

From 'Good' Research to the 'Right' Research

The role of Civil Society in Research Decision Making for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development

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Peoples' concerns about research for sustainable agriculture and rural development

The village meeting is closing. Somebody asks the question "Why work on that crop, why not work on a new crop for the market". "Because", replies the researcher "we only do research on that crop". "But", rebuts a farmer, "why try that technology when it is so costly and we are poor?" "Actually", says another, "why not help us transport our products to the market? You say you want to help, but we cannot use what you have got for us". As they climb in the jeep to leave the researcher observes "yes, much of our good research work is not being used". The extension agent replies "Yes it is good research, but the farmers are telling us it is not the 'right' research for them". If this story only happened in a few villages it would not matter, but it doesn't. It happens in too many villages and too often.

We are all concerned that the way we choose what research gets funded does not deliver the benefits to the poor that we all hoped for. No doubt, our faulty decision making arises, in part, from too much reliance on the input of scientists and academics and not enough on the input of farmer organizations, extension agents or other service providers. Changing the balance of inputs will improve our decision making, but there are many more 'stakeholders' in sustainable agriculture and rural development whose views need to be considered for us to get to the 'right' research.



Farmer group visualizes their future development.

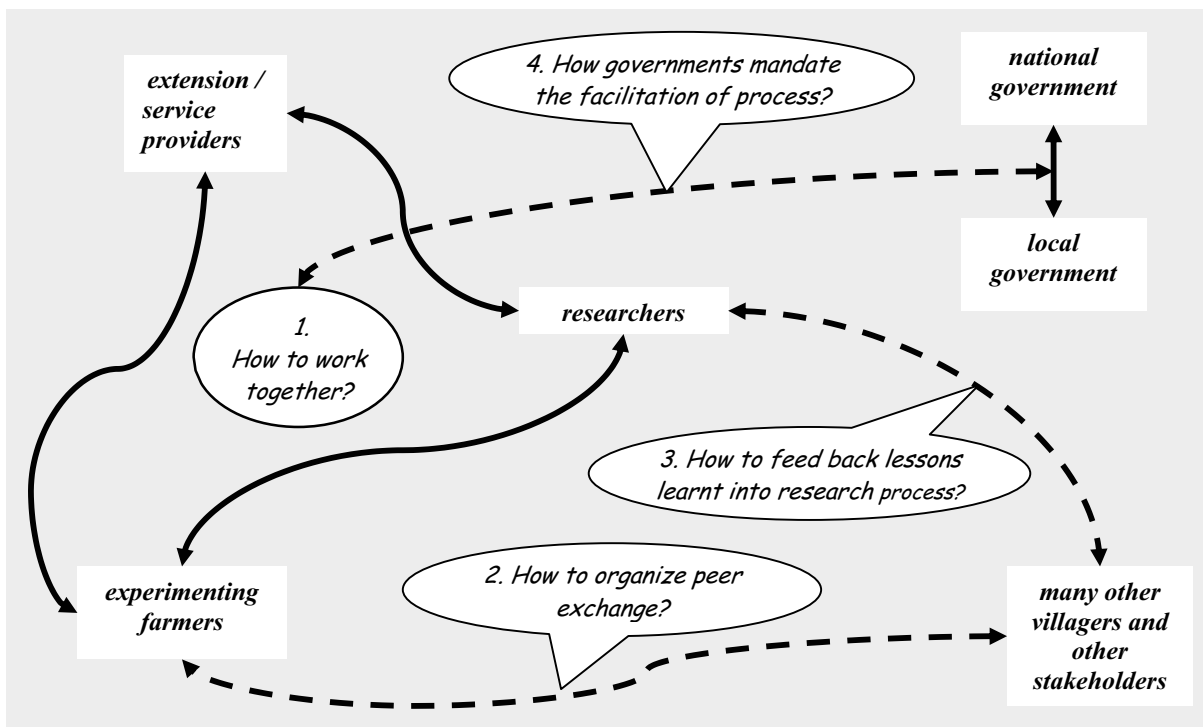
Getting to the 'right' research

Getting to the 'right' research for sustainable agriculture and rural development means not only finding the 'right' research question, but also the 'right' research partnerships between farmers, service providers, and other relevant stakeholders. Getting to the 'right' research for sustainable agriculture and rural development means finding a more democratic way to reach our decisions. Today's research is not 'the right research' because it does not benefit the resource poor and it does not have democratic decision making processes.

