

Perspectives on Knowledge Sharing in Research

The knowledge Sharing project of

ict-km

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Research project: ICARDA Participatory Plant Breeding Program

KS approach: International Farmers' Conference

Perspective: Researcher-Maatougui Mohammad

An interview was held with Dr. Maatougui Mohammad, researcher at ICARDA, who participated in the recently held Farmers' Conference at ICARDA (4th-8th May). Although perhaps one of the already 'converted', working on participatory plant breeding, he was very excited about Farmers' Conference. He said that it was really a dynamic and successful event bringing together farmers, scientists and others to focus particularly on the knowledge and experiences that farmers have.

"In my experience farmers have a lot of good knowledge, skills and experience—they are doing a lot of experimentation and implementation on their own, often with great success. We can learn a lot from them. The Farmers' Conference gave them centre-stage to share with each other and also with us—the research community. Because they also need our help, our research should take into account their situations, problems, what they know and what they are doing."

Maatougui however indicated that as this was something new, of course there are challenges. A key challenge was that of language barriers. There was need for a lot of translation between the many languages and this takes a lot of time and effort.

Credit: ICARDA, 2008.



Dr. Mohammad discussing with others in an ICARDA field.
Credit: ICARDA, 2008.

We discussed the storytelling approach chosen for the conference with the response being that "*stories are a good way of having the farmers share knowledge as it is like a synopsis of their experiences. It is a good way to talk to each other.*" He did caution that "*sometimes in stories the truly valuable content may only be a small part of what is shared*" but followed this up by saying that "*the process itself is also very comfortable and empowering for them.*" While he felt that stories were a useful approach for sharing knowledge, he suggested that this should be one part of the program of a knowledge sharing event like a Farmers' Conference, with another key component being to work together in the fields. He also felt that it was necessary to have pictures, visuals, films etc as an addition to the stories to give people a better idea of conditions, problems, techniques, varieties, etc being discussed.

Maatougui felt very strongly that a positive component of the Farmers' Conference was the time spent out in the fields, as this allowed for more context and reason to talk and discuss. He commented that another good way of communicating was

through the Food and Seed Fair that was an activity which sprung up spontaneously during the Farmers' Conference, in which farmers brought things to show and share.

For him the Farmers' Conference was a good reminder of the fact that we work for farmers; that what we are doing is to develop technologies, varieties etc that will help improve the lives of farmers. Working together with and learning from farmers (in an event like this) helps to make research more appropriate by giving insight into problems, situations and needs on the ground as well as the innovation and knowledge that farmers may already have and be using.

The Farmers' Conference also had other benefits. Maatougui pointed out that by facilitating farmers to share knowledge between themselves and learn from each other, this helps to create farmer-to-farmer extension, which is especially useful in countries where there is limited or even ineffective formal extension services. Farmers can feel that their knowledge is valuable and learn to share with other farmers. Introducing technology such as exchange of stories via cell phones can also be a useful mechanism for dissemination of farmer and research-generated knowledge.

Additional benefits coming out of such a knowledge sharing activity, that were indicated by Maatougui were:

- helping researchers to understand farmer expectations and needs
- listening to the farmers and working with them helps to develop trust
- helping institutions to understand the context in which they are working
- helping us to plan research and understand how to disseminate
- learning a lot about limitations to adoption

One thing to be improved, according to Maatougui, was that there should have been more researchers at the Farmers' Conference, especially social scientists. He felt that scientists need to be more aware of what the farmers are thinking and doing and what they know in order to conduct better research and have better impact.

Participants of the farmers' conference having discussions in the ICARDA fields.
Credit: ICARDA, 2008.

