

From „Good“ Research to the „Right“ Research

Factors impeding the transition from 'good' to 'right' research

by John Caldwell¹

In the BeraterInnen News 2/2003 we published an article of Clive Lightfoot and Ueli Scheuermeier about the “right” research for sustainable agriculture and rural development. We’ve got a nice and stimulating commentary on the article from John Caldwell of JIRCAS in Japan and would like to publish it here. All of you who don’t have the issue 2/2003 at hand, can have a look at the article on our website to recall the topic. If this is not possible, please let us know by mail eza@lbl.ch, and we will send you the article. But the comment can be understood very well even without knowing the article to which it is responding.

Why faulty decision making

Quote from BN 2/2003 (p. 70, left): *“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.”*

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The description of the village meeting sounds so very true, having seen situations that were in essence the same as the example described in the article. Why then is there too much reliance on the input of scientists and academics, and why does their input often lead to research that is not what farmers want? I think the following four reasons play a large role:

1. Accountability

Since the accountability revolution of the late 1990s, researchers come with funds to achieve goals set in advance. They are evaluated by how well they achieve those goals. These goals are not set directly by stakeholders, but primarily by administrators who know how to get funds. Researchers often do not have a free hand to accept farmer proposals or demands that do not match the goals against which they (researchers) will be evaluated. There is thus an inherent conflict between researchers’ needs for survival in an administrative system of high top-down accountability, and farmers’ demands which may place higher priority on other topics.

2. Who pays the piper to play the tune (who has the funds)?

Closely related to accountability is the reality that a major source of funds for activities that might help address farmer needs comes from institutions. ‘The piper plays the tune he is paid to play.’ As long as others are paying for the piper (researchers) to play for farmers, the tune is likely to be the tune of donors.

3. Belief in the power of formal science and the self-evident value of the ‘banking system’

Among administrators, researchers, and extension personnel, there is a deeply-rooted belief that formal science has a power to discover causes of problems and develop solutions, that is fundamentally different from, and superior to the abilities of farmers. The term ‘banking system’ is not known to most biological scientists,

economists, administrators, or extension personnel, but if explained to them, many would think that it is perfectly logical. Likewise, the concept of constructivism would be seen as being contrary to objective reality. Comments such as “we have superior knowledge”, or “farmers’ needs are subjective, and their knowledge lacks universality, being defined by, and limited to, their specific locality and circumstances,” illustrate this belief system.

4. Love of science

Biological researchers are trained to study plants, animals, or their pests (insects and diseases). They achieve satisfaction from using the tools and knowledge of their specialised training. There is a certain beauty in a well-laid out experimental plot, a well-designed experiment, or a complex hydrological model. The world of farmers is much more messy. Biological researchers often do not know how to handle this. Moreover, this is not what they are trained to do. How can they find satisfaction in putting aside their tools, and simply becoming facilitators for farmer meetings and discussions? (compare with p. 71. left top).

Developing a more democratic decision-making process

Quote from BN 2/2003 (p. 70, right): *“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.”*

Here is the crux of the matter: who wants a more democratic decision-making process? There are a number of reasons why this is not necessarily what different stakeholders want.

1. Farmers

Farmers often get tired of long processes of consultation and development of consensus. Farmers will

sometimes stop facilitators and say, “let’s get to the solutions.” Farmers want solutions to problems, and often expect that outsiders will bring these, through superior knowledge (farmers also often believe in the ‘banking system’) and outside funds (a culture of dependency, in part fostered by top-down approaches, but in part also reflecting farmers’ poverty and lack of resources).

2. Researchers

Motivations of researchers for their choice of career are highly variable. Only a portion of researchers are motivated by a desire to apply the tools of science to solve concrete problems. These tend to be researchers who have come into research after other experiences, or who have benefited from a program in interdisciplinary problem-oriented research. But researchers who come into research primarily from a love of science, and who go straight through from undergraduate study to an advanced degree in the same field in a science-based university, are motivated primarily by a desire to do good science, and be recognised for the resulting contributions to science, not to address needs of local communities.

3. Administrators

Administrators are primarily responsible to those above them in the institutional hierarchy. The well-being of the institution and assurance of its continuity are their primary goals. They must achieve those goals in the context of the system they are placed in. People-centred processes often seem slow, inefficient, and marginal to the targets that administrators must meet to ensure institutional continuity in hierarchical systems. Neither bureaucratic nor corporate systems are inherently democratic.

Can it be documented that democratisation gives farmers better solutions more quickly, in a way that farmers want to take the time? How does it help researchers who are trained to do good science and have a love of science? How can it help administrators achieve their goals? Unless these questions are answered, and the answers presented in ways that reach people who are not necessarily predisposed by idealism, democratisation may seem to be an ideal not very relevant to stakeholders’ concrete needs and constraints.

Mandating facilitation of local experimentation

BN 2/2003 (p. 71, left middle two bullets): “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 go to research that contributes to the local ‘community-based’ development plans. 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.”*

The article makes a normative statement that this “needs” to happen. But is not the most critical question, not normative (which we may all agree on), but rather operational: what conditions will enable this to happen? Hence, the discussion that follows on “leverage points” is very appropriate and critical.

BN 2/2003 (p. 72, left bottom): “*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.*”

This is a good point, but we need to look closely at how these workshops function. Who is selected to represent farmers, and how are they selected?

In a bureaucratic system, there is a tendency for such mechanisms to be structured in a way that they do not threaten continuity. Wealthier farmers and local leaders well known to the formal research system may be selected, and the workshops may end up with the function of granting legitimacy to the existing system.

Concrete examples of how to design consultation mechanisms to represent the resource-poor, and how to convince bureaucracies to accept the loss of control that this implies, are needed.

BN 2/2003 (p. 73, left bottom): “*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.*”

Information and communications technologies are powerful tools, but more farmer-oriented interfaces using farmers’ own symbols and words need to be developed so that farmers can use these tools with greater sense of ownership and control.

BN 2/2003 (p. 73, left bottom): “*Develop the capacity of local organisations 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.*”

Who is willing to provide the funds to local organisations that would seek such funds? Can local organisations establish businesses whose primary objective is not profit for investors, but generation of funds for the local community? How can such local businesses gain access to markets often dominated by entrenched middlemen within countries, and by corporations internationally?

Concrete examples are needed to give practitioners a wider range of tools!