The place to start 'getting it right' is in the village with local communities and all those local people who have a stake in sustainable agriculture. Diagram 1 shows what needs to happen in a village. Villagers need to figure out who the main stakeholders are in their community, especially the resource poor who are supposed to benefit from the research. They need to figure out how 'experimenting' farmers within the community are going to work together with researchers, extension agents, other service providers, and other relevant stakeholders. They need to figure out how they are

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Diagram 1: „Working Together for ‘Right Research’ in the Village”



going to organize exchanges with their peers in other villages. Notice here that we always say ‘they’ here to emphasize that it is the local people who must do this and not project or NGO staffers. Rather, outsiders should restrict themselves to building the skills of local people so that villagers have the capacity to figure things out for themselves.

Two other things need to happen in the village to get to the ‘right’ research:

- First, the facilitation of local experimentation needs to be mandated by government as good governance of public funds requires. National and local governments need procedures to ensure that public funds only goes to research that contributes to the local ‘community based’ develop plan. Failure here risks the waste of scarce public funds for research.
- Second, the lessons learnt by all stakeholders from village experiments need to feed into the research decision making process.

Feeding local lessons into research decision making

So how in practice could the lessons learnt in village experiments be fed back into research decision making?

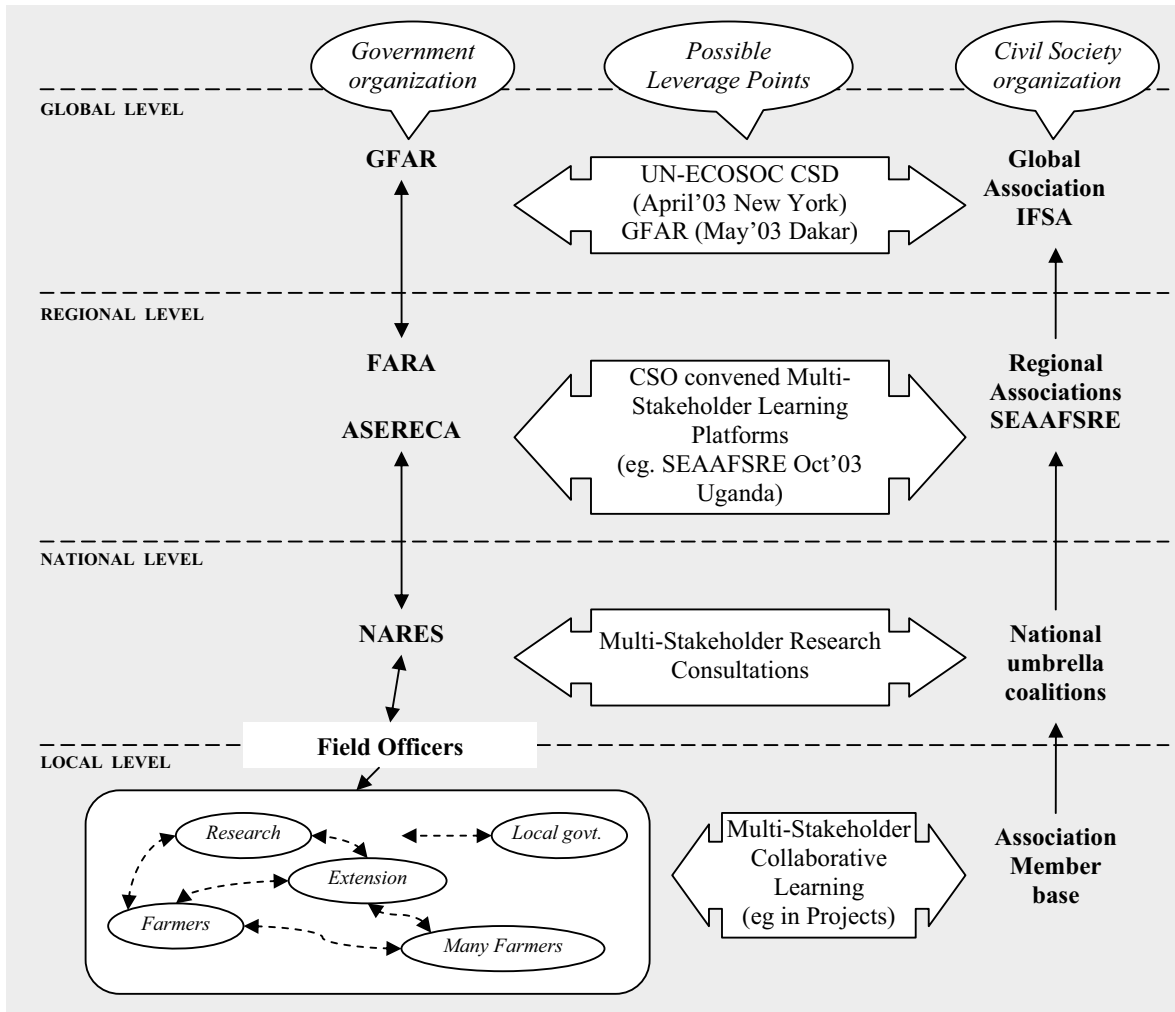
- How can the many stakeholders in sustainable agriculture have more say in determining what research gets funded?
- Where are the leverage points for more democratic decision making?

