons in institutionalising participatory research and gender analysis approaches together with other prospective partners to better understand what factors contribute or hinder organizational change. Capacity building and participatory monitoring and evaluation are considered as integral elements of the strategy to support the learning and change process.

The group discussion brought forward a long list of suggestions on aspects that were missing or should be

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<sup>3</sup> AgREN Network Paper No 109: Integrating Participatory research Methods in a Public Agricultural Research Organization: a partially successful experience in Morocco

<sup>4</sup> International Potato Centre & International Centre for Tropical Agriculture

added/changed. The following points just form part of the observations:

- More clarity is desired on objectives of institutionalisation. What will be institutionalised, where, why? Is the focus on a centre or on a practice? Experience shows e.g. that it is much easier to provide evidence with themes that show quickly visible results such as participatory plant breeding. Should then such “door openers” be strategically used assuming that simple themes permit later to go on to more difficult ones?
- Related to “organizational setting” it may be better to have a component (or cross-cutting issue) in challenge programs. This does not exclude the possibility to work intensively with one or two selected centres in addition.
- Much emphasis needs to be placed in capacity building: Training of Trainers in the National Agricultural Research Centres, “training on the job” and practice in the field.
- The integrated approach cannot completely be left aside. If one of six problems to which the farmer is confronted cannot be solved, the whole experience may fail.
- There is agreement that stakeholder representation in governing the Program (particularly an involvement of principal clients and natural scientists) is important. However, this representation must be kept manageable and proportional.

### **Supplementary information and next steps**

Interested persons can refer to the PRGA website: [www.prgaprogram.org](http://www.prgaprogram.org) for more detailed information on PRGA publications and the next steps that are planned in order to scale up impact by institutionalising gender-sensitive participatory approaches in agriculture and natural resource management research. The Program’s Planning Group and the PRGA team were already working on April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2002 on elaborating a refined proposal together with CIP’s working group on participatory research, taking into account the group discussion results and suggestions.