To identify some possible leverage points let us consider, as shown in Diagram 2, first the levels of engagement going from local to global and second the organization of research decision making in government and civil society.

Leverage point one: In the village

A first leverage point for more democratic decision making occurs in the village. We know that some farmers are members of community based organizations and farmer associations like the unions. Together with other stakeholders involved in local experimentation they can lobby the village council to support their re-

Diagram 2: Leverage Points for ‘Democratizing’ Decision Making on Agricultural Research



search demands. Civil society organizations are able to collaborate across villages for their voice to be taken seriously at parish and district levels.

Leverage point two: At the national level

The second leverage point for civil society is at the national level. Here research demands not addressed at local levels can be taken up to the national level through farmers and NGO national associations or umbrella organizations. Civil society can place demands to their national agricultural research systems by participating in multi-stakeholder research consultation workshops that are now a common event in the calendar of research decision making at the national level.

Leverage point three: At regional levels

The third leverage point is at the regional level. Civil society organizations can voice their research demands at forums organized by inter-governmental agencies like Southern African Development Council or associations like the Association for Strengthening Research in Eastern and Central Africa at the sub-regional level and the regional level in the Forum on Agricultural Research in Africa. In this part of Africa Civil society convenes its own multi-stakeholder consultations. For example the Southern and Eastern African Association of Farming Systems Research and Extension will convene its bi-annual gathering in Uganda in October 2003.

Leverage point four: At the global level

The fourth leverage point is at the global level. Civil society organizations are perhaps best organized to engage in policy debate with governments at the global level. The International Farming Systems Research Association not only convenes its own multi-stakeholder convention engaging Farmer Unions, NGO's, Consumers and Business and Industry, but it also participates in the global inter-governmental forums on agricultural research decision making organized by GFAR. Concrete examples here are the GFAR conference held in May 2003 in Dakar and the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development Session 11 in April 2003 in New York as part of the UN Economic and Social Councils follow up to its World Summit of Sustainable Development.

Recommendations for getting to the 'right' research

A structure, weak though it may be, does exist for more democratic ways for research decisions to be made. This structure would work much better if the following recommendations were followed.

1. Develop local capacity to facilitate the emergence of functional multi-stakeholder groups of 'experimenting' farmers and other relevant stakeholders in the village that are linked to researchers, extension agents and other service providers.
2. Expand the use of modern Information and Communication Technologies in peer-to-peer learning across villages, parishes and districts that is linked to local mentors from among service providers.
3. Develop the capacity of civil society organizations to convene their own forums on agricultural research and development that are linked to inter-governmental forums at national, regional and global levels.
4. Develop the capacity of local organizations representing the resource poor to generate and manage their own funds for research sustainable agriculture and rural development that are linked to public funds for research.

Supporting these four recommendations will do more to move us from doing 'good' research to doing the 'right' research than most anything else we might do.

More informations relating to the article you'll find in the book:



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